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Whatever It Takes

OSU Looks To Move On After U-M Loss With CFP Matchup Against Tennessee

SONNY BROCKWAY

EYES ON THE PRIZE — Unlike many seasons when a loss to Michigan meant the end of national championship aspirations, the new College Football Playoff format allows for second chances, such as Ohio State hosting Tennessee in a first-round matchup on Dec. 21.

By GREG WILSON
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Associate Editor

Ohio State's losses to Michigan in the 2021 and 2023 seasons were enough to keep the Buckeyes out of the four-team College Football Playoff, forcing the Buckeyes into the Rose Bowl against Utah three years ago and the Cotton Bowl against Missouri last season.

Even though they suffered yet another loss to the Wolverines this year – to many the worst of the four straight – the Buckeyes will still have a chance at the national championship due to it being the first year the CFP expanded to 12 teams.

The loss on Nov. 30 was hard, and losing four times in a row knowing you will never get another chance to win The Game – a reality for many senior 2024 Buckeyes – is even harder. The emotions that come with that reality were on full display when punches were thrown on the Block O at midfield and tears were shed in the postgame press conference.

Even though the players and coaches knew that they were locked into a playoff spot despite the loss, the question of moving forward after such a crushing blow was a hard one for the players to grapple with immediately after.

"I'm not really sure right now," fifth-year linebacker Cody Simon said when asked how the Buckeyes can come back from the loss. "It's frustrating for all the seniors, all the older guys. We're just going to have to lick our wounds and regroup, but I don't think anything has hurt more than this."

Now the Buckeyes have no choice but to move on, something that became a little easier when they had something real to look forward to rather than just the idea that they would have a playoff game somewhere, against someone.

On Dec. 8, Ohio State was seeded No. 8 in the College Football Playoff and was matched up against No. 9 Tennessee, allowing the Buckeyes to play in the first-ever postseason game in Ohio Stadium. From that point on, it was all about the Volunteers.

"It was a mixed bag of identifying the things that didn't go well, working through that," OSU head coach Ryan Day said just hours after the 12-team bracket was announced. "You don't just move on after a day or two. We know that, but now that we have a target, we said, 'Listen, we're going to flush that.' We got back on the field, we got into the weekend and said, 'OK, we've got to learn from it. We've got to fix the problems.' But it's not going to do us any good looking back on that. We've got to learn from it and move on."

Howard added on Dec. 16 that they can't be mentlly hampered going forward because of the Michigan loss.

"It sucked. It was terrible for all of us," he said. "But we can't let them beat us twice. I've learned that it's better to use that as motivation, come back from it and challenge myself to be better and not listen to what everyone else is saying."

There's no pretending that the loss to Michigan didn't happen, which seems to be understood as well, but at this point, Day sees no reason to look back at that game other than to make corrections and figure out how they can become a better version of themselves. The Buckeyes feel comfortable with the draw they had and understand that none of the teams in the bracket is perfect, each with their own problems that likely need to be fixed to

Continued On Page 11

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FAN FORUM

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Michigan Has Big Ten By Tail

It will be far more difficult for teams in the Big Ten, including Ohio State, to make it to the Big Ten Championship Game or the College Football Playoff championship in the future. Name, image, likeness (NIL) and the transfer portal have scarcely appeared on the college football scene when Michigan took a giant step to surpass its competitors. The Wolverines just flipped Bryce Underwood, the top high school quarterback in the nation, from LSU to Ann Arbor.

Larry Ellison, a co-founder of Oracle and the world's fourth-richest man (The Wall Street Journal, Dec. 3, 2024), presented Michigan more than $10 million to land Underwood. The Ellison coup, and possibly similar future deals by deep-pocket Wolverines to attract top-tier high school players, could cement Michigan on top for the foreseeable future.

This issue is bigger than Michigan. In the current NIL and transfer portal environment, the Ellison development further threatens "college" football today, and should be immediately scrutinized by the Big Ten Conference and the NCAA. Ultimately, their response to this development will require great effort, and a resolution, in an attempt to preserve a competitive football playing field.

Joseph H. Huber
Walpole, MA

Day and Night

I have officially fallen off the Ryan Day bandwagon. I think Coach Day is a great person and representative of The Ohio State University, a family man and excellent recruiter, but he has become the second coming of former coach John Cooper. I'm usually not in favor of firing coaches. My thought is, if you do, who do we get that will be better?

When Ryan Day was offensive coordinator for former coach Urban Meyer, it seemed his strategy for calling plays was, "attack the defense." Since becoming head coach it seems the offensive game plan is, "play not to lose." Despite thinking about putting players in positions to excel, that certainly has not been the case.

Overall, his win/loss record is among the best in college football, but like Coach Cooper he struggles to win the big games! Let's not give Coach Day the opportunity to win only two out of 13 games against The Team Up North!

William Bates
Canal Winchester, Ohio

My Darling Buckeyes

Have you sobered up? You have been drunk on hate and other disruptive emotions. Now are you ready to play football?

Angela Burdge (90 years old)
Hilliard, Ohio

If you would like to express an opinion concerning Ohio State University sports, please send your letter to BSB Letters, P.O. Box 12453, Columbus, OH 43212, or email it to bsb@buckeyesports.com. Letters must be signed and include the writer's hometown and a daytime telephone number for verification. Publication priority will be given to those letters that are brief, and we reserve the right to edit letters for publication.

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From The Message Board

The inaugural 12-team College Football Playoff bracket was unveiled on Dec. 8, sparking some intense conversations and debates among fans and experts regarding the rankings and the new system. We asked readers and staff members on the BuckeyeSports.com Fan Forum to offer their thoughts on the first-ever 12-team bracket, the current system of the CFP, Ohio State's placement as the No. 8 seed and any changes they would make to the system moving forward.

"I don't like it at all. It should've just stayed at four teams but everything is a money grab so this is what we get."

– Tiffin Buckeye

"There's much I don't like about it, especially having the seeding not following the rankings. I think four teams would be better than 12. I don't like the subjectivity of the committee and would prefer a computer system which would determine the best four or eight teams.

"The only 'logic' (for Penn State being ranked ahead of Ohio State) is Penn State has no bad losses and OSU has one!"

– Terrier Buck

"(The Michigan loss) is a bad loss in the eyes of Buckeye fans, but should a 13-10 loss be seen as bad to the committee? It's three points, and the other loss to Oregon was by one. Penn State's losses were by seven and eight."

– Frank Moskowitz

"Right now it just seems insane. I'm sure in a decade or so we will get used to it and won't be able to remember a time before the 12-team playoffs."

– PeyoteBuck

"OK. I'm bugged by Penn State being ranked ahead of Ohio State. They have the same number of losses. Whatever happened to head-to-head play? Penn State looks like it has as clear a path to the title as Oregon. Is there something wrong here?"

– Poster That Harley Built

"I don't see so much of a problem with the Hocus Pocus that the CFP Committee used in the 12-team CFP playoff seeding. The problem is with the overly large conferences that resulted in an excessive amount of tiebreakers required to determine the conference champions.

"If we want a better playoff system we need the conferences to go back to divisions where each team plays everybody in their division. Then the division champs get to go to their respective championships. The CFP Committee can then choose the 'at-large' teams from all the losers. Not as much debate required or at least a different kind of debate will be the result."

– **Buckeye Scott**

"I realize it's about the money but 12 teams with conference champs being seeded screws up the playoff system. Champs from weaker conferences force stronger teams to play more games, possibly incur injuries and maybe keep the better teams from the championship. If we are going to have change let's get it done. Let's get to the super conferences and maybe divisions. 16 teams in each division. All teams must be in a conference to qualify for the playoffs. Enlarge the CFP to 16 teams and set those teams based on final rankings. No one gets a bye. The other 48 teams go to bowls."

– John Lanning

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No. 1	Sept. 7	No. 13	Dec. 21
No. 2	Sept. 21	No. 14	Jan. 18
No. 3	Sept. 28	No. 15	Feb. 1
No. 4	Oct. 5	No. 16	Feb. 15
No. 5	Oct. 12	No. 17	March 8
No. 6	Oct. 26	No. 18	March 22
No. 7	Nov. 2	No. 19	April 5
No. 8	Nov. 9	No. 20	April 19
No. 9	Nov. 16	No. 21	May
No. 10	Nov. 23	No. 22	June
No. 11	Nov. 30	No. 23	July
No. 12	Dec. 7	No. 24	August

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One Final Chance For Redemption

EDITOR'S NOTEBOOK
Mark Rea

Redemption.

Merriam-Webster loosely defines it as "serving to offset or compensate for a defect or defeat."

Seldom does one get a chance at said redemption. We absorb the defeat, reluctantly accept the consequences, and somehow move on. Every once in a while, however, a chance comes for us to make up for what previously went wrong and compensate for that defeat.

The 2024 Ohio State football team, once thought of as equal parts invincible and the best college team NIL money could buy, enters the expanded College Football Playoff with its second chance for redemption in a matter of weeks. The Buckeyes blew their first chance by failing to get the job done against the weakest Michigan team since the Rich Rodriguez era, but they now get an opportunity to bring out that torn and tattered "Natty or Bust" banner and make a run at the national championship.

Through the years, Ohio State teams have had little opportunity for redemption following a loss to Michigan. Since the rivalry game was moved in 1935 to the final game of the regular season, the Buckeyes have gone home to stay 18 times after losses to the Wolverines.

Since the mid-1970s, when the Big Ten began to allow its member programs to play in postseason games other than the Rose Bowl, Ohio State has had 20 shots at redemption following a defeat at the hands of its archrival and has emerged victorious only eight times.

The first came in 1976 when the Buckeyes followed a 22-0 loss to Michigan with a 27-10 win against Colorado in the Orange Bowl. The victory served as the final bowl win for Woody Hayes during his 28-year run as Ohio State head coach. His final two bowl appearances – a 35-6 loss to Alabama in the Sugar Bowl following the 1977 season and a 17-15 defeat against Clemson in the 1978 Gator Bowl – each came after losses to Michigan.

It has always been a difficult task for any Ohio State team to regroup after a loss in the rivalry game. Perhaps the biggest piece of redemption the Buckeyes have earned in program history was the 20-17 win against fourth-ranked Arizona State in the 1997 Rose Bowl. That came after a 13-9 upset loss to Michigan that cost Ohio State the 1996 national championship.

One year before that last-second Rose Bowl victory – arguably the biggest win during the 13-year John Cooper era – the Buckeyes were coming off another upset loss to Michigan, this one a 31-23 decision that included 313 rushing yards from little-known running back Tim Biakabutuka.

That outcome sent Ohio State to a Citrus Bowl matchup against Tennessee and star quarterback Peyton Manning. Manning didn't do much – just 182 yards and a touchdown through the air – but the Buckeyes fumbled the ball away three times in the fourth quarter on their way to a 20-14 loss.

That was a microcosm of the Cooper years. The Buckeyes would lose to Michigan in some inexplicable way and then commit just enough mistakes to make the bowl game go south as well.

In each of the last two years, that ugly blueprint has begun to reappear. A failure to get closer at the end of the 2022 CFP semifinal against Georgia resulted in Noah Ruggles missing a 50-yard field goal and the eventual national champion Bulldogs escaping with a 42-41 win.

Last year, injuries and player defections conspired for the most lackluster, why-are-we-even-here bowl performance by the Buckeyes since a 23-11 loss to Air Force in the 1990 Liberty Bowl. That embarrassment also came on the heels of a loss to Michigan, a 16-13 defeat achieved by the Wolverines after Ohio State (most definitely not an option team) tried a quarterback option on fourth-and-1 at its own 29-yard line with 1:38 remaining in the game. The play was stuffed for no gain, and five plays later Michigan kicker J.D. Carlson booted a game-winning 37-yard field goal on the final play.

All of the aforementioned wins and losses prove only one thing. Redemption is achievable, but only if your head is in the right space. I wrote in the last issue of BSB that I thought the coaching staff had developed something of a mental block against Michigan, a game it wanted to win so badly that it hamstrung itself trying to be something it was not.

Woody Hayes is dead, and Ohio State is no longer a power team. Those are just facts. The Buckeyes are not recruited as a power team and therefore should never let pride get in the way of the bottom line. Three years ago, after it was pretty well manhandled by Michigan during a 42-27 loss, the team went to Pasadena and put on an offensive fireworks show for the ages.

OSU shattered the Rose Bowl record book during a 48-45 victory against Utah with C.J. Stroud throwing for 573 yards and six touchdowns, Jaxon Smith-Njigba grabbing 15 receptions for 347 yards and three TDs, and Marvin Harrison Jr. totaling six catches for 71 yards and three scores. There was even enough offense left over for TreVeyon Henderson to rush for 83 yards on 17 carries.

Most fans have forgotten the Buckeyes trailed the Utes by 10 points midway through the third quarter before stepping on the gas pedal for 20 points in the final 18 minutes of that game. Also pretty much forgotten was the fact that the winning points came on a 19-yard field goal from Ruggles with just nine seconds remaining.

The bottom line is that Ohio State beat Utah in an evenly matched Rose Bowl three years ago because the Buckeyes didn't try to be anything but themselves. It's a winning formula – if you're not too prideful to use it.

Perception Vs. Reality

I must admit I'm getting increasingly weary answering this question from friends and family: If Ohio State loses to Tennessee, will Ryan Day get fired?

The short and quick answer is "No." The university is not going to risk becoming the laughingstock of college football for dismissing a coach with an .868 winning percentage. Plus there is the matter of buying out the remainder of a long-term contract that could cost the school somewhere in the neighborhood of $37 million.

Despite all of the hand-wringing over the four-game losing streak to Michigan, Day remains a good and decent man whose recruiting classes consistently rank among the nation's top five and whose program purrs along without a sniff of impropriety or scandal.

When his team hits the Ohio Stadium turf for its first-round playoff game, Day will stare across the field at his Tennessee counterpart and see someone similar in background and philosophy.

Josh Heupel is currently in his fourth season as head coach of the Volunteers. Heupel and Day were each born in March, just 10 days away from being exactly a year apart. Each played quarterback at the college level, and each is considered an innovative offensive coach.

Day is completing his fifth full season in Columbus; Heupel is finishing season No. 4 in Knoxville. Day has a better record against ranked teams (20-9 vs. 12-9 for Heupel) and an 11-8 mark against top-10 opposition to 4-4 for Heupel. Whittle that down to top-five opponents, and the coaches are nearly even. Heupel is 3-4; Day is 4-6.

In four years at Tennessee, Heupel has posted a pair of two-loss seasons (including 2024), one season with four defeats, and one with six. For Day's five full years at Ohio State, the Buckeyes (so far) have never lost more than two games in a single season. Day has won two Big Ten championships; Heupel has no SEC titles. Day has a 4-4 record in the postseason, while Heupel is 2-1 with Tennessee and 3-3 lifetime counting his three seasons at UCF.

One could make the case on numbers alone that Day has enjoyed more success than Heupel. Yet, the two fan bases could not be more polar opposite. While Day is the subject of conjecture on how much longer he can hold onto his job, Heupel is seen by most Tennessee fans as the best thing to happen to the program at least since 1998 when the Volunteers won their most recent national championship.

Why the difference in perception between the two coaches? It's fairly simple, really.

For years, Ohio State and Tennessee shared college football's longest streak of avoiding back-to-back losing seasons. The Buckeyes are still going strong with 2024 marking the 100th season since the program last experienced consecutive losing seasons.

The Volunteers matched that streak year for year until they fired longtime head coach Phillip Fulmer late in the 2008 season. Fulmer, a College Football Hall of Fame member whose 151 career wins place him second in Tennessee history only to the legendary Robert Neyland – the guy for whom the school named its stadium – finished with a 5-7 record during his final season in Knoxville.

Throwing Fulmer overboard allowed the Volunteers to chase the shiniest new penny in the coaching profession, and they hired 33-year-old wunderkind Lane Kiffin as head coach. Kiffin was just beginning a hopscotching career that has already included nine different stops, and his tenure at Tennessee lasted only one season.

Jettisoning Fulmer and the quick defection of Kiffin ushered in an era during which the Volunteers burned through six head coaches, suffered seven losing seasons between 2010 and 2020, and had to vacate several victories due to recruiting violations.

I asked a friend, who just happens to be a Tennessee alum, what the fan base thought of Heupel, and he replied, "Are you kidding? They love the guy. Considering where the program was when he got here, he's been a godsend. He could probably run for governor if he wanted to, but to be honest, we need him much more in Knoxville than they do in Nashville."

I know I've written about this before, but it bears repeating. There was an old saying my parents used to throw out every once in a while when I was contemplating something stupid: "Fool around and find out."

That pertains to college football programs as well. Tennessee fooled around in 2008, and its football program is just now returning to prominence. Here's hoping Ohio State learns from its first-round opponent's mistake.

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Bjork Doubles Down On Support For Day

Just one day after Ohio State's stunning 13-10 loss to unranked Michigan on Nov. 30, athletic director Ross Bjork told The Columbus Dispatch that he had full confidence in Ryan Day as the Buckeyes' head coach, stating that he has built a strong foundation across his six years leading the program that has allowed them to compete at a high level every season.

"Our program is built to last, and Coach Day has done that," Bjork said on Dec. 1. "He has put us in a great spot."

Eleven days after that ringing endorsement, Ohio State's first-year athletic director continued that same sentiment, telling 97.1 The Fan's "The Morning Juice" – hosted by former Ohio State linebacker Bobby Carpenter and Jeff Thitoff – on Dec. 12 that he and Day continue to have a great relationship and the coach has shown all the traits needed to succeed in the head coaching chair in Columbus.

"Coach Day and I have just hit it off so well," Bjork said after being asked if Day would return to the sidelines in 2025 regardless of CFP performance. "I've been really, really impressed. Every single time I've talked to him, I've learned something. He's innovative. He recruits at the highest level. He has a great staff."

Bjork's unwavering support of Day as Buckeye head coach comes at a time when fan and outside criticism has reached its apex following the team's fourth straight loss to Michigan, with many questioning his ability – or in some people's opinions, his lack thereof – to lead a successful and winning program at a flagship program such as Ohio State.

Bjork did acknowledge that some "tweaks" will need to be made in the offseason regarding how the program approaches certain things, but he also reminded both those listening and within the Woody Hayes Athletic Center to stay committed to the process, one which – despite the Michigan loss – still has them in reach of delivering on their "natty or bust" mission statement and securing the program's first national title since 2014 with a four-game run to the championship.

"This whole mentality about – and look, we live it, and we sign up for it – but if you get fixated on the end result and not have the process fully baked every time, you're going to lose," Bjork said. "The mindset's going to lose because you're only fixated on one thing.

"And so what we have to do is this whole 'championship or bust' mentality – you want that as the goal, but it has to be about the process. We have to maybe change some conversations a little bit. I think we need to maybe just approach things a little bit differently.

"But here's the thing, too – and the reason why we needed to say something after that game – we're still breathing. We're still alive. The season's not over. The book is not closed.

2024 Ohio State Football Schedule

Date	Opponent	Result/Time (ET)	TV	Record, Last Result
Aug. 31	AKRON	W, 52-6	CBS	4-8, 21-14 win over Toledo
Sept. 7	WESTERN MICHIGAN	W, 56-0	BTN	6-6, 26-18 win over Eastern Michigan
Sept. 21	MARSHALL	W, 49-14	FOX	9-3, 35-33 win over James Madison
Sept. 28	at Michigan State	W, 38-7	Peacock	5-7, 41-14 loss to Rutgers
Oct. 5	IOWA	W, 35-7	CBS	8-4, 13-10 win over Nebraska
Oct. 12	at Oregon	L, 32-31	NBC	12-0, 49-21 win over Washington
Oct. 26	NEBRASKA	W, 21-17	FOX	6-6, 13-10 loss to Iowa
Nov. 2	at Penn State	W, 20-13	FOX	11-1, 44-7 win over Maryland
Nov. 9	PURDUE	W, 45-0	FOX	1-11, 66-0 loss to Indiana
Nov. 16	at Northwestern	W, 31-7	BTN	4-8, 38-28 loss to Illinois
Nov. 23	INDIANA	W, 38-15	FOX	11-1, 66-0 win over Purdue
Nov. 30	MICHIGAN	L, 13-10	FOX	7-5, **13-10 win over Ohio State**
Dec. 21	TENNESSEE	8 p.m.	ESPN	10-2, 36-23 win over Vanderbilt

"We have to have confidence. I mean, Ohio State should be confident every single day. We're Ohio State. But we also have to make sure we stay to our values, and we stick to what we believe in. And so to me, it's about the process as much as it is about the end result, and if the process is right, the end result will take care of itself."

Regardless of how the process ends for Ohio State this season, Bjork's consistent praise of Day – who has led Ohio State to a 66-10 record and four College Football Playoff appearances since taking over for Urban Meyer in 2019 – suggests that he is likely headed for a return as OSU head coach in 2025, if he opts to stay.

"Coach Day is awesome," Bjork said. "He's great to work with. He totally gets it. He loves being a Buckeye. So we're going to support him at the highest level."

Day Details Reasons For U-M Loss

Despite Bjork's confidence in Day, there is no denying that the Buckeyes suffered one of their worst losses in program history to the Wolverines that day, a defeat that few in college football – Day included – expected heading into the final weekend of the college football regular season.

"I was in shock after the game, I really was," Day said Dec. 4 at the Woody Hayes Athletic Center in his first public appearance since the loss to the Wolverines. "I never expected that to happen. There were some things that happened in the game that I'm responsible for that can never happen again. I don't know how else to say it."

With a few days to get out of that mental state – one which had him sporting somewhat of a blank, shell-locked look on his face post-game when his team was engaged in a full-out brawl with Michigan at midfield – Day took the lectern to dive into some of the reasons his team fell short in The Game.

When asked about what went wrong in the matchup, Day was quick to point out that while he thought the defense mostly did their job, holding Michigan to just 13 points and 234 total yards, the offense fell flat, a development that he ultimately took the blame for.

"I feel like the defense played excellent," Day said. "They played really, really hard in this game. Was everything perfect? No. But I thought they played really well.

"When you look at the offensive side of the ball, it was not a good day. It wasn't a good day across the board on offense. Some of that had to do with the coaching and some of the game planning that went on. There's no question that we could have done a better job getting the ball at the perimeter."

Day went on to say that what plagued the Buckeye offense the most was its overreliance on the inside game and inability to get the ball to their skill players on the outside. These are areas that Day has been widely criticized for by fans and media alike since the defeat, most notably by former Michigan and NFL quarterback Tom Brady, who said on FOX Sports' "The Herd With Colin Cowherd" that he "may as well have been out there playing receiver for Ohio State."

Despite Michigan boasting two likely first-round NFL draft picks at defensive tackle in Mason Graham and Kenneth Grant and the Buckeye offensive line conversely being ravaged by injury, the Buckeyes rushed 26 times for just 77 yards (3.0 average) while giving Emeka Egbuka, Jeremiah Smith and Carnell Tate only a combined 15 receptions for 144 yards and a touchdown.

"There's no question that the ball was run on the interior too much in the game, I think that's clear to see," Day said. "Again, we did throw (33) times, and there were some plays to the outside. But overall, just the percentage was too high of running the ball inside."

Day also mentioned his team's red-zone struggles as a major reason behind the loss, where the Buckeyes found themselves inching toward a potential touchdown on multiple occasions just to settle for just one touchdown and a field goal. Those red-zone inefficiencies occurred either due to the drives stalling or Jayden Fielding missing a pair of field goals from close range, both of which were mistakes that Day said killed the Buckeyes in the rivalry game.

"I think one of the key points of the game, though, is when you have five trips to the red zone and you only get 10 points," Day said. "In those moments there, we had a couple missed field goals, we had an interception, we had a field goal and we had a touchdown. We hadn't done that up to that point, and that was a big deal.

"And then on special teams, we added some other things that we didn't execute very well. A couple kicks that weren't fielded great – down at the 7-yard-line – which created coming out situations, and then we had the two missed field goals."

Day also mentioned the defense's 12-men-on-the-field penalty that gave Michigan a fresh set of downs in their game-winning field-goal drive as another sequence that came back to bite them, one which he once again claimed was a miscommunication between the players and staff that was in large part caused by crowd noise.

But no matter what caused any of these issues to plague the Buckeyes in The Game, Day said each of these mistakes ultimately falls on

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Scarlet VIPS: William Adams, Willoughby, Ohio; Anthony Ananthanarayanan, Rochester, Mich.; Greg Brooks, Gahanna, Ohio; Marty Brumbaugh, Troy, Ohio; Donald Collins, Kenton, Ohio; Joseph A. Cusma Sr., Massillon, Ohio; Dennis Dahm, Sandusky, Ohio; Julie Ellis, Apple Valley, Calif.; Mike Freeburn, Columbus; Tom Goila, Cincinnati; Dave Hamilton. Canton, Ohio; Richard G. Hannan Jr., Chillicothe, Ohio; Doug Harris, Lima, Ohio; Ed Helal, Ashland, Ohio; Phil Helal, Strongsville, Ohio; Dave Palmer, Washington, Mich.; Theodore Pegram, Eden Prairie, Minn.; In memory of Ike Reynolds, Columbus; Lawrence Romanoff, Powell, Ohio; Jim Shaw, Lake Forest, Calif.; Dr. William Thomas, Gallipolis, Ohio; Anonymous, Dallas; Anonymous, Gaffney, S.C.; Anonymous, Girard, Ohio; Anonymous, Norwalk, Ohio.

his shoulders as the leader of the program, as he did not put his team in the right position to succeed when it mattered most.

"Ultimately, that comes back on me as the head coach," Day said. "Whether it's the right guys being in the right spot, the recruiting part of it, the scheme, the coaching – that's on me."

Brown, Five Others Enter Portal Before CFP

Despite making the College Football Playoff, Ohio State had six players announce their intention to enter the transfer portal since BSB last went to press.

Redshirt sophomore backup quarterback Devin Brown headlined the group, announcing on Dec. 8 his decision to enter the transfer portal but remain with the team through the CFP, while redshirt sophomore wide receiver Kojo Antwi, senior wide receiver Jayden Ballard, redshirt sophomore linebacker Gabe Powers, freshman quarterback Air Noland and redshirt freshman offensive lineman Miles Walker all also opted to pursue other opportunities next season.

Day said on Dec. 16 that both Ballard and Powers would not be with the team for the Buckeyes' first-round College Football Playoff matchup against Tennessee on Dec. 21, while Antwi and Brown are remaining with the team. He did not provide an update on Walker.

Noland – a former five-star recruit and the No. 4 quarterback in the 2024 class – entered the portal a few hours after Day took the lectern, so his roster status was also unknown as BSB went to press.

With Brown, starter Will Howard and Noland now all leaving the program next season, Ohio State is currently looking at just a three-man quarterback room consisting of true freshman Julian Sayin, redshirt freshman Lincoln Kienholz and incoming freshman and Bellefontaine, Ohio, five-star Tavien St. Clair (6-4, 225), the No. 3 rated signal caller in the 2025 class.

If anything were to happen to Howard in the CFP, Brown – who Day said would remain the backup quarterback heading into the game against the Volunteers – could be thrust into a pivotal position.

"I give Devin credit, he wants to finish this thing out the right way," Day said of Brown on

Continued On Page 6

OHIO STATE INSIDER

Continued From Page 5

Dec. 16. "But he also wants to see what other options are available for his future. It's not an easy thing to do, but I give him credit for wanting to finish this thing out the right way."

While Brown could be thrust into a high-pressure situation in the CFP with one injury, the other four non-quarterback transfers – whether they were on the roster or not – were unlikely to see much playing time in the postseason while playing behind a group of established starters at their respective positions.

Antwi and Ballard, who came into the program as the nation's 151st- and 99th-best prospects in their respective recruiting classes, combined for just three catches, 26 receiving yards and no touchdowns this season, while Powers mostly saw time on special teams and Walker did not play a single game during his two years with Ohio State.

No other players have entered the portal since BSB last went to press, but Day said on Dec. 8 that he expects around 15 percent of his roster to leave the program to pursue opportunities at different schools.

McLaughlin Wins Rimington Trophy

Ohio State center Seth McLaughlin missed the last two games of the regular season due to a torn Achilles tendon he suffered during a practice held the week before the Indiana game, but what he put on the field in the first 10 games was enough for voters to name him the winner of the Rimington Trophy, given to the best center in all of college football each year, on Dec. 12.

McLaughlin, a fifth-year senior transfer from Alabama, joins LeCharles Bentley (2001), Pat Elflein (2016) and Billy Price (2017) as the only Ohio State centers to take home the honor.

"I am incredibly honored to receive this award!" McLaughlin wrote on Twitter on Dec. 12. "Thank you Buckeye Nation for welcoming me in and giving me the opportunity to be the player that I knew I was capable of being!"

Despite it being just his first and only year with the Buckeyes, McLaughlin emerged as a key veteran presence in the locker room and on the offensive line, helping an oft-maligned OSU front five emerge before his injury as one of the top units in all of college football.

The group was named a semifinalist for the Joe Moore Award – honoring the top offensive line in college football – on Nov. 12, a time in which they ranked 25th in the nation in sacks allowed (11) and helped the Buckeyes rush for 185.0 yards per game.

"He knows these guys well. He knows what's going on in terms of the calls and knows the dynamics," Day said of McLaughlin during the season. "It's one thing to have a coach. It's another thing to have a player or a peer that you can go to for certain things.

"There are some things you can talk to your coach about that are easier to talk to another player about. Just about preparation, guys who have been through it, been through it this year, know the team dynamics, things like that. He's going to be around these guys the best he can, the most he can."

McLaughlin most notably showed off football smarts and veteran leadership in the games after left tackle Josh Simmons went down with a season-ending injury against Oregon, where he helped the unit not miss a beat in important games down the stretch, including against Penn State on Nov. 2 when the Buckeyes rushed 11 straight times for 58 yards from the 1-yard line in their final drive of the game to ice the 20-13 victory.

McLaughlin, who was regarded as a high riser in the upcoming NFL draft before his injury, was also named a semifinalist for the Outland Trophy – the only center of seven players listed – given to the nation's best interior offensive lineman, and the William V. Campbell Trophy, which recognizes a player for combined academic success, football performance and leadership.

2024 Big Ten Individual Award Winners

Dungy-Thompson Humanitarian Award: Madieu Williams, Maryland
Ford-Kinnick Leadership Award: Russell Wilson, Wisconsin
Graham-George Offensive Player of the Year: Dillon Gabriel, Oregon
Nagurski-Woodson Defensive Player of the Year: Abdul Carter, Penn State
Thompson-Randle El Freshman of the Year: Jeremiah Smith, Ohio State
Hayes-Schembechler Coach of the Year (coaches vote): Curt Cignetti, Indiana
Dave McClain Coach of the Year (media vote): Curt Cignetti, Indiana
Griese-Brees Quarterback of the Year: Dillon Gabriel, Oregon
Richter-Howard Receiver of the Year: Jeremiah Smith, Ohio State
Ameche-Dayne Running Back of the Year: Kaleb Johnson, Iowa
Kwalick-Clark Tight End of the Year: Tyler Warren, Penn State
Rimington-Pace Offensive Lineman of the Year: Aireontae Ersery, Minnesota
Smith-Brown Defensive Lineman of the Year: Abdul Carter, Penn State
Butkus-Fitzgerald Linebacker of the Year: Jay Higgins, Iowa
Tatum-Woodson Defensive Back of the Year: Caleb Downs, Ohio State
Bakken-Andersen Kicker of the Year: Dominic Zvada, Michigan
Eddleman-Fields Punter of the Year: Eddie Czaplicki, USC
Rodgers-Dwight Return Specialist of the Year: Kaden Wetjen, Iowa

Five Bucks Earn All-America Nods

McLaughlin was also one of five Ohio State players who took home All-America recognition during college football awards season.

The honors started on Dec. 12 when the Ohio State center and sophomore safety Caleb Downs were named first-team All-Americans by Walter Camp, with Smith earning a second-team selection. Each player received the same recognition by the American Football Coaches Association (AFCA) on Dec. 13, but Smith was joined on the second team by senior offensive lineman Donovan Jackson.

Downs earned three other first-team All-America nods after his excellent regular season with the Buckeyes from CBS/247Sports, The Athletic and The Associated Press, making him Ohio State's 56th consensus All-American in program history. As BSB went to press, the former Alabama transfer – who was also named a finalist for the Jim Thorpe and Bednarik Awards, given to the nation's top defensive back and top overall defensive player, respectively – still had the opportunity to become a unanimous All-American if he earned first-team honors from the Football Writers Association of America and the Sporting News on Dec. 17 and Dec. 18.

McLaughlin was right behind his former Alabama teammate Downs with two more first-team All-American nods from CBS/247Sports and The Athletic and a second-team selection from The Associated Press. Florida center Jake Slaughter earned the first-team selection over McLaughlin.

Smith was also a second-team AP All-American as well as On3's freshman All-American of the Year and was named a finalist for the Shaun Alexander Freshman of the Year award after an impressive first collegiate season in which he smashed every Ohio State freshman single-season receiving record previously set by Pro Football Hall of Famer Cris Carter in 1984, catching 57 passes for a team-high 934 receiving yards and 10 touchdowns.

Jackson, now a three-time first-team All-Big Ten selection, also earned himself a spot on the AP-All America second team as well as the Senior Bowl All-America team following a senior season in which he showed off his versatility on the offensive line. He played his first six games at left guard then the final six at left tackle while filling in for the injured Simmons, who went down for the year after suffering a knee injury in the team's Oct. 12 loss at Oregon.

The final Buckeye to receive All-American honors was fifth-year safety Lathan Ranson, who earned a third-team AP All-America selection after recording 57 tackles (six for loss), three forced fumbles, a fumble recovery returned for a touchdown, a pass breakup and a quarterback hurry.

Simmons Declares For NFL Draft

Speaking of Simmons, it was reported on Dec. 4 by ESPN Senior NFL Insider Adam Schefter that the senior has decided to forgo his final year of collegiate eligibility and declare for the 2025 NFL draft.

Simmons, who started 19 games for Ohio State in his two seasons with the program, was having his best season at the college level before going down with the season-ending injury against the Ducks, a strong start that allowed him to shoot up many NFL draft boards.

According to NFLMockDraftDataBase.com, the San Diego State transfer is projected to be selected in the first round with his overall ranking coming in at No. 30 and his best ranking being at No. 25. Simmons' agent, Drew Rosenhaus, said that his client could find his way into the early first round of this year's draft because he is making a swift recovery from his surgery.

"Josh will be fully cleared for practice by the start of NFL training camp, and he will be a high first-round pick," said Rosenhaus.

Simmons did have another year of collegiate eligibility remaining and could have decided to come back to Columbus, but he will instead try to heal up and continue raising his draft stock heading into the spring.

The loss of the 6-5, 310-pound Simmons is a significant one for Justin Frye's offensive line next season, a unit that will look much different with Jackson, McLaughlin and right tackle Josh Fryar having all exhausted their collegiate eligibility after the 2024 season.

Knowles Named Broyles Award Semifinalist

Ohio State defensive coordinator Jim Knowles was named on Dec. 3 as one of 15 semifinalists for the Broyles Award, given annually to the nation's top assistant coach.

Knowles has transformed the Buckeye defense into the nation's best in his third season leading the unit, with the group finishing the regular season ranking first in both scoring defense (10.9 points allowed per game) and total defense (241.1 yards allowed per game) while also ranking second in passing defense (144.3) and seventh in rushing defense (96.8).

Ohio State's defense, which ranked second in scoring defense (11.2) and third in total defense (265.4) in 2023, took an extra step forward this season behind the play of All-Big

Final CFP Rankings

Rk.	Team	Record
1	Oregon	13-0
2	Georgia	11-2
3	Texas	11-2
4	Penn State	11-2
5	Notre Dame	11-1
6	**Ohio State**	**10-2**
7	Tennessee	10-2
8	Indiana	11-1
9	Boise State	12-1
10	SMU	11-2
11	Alabama	9-3
12	Arizona State	11-2
13	Miami (Fla.)	10-2
14	Ole Miss	9-3
15	South Carolina	9-3
16	Clemson	10-3
17	BYU	10-2
18	Iowa State	10-3
19	Missouri	9-3
20	Illinois	9-3
21	Syracuse	9-3
22	Army	11-2
23	Colorado	9-3
24	UNLV	10-3
25	Memphis	10-2

Ten defenders such as first-teamers Downs, Ransom, Cody Simon and JT Tuimoloau as well as second-teamers Jack Sawyer and Sonny Styles.

That group as well as Knowles' teaching helped Ohio State record two shutouts on the season, first against Western Michigan on Sept. 7 (56-0) and then vs. Purdue on Nov. 9 (45-0). The win over the Broncos marked the first time the Buckeyes allowed zero points in a game since 2019.

Knowles was joined on the list by a group of 15 semifinalists that has since been narrowed down to five finalists, with the Buckeye defensive coordinator missing the cut. The five finalists for the award were Arizona State offensive coordinator Marcus Arroyo along with defensive coordinators Bryant Haines of Indiana, Al Golden of Notre Dame, Tim Banks of Tennessee and Pete Kwiatkowski of Texas.

A winner for the award – which was won last year by longtime Iowa defensive coordinator Phil Parker – will be declared at the Broyles Award Ceremony on Feb. 13, 2025.

Hartline Interviews For WVU HC Position

Ohio State co-offensive coordinator/wide receivers coach Brian Hartline once again garnered head coaching interest from a notable school on Dec. 11 when he reportedly completed an interview with West Virginia for the program's now-filled head coaching vacancy.

The Mountaineers, who fired Neal Brown on Dec. 1 after six disappointing seasons, rehired former Michigan and Arizona head coach Rich Rodriguez on Dec. 12. He led West Virginia to a combined 60-26 record while leading the program from 2001-07.

Hartline earned the interview with West Virginia due to his status as one of the top assistant coaches and recruiters in all of college football.

Since joining the OSU staff as a wide receivers quality control coach in 2017, he has helped mold or recruit a plethora of future NFL first-round draft picks, a group that includes Marvin Harrison Jr., Chris Olave, Jaxon Smith-Njigba and Garrett Wilson, among others. The former OSU and Miami Dolphins wideout has also recruited and molded several players on this year's squad into standout college players and potential first-round NFL draft selections, including starting wideouts

Continued On Page 8

2024 All-Big Ten Football Teams

Here is a look at the All-Big Ten football teams as selected by the coaches and media. **Ohio State players are in bold.**

Coaches Team

FIRST-TEAM OFFENSE:
QB – J.Dillon Gabriel, Oregon
RB – Kaleb Johnson, Iowa
RB – Kyle Monangai, Rutgers
WR – Tai Felton, Maryland
WR – **Jeremiah Smith, Ohio State**
C – Seth McLaughlin, Ohio State
OG – Connor Colby, Iowa
OG – Donovan Jackson, Ohio State
OT – Aireontae Ersery, Minnesota
OT – Josh Conerly Jr., Oregon
TE – Tyler Warren, Penn State

FIRST-TEAM DEFENSE:
DL – Mikail Kamara, Indiana
DL – Mason Graham, Michigan
DL – **JT Tuimoloau, Ohio State**
DL – Abdul Carter, Penn State
DL –*
LB – Aiden Fisher, Indiana
LB – Jay Higgins, Iowa
LB – Cody Lindenberg, Minnesota
LB – *Carson Schwesinger, UCLA
DB – D'Angelo Ponds, Indiana
DB – Koi Perich, Minnesota
DB – Caleb Downs, Ohio State
DB – Lathan Ransom, Ohio State

FIRST-TEAM SPECIAL TEAMS:
K* – Dominic Zvada, Michigan
P – Eddie Czaplicki, USC
Returner – Kaden Wetjen, Iowa
LS – William Wagner, Michigan

SECOND-TEAM OFFENSE:
Kurtis Rourke, Indiana
Jordan James, Oregon
Woody Marks, USC
Pat Bryant, Illinois
Tez Johnson, Oregon
Logan Jones, Iowa
Olaivavega Ioane, Penn State
Emmanuel Pregnon, USC
Gennings Dunker, Iowa
Hollin Pierce, Rutgers
Colston Loveland, Michigan

SECOND-TEAM DEFENSE:
Kenneth Grant, Michigan
Josaiah Stewart, Michigan
Matayo Uiagalelei, Oregon
Jack Sawyer, Ohio State

Bryce Boettcher, Oregon
Sonny Styles, Ohio State
Kobe King, Penn State

Xavier Scott, Illinois
Justin Walley, Minnesota
Theran Johnson, Northwestern
Jaylen Reed, Penn State

SECOND-TEAM SPECIAL TEAMS:
Jonathan Kim, Michigan State
Ryan Eckley, Michigan State
Tez Johnson, Oregon
Luke Basso, Oregon

THIRD-TEAM OFFENSE:
Will Howard, Ohio State
TreVeyon Henderson, Ohio State
Quinshon Judkins, Ohio State
Elijah Sarratt, Indiana
Emeka Egbuka, Ohio State
Jonah Monheim, USC
Marcus Harper II, Oregon
Joe Huber, Wisconsin
J.C. Davis, Illinois
Ajani Cornelius, Oregon
Max Klare, Purdue

THIRD-TEAM DEFENSE:
Gabe Jacas, Illinois
Ty Robinson, Nebraska
Jordan Burch, Oregon
Derrick Harmon, Oregon
Tyleik Williams, Ohio State
Cody Simon, Ohio State
Kain Medrano, UCLA
Carson Bruener, Washington

Sebastian Castro, Iowa
Jermari Harris, Iowa
A.J. Harris, Penn State
Jaylin Smith, USC

THIRD-TEAM SPECIAL TEAMS:
Drew Stevens, Iowa
Rhys Dakin, Iowa
Makai Lemon, USC
Hank Pepper, USC

OFFENSE HONORABLE MENTION: ILLINOIS: Luke Altmyer, Josh Kreutz, Josh Gesky, Melvin Priestly; INDIANA: Justice Ellison, Zach Horton, Mike Katic, Carter Smith; IOWA: Beau Stephens, Mason Richman; MICHIGAN: Kalel Mullings, Donovan Edwards, Josh Priebe, Giovanni El-Hadi, Myles Hinton; MICHIGAN STATE: Luke Newman; MINNESOTA: Daniel Jackson, Darius Taylor, Tyler Cooper; NEBRASKA: Bryce Benhart; NORTHWESTERN: Josh Thompson, Caleb Tiernan; **OHIO STATE: Tegra Tshabola, Josh Fryar, Josh Simmons;** OREGON: Evan Stewart, Traeshon Holden, Iapani Laloulu; PENN STATE: Drew Allar, Nicholas Singleton, Sal Wormley, Drew Shelton, Anthony Donkoh; PURDUE: Gus Hartwig, Marcus Mbow; RUTGERS: Ian Strong, Kwabena Asamoah; USC: Makai Lemon, Lake McRee, Elijah Paige; WASHINGTON: Denzel Boston, Jonah Coleman, Keleki Latu; WISCONSIN: Tawee Walker, Jack Nelson.

DEFENSE HONORABLE MENTION: ILLINOIS: Dylan Rosiek, TeRah Edwards; INDIANA: CJ West, Jailin Walker, James Carpenter; IOWA: Aaron Graves, Ethan Hurkett, Nick Jackson, Quinn Schulte, Yahya Black; MARYLAND: Dante Trader Jr.; MICHIGAN: Derrick Moore, Ernest Hausmann, Will Johnson, Zeke Berry; MICHIGAN STATE: Charles Brantley, Jordan Turner; MINNESOTA: Anthony Smith, Danny Striggow, Ethan Robinson, Jah Joyner; NEBRASKA: John Bullock, Malcolm Hartzog Jr., Nash Hutmacher; NORTHWESTERN: Aidan Hubbard, Anto Saka, Damon Walters, Xander Mueller; **OHIO STATE: Davison Igbinosun, Denzel Burke, Ty Hamilton;** OREGON: Jabbar Muhammad, Jamaree Caldwell, Jeff Bassa, Nikko Reed, Teitum Tuioti, Tysheem Johnson; PENN STATE: Tony Rojas, Zane Durant; PURDUE: Dillon Thieneman, Kydran Jenkins, Will Heldt; RUTGERS: Dariel Djabome, Kyonte Hamilton, Robert Longerbeam; UCLA: Jay Toia, Kaylin Moore; USC: Easton Mascarenas-Arnold, Gavin Meyer, Kamari Ramsey; WASHINGTON: Alphonzo Tuputala, Sebastian Valdez, Thaddeus Dixon; WISCONSIN: Hunter Wohler, Ricardo Hallman.

SPECIAL TEAMS HONORABLE MENTION: ILLINOIS: Hank Beatty, Lane Hansen, David Olano; INDIANA: Mark Langston; IOWA: Luke Elkin; Maryland: Bryce McFerson; Michigan: Semaj Morgan; MINNESOTA: Koi Perich, Alan Soukup; NEBRASKA: Brian Buschini; NORTHWESTERN: Joe Himon; **OHIO STATE: John Ferlmann,** OREGON: Atticus Sappington; PENN STATE: Tyler Duzansky, Ryan Barker; PURDUE: Nick Levy, Keelan Crimmins; RUTGERS: Austin Riggs; WISCONSIN: Atticus Bertrams.

Media Team

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QB – Dillon Gabriel, Oregon
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RB – Kyle Monangai, Rutgers
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Bryce Boettcher, Oregon
Kobe King, Penn State

Will Johnson, Michigan
Lathan Ransom, Ohio State
Jabbar Muhammad, Oregon
Jaylen Reed, Penn State

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Jonathan Kim, Michigan State
Rhys Dakin, Iowa
Koi Perich, Minnesota
Luke Elkin, Iowa

THIRD-TEAM OFFENSE:
Will Howard, Ohio State
Kalel Mullings, Michigan
Jonah Coleman, Washington
Elijah Sarratt, Indiana
Emeka Egbuka, Ohio State
Mike Katic, Indiana
Josh Priebe, Michigan
Sal Wormley, Penn State
Gennings Dunker, Iowa
Josh Simmons, Ohio State
Terrance Ferguson, Oregon

THIRD-TEAM DEFENSE:
Gabe Jacas, Illinois
Ty Robinson, Nebraska
Jack Sawyer, Ohio State
Jordan Burch, Oregon
Kydran Jenkins, Purdue
Dariel Djabome, Rutgers
Carson Bruener, Washington

Sebastian Castro, Iowa
Jermari Harris, Iowa
Denzel Burke, Ohio State
A.J. Harris, Penn State

THIRD-TEAM SPECIAL TEAMS:
Drew Stevens, Iowa
Ryan Eckley, Michigan State
Hank Beatty, Illinois
Tyler Duzansky, Penn State

OFFENSE HONORABLE MENTION ILLINOIS: J.C. Davis, Josh Gesky, Josh Kreutz, Luke Altmyer; INDIANA: Carter Smith, Justice Ellison, Myles Price, Zach Horton; IOWA: Beau Stephens, Luke Lachey, Mason Richman; MICHIGAN: Giovanni El-Hadi, Myles Hinton; MICHIGAN STATE: Luke Newman; MINNESOTA: Daniel Jackson, Darius Taylor, Quinn Carroll, Tyler Cooper; NEBRASKA: Ben Scott; NORTHWESTERN: Caleb Tiernan, Josh Thompson; **OHIO STATE: Josh Fryar, Quinshon Judkins, TreVeyon Henderson;** OREGON: Iapani Laloulu, Marcus Harper II; PENN STATE: Anthony Donkoh, Drew Allar, Drew Shelton, Harrison Wallace III, Kaytron Allen, Nicholas Singleton, Nick Dawkins; PURDUE: Gus Hartwig, Max Klare; RUTGERS: Gus Zilinskas, Kwabena Asamoah; USC: Jonah Monheim, Makai Lemon; WASHINGTON: Denzel Boston; WISCONSIN: Jack Nelson, Joe Huber, Tawee Walker.

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* - additional honorees due to ties

INSIDER

Continued From Page 7

Egbuka, Smith and Tate.

Hartline, who has another likely star wideout coming to Columbus in 2026 five-star wide receiver and consensus No. 1 prospect Chris Henry Jr. (6-5, 205) of Santa Ana (Calif.) Mater Dei, has also earned a reputation as an elite offensive mind, which allowed him to be promoted to offensive coordinator in 2023, although Day continued to call plays that entire year.

While Hartline now appears to be staying in Columbus for the time being, this is not the first time he has received head coaching interest from other schools. He also reportedly landed an interview for the head coaching vacancy at Cincinnati in 2022 after Luke Fickell departed for Wisconsin.

Howard Earns Invite To Senior Bowl

Howard did not end his regular season the way he wanted to in a loss to Michigan, but he still showed enough promise throughout the year to impress Senior Bowl scouts.

Howard reciprocated that interest from the Senior Bowl on Dec. 3 when he accepted an invitation to play in the college All-Star event held at Hancock Whitney Stadium in Mobile, Ala., on Feb. 1, 2025, where he will look to improve his draft stock against some of the best seniors from the 2024 season.

Howard, who said earlier in the season that he decided to return to college and enroll at Ohio State to try to improve his NFL draft stock, earned a trip to the Senior Bowl with a solid year as Ohio State's signal caller.

In 12 games as the Buckeyes' starting quarterback, the Downingtown, Pa. native completed 227 of his 314 passes (72.3 percent) for 2,860 yards and 27 touchdowns to eight interceptions, while also showing off his skills as a runner by gaining 240 yards on the ground – he lost 109 yards on the year due to sacks to put his net total at 131 – with seven touchdowns.

Howard's accuracy and efficiency were perhaps his biggest strengths this year. He finished the regular season ranked third in the nation in passing efficiency with a mark of 172.1 while also completing over 80.0 percent of his passes in six games this season, the most ever by a Buckeye quarterback in a single season.

The Kansas State transfer had by far his worst performance of the year against Michigan, passing for a season-low 175 yards with one touchdown while also throwing two interceptions, but he still has the opportunity to finish his collegiate career on a high note and further impress scouts in the College Football Playoff.

Howard will be joined on the Senior Bowl roster by his now-former starting center McLaughlin – who accepted his invitation on Nov. 13 just before going down with his season-ending injury – along with a few other familiar faces around the college football world, including defensive linemen Jordan Burch (Oregon) and Josaiah Stewart (Michigan), quarterbacks Dillon Gabriel (Oregon) and Riley Leonard (Notre Dame) and wide receivers Tai Felton (Maryland) and Tez Johnson (Oregon), among others.

2025 Football Schedule Solidified

The Ohio State football schedule for the

From The Pages Of BSB

40 Years Ago— 1984

As expected, Keith Byars took a box full of awards home with him from the annual Football Appreciation Banquet, held Nov. 26 in the Ohio Union.

First, trainer Billy Hill announced Byars' name along with several others as recipients of an Ironman Award in honor of not missing a practice during the 1984 season.

Then, Byars received an award from Sigma Alfa Epsilon given each year to the most valuable player in the homecoming game. That was the Illinois game, in which Byars rushed for 274 yards and scored five touchdowns, both Ohio State records, in the 45-38 Buckeye victory.

Those two victories were only a warmup. Still to come were three more trips to the podium for Ohio State's most productive offensive player ever.

The Rex Kern Award, given annually to the top offensive back, summoned Byars and quarterback Mike Tomczak to the stand as co-winners.

Archie Griffin then took center stage to name Byars the 1984 recipient of the Archie Griffin Award as the offensive player of the year.

Byars entered the Rose Bowl just 40 yards short of Griffin's Big Ten rushing record of 1,695 yards, and Griffin didn't mind hanging on to the mark.

"You just about broke every other record of mine. Why don't you save me one?" Griffin said with a smile before acknowledging his vote for the Heisman Trophy five days before Boston College's Doug Flutie would be named the '84 winner.

"I consider you the most outstanding offensive player in America," Griffin told Byars. "What I'm trying to say is that you're very deserving of the Heisman Trophy."

35 Years Ago — 1989

The Big Ten football world was rocked by the announcement Dec. 13 from Michigan head coach Bo Schembechler that he would resign, effective after the Wolverines' Rose Bowl date with Southern Cal.

At a press conference, Schembechler said he was resigning because "I felt it was just time to get out."

Schembechler said that he had a feeling that he would not be back next year following the Ohio State game. He added that his decision had nothing to do with his health, which he proclaimed was good.

"I just didn't want to run my luck too far," he said.

Schembechler had had one heart attack and two heart operations.

He wasted no time naming his successor. Longtime offensive coordinator Gary Moeller, a Lima, Ohio, native who had played for Ohio State, would be the new Michigan head coach.

Moeller was previously head coach at Illinois from 1977-79.

Schembechler finished with a career record of 234-65-8, which was the most wins among active football coaches.

30 Years Ago — 1994

Though he did not gloat — as he had every right to — John Cooper made a clear point during Ohio State's Dec. 2 announcement that he had agreed to a new five-year contract with the school.

"I think stability is very, very important in any program, and certainly it's important in the decision here now," said the often-embattled Cooper. "The message is loud and clear. Those schools that have been using this against us the last two or three years … it's over.

"I'm going to be here. And that's one of the exciting things about it for me and our coaching staff, the fact that we do have stability in this program and, 'Hey, let's get on with it.' "

The seventh-year OSU head coach, preparing for a Jan. 2 Citrus Bowl date with Alabama, had churned out highly rated recruiting classes in the last few years despite heavy speculation that his current contract would not be renewed. That conjecture finally ended two weeks after Ohio State's first win over Michigan in the Cooper era with a renewal that secured the coach through the end of the 1999 season.

Cooper owned a 54-25-4 record at OSU, which included a 35-17-4 mark in the Big Ten.

25 Years Ago — 1999

Coming off the worst season since his initial campaign in 1988, Cooper decided to make some changes with his staff.

Cooper met with the media Nov. 29 – just nine days after his team ended the year 6-6 with a loss at Michigan – to announce that he had decided to not renew the contracts of offensive coordinator Mike Jacobs and defensive ends coach Shawn Simms.

In addition to letting Jacobs and Simms go, Cooper promoted defensive coordinator Fred Pagac to assistant head coach, secondary coach Jen Tenuta to defensive coordinator and receivers coach Chuck Stobart to offensive coordinator.

"I just felt some changes needed to be made with our staff," Cooper said. "I wasn't happy with the play of our team this year, in all areas – offense, defense and special teams. I just felt in this case it was in the best interest of our program to do this."

20 Years Ago —2004

After a couple questions about bowl preparations during an interview at the Woody Hayes Athletic Center on Dec. 14, an unusual one came.

"Do you know Randy Lerner?" a reporter asked.

Ohio State head coach Tim Tressel paused for a moment then shook his head and replied, "No."

"Would you like to?" was the follow-up.

For those who don't know, Lerner was then the owner of the Cleveland Browns, a team that was in the market for a new head coach. At least one newspaper — the Denver Post — went on record as saying Tressel would make a perfect replacement for Butch Davis in Cleveland, but the Ohio State head coach said he had no desire whatsoever to try his hand at the NFL.

"No," Tressel replied when asked if he would be interested in the Browns job.

When someone wondered aloud if his coaching style would fit the professional ranks, he answered, "I doubt it. Look, I was an education major in school, and I feel education is my calling. There is a lot of education at the high school and college level, and that's what I want to do. I think I'm better suited for the education level."

15 Years Ago — 2009

Ohio State president Dr. E. Gordon Gee met with reporters Dec. 14 and reaffirmed his distaste for a playoff for Division I-A college football. He did not guarantee the continued existence of the Bowl Championship Series, either.

"I can assure you there is no support among the college presidents in this country for a BCS playoff system," he said. "If anything, there is (support for) a move back to the bowl system, so I would have to say that (a playoff scenario) is losing support among college presidents."

Asked to expand on that statement, Gee said he felt the BCS worked perfectly as it was intended to, but that when the committee of which he was a member worked with ABC to draw up the forerunner to the BCS in 1995, they did not anticipate potential interference from the U.S. Congress or moves by conferences from outside the BCS to gain admittance.

"With the BCS system now, we have up until 2014," he said, "but when you talk to presidents and ask beyond that what we should do, many of them say we should not move to renew (the BCS contract). We might even think about moving back to the (previous) bowl system."

10 Years Ago — 2014

When the clock ticked down to zero in the fourth quarter of Ohio State's 59-0 win over Wisconsin on Dec. 6, members of the 2014 Ohio State Buckeyes could no longer say they were a group without a ring. Sure, there were division titles in three consecutive years, but the Buckeyes hadn't been able to capitalize on that for reasons on the field (2013) and off (2012).

The last five minutes on the sideline felt like a party. Players crept over to the Gatorade jugs and attacked their coaches from behind, while others exchanged hugs or danced on benches.

"We've been waiting for this for four years," senior defensive tackle Michael Bennett said. "It means so much to me to be able to do this with these young guys that have contributed and take it seriously. You don't see that in every program where the young guys look up to the seniors and respect them the way our young guys do. That just means a lot to me because it shows how close this team is and how much we care about each other.

"We've been hyped up before a lot of games, but this game was different – the way guys looked at each other, the way guys cared about each other. Just so much intensity, and people have taken ownership in what they do. It was incredible. I'm blessed to be a part of it."

Five Years Ago — 2019

As expected, LSU quarterback Joe Burrow was named the 2019 recipient of the Heisman Trophy on Dec. 14, receiving a record 90.7 percent of the total first-place votes to break the mark set by former Ohio State quarterback Troy Smith in 2006.

But before he headed to the stage at the PlayStation Theatre in New York City to give his acceptance speech, Burrow made an unexpected detour.

He shared congratulatory hugs with the other finalists – including Oklahoma quarterback Jalen Hurts and Ohio State quarterback Justin Fields and defensive end Chase Young – as well as his parents, Jim and Robin; LSU head coach Ed Orgeron; and a handful of assistants who also made the trip to see Burrow win LSU's second Heisman in program history, the first being running back Billy Cannon in 1959.

Burrow – who played for the Buckeyes from 2015-17 before pursuing a graduate transfer – then made his way across the room to where Ohio State head coach Ryan Day and director of sports performance Mickey Marotti were sitting and gave each of them a hug.

Then after lifting the trophy, he expressed his gratitude for his time with the Buckeyes.

"I'm just so thankful for LSU and Ohio State, two of the great programs in the country," Burrow said while fighting back tears. "Great coaches at both places. My journey… I wouldn't have traded it for anything in the world."

One Year Ago — 2023

Ohio State junior quarterback Kyle McCord was the biggest name in a group of 14 Buckeyes, also including wide receiver Julian Fleming, who announced entrance into the NCAA transfer portal on Dec. 4.

"I'm extremely thankful for my time at Ohio State," McCord said in a statement. "Playing in the scarlet and gray was truly an honor. I'm grateful for all of the lifelong relationships I've made along the way here in Columbus. My teammates, my brothers, I'm appreciative for each and every one of you. Thank you to Coach (Ryan) Day, Coach (Corey) Dennis, Coach (Todd) Fitch and the rest of the staff and support team. "

"Buckeye Nation, your passion is what makes playing in Columbus special. With that being said, I've decided to enter the transfer portal to explore other opportunities."

It left Ohio State in an unenviable position of not knowing who would take the reins at quarterback next season. It could have been Devin Brown or Lincoln Kienholz, who were entering their third and second seasons, respectively, with the Buckeyes. It could have been five-star quarterback Air Noland (6-3, 185) out of Fairburn, Ga., who was scheduled to arrive on campus in January.

The more likely option, though, was just as McCord was utilizing the portal, Ohio State would look at the portal and see what options were out there at quarterback, whether it was an expected starter or someone who would compete with the other quarterbacks on the roster.

2025 season was released on Dec. 11.

Ohio State will now officially open the season up at home against Texas on Aug. 30 in what will be a matchup with several storylines attached, perhaps none more interesting than Longhorn quarterback Arch Manning potentially making his first true start for Texas against the Buckeyes in Ohio Stadium.

The Buckeyes will then play a pair of non-conference home games, first against Grambling State on Sept. 6 and then against Ohio University on Sept. 13, before heading into their first off week on Sept 20.

From there on will be the start of Big Ten play, where the Buckeyes will open up at Washington on Sept. 27 in what will be the two teams' first matchup as Big Ten foes, followed by a home game against Minnesota on Oct. 4 and road contests against Illinois on Oct. 11 and Wisconsin on Oct. 18 before their second off week of the year on Oct. 25.

Ohio State will then close the 2025 slate with Penn State at home on Nov. 1, Purdue on the road on Nov. 8, UCLA at home on Nov. 15, Rutgers at home on Nov. 22 and finally Michigan in Ann Arbor on Nov. 29, where the Buckeyes will look to break their four-game losing streak against their archrivals.

McCord 10th In Heisman Trophy Voting

Former Ohio State quarterback Kyle McCord was recognized for an impressive season at Syracuse this year when he finished 10th in the Heisman Trophy voting.

Colorado two-way star Travis Hunter was named the winner of the award on Dec. 14 over finalists Gabriel of Oregon, Ashton Jeanty of Boise State and Cam Ward of Miami after receiving 2,231 points (552 first-place votes), 214 more than Jeanty (2,017 points, 309 first-place votes).

McCord received one second-place vote and seven third-place votes for a total of nine points after an excellent regular season at Syracuse in which he threw for an FBS-leading 4,236 yards along with 29 touchdowns and 12 interceptions. Those stats helped him earn second-team All-ACC honors and guide the Orange to a 9-3 record (5-3 in ACC), their best season since 2010, and a berth in the Holiday Bowl against Washington State on Dec. 27 (8 p.m., FOX).

McCord's individual stats with the Orange have helped him emerge as a potential late-round NFL draft selection if he opts to forgo his final season of eligibility and enter the draft this offseason, a status that he did not necessarily have after his one season starting for the Buckeyes in 2023.

He completed 229 of his 348 passes for 3,170 yards and 24 touchdowns to six interceptions for the Scarlet and Gray last season, leading the Buckeyes to an 11-1 regular-season record before entering the transfer portal just nine days after the team's loss to Michigan.

Ohio Rep. Introduces Anti-Flag Planting Bill

Beware, flag planters at Ohio Stadium, you may wander into becoming a felon.

Ohio State Rep. Josh Williams (R-Sylvania Twp.) introduced a bill on Dec. 10, titled the O.H.I.O Sportsmanship Act, that would make flag planting at Ohio Stadium a felony.

Officially called House Bill 700 while it is pending approval, the law would "prohibit planting a flagpole and flag in the center of the Ohio Stadium football field on the day of a college football game and to name this act the O.H.I.O. Sportsmanship Act."

Williams – who said he was "born and raised a Buckeye" despite online critics saying that he may have been a Michigan fan who was trying to make Ohio State look bad – told The Columbus Dispatch in a Dec. 12 interview that he knew the flag-planting bill would not become a law and simply introduced it to get the NCAA and the Big Ten's attention.

"I introduced it at the very end of the General Assembly in lame duck. I knew it wouldn't move," Williams said. "It's not even going to get a hearing. It was intended to be a shot across the bow at the NCAA, the Big Ten that they need to take tougher steps, or eventually the legislature will have to step in if this continues."

While it is unclear if the bill captured the attention of the Big Ten or NCAA, it did do so for Ohio governor Mike DeWine, who expressed skepticism over the bill and how it would be enforced.

"Who the hell's going to enforce that?" he said on Dec. 12.

This all arises from the over five-minute brawl that broke out between Michigan and Ohio State at Ohio Stadium on Nov. 30 over the Wolverines' attempt to plant a U-M flag at midfield, which ended in players and media members being pepper sprayed by police and one officer being sent to the hospital after suffering a head injury in the scuffle.

Both teams received $100,000 fines from the Big Ten the day after the brawl.

Carter Says Day Needs To Win It All

During an interview on the Stephen A. Smith Show on Dec. 3, Carter, the former Buckeye receiver, voiced his displeasure with the current state of the program after its fourth straight loss to Michigan under Day.

"If you look at the quarterbacks that he's had, if you look at the offensive productivity he's had, and lack of mettle to win the big one but one time and no national championships, yes, your job will be in jeopardy at Ohio State just like his is," Carter said of Day.

After starting his career with back-to-back Big Ten championships, Day's teams' losses to Michigan have largely prevented them from collecting other trophies.

"If you go 1-4 against Michigan, anything else that you do besides winning the national championship. ... my coach at Ohio State, Earle Bruce, went 9-3 a couple of seasons and they fired him," Carter said. "John Cooper, he had all the Heisman Trophy winners. He had all the big first-round draft picks, the Outland Trophy winners."

Meyer Shuts Down Rumors Of Return

Meyer refuted rumors of him potentially being interested in returning as Ohio State head coach if the position opens up over the offseason, saying in a written statement released on Dec. 5 that he has "no interest" in being on the sideline again.

"It has come to my attention that there are reports speculating my return to the sidelines in Columbus," Meyer said in the statement, which was released on the official Twitter account for his "The Triple Option" podcast. "While I thoroughly enjoyed my seven seasons as head coach at The Ohio State University, I have no interest in coaching again. I will always be a Buckeye and have full confidence in Day, his staff and every player that puts on the Scarlet and Gray."

Meyer's statement came just days after former ESPN sports anchor and current co-host of "The Ultimate Cleveland Sports Show" Jay Crawford said that he had talked to multiple people close to the university who believed Meyer would return to Ohio State if he was asked to and that he "never wanted to leave Ohio State" when he retired in 2018.

These claims now seem to be unfounded, as Meyer not only refuted Crawford's report but has stated multiple times over the past several years that he has no plans to coach football again.

Meyer, who compiled an impressive 83-9 record in his seven seasons leading the Buckeyes (2012-18) that included a perfect 7-0 record against Michigan and a 2014 national championship, last served as a head coach in 2021 for the NFL's Jacksonville Jaguars, a tumultuous and scandal-ridden stint that lasted just 13 games after Meyer led the Jaguars to just a 2-11 record.

Meyer now serves as an analyst for FOX Sports' "Big Noon Kickoff," which frequently airs from Columbus, visiting Ohio State for each of its last four home games this season.

Meyer was on hand for the team's loss to Michigan, a defeat which he said will cause Day and the Buckeyes "365 days of pain."

Day, Staff Earn Bonuses For CFP Berth

Ohio State making the cut in the 2024 College Football Playoff has Day and 10 assistants in position to collect just over $1.24 million in combined bonuses according to the Dispatch.

Ohio State's inclusion into the 12-team playoff as the No. 8-seed has Day taking home a $100,000 bonus. The assistant coaches, who receive a 10 percent bonus of their base salary for the playoff berth, are led by offensive coordinator Chip Kelly and Knowles, who will make $200,000 and $220,000, respectively.

None of the position coaches' bonuses reached the $200,000 mark, but a portion of them brought in at least six figures. Hartline brought in a bonus of $160,000, defensive line coach Larry Johnson and secondary coach Tim Walton both made bonuses of $140,000, while Frye's bonus was $100,000.

First-year running backs coach Carlos Locklyn brought in $65,000, while safeties coach Matt Guerrieri made $42,500, tight ends coach Keenan Bailey made $40,000 and linebackers coach James Laurinaitis made $35,000.

If the Buckeyes can make a run in the College Football Playoff and ultimately win the national championship, the coaching staff could earn combined bonuses of nearly $5 million.

Former OSU DC Coombs Fired At Cincinnati

Former Ohio State cornerbacks coach and defensive coordinator Kerry Coombs was fired from his post as Cincinnati's cornerbacks and special teams coach. Coombs' firing comes after the Bearcats allowed 222.8 passing yards per game, which ranked 75th in the country.

Coombs joined the Cincinnati staff after being fired from the defensive coordinator job in Columbus, a position he held for two seasons. Coombs' 2021 Ohio State defense gave up 372.9 yards per game, which ranked tied for 59th in the country. The team's defensive woes were particularly costly in a 35-28 loss to Oregon and a regular season-ending 42-27 loss to Michigan.

Coombs initially joined the Bearcats' staff when former Ohio State interim head coach Fickell was at the helm. When Fickell left to take the Wisconsin job and was ultimately replaced by current-Cincinnati head coach Scott Satterfield, Coombs remained on the staff as the cornerbacks coach and special teams coach until his firing.

OSU Club Football Wins Third National Title

The Ohio State club football team added another piece of hardware to its crowded trophy case on Dec. 7 when it won the National Club Football Association (NCFA) championship with a 20-13 victory over Clayton State.

The win gave the Buckeyes and head coach/offensive coordinator/quarterbacks coach James Grega Jr. their third national title since 2019 – their last championship coming in 2021 – which is the most in NCFA history, eclipsing Oakland and Coppin State with two.

It didn't seem like Ohio State was in line for

Continued On Page 10

OHIO STATE
INSIDER

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Sets CFP Contingency Print Schedule

The next print issue of Buckeye Sports Bulletin, the Jan. 18, 2025, edition, is currently scheduled to be mailed on Jan. 14. However, if Ohio State advances to the CFP national championship game on Jan. 20, the print date will be pushed back to Jan. 22, and we will return to our regularly posted schedule on Jan. 28 (Feb. 1 cover date).

With so many potential games and so few BSB print issues to cover them, don't forget that the BSB staff will be covering all the action, including complete game coverage, daily at the electronic BuckeyeSports.com, free to all BSB subscribers. This would also be a great time to jump on the Forum, as the discussion between readers and the BSB staff is bound to be lively.

And remember, the complete edition of each print BSB is posted at BuckeyeSports.com immediately upon publication. This is a great stopgap measure for those of you who are continuing to have mail delivery problems, while your paper winds its way through the postal system.

BuckeyeSports.com also offers plenty of additional content not found in your paper. The Buckeye Sports Bulletin staff reports on the breaking stories, plus posts additional features. This is also where you can find the latest recruiting news.

Along with daily posts, we offer reprints from the Buckeye Sports Bulletin archives as part of our popular Reprint Thursdays

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Continued From Page 9

a third championship early on when it found itself in a 13-0 first-half hole midway through the second quarter, but the Buckeyes stormed back to score the game's final 20 points and earn the narrow victory over the Lakers, who made it all the way to the national title game in their first-ever club season.

The comeback was sparked by the Buckeyes' defense, which forced four turnovers – three fumbles and one interception – to help set the offense in sound field position and ended the game with a goal-line stand as time expired.

Tight end Aidan Donovan was named the game's Most Valuable Player after scoring all three of Ohio State's touchdowns on the ground, including the go-ahead score with 4:57 left in the game. He finished the day with eight carries for 14 yards and the three scores along with another three catches for 38 yards.

With three championships in five seasons, Ohio State's club team has created a powerhouse program under Grega's leadership. Since he took over as head coach in 2018, the Buckeyes have had four of their players elevated as walk-ons at the varsity level and two players make it to the NFL.

OSU Posts Near-Record Graduation Success Rate

Ohio State student-athletes matched school-best single-year and four-year rolling scores of 94 and 93 according to the NCAA's Graduation Success Rate date released on Nov. 28.

"Last year, Ohio State posted all-time highs in both the single-year (94) and multiyear (93) GSR scores," said John E. Davidson, the faculty athletics representative. "By matching those scores this year, our student-athletes showed that they hold this high achievement to be our standard."

Contributing to Ohio State's high GSR numbers were 13 programs that had a GSR score of 100, including artistic swimming, women's cross country/track and field, men's fencing, women's fencing, field hockey, men's golf, women's golf, women's lacrosse, rifle, women's soccer, men's tennis, women's tennis and men's volleyball.

Ohio State also had 10 programs with GSR scores of 90 or better including, baseball, men's cross country/track and field, women's ice hockey, men's lacrosse, women's rowing, men's soccer, softball, men's swimming and diving, women's swimming and diving and wrestling.

The football team didn't quite reach the 90 score threshold but recorded a new program-best score of 89, which surpassed the 87 it recorded last year.

13 Buckeyes Graduate On Dec. 15

The football team's improved GSR score was reflected on Dec. 15 during commencement ceremonies at Value City Arena, when 13 Buckeyes received degrees or certificates, including eight starters.

The starting Buckeyes who received degrees or certificates included cornerback Denzel Burke (sport industry), Fryar (human development and family science), running back TreVeyon Henderson (sport industry), Howard (master's degree in sport's coaching), Ransom (DEI certificate) and defensive linemen Sawyer (sport industry) and Tyleik Williams (sport industry), while graduating reserves included kicker Casey Magyar (mathematics), offensive lineman Zen Michalski (sport industry), tight end Jace Middleton (human development and family science), quarterback Chad Ray (DEI certificate) and center Toby Wilson (sport industry)

Demian Victim Of Off-Campus Shooting

Ohio State redshirt junior defender Nathan Demian was a victim of an off-campus shooting that occurred after the Buckeyes' NCAA quarterfinal win over Wake Forest on the night of Dec. 7, the school announced in a statement on Dec. 9.

"Following the Ohio State men's soccer match with Wake Forest (Dec. 7), redshirt junior Nathan Demian, from Vancouver, British Columbia, was a victim of an off-campus shooting," the statement read. "He was an innocent bystander, is not a suspect in any way, and was not involved in any altercation. The soccer program is thankful for the incredible university support and medical care available to Nathan and his family during this difficult time.

"Nathan's family is with him, and the team is extremely close. The family has asked that everyone keep Nathan in their prayers. The department will do all it can to support Nathan, his family and the men's soccer program in every way possible."

Demian, who is in his fourth year with the program, played 84 minutes in the Buckeyes' 3-0 quarterfinal win over Wake Forest. He has appeared in 14 games this season with 12 starts, earning one assist and attempting three shots in those contests.

Ohio State did not offer any other information regarding the situation or Demien's health status, saying that because of a police investigation "the department will not be able to discuss the incident further." But his family told FOX 28 Columbus that he is making a "miraculous" recovery.

Men's Soccer Falls In Semifinal Round

Ohio State men's soccer's historic 2024 season ended just one game short of a national championship appearance after a 1-0 loss to No. 13 Marshall on Dec. 13.

The No.1-ranked Buckeyes ceded the lone goal of the game in the seventh minute off a breakaway goal from Marshall forward Tarik Pannholzer.

Ohio State had its share of chances to tie the game and ended the game with 20 shots compared to Marshall's eight, but ultimately none of them found the back of the net.

Although the loss brought the season to an unfortunate end for the Buckeyes, the team reached new heights under seventh-year head coach Brian Maisonneuve.

The Buckeyes earned their No. 1 overall seed in the NCAA tournament winning the Big Ten regular season and conference tournament.

Buckeye Sports BulletinBoard

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FOR SALE: OSU football programs including bowl games, national playoff and championship games. OSU basktball programs, NFL programs, golf, Olympics, NBA, other print sports memorabilia. Call John at (330) 507-7339.

TIM POND, member of both the Bishop Watterson High School and the Otterbein University Basketball Halls of Fame, recently offered his publication entitlted "Coaching Youth Basketball: Coaching the Coaches" for sale on Amazon.com. Access to this instructional manual was previously limited to attendees of his basketball clinics and camps only.

FOR SALE — OSU-MICHIGAN Game, 1975 - original RADIO broadcast on CD! Woody's last great team & Archie's last UM game as Bucks go 11-0! Three-disk set runs 3½ hours! Listen in your car! $25 + $3 S & H. Call 1-630-527-8890!

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Buckeyes Focused On Task At Hand In CFP

Continued From Page 1

win a national championship.

"When you look at a bunch of the teams that are in there, our guys have played some of these teams whether it was this year, in the past, whenever it might be," Day said. "There are guys who have a lot of confidence looking at the draw saying, 'We know who these teams are.' They're very good, but we also feel confident.

"We also have to make adjustments and make corrections and fix the things that need to get fixed. Coming off the last game, that has to happen, but almost every team in this playoff has their own issues. They have their own things that they need to address. That's going to be a huge part of who has success here."

There is still concern around Buckeye circles that the black cloud of the Wolverine loss will still be hanging over the program's head when Dec. 21 rolls around – something former Ohio State quarterback and longtime ESPN analyst Kirk Herbstreit referred to on air just moments after it was revealed the Buckeyes were getting a home game, saying Day's program would be better off playing on the road to avoid frustrated fans at Ohio Stadium from booing if the offense faces some early struggles.

Regardless of how the fans will react that night, Day understands that getting the first win could be the most important one in terms of getting the team back on track to the best version of itself.

"The guys have a good look in their eye," Day said. "We were (in the Woody) at noon watching the selection show and there was a great energy up there. They want to play. They want to get back on the field and get a win.

"Getting this first win is going to be critical and building momentum as you head into the teeth of the playoffs. When you look at tournament play, when you look at playoff play, we all know that the first game is very, very important. It's not bowl prep. It's very different. It's a quick turnaround, and all of our focus is on these guys."

If Day's demeanor was any indication, the team will be out to prove something after the head coach was back to his usual confident self in the post-selection show press conference.

He also understands that while the Michigan game definitely wasn't a good one, the team can't overcorrect the mistakes it made in that contest and will just have to game-plan with what is best for the Buckeyes on Dec. 21 instead of making too many changes. The offense had its worst game in years, not scoring a single point in the second half and failing to record a first down for the final 19 minutes.

"I think that's important," Day said about not overcorrecting. "It's similar to what happened in the Oregon game on defense. When you saw some of the adjustments that were made, to the naked eye it's like, 'OK, what really was different?' But there was a difference. It's going to be that way here up front and how we're running the ball. Some of it is execution, some of it is making sure we put the guys in the right position to be successful.

FILE PHOTO

NEXT MAN UP — The season-ending injuries to center Seth McLaughlin (56) and left tackle Josh Simmons have forced Donovan Jackson (74) and Carson Hinzman (75) to switch positions to plug the holes. The offensive line will come under scrutiny against Tennessee's stout defense on Dec. 21 in Ohio Stadium.

"I've definitely been spending some time with the offense. We'll look at it and see whatever makes the most sense and win this game. We'll do whatever it takes."

Before the Buckeyes' place in the 12-team bracket was officially revealed, it was easy to imagine where they might be placed after the previous week's rankings.

Day and the team had taken a look at that and were very prepared to be matched up against Tennessee, a team with both the No. 4 scoring defense in the country (13.9 points allowed per game) and total defense (278.3 yards allowed per game).

The Vols also have the No. 9 rushing offense in the nation (232.0) due to the 2024 SEC Player of the Year, Dylan Sampson, manning the backfield, providing some sort of trouble on both sides of the ball for the Buckeyes. But Day feels like his team will be ready to bring their A-game against the Vols under the lights at Ohio Stadium.

"You could kind of project out where we might be. This is one of the projections that we saw," Day said. "So we've been looking at these guys and a couple other opponents, but we're fired up. We're excited about playing in the first-ever playoff game in Ohio Stadium. Ohio Stadium has been around a long time, over 100 years. There's been a lot of great games, but never a playoff game like this. A night game, 8 p.m., it's going to be electric."

One thing they are looking back at the Michigan game to try to fix is the offensive line. With two season-ending injuries to starters – both left tackle Josh Simmons (knee injury) and center Seth McLaughlin (torn Achilles) going down – it would be tough for any team to deal with the fallout, but it's also not a reality the Buckeyes can change.

With a total of 77 rushing yards against the Wolverines on 26 attempts (3.0 yards per carry), Day wasn't happy with how the front five performed in the second game that Donovan Jackson, Austin Siereveld, Carson Hinzman, Tegra Tshabola and Josh Fryar played together.

It's mainly the interior that Day is taking a look at, where he and his staff will be giving players the ability to step up. He named Luke Montgomery and Joshua Padilla – the left guard and center backups to Siereveld and Hinzman, respectively – as possible replacement candidates if they are able to step up in the weeks leading up to the game, saying on Dec. 16 that Montgomery would get his chance to play in the playoff game,

While he did say George Fitzpatrick could possibly impress enough to step up at left tackle to make the Buckeyes comfortable enough to move Jackson back to left guard, it didn't seem like the likely solution if they do go into the matchup with a different configuration.

"I know who's going to be in the mix. I'm not going to get into that just yet," Day said. "We have two weeks of prep that we have to dive into and identify what gives us the best chance to go win this thing. There will be some guys in the mix. Luke Montgomery will be in the mix, Josh Padilla will be in the mix, and we'll make sure it's right. Based on how they practice we'll figure out how it's going to look."

But while the Buckeyes are preparing for the playoff game, they also have to deal with the question of transfers and whether they are still going to be allowed to dress for the game.

Wide receivers Jayden Ballard and Kojo Antwi, linebacker Gabe Powers, offensive lineman Miles Walker and quarterbacks Devin Brown and Air Noland have already announced their intention to enter the portal, which opened on Dec. 9.

Of those five, it has been revealed already that Brown, who has been the direct backup for Howard all season, would be able to remain with the team for the remainder of the playoffs. That is a significant development considering he was thrust into action for two plays in the second quarter against Michigan after Howard went down with a head injury.

"I entered this season with the intent of doing everything I could to win a national championship with my brothers, and that goal is still very much alive," Brown said in a Twitter post on Dec. 8. "I will remain with the team and honor my commitment for the remainder of the season as we pursue our goal of winning it all."

"It's a very unique situation," Day said of players entering the transfer portal the same time the Buckeyes are preparing for a run at the national championship. "We're going to deal with each of those situations on an individual basis because there are guys who want to finish off what they started here. These guys made a commitment to the team – it's a close team – and they want to finish up their commitment. I think those guys deserve a lot of credit for wanting to do that.

"Some guys need to figure out, 'OK, what's next for me?' It's not their fault. It's just the way it's designed. They have to make decisions while we're getting ready to go play in a playoff. We have to make sure that we're being fair to our guys but also have enough depth that we need to go make this run."

The first 12-team playoff will provide no shortage of intrigue, but before the Buckeyes even think about the Rose Bowl and a rematch against No. 1 Oregon – which would be where they are headed with a win – they will have to take down the Volunteers, a game for which they will take advantage of being at home and "Scarlet Out" Ohio Stadium, telling all fans to wear scarlet to match the Buckeyes' all-scarlet uniforms.

"No, we're not there. We have to win this first game and then build from there," Day said when asked if they had been looking forward to other matchups at all. "I don't think there's one person in this building that's looking way down the road. When you're in this style of play, you have to get that first win. You have got to get started and build some momentum into the playoffs. That will be our focus."

A matchup against a tough SEC team and then potentially after that the No. 1 team in the country likely isn't where the Buckeyes wanted to be going into the playoff at the start of this "natty or bust" season, but it's something that Day understands they are solely responsible for.

"The first thing is it's our responsibility to win the conference," Day said. "When you win the conference, you're in. So when you don't do that, you put yourself at risk."

There's nothing Day and the Buckeyes can do to change where they are at this point. The loss to Michigan already happened. Having to watch the Big Ten Championship Game from their couches already happened as well. But even though those two preseason goals are no longer in reach, their third – and depending on who you ask, biggest of the three – is still well within reach.

"Our draw is our draw. The teams we're going to play are the teams we're going to play," Day said. "Tennessee is coming to our place to play us at home. When you think about the opportunity our team has to go do something like this, it would be an unbelievable accomplishment to go on a run here and go win the whole thing when you're four games away.

"(The Michigan loss) hurt. It hurt. But here we are now, and all the focus has to go on Tennessee and winning this first one."

COLLEGE FOOTBALL
PLAYOFF INSIDER

Second Meeting Between OSU, U-T

The last time Ohio State and Tennessee squared off on the gridiron, two College Football Hall of Fame honorees and NFL legends went head to head.

Peyton Manning, at the time a sophomore at Tennessee, and senior running back Eddie George, fresh off a Heisman Trophy-winning campaign, highlighted their respective teams in the 1996 Florida Citrus Bowl, a game Tennessee ultimately won 20-14.

George scored the first touchdown for Ohio State, a 2-yard scamper that gave the Buckeyes the only lead they would have all day. Both teams traded scores up until the fourth quarter before Volunteers kicker Jeff Hall nailed two-late field goals to break a 14-14 tie.

In the loss, George rushed for 101 yards and a touchdown on 25 carries in his final collegiate game while Manning threw for 182 yards on 20 completions with a score. The game, which was played in sunny Orlando, Fla., would be a dream compared to the conditions expected Dec. 21 in Columbus. A high of 29 degrees is expected that day, with a low of 16, and the 8 p.m. game time could lead to those temperatures approaching the colder end of the spectrum. It would be the coldest game for Tennessee since 2015 and one of the coldest since 1950.

With the second all-time meeting between the Buckeyes and Volunteers also coming in the postseason like the first, it's easy to see that the matchup always spells implications for overall season outlook and success, and that's even more apparent in the tilt this season.

"We're certainly excited about being in the playoff and obviously playing a great program," Tennessee head coach Josh Heupel said. "Ohio State has had a ton of success in recent history but throughout their program history and certainly what they've done on the field this year, and we're excited that we get the opportunity to play an elite program like that. As we get ready here, we understand what it's going to take to go on the road and play really good football against a great football team."

First December Home Game For OSU

While Ohio State fans are accustomed to playing games in the final month of the year, Buckeye faithful will have a first-time treat with the matchup against Tennessee marking the first December Ohio State home game in the 102-year history of Ohio Stadium.

The Buckeyes have knocked on the doorstep of December just twice all-time at Ohio Stadium, losing to Michigan 14-0 on Nov. 30, 1918, and in the most recent edition of The Game. Furthermore, in the 132-year history of Ohio State football, the team has never hosted a home game of any kind in the month of December.

The last time Ohio State played in the month of December was last season's 14-3 Cotton Bowl loss to another SEC foe, Missouri.

Ohio State Set To 'Scarlet The 'Shoe'

It will be a sea of scarlet come Saturday, as Ohio State announced that the team will don all scarlet jerseys and pants for the matchup against Tennessee while also advertising the game as a "Scarlet the 'Shoe" theme for fans.

Encouraging fans to wear red is not something new for Ohio Stadium. There has been a Scarlet Out the past four seasons: a 33-24 victory over Penn State in 2021, a 54-10 win over Iowa in 2022, a 20-12 win over Penn State in 2023 and this year's 21-17 win over Nebraska. However, the last time the Buckeyes wore scarlet from head to toe was that 2021 win over Penn State, also a night game played at Ohio Stadium.

The Buckeyes seem to be pulling out all the stops for their primetime playoff matchup with the Volunteers. In addition to the jerseys, Ohio State athletic director Ross Bjork said on 97.1 The Fan that the school plans to have a drone show and pyrotechnics inside the stadium for the matchup, which he said is an effort to create more of an exciting gameday atmosphere.

"We want that to (have) an atmosphere that we can really latch on to," Bjork said of the playoff game. "So maybe (we can do) more things than with our LED boards, with our video board that normally would be a sponsor, now we can make it about the atmosphere. So we'll have pyro, we'll have a drone show. I mean, we're going to do as many things – having a night game, people have been clamoring for night games, so now we have it. So we want to go all in."

On the other side of the coin, Tennessee's presence at the 'Shoe has added a wrinkle to Ohio State's gameday operations, as the Volunteers will get their own entrance video due to the College Football Playoff organization having a say in postseason stadium operations.

"The in-game atmosphere will be a little bit more controlled by the CFP. Our staff will do it, but the scripting, how music is played," Bjork said. "Like Tennessee will have an intro video when their team runs on the field. We wouldn't do that for a normal visiting team. But we'll be able to do a lot of similar things we do now. The script will be a little more tame than what the CFP will allow."

"College GameDay" In Columbus For Game

ESPN's "College GameDay" will return to Columbus on Dec. 21 for Ohio State's first-round matchup against the Volunteers. This will be the second school the show will visit that weekend, with it also heading to South Bend, Ind., on Dec. 20 for Notre Dame's first-round game against No. 10 seed Indiana.

This marks the second time this season the Emmy-winning college football pregame show – which features a panel of hosts Rece Davis, longtime analysts Lee Corso, Kirk Herbstreit and Desmond Howard, ESPN personality Pat McAfee and former Alabama head coach Nick Saban – will visit Ohio State for a Buckeye game.

The first instance occurred on Nov. 23 when the show aired from Ohio Stadium before the Buckeyes' top-five matchup against then-No. 5 Indiana, a 38-15 victory for Ohio State. Former Ohio State quarterback Justin Fields served as the show's celebrity guest picker on that day.

"College GameDay" was also on hand for Ohio State's 32-31 road loss to now-No. 1 Oregon at Autzen Stadium on Oct. 12 and its 20-13 road win at Penn State on Nov. 2, giving Ryan Day's team a 2-1 record this season when they are the featured matchup on the show.

Ohio State boasts a 42-20 record in its 62 all-time appearances on "College GameDay," which dates back to 1996. Corso has donned Brutus Buckeye's headgear a record 44 times in his 28 years as the show's game picker, although he picked his former team Indiana before the Nov. 23 matchup.

Ticket Prices Soar After Presale Code Leak

As Ohio State geared up to host the first December home game in the school's history, Buckeye fans hit a snag on Dec. 12 when attempting to get presale tickets.

According to an Ohio State football spokesperson, tickets would start off at $100. However, as BSB went to press, resale tickets were starting at $175.

While there are myriad possibilities as to why these ticket prices have jumped so suddenly, such as the historic nature of

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the matchup, it appears that a potentially leaked presale code allowed for eager Volunteer fans to get their hands on early-access tickets.

"Good morning Vol Twitter," the user VolFan4Life21 posted on Twitter on Dec. 11. "Last night an Ohio State season ticket holder decided to give us his season ticket code for the presale. Had to prove I was an Ohio State fan, so I photoshopped an OSU jersey on myself and it worked. We're officially invading their section."

Bjork warned Buckeye fans about the threat that a heavy Tennessee presence would pose on the game come Saturday.

"Don't sell your tickets," Bjork said on Dec. 13. "Tennessee fans, they're rabid fans. They are going to invade the 'Shoe. Let's make sure we don't have as much orange in there as people think."

Furthermore, according to several Volunteer fans on social media, the presale code was "OSUFB," allowing for the easy-to-guess code to be cracked by Tennessee fans who were looking to spoil the first home playoff game for the Buckeyes.

Vols' Depth Hit By Portal Departures

As BSB went to press, eight Volunteer football players had entered their names into the transfer portal, with some marking major losses in terms of depth before Tennessee's matchup against Ohio State.

In total, five within the group come from the offensive side of the ball, but arguably the biggest loss is linebacker Jalen Smith, who appeared in all 12 games for the Volunteers, pouring in 34 tackles (13 solo) and 1½ tackles for loss. With the loss of Smith, Tennessee's stellar defense, which has allowed only 278.2 yards per game (fourth in the NCAA), will need to fill a lost role against one of the most efficient offenses in the country in Ohio State.

On top of the loss of Smith, the Volunteers also said goodbye to three wide receivers in Nathan Leacock, Chas Nimrod and Kaleb Webb. Nimrod was the most prolific of the group, catching 10 passes for 121 yards this season, a year removed from catching 19 passes for 194 yards and a score.

While Ohio State hasn't been too hampered by the transfer portal as BSB went to press, the Buckeyes have also been challenged depth-wise with the losses of Seth McLaughlin and Josh Simmons due to injury along the offensive line and the departures of wide receiver Jayden Ballard and linebacker Gabe Powers to the transfer portal among others.

Day, Heupel Share Mutual Respect

Before their first meeting as head coaches on the gridiron, Heupel and Day both offered words of respect and excitement about the upcoming matchup between the two schools.

"I have not had an opportunity to cross paths with him very much," Heupel, now in his fourth season with the Volunteers, said on Dec. 8. "I have great respect for what he's done in his coaching career and what he's done there at Ohio State. The success that they've had year in and year out, I have a great appreciation for how he's done it and what he's accomplished there.

"When you get into the postseason, and you're getting into a game like this, you've got to do the ordinary things at a really high level. You have to do things consistently for four quarters. It's not about some magical play that's going to be the difference in the football game. It's about the fundamentals, technique, eye discipline, and playing within the structure of what you're doing in all three phases of the game."

Day also acknowledged his opponent's coach, emphasizing the offense that Heupel has built in Knoxville, Tenn.

"(Heupel) is a very innovative coach," Day said on Dec. 8. "I think (Tennessee quarterback Nico Iamaleava) has a strong arm. (Volunteers running back Dylan Sampson) is excellent. He's All-SEC, runs low to the ground. They spread you out and try to create space issues for you. The receivers are some big ones. There are some quick guys in there. I mean, they're talented. And so, they try to put as much stress on you, especially with the space and the tempo."

While Day already has a College Football Playoff win under his belt, it's do-or-die and national championship or bust time for Ohio State while Tennessee is looking for its first taste of postseason success under Heupel.

Former Buckeye Not Worried About Noise

Former Ohio State and now Tennessee safety Andre Turrentine added his portion of fuel to the already-burning fire between the Buckeyes and Volunteers, this time regarding Ohio Stadium's atmosphere.

"The 'Shoe isn't as loud as the SEC," Turrentine, who spent his 2021 freshman season with Ohio State, said. "It's a different animal here. Whether you're at South Carolina at nighttime or whether you're at Arkansas at nighttime, whether you're at Neyland (Stadium) at nighttime, or the daytime for that matter, it's loud here. I would say it's deafening."

Maybe in an effort to retract his words, Turrentine did give some props to his former stadium.

"I would say the 'Shoe is the same way, that they have really diehard fans that are willing to make enough noise to achieve what they need to," Turrentine said. "So I would say that the SEC is a little bit louder, but the 'Shoe brings it as well."

It won't be a personal contest just for Turrentine, though. Tennessee edge Caleb Herring also has a bad taste in his mouth toward the Buckeyes. Herring, a four-star recruit, was never offered by Ohio State.

"Well this game is actually going to be pretty personal," Herring said on an episode of "The Locker Room" television show on Dec. 8 "Because I remember when I was talking to Ohio State, they (said) whenever I get on campus, they're going to (give me) an offer and it will be all good and stuff. But when I got to campus, I went through the visit and stuff, talked to the coaches and they didn't once mention an offer. So I was like 'OK, get these pictures over with, and then afterwards I'm done with them.' "

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Vols Hoping To Party Like It's 1996 Vs. OSU

By PATRICK ENGELS
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Associate Editor

With six national championships, 13 SEC titles and a plethora of NFL alumni, Tennessee has long established itself as one of the more recognizable brands and programs in all of college football.

College football fans across the country have become well accustomed to the school's "Rocky Top" fight song and orange, white and smokey gray colors that are on full display every fall Saturday, but over the last few decades, the program has lost some of its luster.

As teams such as Alabama and Georgia have become the dominant forces in the SEC, winning a combined eight national championships and 12 SEC championships since 2009, the Volunteers have yet to accomplish either feat since 1998, when Peyton Manning led them to a perfect 13-0 record and national title game win over Florida State.

Josh Heupel

The program seemed as far removed from those championship years as ever in 2020 when then-head coach Jeremy Pruitt led Tennessee to a 3-7 record, its third-worst winning percentage in program history and the worst since the 1909 Tennessee team finished 1-6-2.

But things seemed to change in Knoxville, Tenn., that offseason when the Vols fired Pruitt and hired then-42-year-old Josh Heupel from UCF.

Since then, Heupel – a former national championship-winning quarterback at Oklahoma – has methodically brought Tennessee closer to SEC and national title contention, securing nine or more victories in three of his first four seasons, including an 11-2 campaign in 2022 that almost resulted in a College Football Playoff appearance.

It's a four-year rebuild that has the Volunteers competing in the inaugural 12-team College Football Playoff this season as a No. 9 overall seed, set to put their strong 10-2 record and 6-2 mark in the conference to the test on the road against No. 8 seed Ohio State on Dec. 21 (8 p.m., ESPN/ABC).

Heading north to Columbus for a late-December matchup with the Buckeyes – which will be just the second game ever between the two programs, the first being a 20-14 win for the Manning-led Volunteers over Eddie George and the Buckeyes in the 1996 Florida Citrus Bowl – is no easy task for an SEC school.

But regardless, it's an opportunity that has been years in the making for Tennessee, one Heupel said his players have earned with their play all season.

"It's the next step for our program," he said of the opportunity to play in the College Football Playoff for the first time in program history. "This is something that our players have worked towards since last January. You earn the right to be in a game like this. I'm proud of what we've done throughout the course of the regular season.

"The new season starts here. There was an expectation inside of our program to earn the right to play in a game like this in the postseason. So there is a lot of excitement here. But we also understand that we're getting ready to go play a great team, and we have to be at our best."

For Heupel's Volunteers, their "best" lies within the trenches, specifically on their defensive line, which is regarded by many as one of the best and most deep fronts in the nation.

Led by defensive line coach Rodney Gardner, a 35-year SEC coaching veteran who admitted earlier this season that he is "not the easiest guy to play for," the Volunteers' front four helped them finish the regular season ranked eighth in the nation in rushing defense (99.6 yards allowed per game) and fourth in opponent yards per rush (2.8) while also ranking tied for 39th in sacks (2.42 per game) and seventh in tackles for loss (7.8 per game).

Tennessee's defensive line success begins with the standout junior James Pearce Jr., who occupies the hybrid linebacker/defensive end "Leo" position in defensive coordinator Tim Banks' unit. The Leo is similar to the "Jack" position used sparingly by Ohio State and defensive coordinator Jim Knowles.

While Jack Sawyer, C.J. Hicks and others have all struggled to produce much in the hybrid defensive end/linebacker role for the Scarlet and Gray, Pearce has excelled at the position for the Orange and White, tallying a team-high 7½ sacks and 11 tackles for loss this season, and another 14½ TFLs and 10 sacks in 2023.

This season, Pearce has not quite been able to reach the same dominance he had in 2023 – which is why he has gone from being a potential No. 1 overall pick in the 2025 NFL draft at the start of the year to a projected top-15 selection at the start of the CFP – but that may be due to the fact that opposing offenses have made him the focal point of their game plans, often implementing double-teams and trying different looks to stop his production.

Those game plans haven't completely taken Pearce – who still managed to be a first-team All-SEC selection this year – out of the picture, though, something that his teammates say is a testament to his unique talents and mentality.

"We know he's getting all types of stuff thrown at him when he's pass-rushing and things like that, but for him to still find ways to be effective says a lot on that part alone," redshirt senior defensive tackle Bryson Eason said.

"But him just scraping at the ball, being at the ball, traveling, running – it's simple things, but it matters. And his attitude, how he approaches it is lovely. It helps the whole unit out, helps the whole team out. We love James Pearce through whatever, so shoutout to my guy."

The extra attention put on Pearce has also opened up more opportunities for others on the defensive line to produce. Fellow starters nose tackle Omari Thomas (five TFLs, one sack), defensive tackle Eason (seven, 1½) and defensive end Dominic Bailey (2½, two) have each made their mark this season, while reserves such as Joshua Josephs (nine, 1½), Omarr Norman-Lott (four sacks) and Tyre West (five, two) have also cracked the rotation and made serious impacts.

When put all together, the Vols have a loaded defensive line that feeds off each other and stays fresh throughout, a scary sight for what is now a patchwork Ohio State offensive line that is coming off its worst performance of the season against Michigan.

"Everyone rotates and everyone contributes and everyone does their job," Thomas said. "Being able to have a bunch of guys rotating allows you to play fresh; you play fast."

Tennessee's defensive line is the obvious strength of the team, but its secondary is also nothing to scoff at. The Vols enter Ohio Stadium ranking 17th in the nation in passing defense (178.7 passing yards allowed per game) and ninth in team passing efficiency defense (110.51), allowing just three plays over 40 yards – a mark that is tied for second best in the nation behind Ohio State's two – and 10 over 30 (fifth in the nation).

These successes have been in large part due to the ball-hawking efforts of sophomore defensive back and Oregon State transfer Jermod McCoy, who finished the regular season with a team-high 13 passes defended (four interceptions, nine pass deflections) – a number that ranks second in the SEC and tied for 15th in the FBS – along with 39 tackles (one-half for loss).

Working alongside McCoy at cornerback for Tennessee is fellow sophomore Ricky Gibson III (29 tackles, two tackles for loss, five pass deflections), while safeties Will Brooks (54 tackles, three tackles for loss, five pass breakups, three interceptions, one forced fumble) and Andre Turrentine (35 tackles, 1½ tackles for loss, three pass breakups, one interception) also lead the unit.

Dec. 21 will be a reunion for Turrentine, as the redshirt junior began his career at Ohio State in 2021, playing three games on special teams that year before transferring to Tennessee the next season.

"It's ironic but I kind of expected it to be

Get To Know ... Tennessee

- **2024 Record:** 10-2, 6-2 in SEC.
- **Team Information:** Offensive Formation – Veer and Shoot; Defensive Formation – 4-2-5; Starters Returning – Offense 6, Defense 4, Specialists 1.
- **Head Coach:** Josh Heupel, 4th year at Tennessee, 37-14.
- **Series History:** 2nd meeting; Tennessee leads 1-0.
- **School Facts:** Location – Knoxville, Tenn.; Enrollment – 38,728; Nickname – Volunteers; Colors – Orange, White; Conference – SEC; Stadium – Neyland Stadium (Surface – Grass; Capacity – 101,915).

Top Offensive Players

Rushing	Att.	Net	Avg.	TD
Dylan Sampson	256	1485	5.8	22
DeSean Bishop	67	433	6.5	3
Nico Iamaleava	89	311	3.5	1

Passing	Comp-Att.	Pct.	Yds.	TD-INT
Nico Iamaleava	199-303	65.7	2512	19-5
Gaston Moore	16-27	59.3	201	2-2

Receiving	Rec.	Net	Avg.	TD
Bru McCoy	35	432	12.3	2
Squirrel White	33	364	11.0	2
Chris Brazzell II	28	325	11.6	2
Don't'e Thornton Jr.	25	647	25.9	6

Team Offensive Stats

Points Per Game — 37.3
Rushing Yards Per Game — 232.0
Passing Yards Per Game — 230.9
Total Offense Avg. Per Game — 462.9

2024 Schedule

Date	Opponent	Time/Result (ET)
Aug. 31	CHATTANOOGA	W, 69-3
Sept. 7	at NC State	W, 51-10
Sept. 14	KENT STATE	W, 71-0
Sept. 21	at Oklahoma	W, 25-15
Oct. 5	at Arkansas	L, 19-14
Oct. 12	FLORIDA	W, 23-17 (OT)
Oct. 19	ALABAMA	W, 24-17
Nov. 2	KENTUCKY	W, 28-18
Nov. 9	MISSISSIPPI STATE	W, 33-14
Nov. 16	at Georgia	L, 31-17
Nov. 23	UTEP	W, 56-0
Nov. 30	at Vanderbilt	W, 36-23
Dec. 21	at Ohio State	8 p.m.

Top Defensive Players

Def. Leaders	Solo	Asst.	Tot.	TFL-Yards	Sacks
Arion Carter	27	38	65.0	6.5-9	0.0-0
Will Brooks	32	22	54.0	3.0-4	0.5-1
Jermod McCoy	22	17	39.0	0.5-0	0.0-0
Joshua Josephs	17	21	38.0	9.0-25	1.5-10
Andre Turrentine	18	17	35.0	1.5-3	0.0-0
James Pearce Jr.	20	15	35.0	11-59	7.5-53
Boo Carter	27	8	35.0	3.0-13	1.0-10
Jeremiah Telander	13	20	33.0	2.5-3	0.5-1

Interceptions	No.	Yds.	Avg.	TD
Jermod McCoy	4	71	17.8	0
Will Brooks	3	152	50.7	1

Team Defensive Stats

Points Per Game Allowed — 13.9
Rushing Yards Per Game Allowed — 99.6
Passing Yards Per Game Allowed — 178.7
Total Offense Avg. Per Game Allowed — 278.3

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like this," Turrentine said of the matchup between him and his former team. "College has been a full circle for me personally. I knew we would see them in one form or fashion, so it's just special it being the first game."

Another member of Tennessee's secondary worth noting is true freshman Boo Carter, who started at the hybrid linebacker/defensive back Star position for the last five games of the regular season. The Volunteers allowed less than 150 yards passing in four of those contests, the outlier being the 347-yard outing by Georgia quarterback Carson Beck in the Bulldogs' 31-17 win over the Vols on Nov. 16, while Carter recorded 16 of his 35 tackles in those five games.

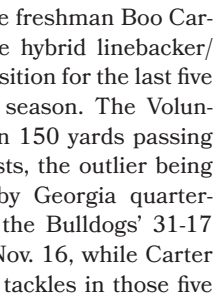
"Boo as a young player is just going to continue to get better and better in all areas," Heupel said. "I'm really, really proud of what he's done in a short amount of time."

Tennessee's offense has been just as efficient as its defense, ranking eighth in the nation in both scoring offense (37.3 points per game) and total offense (462.9 yards). And like Banks' group, the success of Heupel and second-year offensive coordinator Joey Halzle's offense begins in the trenches, where the Volunteers boast the nation's ninth-best rushing offense, totaling an impressive 232.0 yards per game.

That mark is in large part due to the team's veteran offensive line, which returns four of its five starters from last year, including senior left guard Andrej Karic, four-year starter and 2024 Rimington Award finalist center Cooper Mays, four-year starter and third-team All-SEC right guard Javontez Spraggins and two-year starter and senior right tackle John Campbell Jr.

But also key to that success are the talents of junior running back Dylan Sampson, who has emerged as one of the more explosive running backs in the nation after completing the best regular season by a Tennessee tailback in program history.

The 5-11, 201-pound Sampson tallied a program-record 1,485 rushing yards and 22 touchdowns on 256 attempts this season. His 22 scores were the fifth most by a running back in SEC single-season history and the most since Alabama's Najee Harris' 26 in 2020.



Dylan Sampson

Sampson, who led the SEC in 11 different categories, was named a unanimous first-team All-SEC selection and the conference's player of the year, which put a bow on a spectacular regular season that his head coach said was the best he had ever seen from the tailback position.

"I don't even know if I have the right words to describe (Sampson) and what he means to our team, just as a player and as a leader," Heupel said. "But I don't know if anybody's played the position better than he has this year.

"He's dynamic. Plays great without the ball in his hands. And when the ball is in his hands, he's making things happen. Dynamic plays, muddy 3 and 4 (yard gains). He's special, man. He's played the position this year as well as anybody I've ever had."

The speedy Sampson is not the only productive running back in De'Rail Sims' room, though. Joining him in the backfield is redshirt freshman and Knoxville, Tenn., native DeSean Bishop, who has had a breakout season for his hometown team in relief of Sampson, totaling 433 yards and three scores on 67 carries.

Sampson and Bishop have formed a formidable rushing duo that could strike fear into a Buckeyes' defense that gave up 172 yards on the ground to Michigan on Nov. 30, but Knowles' unit may also have to worry about an improving Vols passing offense led by redshirt freshman quarterback Nico Iamaleava that seems to be trending in the right direction heading into postseason play.

Iamaleava, a highly touted five-star prospect who sat behind starter Joe Milton III last season, emerged as an early dark horse Heisman Trophy candidate when he threw for a combined 892 passing yards and seven touchdowns to just two interceptions in his first four games of the season.

What followed was a bit of a "rookie" wall for the first-year starter, where he completed just 57.3 percent of his passes (47 of 82) for 521 yards and just one touchdown to two interceptions in his next three games, the first game of that stretch being a 158-yard and no-touchdown performance in the team's 19-14 loss at Arkansas on Oct. 5.

But Iamaleava hit his stride in the final month of the regular season. Over his last five starts, the Long Beach, Calif., native completed 91 of his 133 pass attempts (68.4 percent) for 1,009 passing yards and 11 touchdowns to just one interception, while also showing off some of his dual-threat ability by rushing for another 132 yards on 36 carries.

Iamaleava's improvements over the year have been felt by his head coach, who said his quarterback is playing his best football at the most important time of the year.

"(Iamaleava is) just a young guy who just continues to get better throughout the course of the season," Heupel said Dec. 7 on "The Rich Eisen Show." "Nico has an unbelievable skill set. He's hungry to get better every single day. He's continued to grow as a player throughout the course of the season, and he's just playing really good football right now.

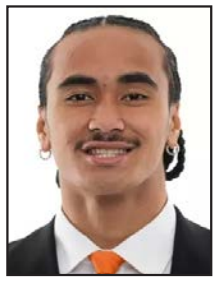
"He has great command of what we're doing. He's taking care of the football through the air. He's done a really nice job understanding our run-pass game and controlling the run game for us. I'm looking forward to him playing his best as we get into the playoffs."

Iamaleava, though, feels there is still so much more he can improve upon as a first-year starting quarterback.

"As a young guy, I can still do better at (taking control of the offense)," Iamaleava said after the win over Vanderbilt on Nov. 30. "I think just me having full command of the offense, knowing what our coaches want, knowing what we want on certain plays and certain downs and distances is what I've been working on."

Iamaleava's improvements have proved beneficial for Tennessee's main pass catchers, most notably senior wideout and Oregon transfer Dont'e Thornton, who eclipsed 100 yards and a touchdown in two of his final four games, including his season-high 118-yard, two-score outing in the season finale against the Commodores.

Thornton leads the team with an explosive 647 yards and six touchdowns on just 25 receptions, while redshirt sophomore Chris Brazzell II, senior Bru McCoy and junior slot man Squirrel White have been featured more consistently in the passing game, with each of them recording at least 325 yards and two touchdowns. McCoy leads the team in receptions (35) and is second in yards (432).



Nico Iamaleava

Also featured in the passing game is senior tight end Miles Kitselman, who has served as a reliable target for Iamaleava all year, ranking second in touchdown receptions with four while also totaling 21 receptions and 296 yards.

The Vols' passing offense ranks just 62nd in the nation at 230.9 yards per game, but it is still a unit that could explode in any game if Iamaleava and his pass catchers can put it all together.

Although Tennessee enters Ohio Stadium with a top-eight scoring offense and defense in the nation, there are some trends that work against it and in favor of the Buckeyes. Perhaps the most obvious example is the likely cold conditions inside at kickoff on Dec. 21, which, according to The Weather Channel, will see temperatures dip to as low as 16 degrees that night with 8 mph winds, a number that is much lower than the 41-degree conditions the Volunteers played under against Vanderbilt.

Tennessee also heads into the CFP with just a 2-2 record on the road, with its two losses being to Arkansas and Georgia and the two wins being against then-No. 15 Oklahoma on Sept. 21 and Vanderbilt, and as the fifth-most penalized team in the country, with 99 flags worth 819 yards.

With all of those things considered, few pundits and experts are selecting the Volunteers to come out of frigid Columbus with a victory, as evidenced by the Buckeyes holding as a 7.5-point favorite by many sportsbooks as BSB went to press.

But Heupel and the Volunteers do not care what the sportsbooks or experts think. They know they have a good team heading into Ohio Stadium on Dec. 21, and they are ready to put in the work and take on the challenge.

"The only thing that matters is (Dec. 21) inside (Ohio Stadium) in Columbus, Ohio," Heupel said. "We've played in big games. We have to be ready to go handle everything that we're going to face that night. But it's your preparation that takes you to that moment. So being completely invested in what happens in the present is the most important thing day to day."

"I think we have the utmost confidence (in ourselves)," Iamaleava added. "We will take this team vs. anyone. I think all our team knows that we have what it takes to go out there and compete on the highest level."

Tennessee vs. Ohio State

Saturday, Dec. 21 ▪ 8 p.m. ▪ ABC/ESPN
Ohio Stadium; Columbus

Projected Depth Charts

WHEN OHIO STATE HAS THE BALL...

35 Will Brooks, 6-1, 206, Sr.
14 Christian Charles, 6-1, 200, Jr.
FS

22 Jeremiah Telander, 6-2, 238, So.
13 Edwin Spillman, 6-1, 234, Fr.
MIKE

2 ANDRE TURRENTINE, 5-11, 195, JR.
9 Jakobe Thomas, 6-2, 200, Jr.
SS

7 Arion Carter, 6-1, 234, So.
8 Kalib Perry, 6-3, 231, Jr.
WILL

23 Boo Carter, 5-11, 195, Fr.
5 Christian Harrison, 6-1, 191, So.
STAR

3 Jermod McCoy, 6-0, 193, So.
25 Kaleb Beasley, 6-1, 200, Fr.
CB

1 Rickey Gibson III, 6-0, 185, So.
6 Jalen McMurray, 6-0, 187, Jr.
CB

20 BRYSON EASON, 6-3, 310, SR.
55 Omarr Norman-Lott, 6-3, 315, Sr.
DT

27 JAMES PEARCE JR., 6-5, 243, JR.
19 Joshua Josephs, 6-3, 245, Jr.
LEO

90 Dominic Bailey, 6-3, 292, Sr.
42 Tyre West, 6-3, 290, Jr.
DE

21 OMARI THOMAS, 6-4, 325, SR.
10 Elijah Simmons, 6-2, 340, Sr.
NT

WR — LT — LG — C — RG — RT — WR

17 Carnell Tate, 6-3, 191, So.
13 Bryson Rodgers, 6-2, 185, So.
WR

74 DONOVAN JACKSON, 6-4, 320, GR.
68 George Fitzpatrick, 6-6, 313, Jr.
LT

51 Luke Montgomery, 6-5, 308, So.
67 Austin Siereveld, 6-5, 320, So.
LG

75 CARSON HINZMAN, 6-5, 300, JR.
62 Joshua Padilla, 6-4, 295, R-Fr.
C

77 Tegra Tshabola, 6-6, 327, So.
67 Austin Siereveld, 6-5, 320, So.
RG

70 JOSH FRYAR, 6-5, 320, Sr.
68 George Fitzpatrick, 6-6, 313, Jr.
RT

4 Jeremiah Smith, 6-3, 215, Fr.
9 Jayden Ballard, 6-2, 195, Sr.
WR

42 Joe McGuire, 6-2, 212, So.
35 Anthony Venneri, 6-0, 225, Jr.
19 Nick McLarty, 6-7, 255, Fr.
P

38 JAYDEN FIELDING, 6-0, 175, JR.
98 Austin Snyder, 5-7, 194, Sr.
K

33 TREVEYON HENDERSON, 5-10, 208, SR.
1 Quinshon Judkins, 6-0, 219, Jr.
20 James Peoples, 5-10, 203, Fr.
RB

18 Will Howard, 6-4, 237, Gr.
33 Devin Brown, 6-3, 212, Jr.
QB

2 EMEKA EGBUKA, 6-1, 205, GR.
11 Brandon Inniss, 6-0, 203, So.
SLOT

88 Gee Scott Jr., 6-3, 243, Gr.
89 Will Kacmarek, 6-6, 260, Sr.
15 Jelani Thurman, 6-6, 258, So.
TE

— Starters in bold, returning starters in all caps

WHEN TENNESSEE HAS THE BALL...

7 JORDAN HANCOCK, 6-1, 195, SR.
3 Lorenzo Styles Jr., 6-1, 195, Sr.
24 Jermaine Mathews Jr., 5-11, 189, So.
NICKEL

2 Caleb Downs, 6-0, 205, So.
9 Malik Hartford, 6-3, 194, So.
Adjuster

0 Cody Simon, 6-2, 235, Gr.
20 Arvell Reese, 6-4, 238, So.
MIKE

6 SONNY STYLES, 6-4, 235, Jr.
11 C.J. Hicks, 6-3, 233, Jr.
WILL

8 LATHAN RANSOM, 6-1, 210, GR.
16 Keenan Nelson Jr., 6-1, 195, Jr.
BANDIT

10 DENZEL BURKE, 6-1, 193, SO
22 Calvin Simpson-Hunt, 6-0, 204, So.
CB

44 JT TUIMOLOAU, 6-5, 269, So.
97 Kenyatta Jackson Jr., 6-6, 258, Jr.
DE

91 TYLEIK WILLIAMS, 6-3, 327, SR.
93 Hero Kanu, 6-5, 305, Jr.
DT

58 TY HAMILTON, 6-3, 295, Sr.
98 Kayden McDonald, 6-3, 326, Sr.
NT

33 JACK SAWYER, 6-5, 260, Sr.
92 Caden Curry, 6-3, 260, Jr.
DE

1 DAVISON IGBINOSUN, 6-2, 193, JR.
24 Jermaine Mathews Jr., 5-11, 189, So.
CB

WR — LT — LG — C — RG — RT — WR

5 BRU MCCOY, 6-3, 230, SR.
10 Mike Matthews, 6-1, 197, Fr.
WR

53 Lance Heard, 6-6, 340, So.
77 Larry Johnson III, 6-7, 348, So.
LT

70 ANDREJ KARIC, 6-6, 314, SR.
75 Jackson Lampley, 6-4, 325, Sr.
LG

63 COOPER MAYS, 6-4, 310, SR.
50 William Satterwhite, 6-3, 300, Fr.
C

76 JAVTONEZ SPRAGGINS, 6-3, 330, SR.
79 Shamurad Umarov, 6-7, 330, R-Fr.
RG

74 JOHN CAMPBELL JR., 6-6, 330, SR.
66 Dayne Davis, 6-7, 333, Sr.
RT

17 Chris Brazzell II, 6-5, 200, So.
1 Dont'e Thornton Jr., 6-5, 214, Sr.
WR

98 JACKSON ROSS, 6-3, 204, SO.
94 Josh Turbyville, 6-2, 209, So.
P

90 Max Gilbert, 6-0, 200, R-Fr.
94 Josh Turbyville, 6-2, 209, So.
K

6 Dylan Sampson, 5-11, 201, Jr.
18 DeSean Bishop, 5-10, 200, R-Fr.
RB

8 Nico Iamaleava, 6-6, 215, R-Fr.
13 Gaston Moore, 6-2, 212, Sr.
QB

3 SQUIRREL WHITE, 5-10, 167, JR.
14 Braylon Staley, 6-0, 190, Fr.
SLOT

87 Miles Kitselman, 6-5, 256, Sr.
19 Holden Staes, 6-4, 248, Jr.
TE

— Depth charts compiled by Patrick Engels

How We See It

OHIO STATE RUSH OFFENSE vs. TENNESSEE RUSH DEFENSE

There were many problems that led to the Buckeyes' inexplicable loss to Michigan, and the inability to run the ball was at the top of the list, specifically slamming into a brick wall time after time. The Buckeyes netted just 77 yards for a 3.0 per carry average that included a 17-yarder by Quinshon Judkins. Of course, the big issue was the injury-ravaged offensive line that has not been able to overcome the losses of center Seth McLaughlin and left tackle Josh Simmons to season-ending injuries. Coach Ryan Day has said there will be some reshuffling along the line, and there has to be in order to unleash Judkins, who led the team with 805 yards (5.5 average) and eight touchdowns. TreVeyon Henderson ran for 751 yards (7.0) with six scores. OSU rushes for 169.2 yards per game while Tennessee is eighth nationally in rush defense (99.6) and tied for fourth in points allowed (13.9). The Volunteers have given up only nine touchdowns on the ground. Unless the O-line is measurably better, it could be another long game for the Buckeyes. **EDGE: TENNESSEE**

TENNESSEE RUSH OFFENSE vs. OHIO STATE RUSH DEFENSE

The Buckeyes have an exceptionally good defense that is No. 7 in the country in allowing 96.8 rushing yards per game, and they too have ceded only nine running TDs. They will be tested by Dylan Sampson, the SEC Offensive Player of the Year, who led the conference with a Vols single-season record 1,485 yards. His 22 touchdowns are tied for fourth most in the country. Sampson averages 5.8 yards per carry and 123.8 yards a game, and he has surpassed over 100 yards in all but two games. The Vols are ninth in the nation in rushing (232.0). **EDGE: EVEN**

OHIO STATE PASS OFFENSE vs. TENNESSEE PASS DEFENSE

Remember how bad the run was against the Wolverines? The passing game wasn't particularly good either with much of the blame going to poor play calling. How could Jeremiah Smith, the Big Ten Freshman of the Year and Receiver of the Year, be targeted just twice in the second half? It didn't help that Will Howard had his worst game as a Buckeyes, going 19 of 33 for 175 yards with one touchdown and two interceptions. He must get the ball downfield to Smith (57 catches, 934 yards, 16.4 yards per catch, 10 touchdowns), Emeka Egbuka (60, 743, 12.4, nine) and Carnell Tate (41, 583, 14.2, four). Tennessee allows 178.7 passing yards per game and is fourth in total yards allowed (278.3). Edge rusher James Pearce Jr. is expected to be a first-round pick in the NFL draft if he chooses to leave. He led the team with 11 tackles for loss and 7½ sacks. Safety Andre Turrentine took 10 defensive snaps for Ohio State as a freshman before transferring. He has 35 tackles and an interception this season. **EDGE: OHIO STATE**

TENNESSEE PASS OFFENSE vs. OHIO STATE PASS DEFENSE

The Volunteers are No. 62 in passing offense (230.9) with redshirt freshman Nico Iamaleava. He's completed 65.7 percent of his passes for 2,512 yards and 19 touchdowns against five picks. Dont'e Thornton Jr. is the deep threat with 25 receptions for 647 yards (25.9) and six touchdowns. Bru McCoy leads the Vols with 35 catches for 432 yards (12.3) with two touchdowns. Tennessee is No. 8 in scoring offense (37.3) but has allowed 2.2 sacks per game to rank 73rd. The Buckeyes have the advantage. They are No. 1 in scoring defense (10.9 points) and total defense (241.1) and No. 2 in passing yards allowed (144.3). They yielded only four passing TDs for the season and had two interceptions against Michigan, including one in the red zone by Jack Sawyer. **EDGE: OHIO STATE**

SPECIAL TEAMS

The Buckeyes were horrible vs. the Wolverines with Jayden Fielding missing field goals from 38 and 34 yards and Joe McGuire punting for a 36.0 average. Tennessee punter Jackson Ross averages 44.4 yards, and Max Gilbert has made 19 of 25 field goals with a long of 52 yards. He has made half of his six attempts from 50-plus. The Vols' top two punt returners are Boo Carter and Squirrel White, so that must count for something. **EDGE: TENNESSEE**

INTANGIBLES

This is a chance for redemption after the embarrassing result against Michigan. The only way Day can reduce the temperature on his hot seat is with the first of possibly four playoff victories. If the Buckeyes succeed, redemption will be replaced by revenge as they will face Oregon again in the quarterfinals. OSU fans have railed against the plethora of noon games. Now is their chance to create a hostile environment in prime time. **EDGE: OHIO STATE**

PREDICTION

It seems foolhardy to pick the Buckeyes as a favorite, but a good start to keep the fans on their side will make a difference in what most believe will be the most competitive first-round matchup. **OHIO STATE 28, TENNESSEE 24**

The Numbers Game

Ohio State Season Statistics

2024 Game-By-Game

Date	Opponent	Result/Time	Crowd
Aug. 31	(2) AKRON	W, 52-6	102,011
Sept. 7	(2) WESTERN MICHIGAN	W, 56-0	102,665
Sept. 21	(3) MARSHALL	W, 49-14	103,871
Sept. 28	(3) Michigan State	W, 38-7	71,114
Oct. 5	(3) IOWA	W, 35-7	105,135
Oct. 12	(3) Oregon (2)	L, 32-31	60,129
Oct. 26	(4) NEBRASKA	W, 21-17	104,830
Nov. 2	(4) Penn State (3)	W, 20-13	111,030
Nov. 9	(3) PURDUE	W, 45-0	103,463
Nov. 16	(2) Northwestern	W, 31-7	38,147
Nov. 23	(2) INDIANA (5)	W, 38-15	105,751
Nov. 30	(2) MICHIGAN	L, 13-10	106,005

OSU's gameday AP ranking is in parentheses before the opponent, while the opponent's ranking is after the name.

Team Statistics

	OSU	Opp
First Downs	248	170
Rushing	104	71
Passing	135	79
Penalty	9	20
Average Per Game/Rush	169.2	96.8
Average Per Game/Pass	254.3	144.3
Total Offense	5082	2893
Total Plays	749	706
Average Per Game	423.5	241.1
Average Per Play	6.8	4.1
Penalties-Yards	52-481	42-320
Fumbles-Lost	12-5	18-8
Third Down Efficiency	61-143	56-166
Percentage	43%	34%
Fourth Down Efficiency	18-26	8-21
Percentage	69%	38%
Sacks-Yards	35-231	13-85
Time Of Possession Avg.	29:54	30:06

Score By Quarters	1	2	3	4	OT	Tot.	Avg.
Ohio State	76	150	135	65	0	426	35.5
Opponents	33	53	9	36	0	131	10.9

Individual Statistics

Rushing	Att.	Net	Avg.	TD	Long
Quinshon Judkins	147	805	5.5	8	86
T. Henderson	108	751	7.0	6	53
James Peoples	42	191	4.5	2	18
Will Howard	72	131	1.8	7	19
S. Williams-Dixon	7	53	7.6	0	31
Jeremiah Smith	4	47	11.8	1	19
Julian Sayin	2	24	12.0	0	19
Emeka Egbuka	5	21	4.2	0	13
Devin Brown	7	13	1.9	0	10
Carnell Tate	0	6	0.0	0	6
Mason Maggs	1	3	3.0	0	3
Team	10	-15	-1.5	0	0
OSU Totals	**405**	**2030**	**5.0**	**24**	**86**
OPP Totals	**408**	**1162**	**2.8**	**9**	**38**

Passing	Comp.	Att.	Pct.	Yds.	TD-INT	Effic.
Will Howard	227	314	72.3	2860	27-8	172.1
Devin Brown	10	19	52.6	108	1-0	117.7
Julian Sayin	5	11	45.5	84	1-0	139.6
OSU Totals	**242**	**344**	**70.3**	**3052**	**29-8**	**168.0**
OPP Totals	**179**	**298**	**60.1**	**1731**	**4-9**	**107.2**

Receiving	Rec.	Net	Avg.	TD	Long
Emeka Egbuka	60	743	12.4	9	68
Jeremiah Smith	57	934	16.4	10	70
Carnell Tate	41	583	14.2	4	40
T. Henderson	19	135	7.1	0	32
Gee Scott Jr.	16	150	9.4	2	34
Quinshon Judkins	15	109	7.3	1	21
Brandon Inniss	12	151	12.6	1	27
Will Kacmarek	5	58	11.6	0	32
Bryson Rodgers	5	46	9.2	0	12
Jelani Thurman	4	42	10.5	1	19
Jayden Ballard	2	18	9.0	0	12
Bennett Christian	2	61	30.5	1	55
David Adolph	1	10	10.0	0	10
Kojo Antwi	1	8	8.0	0	8
Patrick Gurd	1	6	6.0	0	6
James Peoples	1	-2	-2.0	0	0
OSU Totals	**242**	**3052**	**12.6**	**29**	**70**
OPP Totals	**179**	**1731**	**9.7**	**4**	**69**

Scoring	TD	EPK	EPR	EPRC	FG	PTS
Jayden Fielding	–	54-54	–	–	9-12	77
Jeremiah Smith	11	–	–	–	–	66
Q. Judkins	9	–	–	–	–	54
Emeka Egbuka	9	–	–	–	–	54
Will Howard	7	–	–	–	–	42
T. Henderson	6	–	–	–	–	36
Carnell Tate	4	–	–	–	–	24
James Peoples	2	–	–	–	–	12
Gee Scott Jr.	2	–	–	–	–	12
Bennett Christian	1	–	–	–	–	6
Gabe Powers	1	–	–	–	–	6
Jack Sawyer	1	–	–	–	–	6
Lathan Ransom	1	–	–	–	–	6
Brandon Inniss	1	–	–	–	–	6
Jelani Thurman	1	–	–	–	–	6
Caleb Downs	1	–	–	–	–	6
Austin Snyder	–	3-3	–	–	–	3
OSU Totals	**56**	**57-57**	**–**	**–**	**9-12**	**426**
OPP Totals	**14**	**10-10**	**-**	**2**	**11-16**	**131**

FG Distance	0-29	30-39	40-49	50+	Total
Jayden Fielding	2-2	2-4	5-6	0-0	9-12
OSU Totals	**2-2**	**2-4**	**5-6**	**0-0**	**9-12**
OPP Totals	**4-5**	**1-2**	**4-6**	**2-3**	**11-16**

Punting	No.	Yds.	Avg.	Bk	Long
Joe McGuire	32	1354	42.3	0	61
Nick McLarty	2	65	32.5	0	35
OSU Totals	**34**	**1419**	**41.7**	**0**	**61**
OPP Totals	**64**	**2709**	**42.3**	**2**	**68**

Interceptions	No.	Yds.	Avg.	TD	Long
Denzel Burke	2	31	15.5	0	31
Davison Igbinosun	2	45	22.5	0	45
Lathan Ransom	1	24	24.0	0	24
Jordan Hancock	1	0	0.0	0	0
Jack Sawyer	1	12	12.0	0	12
Gabe Powers	1	29	29.0	1	29
Caleb Downs	1	0	0.0	0	0
OSU Totals	**9**	**141**	**15.7**	**1**	**45**
OPP Totals	**8**	**112**	**14.0**	**1**	**36**

Punt Returns	No.	Yds.	Avg.	TD	Long
Brandon Inniss	12	109	9.1	0	36
Caleb Downs	5	102	20.4	1	79
Jayden Ballard	1	0	0.0	0	0
David Adolph	1	0	0.0	0	0
Caden Curry	1	0	0.0	0	0
OSU Totals	**20**	**211**	**10.6**	**1**	**79**
OPP Totals	**8**	**45**	**5.6**	**0**	**14**

Kickoff Returns	No.	Yds.	Avg.	TD	Long
T. Henderson	5	58	11.6	0	19
Brandon Inniss	3	47	15.7	0	18
Jayden Ballard	2	23	11.5	0	23
Emeka Egbuka	1	16	16.0	0	16
OSU Totals	**12**	**144**	**12.0**	**0**	**23**
OPP Totals	**10**	**152**	**15.2**	**0**	**25**

Def. Leaders	Solo	Ast.	Tot.	TFL-Yds.	Sacks
Sonny Styles	33	43	76	6.5-35	4.0-29
Cody Simon	31	43	74	8.5-49	5.0-44
Caleb Downs	34	28	62	6.5-11	0.5-2
Lathan Ransom	32	25	57	6.0-9	0-0
Jack Sawyer	20	26	46	4.5-28	4.5-28
Denzel Burke	31	10	41	2.0-2	0-0
Ty Hamilton	12	28	40	4.0-15	2.5-10
JT Tuimoloau	19	19	38	11.5-58	6.0-38
Arvell Reese	16	21	37	2.5-8	0.5-5
Jordan Hancock	21	11	32	1.5-4	0.5-3
Tyleik Williams	9	23	32	5.5-16	2.5-9
Davison Igbinosun	18	12	30	2.0-6	0-0
C.J. Hicks	9	12	21	2.0-14	2.0-14
Caden Curry	11	7	18	2.5-39	1.5-16
Kayden McDonald	7	10	17	1.5-3	0-0
J. Mathews Jr.	10	5	15	2.5-6	1.0-3
Lorenzo Styles Jr.	8	5	13	0-0	0-0
Jaylen McClain	6	6	12	1.0-1	0-0
Mitchell Melton	6	5	11	3.5-15	2.0-12
K. Jackson Jr.	5	6	11	2.0-11	1.5-11
Tywone Malone	1	6	7	1.0-1	0-0
Malik Hartford	3	4	7	0-0	0-0
Gabe Powers	4	1	5	0-0	0-0
Eddrick Houston	2	2	4	0-0	0-0
Payton Pierce	1	3	4	0-0	0-0
Joshua Mickens	2	1	3	1.0-7	1.0-7
C. Simpson-Hunt	1	1	2	0-0	0-0
Aaron Scott Jr.	1	1	2	0-0	0-0
Hero Kanu	-	2	2	0-0	0-0
Bryce West	-	1	1	0-0	0-0
Dominic Kirks	1	-	1	0-0	0-0
Will Smith Jr.	1	-	1	0-0	0-0
Joey Velazquez	-	1	1	0-0	0-0
OSU Totals	**363**	**370**	**733**	**78-338**	**35-231**
OPP Totals	**401**	**338**	**739**	**42-153**	**13-85**

Fumbles Forced: Ransom (3), Hancock (2), Sawyer (2), Curry, Hamilton, Simon, Tuimoloau.

Fumbles Recovered: Sawyer (2), Hamilton, Igbinosun, Jackson Jr., Ransom, Simon, Styles.

Tennessee Season Statistics

2024 Game-By-Game

Date	Opponent	Result/Time	Crowd
Aug. 31	(15) CHATTANOOGA	W, 69-3	101,915
Sept. 7	(14) at NC State	W, 51-10	72,730
Sept. 14	(7) KENT STATE	W, 71-0	101,915
Sept. 21	(6) at Oklahoma (15)	W, 25-15	84,071
Oct. 5	(4) at Arkansas	L, 19-14	75,573
Oct. 12	(8) FLORIDA	W, 23-17 (OT)	101,915
Oct. 19	(11) ALABAMA (7)	W, 24-17	101,915
Nov. 2	(7) KENTUCKY	W, 28-18	101,915
Nov. 9	(7) MISSISSIPPI STATE	W, 33-14	101,915
Nov. 16	(6) at Georgia	L, 31-17	93,033
Nov. 23	(10) UTEP	W, 56-0	101,915
Nov. 30	(7) at Vanderbilt	W, 36-23	28,934

Tennessee's gameday AP ranking is in parentheses before the opponent, while the opponent's ranking is after the name.

Team Statistics

	TEN	Opp
First Downs	287	201
Rushing	139	78
Passing	131	100
Penalty	17	23
Average Per Game/Rush	232.0	99.6
Average Per Game/Pass	230.9	178.7
Total Offense	5555	3339
Total Plays	888	772
Average Per Game	462.9	278.3
Average Per Play	6.3	4.3
Penalties-Yards	99-819	86-666
Fumbles-Lost	17-8	23-9
Third Down Efficiency	87-181	49-166
Percentage	48.1%	29.5%
Fourth Down Efficiency	10-16	6-21
Percentage	62.5%	29.6%
Sacks-Yards	29-191	26-115
Time Of Possession Avg.	29:46	30:13

Score By Quarters	1	2	3	4	OT	Tot.	Avg.
Tennessee	102	143	125	71	6	447	37.3
Opponents	33	37	41	56	0	167	13.9

Individual Statistics

Rushing	Att.	Net	Avg.	TD	Long
Dylan Sampson	256	1485	5.8	22	56
DeSean Bishop	67	433	6.5	3	53
Nico Iamaleava	89	311	3.5	1	31
Peyton Lewis	54	262	4.9	3	35
Cameron Seldon	23	118	5.1	1	14
Khalifa Keith	21	100	4.8	1	23
Hunter Barnes	7	38	5.4	0	14
Jake Merklinger	7	22	3.1	0	24
Gaston Moore	3	18	6.0	0	15
Bru McCoy	2	15	7.5	0	9
Patrick Wilk	3	12	4.0	0	9
Navy Shuler	2	5	2.5	0	6
Miles Kitselman	2	1	0.5	1	1
Squirrel White	1	-7	-7.0	0	0
Team	8	-29	-3.6	0	0
TEN Totals	**545**	**2784**	**5.1**	**32**	**56**
OPP Totals	**422**	**1195**	**2.8**	**9**	**50**

Passing	Comp.	Att.	Pct.	Yds.	TD-INT	Effic.
Nico Iamaleava	199	303	65.7	2512	19-5	152.7
Gaston Moore	16	27	59.3	201	2-2	131.4
Jake Merklinger	6	9	66.7	48	0-0	111.5
Navy Shulere	1	3	33.3	10	0-0	61.3
Team	0	1	0.0	0	0-0	0.0
TEN Totals	**222**	**343**	**64.7**	**2771**	**21-7**	**148.7**
OPP Totals	**199**	**350**	**56.9**	**2144**	**9-11**	**110.5**

Receiving	Rec.	Net	Avg.	TD	Long
Bru McCoy	35	432	12.3	2	42
Squirrel White	33	364	11.0	2	45
Chris Brazzell	28	325	11.6	2	53
Dont'e Thornton Jr.	25	647	25.9	6	86
Miles Kitselman	21	296	14.1	4	31
Dylan Sampson	19	141	7.4	0	21
Holden Staes	15	131	8.7	1	20
Ethan Davis	13	100	7.7	2	18
Chas Nimrod	10	121	12.1	0	27
Mike Matthews	7	90	12.9	2	25
Kaleb Webb	6	48	8.0	0	13
Trey Weary	3	18	6.0	0	8
DeSean Bishop	1	10	10.0	0	10
Cameron Seldon	1	-2	-2.0	0	0
Khalifa Keith	1	8	8.0	0	8
Nathan Leacock	1	13	13.0	0	13
Dayton Sneed	1	12	12.0	0	12
Braylon Staley	1	10	10.0	0	10
Peyton Lewis	1	7	7.0	0	7
TEN Totals	**222**	**2771**	**12.5**	**21**	**86**
OPP Totals	**199**	**2144**	**10.8**	**9**	**46**

Scoring	TD	EPK	EPR	EPRC	FG	PTS
Dylan Sampson	22	-	-	-	-	132
Max Gilbert	-	52-52	-	-	19-25	109
Dont'e Thornton Jr.	6	-	-	-	-	36
Miles Kitselman	5	-	-	-	-	30
DeSeasn Bishop	3	-	-	-	-	18
Peyton Lewis	3	-	-	-	-	18
Squirrel White	2	-	-	-	-	12
Chris Bazzell II	2	-	-	-	-	12
Bru McCoy	2	-	-	-	-	12
Ethan Davis	2	-	-	-	-	12
Mike Matthews	2	-	-	-	-	12
Will Brooks	1	-	-	-	-	6
Holden Staes	1	-	-	-	-	6
Cameron Seldon	1	-	-	-	-	6
Khalifa Keith	1	-	-	-	-	6
Nico Iamaleava	1	-	-	-	-	6
Jordan Ross	1	-	-	-	-	6
Tyre West	-	-	-	-	-	2
Jayson Jenkins	-	-	-	-	-	2
Josh Turbyville	-	2-2	-	-	-	2
TEN Totals	**55**	**54-54**	**-**	**-**	**19-25**	**447**
OPP Totals	**20**	**15-16**	**-**	**1-1**	**10-18**	**167**

FG Distance	0-29	30-39	40-49	50+	Total
Max Gilbert	4-4	8-9	4-6	3-6	19-25
TEN Totals	**4-4**	**8-9**	**4-6**	**3-6**	**19-25**
OPP Totals	**3-4**	**5-5**	**2-5**	**0-4**	**10-18**

Punting	No.	Yds.	Avg.	Bk	Long
Jackson Ross	46	2043	44.4	0	57
TEN Totals	**46**	**2043**	**44.4**	**0**	**57**
OPP Totals	**69**	**3018**	**43.7**	**1**	**66**

Interceptions	No.	Yds.	Avg.	TD	Long
Jermod McCoy	4	71	17.8	0	54
Will Brooks	3	152	50.7	1	85
Arion Carter	1	15	15.0	0	15
Boo Carter	1	9	9.0	0	9
Andre Turrentine	1	0	0	0	0
John Slaughter	1	0	0	0	0
TEN Totals	**11**	**247**	**22.5**	**1**	**85**
OPP Totals	**7**	**256**	**36.6**	**1**	**87**

Punt Returns	No.	Yds.	Avg.	TD	Long
Boo Carter	12	198	16.5	0	38
Squirrel White	7	112	16.0	0	31
Jermod McCoy	6	59	9.8	0	23
Jordan Ross	1	49	49.0	1	49
Braylon Harmon	1	6	6.0	0	6
TEN Totals	**27**	**424**	**15.7**	**1**	**49**
OPP Totals	**15**	**118**	**7.9**	**0**	**30**

Kickoff Returns	No.	Yds.	Avg.	TD	Long
Peyton Lewis	6	127	21.2	0	31
Cameron Seldon	3	77	25.7	0	35
Mike Matthews	1	32	32.0	0	32
William Wright	1	26	26.0	0	26
Dylan Sampson	1	4	4.0	0	4
Squirrel White	1	0	0.0	0	0
TEN Totals	**13**	**266**	**20.5**	**0**	**35**
OPP Totals	**9**	**229**	**25.4**	**1**	**100**

Def. Leaders	Solo	Ast.	Tot.	TFL-Yds.	Sacks
Arion Carter	27	38	65	6.5-9	0-0
Will Brooks	32	22	54	3-4	0.5-1
Jermod McCoy	22	17	39	0.5-0	0-0
Joshua Josephs	17	21	38	9-25	1.5-10
Andre Turrentine	18	17	35	1.5-3	0-0
James Pearce Jr.	20	15	35	11-59	7.5-53
Boo Carter	27	8	35	3-13	1-10
Jaylen Smith	13	21	34	1.5-3	0-0
Jeremiah Telander	13	20	33	2.5-3	0.5-1
Keenan Pili	11	18	29	1.5-4	0-0
Rickey Gibson III	22	7	29	2-15	0-0
Christian Charles	17	9	26	2-3	0-0
Dominic Bailey	9	15	24	2.5-16	2-15
Bryson Eason	16	8	24	7-27	1.5-9
Kalib Perry	9	13	22	2.5-10	0-0
Omari Thomas	11	10	21	5-15	1-7
Jakobe Thomas	13	8	21	3-12	1-5
Daevin Hobbs	7	12	19	2.5-5	1-3
Omarr Norman-Lott	8	10	18	4-32	4-32
Christian Harrison	10	8	18	2.5-6	0.5-1
Jaxson Moi	7	9	16	4.5-19	2-13
TEN Totals	**393**	**368**	**761**	**93-343**	**29-191**
OPP Totals	**460**	**474**	**934**	**56-175**	**26-115**

Fumbles Forced: Josephs (3), Brooks, Pearce, Gibson, Bailey, Perry, Moi, West, Jenkins.

Fumbles Recovered: Telander (3), Bailey (2), Josephs (2), Pearce, J. Thomas.

Fourth Straight U-M Loss Heats Up Day's Seat

By BOBBY GORBETT
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

Inside the walls of the Woody Hayes Athletic Center, the 2024 season started like any other with the team's three goals – beating Michigan, winning the Big Ten and winning the national championship – touted by head coach Ryan Day and the rest of the coaching staff.

Outside the program, those objectives didn't seem like goals but rather the expectations for a team returning star seniors such as wide receiver Emeka Egbuka, defensive ends Jack Sawyer and J.T. Tuimoloau, and defensive tackle Tyleik Williams, among many others.

For those players, the motivation to return for their senior season and bypass early selection in the NFL draft was fairly simple: They hadn't achieved any one of those three goals during their time at Ohio State and wanted to come back for one more year to accomplish them.

"When we decided to come back, I mean, there really wasn't much talk about any other game besides this one and winning the Big Ten title and winning the national championship," Sawyer said on Nov. 23 before The Game.

"I mean, this is what you come back for. This is what we do it for, right here. This is what Buckeye Nation does it for every year, no matter the sport you're playing at Ohio State. Especially for us, we want this one so bad, this is what we came back here for."

In one fateful afternoon at Ohio Stadium, the Buckeyes saw two of their three goals slip through their fingers in a stunning 13-10 loss to Michigan on Nov. 30, a defeat that took them out of the Big Ten Championship Game for the fourth straight season.

With a 10-2 record and wins over top-10 teams Penn State and Indiana, Day's team did enough to make the College Football Playoff, hosting No. 9 seed Tennessee at Ohio Stadium on Dec. 21 (8 p.m., ABC/ESPN). Now the Buckeyes' only hope to avoid a fourth consecutive season without accomplishing their three major goals is to run the table in the CFP and win the national championship.

The season isn't over, but so far, one of the most anticipated Buckeye teams in recent history has not lived up to expectations, and Day and his coaching staff have been right in the line of fire.

"I wouldn't want to go as simple as saying the coaches have done a bad job, but I do think it's fair to say that the expectations for this team are higher than what they've accomplished so far and that if they don't make a deep college football playoff run that this season would be viewed as a big disappointment, and that ultimately comes back to the coaches," Dan Hope of Eleven Warriors said.

Ohio State's loss to a 6-5 Michigan team that was largely removed from College Football Playoff contention in mid-October was one of the biggest upsets in the history of The Game, and it leaves the Buckeyes at a low point in the Day era.

As of right now, the high point of Day's tenure seems to still be at the beginning. Taking over for national championship-winning coach Urban Meyer, Day led the Buckeyes to back-to-back Big Ten championships and CFP appearances in his first two seasons in 2019 and 2020, making it all the way to the National Championship Game against Alabama in 2020.

FILE PHOTO

TAKING THE HEAT — Coach Ryan Day is feeling intense pressure from the fan base to achieve the last attainable goal for the program this season – winning a national championship – after failing the past four years to either beat Michigan or win a Big Ten title.

Day's teams had success through the majority of the 2021, 2022 and 2023 seasons but ultimately fell short when it mattered most against Michigan in each year. The Wolverines made and won the Big Ten Championship Game from 2021-23 – although they may have had help from the ring-leader of the sign-stealing scandal Connor Stalions – while the Buckeyes had to settle for only one appearance in the College Football Playoff in 2022, which ended with a heartbreaking loss to Georgia after a potential game-winning kick was missed by Noah Ruggles as the clock struck zero on both the game and 2022.

Marcus Hartman, a BSB alum who now writes for the Dayton Daily News, said Day was at his best in his first two years as Ohio State head coach but has since struggled to maintain that same championship-level success, a regression that he attributes to several problems that the staff has worked to get rid of but struggled to address right away before it negatively impacted the program.

"He did a great job with the adjustments that he made in '19," Hartman said. "I mean, they were way better in '19 under him than they would have been if Urban came back because he improved the quarterback. I think that they had a little bit different mindset.

"He did a legitimately good job the first couple years, and now they keep running into various problems, and he seems to be good at solving problems after they arise, but a lot of times it's too late."

Perhaps the biggest problem that needed to be solved from the Buckeyes' shortcomings in 2021, 2022 and 2023 against Michigan was what many described as a lack of toughness. In the 2021 game specifically, the Wolverines were unstoppable on the ground in the 42-27 win, rushing for 297 yards and six touchdowns on 41 carries behind the running back duo of Blake Corum and Hassan Haskins.

In 2022, the Buckeyes were solid against the run for much of the day but allowed Michigan running back Donovan Edwards to run for 75- and 85-yard touchdowns in the fourth quarter before losing 45-23.

The next season, Day appeared to have had enough of the questions about his team's toughness. Moments after a 17-14 win over Notre Dame that September, Day called out former Notre Dame head coach Lou Holtz after he previously criticized the Buckeyes for their lack of toughness heading into that game.

"I'd like to know where Lou Holtz is right now," Day said in an interview with NBC Sports after the game. "What he said about our team, what he said about our team – I cannot believe. This is a tough team right here. We're proud to be from Ohio. It's always been Ohio against the world, and it will continue to be Ohio against the world. But I'll tell you what. I love those kids. We have a tough team."

Day's impassioned defense of his team was to no avail for The Game played a few months later. Although the rushing battle was much closer between Ohio State and Michigan in 2023 – with the Wolverines gaining 156 yards and two scores on 39 carries and the Buckeyes gaining 107 and one on 28 totes – the Wolverines had enough of an edge in the trenches to win the game 30-24.

Despite all the troubles of the past three years, the 2024 game seemed different. Not only were the Buckeyes one of the hottest teams in the country and national championship favorites headed into The Game, but the Wolverines went through severe struggles offensively, heading into the matchup with the 127th-best passing offense in the nation (140.1 yards per game) and the 107th-best scoring offense (23.1 points per game).

A funny thing happened though on Nov. 30, when the Buckeye offense – which up until the last game of the regular season was much improved statistically from 2023 – really started to struggle.

The offense's struggles weren't helped by graduate quarterback Will Howard throwing two costly interceptions and playing poorly in general, but a game plan that had the Buckeyes repeatedly run the ball up the middle despite little success rather than feed their highly skilled receivers on the outside drew the majority of the ire from fans and media personnel after the game.

"That 2021 game really created this narrative of Ohio State isn't tough enough to win The Game," Hope said. "They can't win this game a certain way, and I think there's been kind of a concerted effort to win The Game that way ever since. I think this year in particular, you have this clear advantage in terms of your skill-position talent that you really should be utilizing. And there was almost such an insistence on, 'We have to be able to run the ball. We have to win the rushing battle,' and they didn't play to their strengths. They basically played into Michigan strengths."

There have been plenty of theories attempting to explain the Buckeyes' seemingly bizarre decision to attack the Wolverines' star-studded defensive line – led by All-Big Ten defensive tackles Mason Graham and Kenneth Grant – rather than a slightly depleted secondary that was playing without star cornerback Will Johnson, but Hope's viewpoint that Day was trying to send a message has been shared by several others outside of the program.

Hartman, however, believed it simply had more to do with Howard, who didn't just have a bad game but was briefly injured in the second quarter when he was hit hard by Michigan safety Makari Paige and subsequently evaluated for a concussion.

"I believe they went in there with the game plan that everybody thinks they should have had, which is to throw the ball around, and then Will Howard didn't play well," Hartman said. "I think he was not 100 percent after he got hit. He made a really bad mistake, and they had terrible field position. So I think that's how things ended up like that with them running the ball too much. It was more game situation."

Regardless of the source of the Buckeyes' ineffective game plan, the end result was Ohio State lost its fourth straight to Michigan, and with plenty of fans in a state of extreme frustration and shock, Day's job security was questioned by many in the aftermath of The Game.

But as the dust began to settle in the days following the Michigan game, OSU Athletic Director Ross Bjork expressed a vote of confidence in Day to The Columbus Dispatch.

"Our full focus right now is on the College Football Playoff and making a strong run," Bjork said on Dec. 1, one day after The Game. "We have a ton to play for. We have a great team made up of talented players and great young men. Coach Day does a great job leading our program. He's our coach."

According to 247 Sports' Steve Helwagen, a couple of factors are keeping Day's job relatively secure despite the loss, most notably a hefty $37.28 million buyout that the university would have to cough up in addition to a new coach's potential salary.

"From the university's standpoint, do they really want to pay a buyout of over $30 million to get rid of this coach when seemingly every other aspect of his job he does pretty well?"

Unfortunately for Day, though, beating Michigan is what many believe is the most important part of the job. While any fan will tell you that each of Day's teams' slip-ups against the archrival Wolverines were hard to look past, the 2024 loss was particularly inexcusable, according to Hope.

"Without a doubt, it's the worst loss he's had. It's the first time he's lost to an unranked team," Hope said. "I think you could justify each of the three previous losses based on the fact that Michigan had a really good team. Of course, you could factor the Connor Stallions stuff in there as well. But there's really no excuse at all for this loss. I mean, Ohio State clearly has a better roster this year. It's a game that Ohio State should not have lost in any way. And I think because of that, there are a lot of people who would not have said Ryan Day should be fired two weeks ago and are saying that now."

As Hope pointed out, it was Day's first loss to an unranked opponent in his entire tenure as the Buckeye head coach, breaking a winning streak of 47 games. With the comparisons to former Ohio State head coach John Cooper— who beat Michigan only twice in his 13 years as OSU head coach — at an all-time high, Day's first unranked loss couldn't have come at a worse time.

According to Hartman, the loss cost him a chunk of fan support.

"He still has some defenders, but I mean, just from a narrative standpoint, that was a pretty bad loss because the No. 1 defense of him was that he didn't lose to bad teams," Hartman said, "Urban Meyer had a couple of upsets, and now that's out the window. On top of it, when it's to Michigan, that makes it a lot worse. And I don't really think that was a very good defense anyway.

"Even if (Ohio State fans) were on the fence before (regarding Day), I think that they're off the fence," he added. "Or, at best, they're saying it's now or never with this playoff run."

Some fans are put in a bit of a bind with the highly unusual set of circumstances that the expanded College Football Playoff has provided, which has given Ohio State a chance to avenge its loss to Michigan with its first national title since 2014.

According to Helwagen, the appreciation of potential postseason success this season is partially dependent on each fan's age.

"A lot of people who are older fans still hang their hat on the Michigan game as the end-all-be-all, and it's very important, certainly," Helwagen said, "But the year is now 2024, and I think that there are other things to play for and other things to chase, and it would be a tremendous accomplishment if this team would win or beat Tennessee and Oregon. So I don't think you can diminish that in any way, shape or form.

"It's two different things. One does not necessarily depend on the other anymore, and they've had any number of opportunities taken away from them (in the past) because they lost to Michigan. Well, that's no longer the case. You can still get where you want to be despite losing that game, as we see this year."

At least in the short term, Day appears to have the administration's support. But according to Hope, a loss to Tennessee as a home favorite, given the talent on the roster —which was at least partially put in place by NIL funding that was reported to be around $20 million for the 2024 season – could challenge that support.

"My feeling is, if Ohio State loses the first College Football Playoff game, Ohio State will likely have a new coach next year," Hope said. "Beyond that, I'm not sure. And I think that's where you maybe get into some discrepancy between what the fans would do and what the athletic department would do.

"There are certainly fans out there that are of a mindset of, 'Unless Ohio State wins the national championship, Ryan Day may be fired.' I don't think that Ohio State is looking at it quite that way. I do think if they were to lose this first-round game at home with this roster and with four straight losses to Michigan, it's very likely Ohio State would make a change."

Although one of the main mottos of the team at the beginning of the season was national championship or bust, the Buckeyes now face an absolute gantlet in the playoff.

With a win over Tennessee in the first round of the tournament, the Buckeyes would take on No. 1 Oregon at the Rose Bowl, which could potentially be followed by No. 5 seed Texas in the semifinals and ultimately No. 2 Georgia in a potential national championship game, assuming they win their respective games. Helwagen believes a win in each round would help Day get a portion of fans to support him again.

"(The administration) would love for him to win a couple of games, and then that would get everybody off their back to get rid of him," Helwagen said. "I think for him, the more games he wins, the better. One win will bring back a few people. Two wins would bring back most people. Three wins would bring back almost everybody. And if a fourth win doesn't bring back people, they're not worth bringing back, in my opinion."

With Day's large buyout in mind, Helwagen doesn't expect him to be fired even in the event of a loss to Tennessee, but 2025 doesn't exactly have the brightest outlook for the Buckeyes. Ohio State could have to replace 15 or more starters from its 2024 team, leaving Day to have to manage perhaps his worst team on paper in 2025 with arguably the least amount of job security he's had in his career.

Michigan, meanwhile, appears to be headed out of mediocrity after it signed a top-10 class in the country, led by consensus No. 1 overall recruit Bryce Underwood (6-4, 205), a five-star quarterback out of Belleville, Mich.

With The Game back in Ann Arbor in 2025 and Ohio State likely in a relatively down year, Hartman foresees a bleak future for Day at Ohio State.

"I think it's next year or that's it," Hartman said. "This is just my speculation. I think he will not be back in 2026 if they don't accomplish any of their goals next year, and quite honestly it would be surprising if they did accomplish any of their goals next year because they're not going to be as good, barring whatever they get in the portal. So I think (next year) is it."

If Day is to finally get the monkey off his back and defeat Michigan for the first time since 2019, he will have to push aside whatever problem it is that always seems to get in his team's way in The Game.

Many fans have surmised that the Buckeyes' problems with beating Michigan start with the mental side of the game, but Helwagen believes their shortcomings are simply due to their issues in the trenches.

"People will say, 'Oh they play tight, they take on the persona of their coach and he's tight,' and whatever," Helwagen said. "I just think that physically, they've been beaten up. It's a game of football. It's a physical game and the more physical team wins nine times out of 10."

Holistically, there are plenty of indicators that Day has led a consistent, impressive program at Ohio State.

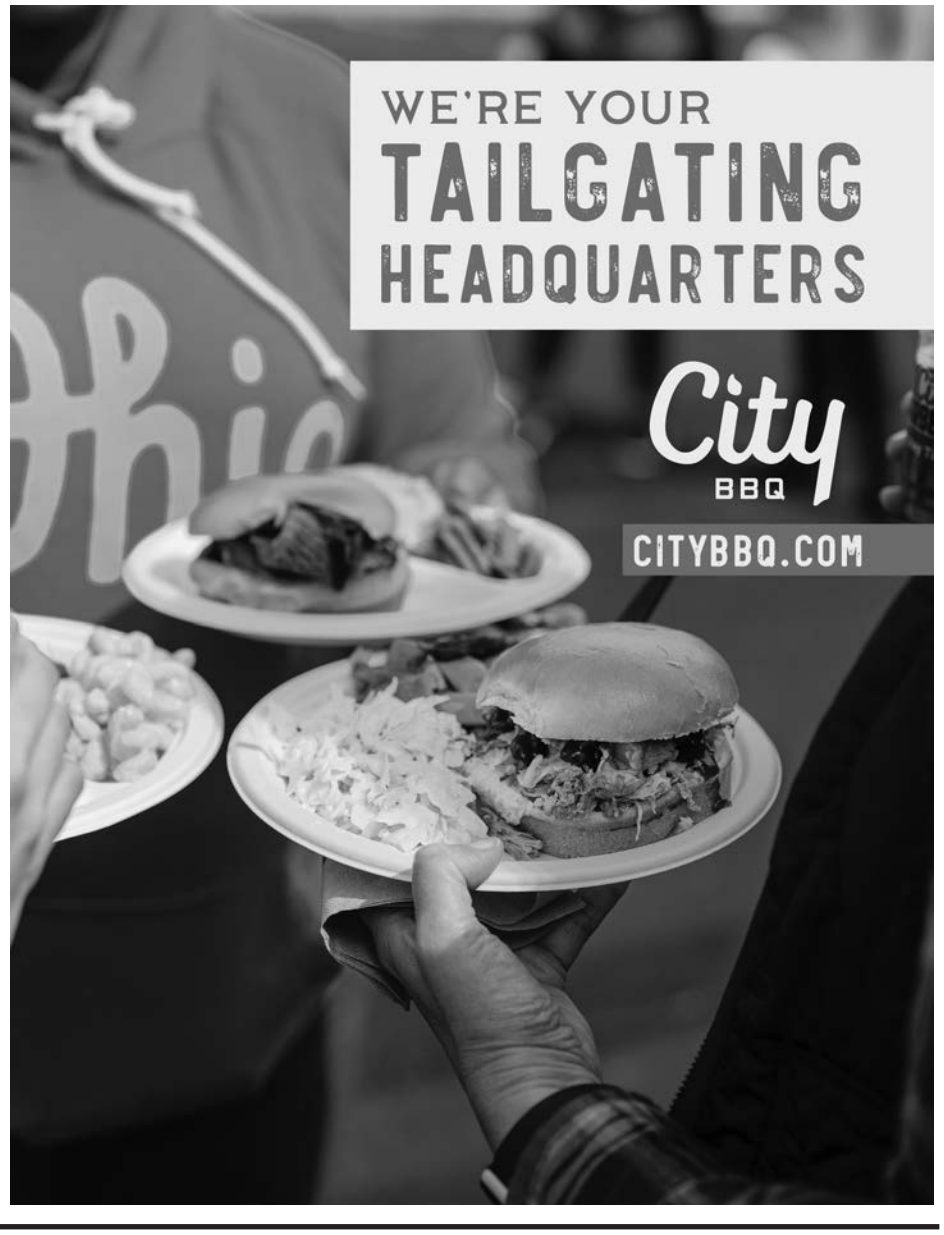
The Buckeyes have a 66-10 record under Day during his tenure and have secured 10 or more wins in five of his seasons as head coach, the only exception being the COVID-19-shortened 2020 campaign that had Ohio State go 7-1. Perhaps most importantly, his recruiting classes have been in the top five ever since Day started recruiting his own guys after the 2019 season.

But for whatever reason the Buckeyes have had little to nothing to show for their talent in the last four years.

"The thing that makes it so tough is if you look at what Ryan Day has done at Ohio State, other than maybe three or four programs, like Alabama or Georgia, pretty much anywhere else in the country, Ryan Day would be praised for doing phenomenal work," Hope said. "To be as consistent as he's been every year – they're winning 10, 11-plus games every single season – just about any other program in the country would take that in a heartbeat.

"But the reality is at Ohio State you are one of the highest-resource programs in the country. The expectation at Ohio State is being the best team in the country, it's winning national championships, and obviously, there's still a chance to do that this year.

"But the reality is that in terms of those major goals, particularly in the last four years, he hasn't accomplished them. If that's the goal that's going to be stated, if that's the standard for the program, these last four years have not lived up to the standard of the program."



Sawyer Interception Marred By Loss To U-M

By GREG WILSON
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Associate Editor

The rivalry between Ohio State and Michigan is so notable for a few reasons. It has a history dating back to 1897, many times a lot of hostility is involved, and there is no shortage of big moments or big plays that have changed many of the 120 games in either team's favor along the way.

In the fourth quarter of the Buckeyes' 13-10 loss to Michigan this season on Nov. 30, it seemed like there might have been another one of those moments when the Wolverines drove 77 yards in 14 plays down to the OSU 3-yard line, and it seemed inevitable that they would score to break what was a 10-10 tie at the time.

Then on the next play, quarterback Davis Warren dropped back and looked left for a streaking Hogan Hansen in the end zone, making a throw that Buckeye defensive end Jack Sawyer was able to go up for and intercept, running the ball back to the 12-yard line.

With just 7:48 left in the game at that point, all of the momentum was finally back on Ohio State's side, and it seemed like Sawyer's pick would go down in history with the likes of Jim Laughlin's blocked punt in 1979, Vaughn Broadnax's big block in 1981 that allowed quarterback Art Schlichter to find the end zone for a touchdown and Tyvis Powell's interception on U-M's attempted two-point conversion in 2013.

But after a 5-yard run by TreVeyon Henderson, an incomplete pass and a 4-yard rush from Will Howard, the Buckeyes were punting the ball back to the Wolverines for what would end up being the game-winning drive with kicker Dominic Zvada connecting on a 21-yard field goal.

Broadnax, who was in attendance for the Buckeyes' loss, told BSB that he didn't like the approach by the Buckeyes on offense after what could have been a game-changing interception, thinking they should have been more aggressive than the two run plays they had during the three-and-out.

"When you have a quick-change interception or a fumble that can change the momentum of the game, you have to dictate some sort of quick strike," Broadnax said. "Instead of running the ball up the middle after that, you throw the ball down the field. Most times (during that game), if Jeremiah Smith didn't catch the ball, they tackled him and caused a pass interference."

Powell agreed that was the issue for the Buckeyes this season, believing that head coach Ryan Day might have been too caught up with statistics that didn't really matter when he was creating his game plan.

"Everybody kept floating out the statistic that whatever team wins the rushing battle has won the game 22 years in a row, or whatever the heck it was," Powell told BSB. "I was like, 'Who cares?' That has nothing to do with us. We've been a really solid, balanced team. We can run the ball and throw it. This Buckeye team, they can beat you both ways. If you take one of them away, you go to the other one. We just didn't have the right adjustment."

The lack of adjustments is a problem that Broadnax believes has been a big issue with Ohio State throughout this entire season, citing a specific example he recalled from the 32-31 loss to Oregon on Oct. 12 in which he believed the game should have been called much differently.

"I've been puzzled with this because I haven't got an answer or any reasonable explanation," he said. "Going back to the Oregon game, Dillon Gabriel runs a 20-plus-yard touchdown to take the lead at their stadium, and Ohio State's offensive response the first play after the kickoff was to come up and line up in a Robust T-formation and barely get back to the line of scrimmage, I think (Quinshon) Judkins ran the ball. What the hell was that?

"We don't run wasted plays at Ohio State University on an opponent's field after they've taken the lead. You attack. It's just mind-boggling. You want to say you have offensive balance –I couldn't care less about balance. If we can throw 60 times a game, score points and win a game, you do it. Ryan has to learn to understand that the passing game can often open up the running game and (you don't need to) depend on the running game to open up the passing game."

Laughlin, who was also at the game, said he saw it as more a problem of the offensive line not being able to create holes for the running game against two Wolverine defensive tackles, Mason Graham and Kenneth Grant, who will be playing on Sundays in the future.

"I like to sit in the end zone because I can see the plays develop, because I watched so much end-zone film when I was in the NFL and you can really see the holes, and there were no holes," Laughlin said of the game this year. "We didn't block them at all. Their defense was good, their D-line was good, and our O-line just didn't make any holes. There was nothing there.

"We also got no big plays where we got a little crease like (Michigan) did two years ago when they beat us (in Ohio Stadium). We didn't get any of those. And to their credit, they were good, and we just kept pounding the ball and there was nothing there."

The Buckeyes finished the game with 77 rushing yards on 26 attempts, an average of 3.0 yards per carry, compared to 33 passing attempts that went for 175 yards by Howard.

Broadnax also believes the running game was an issue for Ohio State, and when that approach wasn't working, Day and Chip Kelly should have changed up the game plan.

"That was idiocy," Broadnax said. "It's idiocy if you do it and it continuously doesn't work. ... You will run a play that doesn't work for whatever reason, but plays that work, you don't run them again, and that is mind-boggling.

"You can talk about cloud coverages, you can talk about zone, but we have incredible athletes at receiver who have throughout their career, either long or short, demonstrated that they can make contested plays, and you don't even give them a chance, for the most part."

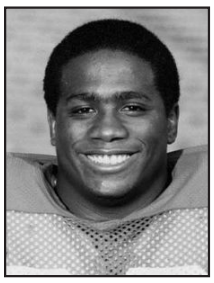
Laughlin might have thought that as well but decided to defer to the coaches who had prepared for the game.

"Some coaches like to do that. I played for John Robinson (while he was head coach of the Los Angeles Rams from 1983-91) who coached against us at USC, and he said, 'We're going to keep running. We're going to keep running,' " Laughlin said. "And usually you'll break one. If you're USC or had Eric Dickerson, that's probably the case.

"But (Ohio State) has all those great receivers and (Will Howard) throws the balls so well. Obviously, it didn't work. It's easy in hindsight to say, 'Why did they run so damn much?' but I guess they thought they could."

A common conversation about the Buckeyes has been the toughness of the team, starting after the 2021 loss to Michigan and continuing through this season.

Powell said that could have been an issue for Day in this game, possibly believing that he felt he needed to prove that his team is tough and is able to win however they want.


Vaughn Broadnax

"I wouldn't call this team soft," Powell said. "I wouldn't say that the players on the team are soft. I would say that they do a lot trying to prove that they're not soft, though. Just play the game.

"If you go out there and play and throw the ball for 500 yards and win the game, nobody's going to call you soft. You don't have to physically run the ball to be tough in this game. I know people think that, but that's just not the case."

Broadnax was a fullback with the Buckeyes from 1980-83, beating Michigan twice during his time in Columbus in 1981 and '82. He played in 39 games in his college career and ran for 972 yards and 13 touchdowns in 223 attempts (4.4-yard average).

While he was a powerful runner, what he was more known for was his blocking, and even this year, Broadnax doesn't believe he would have been able to get the ball up the middle. He believes nobody would have been able to with the way the Wolverines' game plan seemed.

"If you're not trapping these big guys or catching them off-guard from the side and allowing them to get leverage, you're not going to beat those guys up the middle," Broadnax said. "It doesn't matter if you had me blocking or we had a power game, you have to attack a team's weaknesses, not their strengths.

"Over the years, it seems like Ryan has this infatuation with attacking a team's strengths just to prove a point. Trying to exploit a team's strengths doesn't make you tough, exploiting their weaknesses and putting them on their heels makes you tough – and scoring points.

"One of the things Ryan Day has to understand is that he cannot be the nail. He has to be the hammer. It's not just Michigan, it's other teams as well because other teams get good starts on us. They drive down on opening drives and get a touchdown, and then we have a three-and-out. There's not a team that we play against that we should not get a touchdown every first drive. We have to come out in dominating fashion. Attack, and not be attacked."

Four losses in a row to Michigan isn't something that Buckeye fans have had to endure since John Cooper's first four years as head coach. The 17 years with Jim Tressel and Urban Meyer at the helm – interrupted shortly by Luke Fickell's interim year in 2011 – ended with a 16-1 record against the Wolverines.

Cooper ultimately had trouble beating Michigan the entire time he was in Columbus, finishing the rivalry with a 2-10-1 record before he was let go after a 38-26 loss to his archrival in 2000 at the end of an 8-4 season.

Whether it was a mental block or something else that was in Cooper's way during those years, Broadnax is seeing some similarities between those days and the Day-era Buckeyes.

"I've witnessed it with John Cooper, and now I'm witnessing it with Ryan Day," Broadnax said. "There was no reason for our loss this year against Michigan. He allowed Michigan to dictate the game, and he has to learn to be a dictator. He has to learn how to dictate the game by attacking with our strengths against other team's weaknesses.

"Until he accepts that and takes that into his fold of understanding, he's going to struggle, especially in the Michigan game. There's no reason, other than malpractice, why we should have lost this game."

While Cooper might have had a lot of success to talk about during his time at Ohio State, coaching many All-Americans and award-winning players, after his 13 years at the helm in Columbus the main thing he's remembered for is his record against the Wolverines.

"I talk to John Cooper all the time. You know how those things go," Powell said about the way OSU coaches who lose to Michigan are thought of in Columbus. "(Day has) endured that, and all he wants to do it get that stench off him. That's why it's so hard to fully embrace the game, because in his mind it's like, 'If I lose, I know what's going to happen. I know what life is like for my family,' and that stresses you out.

"I get that. I really get that. But – and I'm not saying he's not doing everything. I think he's 100 percent doing everything he can to win that game – but when you get in those moments, you can't play tight. I know I'm not the only one that feels like this. He plays not to lose. You can't play not to lose. You have to play to win the game.

"He's got to say, 'You know what, forget it. I'm going to let it all out.' Just let it out. Hold nothing back. Everything is on the table. There's no set game plan. We're going to go in there and we're going to find the weakest link, and we're going to go after that."

Ohio State's new athletic director, Ross Bjork, has put his support behind Day multiple times since the loss this season, but whether it's Day or someone else on the sideline on Nov. 29, 2025, in Ann Arbor, the Buckeyes are still facing the reality that they have to break what is now a long streak of losses to the Wolverines, something that can be a tough mental hump to get over.

Breaking a losing streak against Michigan is something Laughlin has experience with. Ohio State's 18-15 win over Michigan in Ann Arbor in 1979 ended a three-game losing streak to the Wolverines that the Buckeyes suffered in the final three years of Woody Hayes' time in Columbus, leading to the hiring of Earle Bruce, something Laughlin believes was a help.

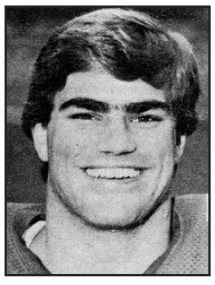
"We had a new coach, Coach Bruce, so it was a different philosophy," Laughlin said. "We had Schlichter, and he had a big year

at quarterback, and Woody didn't do that. Woody's problem was inside the 15, he just ran that robust, full-house backfield, and Bo was used to it and knew exactly what we were going to do.

"(Three years) before with Archie (Griffin), they should have won the national title, and I think they had 200 yards rushing in the first half in the Rose Bowl against UCLA and only scored three points. If we had Urban Meyer as the coach inside the 20, we would have scored 50 points.

"But Michigan had great teams back then, too. Their '76 and '78 teams were better than we were, there wasn't any question. Then in '77, we ran all over and we had 352 (total) yards, they had 196, 10 first downs and we had 23, and yet we scored six points (in a 14-6 loss). That was the difference back then.

"You just have to be positive. Earle Bruce came in, and he was positive. He said we were going to win every game. The first time we met him, he said, 'Don't go out of this meeting and tell anybody that, let me handle that. But we're going to run through this league and we're going back out to the Rose Bowl.' He just gave us confidence that we could beat anybody, and we weren't uptight against that Michigan team. We were a better team, no doubt."


Jim Laughlin

Powell believes it could be somewhat of a mental block when it comes to the losing streak against Michigan as well, since it is such an important game that can weigh on the program that is on the losing side of it.

"What I think it is, I don't think they enjoy that week anymore," Powell said. "It's become such a main priority and everybody's putting all their eggs in one basket, that they don't enjoy all the things that go into that week. It's become such an obligation that they don't enjoy the rivalry. You've just got to loosen up. You've just got to relax.

"When I was playing, we knew we had the better team, we knew we had the better players, we knew that we were going to show up on Saturday and do whatever it took to get it done. Coach Meyer did a really good job of making sure that it wasn't just a game, it was a way of life."

There wasn't a shortage of competition in The Game this year, and there certainly wasn't a shortage of hatred either, when after the game the victorious Michigan team ran a Block M flag to midfield and planted it at the Block O in the middle of Ohio Stadium, prompting the Buckeyes, who were in the middle of "Carmen Ohio," to charge the Wolverines at midfield, where multiple fights broke out over a span of five minutes, ending in police stepping in and pepper spraying players and reporters alike.

Laughlin did not hold back when discussing the flag-planting incident, saying that the Buckeyes were warranted to respond in that manner to what he thought was a disrespectful act by Michigan.

"I was listening to (media personality) Clay Travis on Outkick and he said, 'You plant your flag at the visitors 50-yard line, you deserve to get your ass kicked,' and I agree with that. That's bulls—t," Laughlin said. "I wouldn't do that up at Michigan. I'd celebrate and wave the Ohio State flag, but I wouldn't be planting it at midfield. I don't care what Baker Mayfield says, it's not cool."

Broadnax and Powell both sang the same tune about what happened after the game, saying they would have done the same thing if that happened when they were playing.

"I'm proud of my team because they didn't allow that crap to happen," Broadnax said. "Two years ago, I was so mad I couldn't get down on the field fast enough. I saw our team walking by guys as (Michigan was) running the flag to the middle of the field and not do a dang thing. You don't disrespect our field. They won the game, but you don't allow that to happen. I told a couple of players, 'Don't ever allow that to happen again.' "

Both Broadnax and Laughlin said they would not have allowed that to happen if the Wolverines had tried something similar when they were in Columbus.

"It wouldn't have happened. It wouldn't have got that far," Broadnax said. "It's your home field. You don't allow other teams to disrespect it. You can talk about the fighting and all of that, but I was proud."

"We'd be out there and not let them come near the Block O, although we used to just run off the field when Bo (Schembechler) and Woody were there, although we did tear down their banner in '73, so I guess we're not innocent either," Laughlin said.

But whether the Buckeyes feel they successfully defended their home or not, Michigan went home with yet another win in the rivalry, something that even Sawyer's interception wasn't enough to stop, a play that likely won't be remembered like Laughlin's, Powell's and Broadnax's are by Buckeye fans since the outcome of the game wasn't what they wanted to see.

Had the Buckeyes won the game, Sawyer would have gone down in OSU history like Laughlin did when he blocked the punt that allowed Todd Bell to recover the ball near Michigan's 20-yard-line and get into the end zone, taking an 18-15 lead that was eventually enough to win the game.

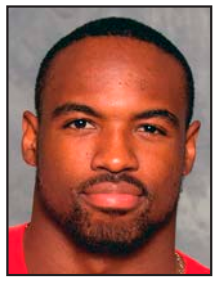
"Oh God, it was the greatest thing in the world," Laughlin said when asked about the play. "I was down on the ground, getting up on my knees and I'm watching like, 'Todd Bell is going to score. He's going to score. I just blocked the punt. We're going to score and win. This is unbelievable. Oh my Lord, this is incredible.' Me and Mike D'Andrea blocked it. He never gets enough credit for it, but he actually got more of it than I did."

Making a play like that in the Michigan game is something Laughlin had dreamed about when he was a kid watching the Buckeyes from Euclid, Ohio, with his dad.

"I remember I was 10 years old in 1968 watching Rex Kern, Jim Otis, Jim Stillwagon and Jack Tatum playing," Laughlin said. "My dad – we had a black and white TV – and he went out for Christmas and said, 'We're getting a color TV to watch the Rose Bowl.' That was the greatest thing in the world to me, watching Ohio State. The nice-looking uniforms and Rex Kern and beating USC in the Rose Bowl. I was like, 'Man, that's what I want to do. I don't care about anything else. I just want to play at Ohio State, beat Michigan, go to the Rose Bowl and be national champs.' "

Laughlin not only got to play at Ohio State but is still remembered over 40 years later because of the play he made – a game now known as the Buckeye Block Party – in the Michigan game, something he said has changed his life, which he is extremely proud of and thankful for.

"Tressel in his first year, he had me come talk to the team about that. You tell them that you're one play away from being famous if you do it in the Michigan game," Laughlin said. "Like I told them, I blocked three other kicks for touchdowns at Ohio State in my career. Nobody remembers any of those. But when you block one against Michigan and you win – it's just one play, one interception, one long run, and you'll be another Hop Cassady. People still know me 30, 40 years later.


Tyvis Powell

"I love it. It's what you dream of," Laughlin added. "I really didn't play until my senior year. I sat for three years and was a special teams guy, but I don't regret it at all. I wouldn't trade it for anything because it all worked out. My senior year, I got to be captain, made that play and the rest is history, and they can't change that."

It's the same for Broadnax. In 1981 when Ohio State was down 9-7 in the fourth quarter, facing a third-and-goal at Michigan's 6-yard-line, Schlichter rolled out right looking for a pass catcher in the end zone, but when he couldn't find anything he made a run for the goal line himself, finding a hole made by Broadnax, who held his block on a Michigan defender for about three seconds then threw another block near the end zone to give the quarterback enough room to score.

"It's as simple as this – do your job," Broadnax said. "I remember that play clear as the day it happened. Carlton Rose – may he rest in peace – he kind of got up under me, and I had to regain leverage. So I got under his shoulder pads and was able to recontrol the situation and push him into another guy. That was doing my job. Sometimes we worry about making this spectacular play instead of doing our job as designed.

"I'll always be tied with Art Schlichter because of that block," he said. "Had Art not made it into the end zone, we could have kicked a field goal and taken the lead as well. But it was the moment that made the block special, and the fact that it was against Michigan made it historic. There are great plays throughout this game's history and great moments throughout this game's history, and I'm just proud to have one of those many moments."

Powell has a more recent play than Laughlin and Broadnax, but one that will still be remembered for years to come when it comes to the story of the rivalry. Trying to hold onto an undefeated record in 2013, the Buckeyes had a seven-point lead before Michigan scored a late touchdown with 32 seconds remaining in the game.

The Wolverines decided to go for the win with a two-point conversion rather than tie the game up, but Powell said he and the rest of the team were prepared for what was coming, ending up in an interception by Powell that, after an onside kick recovery, ended the game.

"We had a nickel blitz on, and they came out in a 2x2," Powell recalled. "Once they motioned the 3x1, I couldn't blitz anymore because I was too far away, so me and Josh (Perry) made the trade call. Josh was supposed to blitz, and I was in coverage. We call the timeout and Coach (Kerry) Coombs walks over to me and he goes, 'Tyvis, this is the same two-point conversion play we did in practice. You've got to be the one to make the play.'

"Sure enough, come back out – a smart team would have switched the play, but they decided to run it – they ran the play. (The receiver) ran the angle route, turned around, boxed Doran (Grant) out, and I just stepped right in front of it and made the play."

For Powell, the feeling of realizing how important that play was in the moment wasn't immediate. When he made the play as a freshman, he was excited about the play he made winning the game, but didn't quite understand the impact that single play would have on his entire life after the fact.

"In the moment, it felt like nothing," Powell said. "I didn't realize the impact the play had. 'All right, I made a play, I stopped them. Good job, Tyvis.' But everything after that, I was like, 'OK, this was huge.' I didn't understand the magnitude of the play until I got on social media, until people on campus were thanking me, people were leaving signs on my mother's door. That was when I was like, 'OK, this is big.'

"It's a play that really changed my life. To have one of those moments that people are like, 'I know exactly where I was when you made that play.' That's an iconic moment. I'm just a regular guy who had a decent career at Ohio State and in the NFL. To have that play that people are going to remember me for, that's why you do football. That's why you want to come to Ohio State, to leave a legacy. Now that I'm not playing anymore, to have a moment like that, it means a lot to me."

Because of that, Powell still remembers something that Meyer used to tell the team when they were preparing for the Michigan game.

"Coach Meyer would say that in this game, careers are made and legends are born," Powell said. "In 2012, that was the first time I heard him say it, but I didn't really understand it. To make that play and see how it impacted my life after that, some people call me a legend. I don't feel like a legend at all, but people are like, 'You're a legend for that,' just because I made a play. He was right on par with that."

While those plays and many others will always be remembered because of the rivalry, Sawyer and the Buckeyes unfortunately came up just short of adding another to the annals of The Game.

The result of the game doesn't change how important that play felt at the time, but it does impact how it will be remembered, or whether it will be at all.

"It got diminished a little bit," Powell said about the interception. "It was an unbelievable, huge play. I think it should still make the documentary, but it didn't lead to them winning the game. That's the problem. I think people will still remember Jack Sawyer for that play because it was such a big play and such a pivotal moment in the game, but obviously the loss waters it down"

"That was a great play, and everybody thought it was going to be a turning point," Laughlin said. "Everybody thought, 'OK, now here we go,' and it just didn't happen. People forget if you lose. They only remember if you win. They remember you forever if you win the game."

U-M AD Manuel Gets Five-Year Extension

Michigan athletic director Warde Manuel was given a contract extension that will keep him in Ann Arbor through at least June 2030. Manuel, a former defensive lineman for the Wolverines, has led the athletic department since 2016 and earned another five years.

BIG TEN NOTES
Greg Wilson

"During Warde's tenure as director, athletics has put a structure in place where our student-athletes compete for Big Ten and national championships, excel in the classroom, and proudly graduate with their University of Michigan degrees," university president Santa J. Ono said on Dec. 5.

Manuel made stops as athletic director at Buffalo (2005-12) and UConn (2012-16). In his new contract, according to ESPN's Pete Thamel, he will make an average of $2.4 million per year, with some of his compensation being deferred, and with his new contract terms, he is one of the highest-paid athletic directors in the Big Ten.

"I want to express my gratitude to President Ono, Board Chair Kathy White, and the members of the Board of Regents who have been very supportive of me and our athletic department," Manuel said. "I look forward to continuing the success that we have driven together during this changing landscape in college athletics.

"Every day, I am thankful to work at this great institution and to represent Michigan Athletics. I especially want to thank the student-athletes, coaches and staff who compete for each of our teams and who have helped us achieve unparalleled success athletically and academically. I am excited to continue giving back to a university that has provided me with so much over my career."

Manuel has overseen a football program at Michigan that is coming off a national championship in 2023, Jim Harbaugh's final year with the Wolverines, and has beaten rival Ohio State four times in a row, the most recent victory coming on Nov. 30 with Manuel's newly hired head coach Sherrone Moore leading the program.

Manuel has not had as much success with the basketball program at Michigan, hiring former Wolverine Juwan Howard to lead the program before he was fired at the end of last season, leading Manuel to bring in former Florida Atlantic head coach Dusty May as his replacement.

May is off to an 8-2 start in his first year leading the Wolverines, a strong start that earned them a No. 24 ranking in the latest AP top 25 poll released on Dec. 16.

In 2024, Manuel took over as the chair of the College Football Playoff selection committee after having joined the committee in 2022.

He was also the recipient of the 2024 John L. Toner Award, which "is designed to honor and acknowledge outstanding athletics directors who have demonstrated superior administrative abilities, especially in the area of college football."

Ducks QB Gabriel 3rd In Heisman Voting

After going undefeated to earn the No. 1 seed in the College Football Playoff and winning the Big Ten Championship over Penn State, Oregon quarterback Dillon Gabriel received the news on Dec. 9 that he was one of four finalists for the Heisman Trophy.

He was joined by Colorado cornerback and wide receiver Travis Hunter, Boise State running back Ashton Jeanty and Miami quarterback Cam Ward as finalists for the award. On Dec. 14, Hunter became the first defensive player to win the Heisman since 1997.

In Gabriel's sixth college season, and first with the Ducks, he has started all 13 games and thrown for 3,558 yards, 28 touchdowns and just six interceptions. He enters the College Football Playoff ranking seventh in the nation in passing efficiency at 166.6, a mark that is third in the Big Ten behind Indiana's Kurtis Rourke (181.4) and Ohio State's Will Howard (172.1).

In the 2024 season, Gabriel was able to push up to second all-time in passing yards in college football with 18,423 in 63 games. With potentially three more games to go in the playoff, he could find himself eclipsing the No. 1 mark set by former Houston quarter-

2024 Standings

	Conf.			All		
	W	L	Pct.	W	L	Pct.
Oregon	9	0	1.000	13	0	1.000
Indiana	8	1	.889	11	1	.917
Penn State	8	1	.889	11	2	.846
Ohio State	7	2	.778	10	2	.833
Illinois	6	3	.667	9	3	.750
Iowa	6	3	.667	8	4	.667
Michigan	5	4	.556	7	5	.583
Minnesota	5	4	.556	7	5	.583
Rutgers	4	5	.444	7	5	.583
USC	4	5	.444	6	6	.500
Washington	4	5	.444	6	6	.500
Nebraska	3	6	.333	6	6	.500
Michigan State	3	6	.333	5	7	.417
UCLA	3	6	.333	5	7	.417
Wisconsin	3	6	.333	5	7	.417
Northwestern	2	7	.222	4	8	.333
Maryland	1	8	.111	4	8	.333
Purdue	0	9	.000	1	11	.083

Dec. 7 Game
Oregon 45, Penn State, 37*

All times Eastern

* Big Ten Championship Game at Lucas Oil Stadium, Indianapolis

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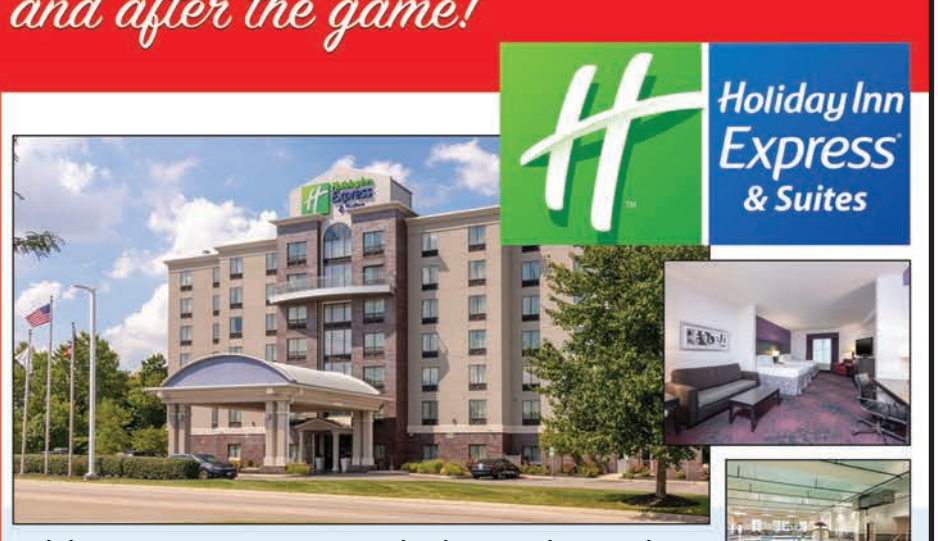

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B1G Conference Bowl Matchups

CFP First Round
Dec. 20 • 8 p.m.
ABC
Indiana (11-1) at
Notre Dame (11-1)

CFP First Round
Dec. 21 • 12 p.m.
TNT
SMU (11-2) at
Penn State (11-2)

CFP First Round
Dec. 21 • 8 p.m.
ABC
Tennessee (10-2) at
Ohio State (10-2)

Rate
Dec. 26 • 5:30 p.m.
ESPN
Rutgers (7-5) vs.
Kansas State (8-4)

Las Vegas
Dec. 27 • 10:30 p.m.
ESPN
USC (6-6) vs.
Texas A&M (8-4)

Pinstripe
Dec. 28 • Noon
ABC
Boston College (7-5) vs.
Nebraska (6-6)

Music City
Dec. 30 • 2:30 p.m.
ESPN
Missouri (9-3) vs.
Iowa (8-4)

ReliaQuest
Dec. 31 • Noon
ESPN
Alabama (9-3) vs.
Michigan (7-5)

Sun
Dec. 31 • 2 p.m.
CBS
Louisville (8-4) vs.
Washington (6-6)

Citrus
Dec. 31 • 3 p.m.
ABC
South Carolina (9-3) vs.
Illinois (9-3)

CFP Quarterfinal
Jan. 1 • 5 p.m.
ESPN
Oregon (13-0) vs.
TBD

Duke's Mayo
Jan. 3 • 7:30 p.m.
ESPN
Minnesota (7-5) vs.
Virginia Tech (6-6)

back Case Keenum (2007-11), who threw for 19,217 yards in 57 games.

Gabriel was also named Big Ten Offensive Player of the Year since BSB last went to press and earned a first-team All-Big Ten selection. To see all of the award winners and All-Big Ten teams, check out pages 6 and 7 of this issue.

Four B1G Teams In CFP

Joining the Ducks in the inaugural 12-team playoff are Penn State, Ohio State and Indiana. The Nittany Lions earned the No. 6 seed after losing to Oregon 45-37 in the Big Ten title game while the Buckeyes were placed at No. 8 and Indiana at No. 10.

With the Ducks' 13-0 finish, they have the chance to become the first 16-0 team in the modern era of college football, with only the 1894 Yale team able to say it did the same thing. But to do that, they will have to get through the winner of the Buckeyes and No. 9 Tennessee in the Rose Bowl first.

Penn State will host No. 11 SMU at Beaver Stadium on Dec. 21 (noon, TNT) in the first round with the winner moving on to face No. 3-seed Boise State in the Fiesta Bowl on Dec. 31 (7:30 p.m., ESPN). Indiana will travel to No. 7 Notre Dame in the first round on Dec. 20 (8 p.m., ABC/ESPN), which lost only one game this season to Northern Illinois.

With four Big Ten teams in the tournament bracket, the conference has more teams featured than any other conference. The SEC had three teams make it in (No. 2 Georgia, No. 5 Texas, Tennessee), while the ACC had two (SMU, No. 12 Clemson), and the Mountain West (Boise State) and Big 12 (No. 4 Arizona State) each had one. Notre Dame is an independent.

Only one other Big Ten team finished the season inside the top 25 of the final College Football Playoff rankings, with Illinois coming in at No. 20.

B1G Transfer Portal Moves

As has been the case since the transfer portal officially began, it has been very active so far, with players able to officially enter on Dec. 9 through the last day the winter portal is open (Dec. 28).

Three teams in the Big Ten have already seen their starting quarterbacks enter the portal looking for another place to play for the 2025 season, with Miller Moss of USC, Cade McNamara of Iowa and Tyler Van Dyke of Wisconsin exploring the other options they might have.

There are many other players throughout the conference who are also going to be with different teams next year, including Northwestern right tackle Josh Thompson, Michigan punter Tommy Doman and wide receiver Tyler Morris, Purdue defensive back Dillon Thieneman, Michigan State wide receiver Jaron Glover, Wisconsin wide receiver Trech Kekahuna and Nebraska defensive end Jimari Butler, among many others.

Headlining that group of transfers is the sophomore Thieneman, who has earned All-Big Ten recognition in each of his first two collegiate seasons, including a second-team all-conference nod in 2023. The Westfield, Ind., native committed to Oregon on Dec. 14.

Also in the portal is former USC defensive lineman Bear Alexander, who left the Trojans early in the season with the intention of keeping an extra year of eligibility to play somewhere else. According to On3, Alexander is the No. 1 defensive lineman in the portal, and his top targets as BSB went to press were Oregon, Penn State and SMU.

With still close to two weeks to go until the transfer portal officially closes, there will likely be much more action before Buckeye Sports Bulletin next goes to press.

B1G Coaching Carousel

Big Ten players aren't the only ones who are looking for new opportunities in college football. Many coaches in the conference are on the move as well, either by choice or because they were let go from their previous positions.

One of them is Indiana co-offensive coordinator and quarterbacks coach Tino Sunseri, who will reportedly join another Big Ten team after the Hoosiers' run in the College Football Playoff, becoming the offensive coordinator at UCLA for the 2025 season. He will replace former Kansas City Chiefs and Washington Commanders offensive coordinator Eric Bieniemy, who was fired from the position on Dec. 5.

In his one season with the Bruins, Bieniemy's offense was 126th in the country in scoring, managing just 18.4 points per game, which was 16th in the Big Ten ahead of just Northwestern (17.8 ppg) and Purdue (15.8 ppg). The Bruins were also 117th in total offense (15th in the Big Ten) at 328.8 yards per game.

Despite losing his co-offensive coordinator who helped the Hoosiers to the second-best scoring offense in the country, Indiana head coach Curt Cignetti said he is confident that the team won't hit a speed bump next season due to Sunseri leaving.

"The philosophy has always been when you lose a coach, hire a better one," Cignetti said. "We had a lot of players (at previous schools) at quarterback before we hired Tino. While he's done a great job, we won't miss a step, and he'll do a great job preparing the quarterbacks during the playoffs."

Rutgers was another team to lose a coach, with defensive coordinator Joe Harasymiak being hired as the new head coach at Massachusetts, a team that has never won more than four games in a season since it joined the FBS in 2012. UMass will be rejoining the Mid-American Conference in July after being independent for the last nine seasons.

Prior to his three-year stint at Rutgers, Harasymiak was a defensive backs coach and co-defensive coordinator at Minnesota for three seasons (2019-21) and a head coach at Maine (2016-18), where he was the 2018 FCS Coach of the Year after leading the Black Bears to a 10-4 record and the national semifinal.

This season, he led a Rutgers defense that was 58th in the country in scoring defense (23.8 points per game allowed) and 80th in total defense (381.5 yards per game allowed).

Michigan moved on from offensive coordinator and quarterbacks coach Kirk Campbell on Dec. 3, firing him just three days after the Wolverines pulled off the stunning 13-10 upset of Ohio State.

Campbell originally joined the Wolverines staff in 2022 as an offensive analyst before being promoted to quarterbacks coach in 2023 and offensive coordinator a year later, leading one of the worst offenses in the Big Ten and the country in the 2024 season.

The Wolverines were 128th in the country in total offense, gaining just 294.3 yards per game, which was 17th in the Big Ten ahead of only Northwestern (284.4 yards per game), and were 112th in the nation in scoring offense with 22.3 points per game, largely helped by a 50-point performance against the Wildcats on Nov. 23.

Wisconsin moved on from offensive coordinator Phil Longo during the season and has officially replaced him with former Kansas assistant Jeff Grimes, who will be taking over as the Badgers' offensive coordinator for the 2025 season.

Grimes spent just one season with the Jayhawks after multiple three-year stints with both Baylor and BYU in the same position. He was also a longtime offensive line coach and will be part of Wisconsin's attempt to return to being more physical and excelling in the running game. Kansas was 75th in the country in rushing offense this season with 153.5 yards per game on the ground.

Analysts Impressed By OSU's 2025 Class

By BOBBY GORBETT
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

The 2025 recruiting period isn't officially over, but the Buckeyes already appear to have another start-studded group following the early signing period from Dec. 4-6. With 26 players already signed, two of whom are rated as five stars, the Buckeyes have the fifth-ranked class in the country, according to the 247Sports composite rankings. Ohio State's average player rating of 92.25 also ranks fifth in the country. Ohio State trails only Texas, Alabama, Oregon and Georgia in both categories.

For weeks leading up to the early signing period, the Buckeyes had the No. 1-ranked class in the country, but a couple of players decommitting from Ohio State and signing elsewhere caused that ranking to drop. Still, it is the Buckeyes' sixth straight top-five recruiting class under head coach Ryan Day.

"It was another really good class," Buckeye Huddle's Marc Givler told BSB. "I mean, people are going to get wrapped up with, 'Oh, they didn't finish No. 1,' or anything like that, but essentially, the blueprint to winning a national championship for most champions over the past 25 years is that you need to have top-five recruiting classes, and they've done that again."

Not surprisingly, the Buckeyes' class starts on the offensive side of the ball where they have traditionally recruited well under Day, with Bellefontaine, Ohio, five-star quarterback Tavien St. Clair (6-4, 225). St. Clair has only improved his standing in many recruiting rankings since committing to Ohio State in June of 2023.

"I don't think I've seen a kid, a quarterback, improve from freshman to junior, senior year like Tavien both mentally and mechanically. But also just the physical transformation, the added strength," Givler said. "It was astronomical how much better, especially sophomore to junior year – he improved every year – but the leap from sophomore to junior year was just completely insane.

"He went from a kid that we saw very early, that we were like, 'OK he could play in the Big Ten somewhere. Where exactly in the Big Ten, I don't know,' to 'Oh my goodness, this might be the best quarterback prospect in the country,' in like eight months. It was an unbelievable development curve that he had, and I think incredibly highly of him as a leader, as a human and as a football player."

St. Clair never seemed to waver from his Ohio State commitment and even attempted to help lure other players to join him in Columbus, even if he wasn't ultimately successful with such players as Mobile (Ala.) Theodore four-star offensive tackle Micah DeBose (6-5, 315).

As is often the case for Ohio State quarterbacks, St. Clair will have plenty of weapons around him when he ultimately gets on the field. Although co-offensive coordinator and wide receivers coach Brian Hartline may not have brought in a generational receiver prospect as he did with former No. 1 overall recruit Jeremiah Smith last cycle, it's still another deep and talented room.

The receiver room additions consist of the No. 53-ranked overall player in the country in Oradell (N.J.) Bergen Catholic four-star Quincy Porter (6-3, 190); Mission Viejo, Calif., four-star Phillip Bell (6-2, 195); Ontario, Ohio, four-star Bodpegn Miller (6-4, 180); and Wayne (N.J.) DePaul Catholic four-star De'zie Jones (6-0, 180).

"They signed the four receivers, and I thought it was a little lower than what Hartline usually brings in," Bill Greene of Buckeye Scoop told BSB. "But now we're comparing this group to JJ Smith and Carnell Tate, (Emeka) Egbuka and Julian Fleming – those guys were all just superstars coming out of high school. I like Quincy Porter, and I think he's the best of this bunch. Is he JJ Smith? No, he's not. I don't look for Quincy Porter to be the No. 1 receiver on the field next year for Ohio State, the way JJ Smith is right now, but Quincy Porter is a dude. I think he probably will get time next year."

Although he wasn't as highly rated as Porter, Miller's experience as a former high school quarterback adds to Greene's intrigue for his potential as a prospect.

"If you're going to gamble on someone and roll the dice, this guy's an athlete that has size, he's got speed, he's got athletic ability playing high school quarterback," Greene said. "Look, he either gets it and he's one of your dudes in a couple of years, or he transfers to Akron. But if I'm taking a chance on someone, if we're going to take a shot, I would take a shot at Miller, just because of his combination of skills."

With senior running back TreVeyon Henderson and junior running back Quinshon Judkins possibly headed to the NFL draft, the Buckeyes added some valuable 2025 running back depth by signing three new running backs in the early signing period. The 2025 haul is led by Cleveland Villa Angela-St. Joseph four-star Bo Jackson (6-0, 205) but also includes Montgomery (Ala.) Carver four-star Anthony Rogers (5-8, 190) and Philadelphia St. Joseph's Prep three-star Isaiah West (5-11, 208). As loaded as the room is, Givler likes the way the trio seems to fit together.

"Isaiah West and Bo Jackson are kind of complementary pieces in that they can kind of be interchangeable the way Henderson and Judkins are, and then Turbo (Rogers) is a totally different type of player," Givler said. "He has a totally different skill set. He can run between the tackles, but he's a speed and space guy, a very talented pass catcher out of the backfield."

According to Givler, Rogers, a player who was committed to Alabama for over a year before ultimately flipping to and signing with Ohio State on Dec. 4, possesses different traits than a prototypical running back, which will allow him to be on the field with another running back. Greene wasn't as optimistic about the configuration staying together.

"I don't," Greene said when asked if he thought the trio could coexist. "Somebody's going to redshirt, but those kids don't like redshirting. When you redshirt a kid, what you're telling them is we'll get back to you in a couple years. Well, nobody wants to hear that. Isaiah West, if he'd go to Kentucky tomorrow, he'd be in their rotation.

"Anthony Rogers, I don't understand what happened, why he left 'Bama as the second running back in that class to come to Ohio State to be the third running back in this class. Sometimes recruiting doesn't make sense, and that doesn't make sense to me, but I like that kid. But why does he want to be a part of a three-running back class? That's kind of weird to me, but one of them is going to be on the field next year, backing up James Peoples I think."

On paper, it's another solid tight end class for Ohio State, which features two commits: Washington, Okla., four-star Nate Roberts (6-4, 235) and Gates Mills (Ohio) Gilmour Academy four-star Brody Lennon (6-4, 220). According to Greene, it could be even better than what initially meets the eye.

"I think the tight end is highly underrated. Nate Roberts, if you watch his film, you don't get to see a lot of his blocking, but he's like a 6-4, 235 dude," Greene said. "There's no reason why he's not a good blocker. Someone that size, if he's not a good blocker, it's because he's not trying, And I don't see that in him, but when you watch him as a receiver, he plays a lot in the slot. He plays a lot outside as an outside wide receiver, too. So is he Cade Stover, maybe a better blocking Cade Stover? If you remember, Cade Stover came to Ohio State as a linebacker. I like Nate Roberts. I think he's highly underrated."

In what is becoming an unnerving trend for Buckeye fans, offensive line coach Justin

Frye has so far signed another slightly disappointing offensive line class. After being firmly in the mix for the highest-rated offensive tackle in the country in Charlotte (N.C.) Providence Day School five-star offensive tackle David Sanders Jr. (6-6, 290) and the previously mentioned DeBose, the Buckeyes settled with only one top-300 offensive lineman and three signees total. The three players making up the Buckeyes' offensive line class to this point are Toledo Whitmer four-star offensive tackle Carter Lowe (6-5, 290) and interior linemen Upper Marlboro (Md.) Riverdale Baptist four-star Jayvon McFadden (6-5, 300) and Westerville (Ohio) North three-star Jake Cook (6-5, 295).

"You hate to sign three. You have to take four or five every year, I think," Greene said. "If that gives you a glut at that position, and they're not developing, then you give them their papers, and you tell them it's time to go to Kent State or Miami of Ohio. Not enough quantity, not enough quality. You've got two developmental guys in McFadden and Cook, and then a dude in Lowe. I was thinking in this class the way they were set up six, seven months ago, I thought it was going to be three dudes and then maybe a Jake Cook."

The Buckeyes' hopes on the other side of the trenches may not have been completely fulfilled either after a hectic final month, which had both of Bradenton (Fla.) IMG Academy four-star defensive end London Merritt (6-3, 250) and Philadelphia Imhotep Institute four-star defensive end Zahir Mathis (6-6, 225) decommit while New Orleans Edna Karr five-star defensive lineman Jahkeem Stewart (6-6, 270) chose USC over Ohio State. Mathis still has not signed with a team as BSB went to press, but according to Givler, the Buckeyes' chances of getting him to still sign are very low.

Regardless, the Buckeyes still managed to bring a deep five-man class, which includes Enterprise, Ala., four-star defensive end Zion Grady (6-4, 235); Newberry, Fla., four-star defensive lineman Jarquez Carter (6-2, 284); Philadelphia St. Joseph's Prep School four-star defensive lineman Maxwell Roy (6-3, 285); Matthews (N.C.) Weddington four-star defensive lineman Trajen Odom (6-4, 285); and Bellflower (Calif.) St. John Bosco four-star defensive end Epi Sitanilei (6-5, 220).

Sitanilei, a UCLA commit up until the start of the early signing period on Dec. 4, is the Buckeyes' lowest-rated player in their defensive line class, but according to Greene that might have had more to do with his prior commitment to UCLA rather than his skill set.

"If that kid would have been committed to Ohio State from the beginning or committed to Georgia, not UCLA, he wouldn't be rated as lowly as he is," Greene said. "I sat in on those meetings for 10 years. I know how they rank dudes."

Givler also believed the up-and-coming Sitanilei was rated well below where he should have been.

"Getting Epi at the very end was huge," Givler said. "They didn't just need a body to fill a quota, they needed a legitimate guy. I mean he's a borderline top-100 prospect, really good pass-rushing skill set, kind of a late bloomer, which is always a good sign."

The Buckeye linebacker prospects were one of the biggest strengths of the class. Made up of two top-100 players in McKinney, Texas, four-star Riley Pettijohn (6-2, 215) and Vero Beach, Fla., four-star Tarvos Alford (6-2, 210) as well as the 568th-ranked player nationally in Akron Hoban three-star Eli Lee (6-3, 230), very few programs can match the high-end talent of the Buckeye linebacker group, according to Givler.

"TJ Alford, Riley Pettijohn and Eli Lee, I think that's the best linebacker group in the country this cycle," Givler said. "They've got a couple guys there in Pettijohn and Alford who are arguably two of the three or four best linebackers in America. I think both of those guys are capable of getting out there early. Not as starters, but as special teams guys, and maybe into the depth chart a little bit where they're getting into the rotation by the end of their freshman years. I think those guys are really, really good."

The strength of the Buckeyes' secondary class took a pretty sizable hit when Birmingham (Ala.) Parker five-star cornerback Na'eem Offord (6-1, 185) decommitted from Ohio State and signed with Oregon. However, the Buckeyes still signed a well-rounded group including Houston North Shore five-star cornerback Devin Sanchez (6-2, 170); Cartersville, Ga., three-star cornerback Jordyn Woods (6-3, 175); Olney (Md.) Our Lady of Good Counsel four-star safety Faheem Delane (6-3, 195); Wayne (N.J.) DePaul Catholic four-star DeShawn Stewart (6-2, 185); and Cleveland St. Ignatius three-star safety Cody Haddad (6-1, 175).

Sanchez, the No. 7-ranked overall player in the class, is a candidate to receive substantial playing time as a true freshman according to Givler.

"I think it's a lot to put on a guy, but if there's one guy in this class that I think can pull it off, I think it's Devin Sanchez," Givler said when asked which freshman could make an impact in his first year. "For my money, he's the best player they signed. I think he's the best corner in the country. I think he's almost a carbon copy of Jeff Okudah. He may even be more athletic than Okudah. He may be a faster kid. He's got high-level maturity, a high-level work ethic. He's coming in early, and he's built out of a lab physically. So there are some parallels there with Jeremiah (Smith) in terms of their physical profile, or maturity, their work ethic that I think would allow Devin to play."

As good as Sanchez appears to be, and Greene believes that both he and Delane have the chance to excel at Ohio State, Offord's decommitment could loom large, especially considering Woods is the No.1,213 prospect in the country.

"They signed a Jordyn Woods kid who I kind of like a little bit, but he's a Georgia kid, and the Dogs never offered him. But he's got some legs and some athleticism," Greene said. "If Jordyn Woods is in a class with Offord and Sanchez, that's great. He's a developmental dude who if it works, it works. If it doesn't, it doesn't. But he's one of your main dudes. He's the No. 2 corner to Sanchez."

Withstanding some slight holes at cornerback and offensive line, the top-five class should give the Buckeyes plenty of talent to work with on both sides of the ball.

"I thought they swung and missed at corner and offensive tackle, and I thought these were both position groups that they've really needed to nail, and I don't think they did. But everywhere else, they have dudes all over the place," Greene said.

Offord Flips, Buckeyes Sign 26 Prospects

There was some expected movement during this year's early signing period from Dec. 4 to Dec. 6, with Birmingham (Ala.) Parker five-star cornerback Na'eem Offord (6-1, 185) flipping his commitment to Oregon on Dec. 4 as the Buckeyes were signing 26 other recruits, pulling off two flips of their own.

RECRUITING OUTLOOK
Greg Wilson

Offord leaving OSU's 2025 class was not unexpected. He had been frequenting games on other team's campuses the entire season, although Auburn seemed the more likely destination since he had been to mostly Tiger games this season. He did take a visit to Eugene, Ore., for the Ducks' 32-31 win over Ohio State on Oct. 12 and stayed in contact with Dan Lanning and the Ducks throughout the two months after that game, ultimately deciding he wanted to be with the 2024 Big Ten champions.

But signing day wasn't all bad news for the Buckeyes, with Montgomery (Ala.) Carver four-star running back Anthony Rogers (5-8, 190) signing after he had decommitted from Alabama on Nov. 17. He decided between OSU and Georgia on Dec. 4 and ended up as the third running back in Ohio State's class along with Cleveland Villa Angela-St. Joseph four-star Bo Jackson (6-0, 205) and Philadelphia St. Joseph's Prep three-star Isaiah West (5-11, 208), who both signed on Dec. 4 as well.

"Those three are upgrades there and also build some depth," head coach Ryan Day said on Dec. 4. "(Running backs coach Carlos Locklyn) is very, very aggressive, and he wanted to build depth in that room."

Day said that Locklyn and the rest of the staff like the fact that Rogers is so versatile.

"Locklyn has known him for a while and has been recruiting him for a while, so he was very, very familiar with him," he said. "Based on what we saw him do this year – he lined up at receiver a lot, he was a returner – he gives us a little of that hybrid, where you can line up as a receiver, you can come into the backfield, you can return kicks. We haven't had a ton of those guys. Whenever you can get guys like that, it's important.

"When you look at the way things are going in NIL and with roster limitations, the more hybrid guys that you can bring in and have do multiple things will be important, especially this time of the year when you're looking to make a run late in the season and you might have injuries. Guys who can do multiple job descriptions, their value is going to continue to increase."

Ohio State was also able to flip Bellflower (Calif.) St. John Bosco four-star edge rusher Epi Sitanilei (6-5, 220), who had been committed to UCLA since June 30. Sitanilei is the nation's 406th-best prospect and 32nd-best edge rusher.

As is often the case with Ohio State, there were questions about Justin Frye's offensive line class and whether it will be enough to fill out what the Buckeye front five needs in the future. The Buckeyes signed just three offensive linemen in the class, those being Toledo Whitmer four-star offensive tackle Carter Lowe (6-5, 290), Upper Marlboro (Md.) Riverdale Baptist four-star offensive lineman Jayvon McFadden (6-5, 300) and Westerville (Ohio) North three-star interior offensive lineman Jake Cook (6-5, 295).

While Day said he likes the three players the Buckeyes were able to sign, there still need to be improvements made by Frye when it comes to recruiting that position group.

"That's the one area that I feel like we have to make sure that we're going to be addressing in the next few weeks," Day said. "Jayvon is really going to give us something at tackle. Carter is a swing guy. Jake's a local guy. All three of those guys we feel great about, but at the end of the day we have to make sure that we have the numbers that we need, make sure we have the depth that we need.

"In today's day and age, it's a little different how you put the roster together. It's not just

OSU Football 2025 Commitments

Players in the class of 2025 who have issued a verbal commitment to play football at Ohio State.

Player	Pos.	Ht.	Wt.	Stars	High School
Tarvos Alford	LB	6-2	210	★★★★	Vero Beach, Fla.
Phillip Bell	WR	6-2	195	★★★★	Mission Viejo, Calif.
Jarquez Carter	DL	6-2	284	★★★★	Newberry, Fla.
Jake Cook	OL	6-5	295	★★★	Westerville (Ohio) North
Faheem Delane	SF	6-3	195	★★★★	Olney (Md.) Our Lady of Good Counsel
Zion Grady	DE	6-4	235	★★★★	Enterprise, Ala.
Cody Haddad	SF	6-1	175	★★★	Cleveland St. Ignatius
Bo Jackson	RB	6-0	205	★★★★	Cleveland Villa Angela-St. Joseph
De'zie Jones	WR	6-0	180	★★★★	Wayne (N.J.) DePaul Catholic
Eli Lee	LB	6-3	230	★★★	Akron Hoban
Brody Lennon	TE	6-4	220	★★★★	Gates Mills (Ohio) Gilmour Academy
Carter Lowe	OT	6-5	290	★★★★	Toledo Whitmer
Jayvon McFadden	IOL	6-5	300	★★★★	Upper Marlboro (Md.) Riverdale Baptist
Bodpegn Miller	WR	6-4	180	★★★★	Ontario, Ohio
Trajen Odom	DL	6-4	285	★★★★	Matthews, N.C.
Riley Pettijohn	LB	6-2	215	★★★★	McKinney, Texas
Quincy Porter	WR	6-3	190	★★★★	Oradell (N.J.) Bergen Catholic
Nate Roberts	TE	6-4	235	★★★★	Washington, Okla.
Anthony Rogers	RB	5-8	190	★★★★	Montgomery (Ala.) Carver
Maxwell Roy	DL	6-3	250	★★★★	Philadelphia St. Joseph's Prep
Devin Sanchez	CB	6-2	170	★★★★★	Houston North Shore
Epi Sitanilei	DE	6-5	220	★★★★	Bellflower (Calif.) St. John Bosco
Tavien St. Clair	QB	6-4	225	★★★★★	Bellefontaine, Ohio
DeShawn Stewart	SF	6-2	185	★★★★	Wayne (N.J.) DePaul Catholic
Isaiah West	RB	5-11	208	★★★	Philadelphia St. Joseph's Prep
Jordyn Woods	CB	6-3	175	★★★	Cartersville, Ga.

ASK AN ANALYST

With BuckeyeScoop's Bill Greene

Bellflower (Calif.) St. John Bosco four-star defensive end Epi Sitanilei (6-5, 220) flipped to Ohio State and signed with the Buckeyes during the early signing period. What do you make of him as a prospect, and what does he add to the 2025 defensive line group?

"I thought he was highly underrated, and I think that comes from being committed to UCLA instead of being committed to Georgia or Texas or Ohio State. I really like him. I had never even heard of him. I never paid any attention to him. I just look at Ohio State news, and this guy just hit the radar late, and so naturally, you go watch the film, and it's like, holy crap, this guy's a player. I think he's highly underrated. If he was committed somewhere else, he'd have been rated highly all fall. So I love the guy. As a pass rusher, I think he has a chance to be really special."

Ohio State is losing a lot of offensive linemen this offseason. Are there any players you've seen in the portal that the Buckeyes should be after to address that?

"Well, right now, when I saw Josh Thompson from Northwestern go into the portal, I wanted to watch him. I don't watch a lot of Northwestern football. You watch that guy, watch what he did this year for them, that guy's a dude. I could see Josh Thompson starting next year for Alabama, Georgia, Ohio State, Texas, Notre Dame, you name it. That guy's going to play wherever he goes, and he's going to be good. So if they have any NIL money left with a lot of those guys coming off the books, I'd pay what I have to pay for Josh Thompson. I think if he would come to Ohio State right now, he might be the No. 1 guy in that room next year.

With the early signing period behind us, what position group do you view as most important to address either in the transfer portal or in the high school ranks before National Signing Day?

"Offensive line for sure. They have their eyes on Thompson. I wanted to go through and see which offensive linemen did not sign (during the early signing period), if anybody is out there that just hung in there and didn't sign, and I'm not aware of anyone off the top of my head. So now you're really probably scraping the barrel to see. So I would probably concentrate on the portal kids.

"I think they could bring in two or three on the offensive line. I'd go after everybody, everybody I thought was good. The Thompson kid just shocks me with how good he is for playing for a bad team. It's hard to stand out on the offensive line when you play for a bad team because the offensive line is mostly all five of them working together, but that guy's good. So I would kill to get him, and then I would probably take another one or two.

Are there any other groups other than the offensive line that you think need to be addressed?

"Yeah, cornerback was a killer. Six months ago, you thought they were going to sign Houston North Shore five-star Devin Sanchez (6-2, 170), Birmingham (Ala.) Parker five-star Oregon flip Na'eem Offord (6-1, 185) and Baltimore St. Frances Academy four-star Auburn flip Blake Woodby (5-11, 175). They signed Devin Sanchez and threw a lottery ticket out to Cartersville, Ga., three-star Jordyn Woods (6-3, 175). Then you're losing Denzel Burke and Jordan Hancock.

"I think losing Na'eem Offord, you can't overcome that with another high school kid, because he might be the top corner in the country. Then you scour the portal and see if there's another Davison Igbinosun out there that you can bring in to start for you. But that hurt losing Offord. Losing Woodby was bad enough, but losing Offord is killer."

With the focus turning to the 2026 class, what do you see as the most important position or players to go after in that class?

"Well, the good thing in 2026 is as much as we harp and complain about the offensive line – well, at least I do, I don't know if other people do – you have a great in-state offensive line class next year. That's the perfect tonic for Justin Frye. I see six that I would be interested in next year. Avon Lake, Ohio four-star offensive tackle Max Riley (6-5, 280) is a dude. There are a lot of guys in that class who are in-state guys that you should realistically be able to land. Justin Frye hasn't really shown that he can go head-to-head with the best in the country and win these battles.

"Akron Hoban four-star offensive tackle Sam Greer (6-7, 310) is a player. I really like Washington Court House (Ohio) Miami Trace four-star offensive tackle Adam Guthrie (6-7, 280). Adam Guthrie is an interior guy. Cleveland Ignatius has four-star interior offensive lineman Will Conroy (6-3, 275). I think they have offered most of these guys, but they're going to be my No. 1 targets.

"They need five offensive linemen next year. If I'm taking them all from Ohio, then I'll take them all from Ohio. Akron Copley offensive tackle Lucas Tielsch (6-7, 300) looks like a big player. You have a chance to address your needs in-state, so go get those guys. I see four or five that I would take."

OSU Football 2026 Commitments

Player(s) in the class of 2026 who have issued a verbal commitment to play football at Ohio State.

Player	Pos.	Ht.	Wt.	Stars	High School
Corbyn Fordham	TE	6-4	215	★★★★	Jacksonville (Fla.) The Bolles School
Chris Henry Jr.	WR	6-5	205	★★★★★	Santa Ana (Calif.) Mater Dei
Jaeden Ricketts	WR	6-0	187	★★★	Pataskala (Ohio) Watkins Memorial

about the high school guys and recruiting. You have to make sure you have your numbers and you have your depth. So whether it's through retention or maybe a guy in the portal, that's what it's going to come down to. It's everybody's job as a position coach to make sure they have what they need."

The Buckeyes' top recruit in the class is Bellefontaine, Ohio, five-star quarterback Tavien St. Clair (6-4, 225), one of two five-stars in the class and the No. 3-ranked player in the country. A finalist for the Ohio Mr. Football award this season and a first-team All-Ohio quarterback, St. Clair has been on the Buckeyes' radar for years, and the feeling has been mutual with St. Clair for that long as well. He has been a frequent visitor at the facility and has been at every Buckeye' home game since 2023.

St. Clair also played a big part in helping recruit his fellow 2025 prospects.

"I think he started coming in as an eighth-grader and came in as a freshman, then every year he's growing and growing to the point where he just continued to improve and continued to grow," Day said. "We saw some traits in him that were unique. We felt like he separated himself from the class, and from then on he was focused on recruiting the class.

"You can see the leadership skills in him. I think he's done a really good job leading his own team. He came down for almost every spring practice to get around the guys and see what's going on in terms of meetings on the field and what it looks like. Then when he went to some of the camps and Elite 11, he carried himself very well there. So he knows what he's stepping into because he's around the facility as much as he is. He's going to come in and look to compete right away. He's excited to get here, and it's been a long recruiting process, and we're very excited to build around him."

Behind St. Clair in the national rankings is Houston North Shore five-star cornerback Devin Sanchez (6-2, 170), who was the only one of the three corners the Buckeyes might have originally thought they would get, with Offord flipping to Oregon and Baltimore St. Frances Academy four-star Blake Woodby (5-11, 175) – who was one of the first 2025 prospects to commit to Ohio State on Oct. 14, 2023 – ending up at Auburn.

Cornerbacks coach Tim Walton was able to make somewhat of a last-second add when Cartersville, Ga., three-star cornerback Jordyn Woods flipped from Cincinnati to Ohio State in November, signing with the Buckeyes on Dec. 4. Woods is the nation's 1,213th-best prospect and 110th-best cornerback.

Ohio State has three coaches on staff who are in their first years being full-time recruiters for the Buckeyes – safeties coach Matt Guerrier, linebackers coach James Laurinaitis and Locklyn – and Day was happy with how the first year went for all three.

He was especially pleased with Laurinaitis, who brought in McKinney, Texas, four-star Riley Pettijohn (6-2, 215); Vero Beach, Fla., four-star Tarvos Alford (6-2, 210); and Akron Hoban three-star Eli Lee (6-3, 230).

"I've been really impressed with our linebacking corps," Day said. "I think James has done an excellent job, first off, building relationships. He's done a good job of evaluating, brings credibility because he played the position at a high level here and then in the NFL.

"(Locklyn) has done an excellent job as well bringing in some really good guys. Matt as well, when you see his evaluation, all three of (the safeties Ohio State signed) are excellent."

Guerrieri's additions to the class are Olney (Md.) Our Lady of Good Counsel four-star Faheem Delane (6-3, 195), Wayne (N.J.) DePaul Catholic four-star DeShawn Stewart (6-2, 185) and Cleveland St. Ignatius three-star Cody Haddad (6-1, 175).

OSU Football 2027 Commitment

Player(s) in the class of 2027 who have issued a verbal commitment to play football at Ohio State.

Player	Pos.	Ht.	Wt.	Stars	High School
Jamier Brown	WR	5-11	170	★★★★★	Huber Heights (Ohio) Wayne
Brady Edmunds	QB	6-5	215	★★★★★	Huntington Beach, Calif.

"Cody is from Ohio and comes from a great program, a great family. He's going to be a huge addition to our team," Day said. "DeShawn had a great year, suffering an injury late, but has huge upside. Faheem is one of the top safeties in the country."

The Buckeyes lost two defensive ends in the month leading up to the early signing period when Bradenton (Fla.) IMG Academy four-star London Merritt (6-3, 250) flipped to Colorado on Nov. 28 and Philadelphia Imhotep Institute four-star Zahir Mathis (6-6, 225) decommitted from the Buckeyes on Nov. 18, announcing that he would not be signing during the early signing period and instead would be waiting until National Signing Day in February.

Still, Ohio State and longtime defensive line coach Larry Johnson signed Enterprise, Ala., four-star defensive end Zion Grady (6-4, 235); Newberry, Fla., four-star defensive lineman Jarquez Carter (6-2, 284); Philadelphia St. Joseph's Prep four-star Maxwell Roy (6-3, 285); Matthews (N.C.) Weddington four-star defensive lineman Trajen Odom (6-4, 285); and Sitanilei.

5-Star '27 QB Edmunds Commits To Ohio State

Ohio State earned another commitment in the 2027 class on Dec. 2 when Huntington Beach, Calif., five-star quarterback Brady Edmunds (6-5, 215) pledged his services to the Buckeyes just two days after the loss to Michigan.

Edmunds has long been favored to land in Columbus and had said that he wanted to commit before the end of the season, choosing the Buckeyes over Penn State, Michigan and Texas, the other three schools in his top four.

He is the second commitment in the 2027 class for OSU already, and the second five-star, joining Huber Heights (Ohio) Wayne five-star wide receiver Jamier Brown (5-11, 170) who committed to Ohio State in November.

Edmunds, the No. 10 player in the country in his class and the No. 2 quarterback, originally got his scholarship offer from Ryan Day and Chip Kelly at a recruiting camp over the summer this year.

In his high school season this year, Edmunds completed 217 of 348 passes for 3,222 yards and 36 touchdowns while running for 312 yards and nine more touchdowns on the ground. In his freshman season, he threw for 2,691 yards and 24 touchdowns.

Now the Buckeyes have a 2027 quarterback before they have one in the 2026 recruiting class, but with Julian Sayin from the 2024 class and St. Clair in the 2025 class signing on

Continued On Page 28

Continued From Page 27

Dec. 4, Ohio State's quarterback room seems to be in good hands in the future.

Top 2026 OT Visits OSU

Frye and the Buckeyes have sent out many offers to offensive linemen in the 2026 class, perhaps none more important than Nixa, Mo., five-star offensive tackle Jackson Cantwell (6-8, 300), who is the No. 1 rated player in the country according to 247Sports composite rankings.

Cantwell was in Columbus for a visit in July and said then that he wanted to schedule a visit to get to a game this season, but the scheduling didn't work out. Cantwell was finally able to get on campus on Dec. 14, giving the Buckeyes their chance to convince the tackle to come back next year for an official visit.

"I have about 30 scholarship offers," Cantwell told 247Sports. "I'm trying to figure out my official visits. I'm still talking to about 10 schools. Ohio State is definitely one of them. I'd like to take about three or four official visits in the summer and ideally pick my college by the end of the summer."

After visiting Ohio State on Dec. 14, Cantwell went a little farther north to check out Ann Arbor on Dec. 15 to see if Michigan would be able to make it to the next step in his recruiting process.

Before he was on campus, Cantwell told 247Sports that he was excited to see Ohio State and that he has been in contact with both Frye and Day.

"Coach Frye is the one I talk to the most, but I talk to Coach Day too," he said. "I want to get an introduction to the program, see if it's a good fit for me. I want to get a good feel for it. I think it will be a pretty fun time. I'm excited to see it."

It's obviously going to be a battle to try to reel in the No. 1 offensive tackle, fighting against the previously mentioned 30 scholarship offers from schools such as Alabama, Florida, Georgia, LSU, Miami (Fla.), Michigan, Nebraska, Notre Dame, Ole Miss, Oklahoma, Oregon, Penn State, Tennessee, Texas A&M, UCLA, USC and many more.

But with Day saying that offensive line recruiting will be addressed, it's possible the Buckeyes could make a run for the five-star.

Even if Ohio State doesn't eventually land Cantwell, though, there are still many in-state offensive line prospects whom the Buckeyes are after, such as Avon Lake four-star offensive tackle Maxwell Riley (6-5, 280), Washington Court House Miami Trace four-star offensive tackle Adam Guthrie (6-7, 285), Akron Hoban four-star offensive tackle Sam Greer (6-7, 310) and Cleveland St. Ignatius three-star interior offensive lineman Will Conroy (6-3, 275).

Transfer Targets For Buckeyes

After the transfer portal opened on Dec. 9, Ohio State lost a few players despite still being in the College Football Playoff, but while the Buckeyes worry about trying to make a run to the national championship, they will also have to be recruiting in the transfer portal to try to fill some holes they might have next season.

Offensive line is likely to be the biggest focus in the portal since three starters from this year's team – left tackle/guard Donovan Jackson, center Seth McLaughlin and right tackle Josh Fryar – no longer have eligibility and one other, left tackle Josh Simmons, already announced that he is entering his name into the 2025 NFL draft.

OSU has already gone into the portal to try to bring one offensive lineman in, with former Northwestern lineman Josh Thompson visiting Columbus the weekend of Dec. 13-15. Thompson started 21 games in his time with the Wildcats, earning playing time at each of left guard, right guard and right tackle. He started 10 games this season at right tackle.

Versatility on the line is something that could prove to be very important to the Buckeyes next season, just as it was this year when Simmons and McLaughlin were out with injuries and Jackson was able to slide to left tackle and fill in admirably.

A Look Back At Recruiting From The Pages Of BSB

40 Years Ago — 1984

Postseason bowl games had to share the interest level with college football fans during December and January with the gridiron version of the Hot Stove League – prep recruiting.

And as usual, the Ohio high school ranks were chock full of prospects courted by Ohio State and colleges across the land.

With schoolboy seniors allowed to start official weekend campus visits Dec. 1, the two upcoming months were crucial to the lifeblood of any college program through the binding NCAA national letter-of-intent signing date of Feb. 13.

Among the in-state "Most Wanted" list according to a variety of sources including scouting services, high school and college coaches and recruiters, and journalists was quarterback Mark Kamphaus of Cincinnati Moeller, considered by some the best-ever Moeller quarterback, who had improved each of the last two seasons.

35 Years Ago — 1989

The OSU football team was practicing for its first bowl game in three seasons, and the young basketball team was looking for the right combination in its early stages of the season. But for many Buckeye fans, that all seemed to pale in comparison to football recruiting.

By far, the player generating the most interest among potential Buckeyes was tailback Robert Smith of Euclid, Ohio.

If you had been reading your Buckeye Sports Bulletins, you already realized that Smith was something very special. He rushed for 2,042 yards and 31 TDs in 1989, earned another "Mr. Football" title from The Associated Press and was a lead-pipe cinch to win many All-American honors.

Smith was an intelligent young man who was making his decision his own way. He attended a couple of games on his own instead of as a guest of any school. He did it in order to get a better feel for the campus atmosphere rather than a hard sell from the coaching staff.

30 Years Ago — 1994

Ohio State moved into the recruiting season looking to capitalize on its first win over Michigan since 1987 – a nationally televised win witnessed by many of its top recruits either in person or on their living room TV sets.

The OSU recruiting effort might have also benefited from coach John Cooper's five-year contract extension, granted just prior to a big weekend of scheduled official visits on Dec. 2.

Buckeye Sports Bulletin had compiled its annual "Hot Twenty" roster, each player on the list already having scheduled their visit or visited Ohio State, including Charles Woodson (6-2, 185) of Fremont (Ohio) Ross.

Woodson was tabbed as Ohio's "Mr. Football" in 1994 by The Associated Press. As a running back, Woodson carried for 2,028 yards and also scored 38 touchdowns. Woodson saw himself as a defensive back at the college level and had intercepted three passes for the season.

He had visited Notre Dame and Michigan already, had a visit to Miami (Fla.) scheduled and was tentatively scheduled to visit Ohio State on Jan. 13.

25 Years Ago — 1999

Ohio State's football recruiting effort kicked into high gear in late November and early December with the Buckeyes locking up four more verbal commitments to push their total for the class of 2000 to 18.

At the same time, OSU got a head start on 2001 with the early verbal commitment of Ironton, Ohio, junior linebacker Reggie Arden (6-5, 225).

On a down note, however, Cincinnati Moeller five-star offensive lineman Michael Munoz (6-7, 290) – one of Ohio's top two prospects, according to the Ohio Football Recruiting News – committed to Tennessee during a Dec. 10-12 visit to Knoxville.

That put more emphasis on OSU's efforts to land Canton (Ohio) McKinley five-star offensive lineman Antonio Hall (6-5, 295), rated No. 1 in the state by TOFRN, and Long Beach (N.Y.) Lawrence offensive lineman Shane Olivea (6-5, 315).

20 Years Ago — 2004

With Lydell Ross and Maurice Hall departing, leaving current freshman Antonio Pittman as the only running back on the roster with any sort of experience, running back was a definite position of need for Ohio State in its recruiting class.

The coaches wanted to sign two backs – ideally one a smaller, shiftier back and the other a bigger, bruising type. The top priorities appeared to be Jacksonville (Fla.) Sandalwood's Maurice Wells (5-9, 180) and Long Island (N.Y.) North Babylon's Jason Gwaltney (6-0, 235).

At 5-9, Wells would have filled the need for the smaller back. He had long been considering Ohio State and visited over the Michigan weekend, returning impressed with what he had seen. After visiting Georgia Tech the weekend of Dec. 10, he told Rivals.com he was down to those two schools.

"Georgia Tech was everything I expected," he said. "I've been there a couple of times before and I really liked it, and my visit was excellent."

15 Years Ago — 2009

Ohio State broke a dry spell of nearly three months by landing verbal commitment No. 14 for its class of 2010, and it was a name that should have already been familiar to Buckeye fans.

Several months later than he initially thought, running back Carlos Hyde was set to join the Ohio State football program. The four-star member of OSU's class of 2009 had been unable to gain admittance to the university the fall prior due to an insufficient ACT score and wound up going the prep school route.

After a season at Fork Union (Va.) Military Academy, the 6-1, 230-pounder told BuckeyeSports.com following an official visit during the Dec. 5 weekend that he was cleared for admission and would be in Columbus in January.

"I had a great visit at Ohio State – even better than my last visit," Hyde said on Dec. 7. "I met with all the coaches, and they're excited for me to get up there. I had such a better feeling for Ohio State this time because I saw a lot more of the campus and talked to more of the players."

10 Years Ago — 2014

Just a few minutes after committing to Ohio State, four-star Hinesville (Ga.) Liberty County linebacker Raekwon McMillan (6-4, 242) apologized to Urban Meyer. And for good reason.

Announcing his college choice in front of a national audience on live television, McMillan picked up a white Alabama hat and stared at its crimson "A" before reaching for a scarlet Buckeye cap and placing it on top of his head.

"I think I'm going to roll with Ohio State," McMillan said during his announcement, which aired live on the NBC Sports Network.

And with that, the Buckeyes landed arguably their most important commitment of the 2014 class.

The fifth-ranked middle linebacker in the country, McMillan was coming to Columbus at a time when a premium had been placed on his position. The Buckeyes already had a five-star linebacker committed to their current class in Cincinnati Moeller's Sam Hubbard (6-6, 225) and two four-star linebackers in Akron St. Vincent-St. Mary's Dante Booker (6-3, 212) and Cleveland St. Ignatius' Kyle Berger (6-3, 215), but McMillan is the only player who projected as a middle linebacker at the college level and was one who could make an immediate impact for OSU.

Five Years Ago — 2019

Ohio State landed a commitment from one of the nation's top-rated signal callers when Rancho Cucamonga, Calif., four-star quarterback C.J. Stroud (6-3, 194) pledged his services to the Buckeyes on Dec. 18.

Stroud – who was considered the second-best pro-style quarterback and No. 83 prospect overall in the class of 2020 – landed an offer from the Buckeyes following his unofficial visit for the 34-10 win over Michigan State on Oct. 5 then returned for an official visit with his mother the weekend of Dec. 14. He picked the Buckeyes over finalists Georgia and Michigan despite what likely would have been a quicker path to playing time with the Bulldogs and Wolverines.

Ohio State already held a commitment from Scottsdale (Ariz.) Chaparral four-star quarterback Jack Miller (6-4, 210), who also signed with the Buckeyes that same afternoon. It marked the first time the program had signed two quarterbacks in the same cycle since Huber Heights (Ohio) Wayne five-star Braxton Miller and Cleveland Glenville three-star Cardale Jones faxed in their letters of intent in 2011.

Ohio State needed to sign two quarterbacks this cycle for depth purposes, with just two scholarship signal callers returning the following fall in starter Justin Fields and graduate transfer Gunnar Hoak. But the fact that both Miller and Stroud were highly regarded prospects made the haul even more impressive.

"You like to have four quarterbacks," coach Ryan Day said on Dec. 16. "It's almost impossible now to have four quarterbacks on your roster that are on scholarship because they all want to play right now. The great thing about coming to Ohio State is you know you're going to get developed at a high level."

One Year Ago — 2023

Ohio State suffered a significant blow to the 2024 recruiting class just weeks before the early signing period when Justin Scott announced his flip to Miami (Fla.) on Nov. 29. Scott was the No. 13 overall prospect and third-ranked defensive lineman in the class.

His initial pledge to Ohio State in July appeared to come out of left field, but Scott seemed locked in with the Buckeyes following an official visit in June.

"Going into the visit, my family was heavily set on Michigan," he told On3. "Throughout the (Ohio State) visit they were really still set on Michigan. But towards the end of it, Coach (Larry) Johnson sat us down and went over an in-depth plan that they had for me."

Scott had previously taken an official visit to Miami (Fla.) over the summer and also spent a week with the Hurricanes in the spring that planted the seeds for his eventual flip.

"I'm feeling really good," he told 247Sports after his spring visit. "I'm super comfortable here now. This is my second time here, basically spent the whole week here. I'm getting super comfortable here."

Other offensive linemen who have entered the transfer portal that the Buckeyes could look to add are former Vanderbilt senior tackle Gunnar Hansen (6-5, 330), former Stanford sophomore tackle Luke Baklenko (6-6, 305), former Liberty junior interior lineman Jordan White (6-2, 300), former Ball State redshirt sophomore tackle Taran Tyo (6-4, 326) and former Virginia Tech redshirt sophomore center Braelin Moore.

Moore, who started at center for each of Virginia Tech's 12 games this season, told 247Sports that if the Buckeyes are interested in him, he would also be interested in the Buckeyes.

With two years of eligibility remaining, Moore said that many schools have reached out to him, including LSU, Miami, Michigan State and Cal.

The Buckeyes finished the regular season with Austin Siereveld at left guard, Carson Hinzman at center and Tegra Tshabola at right guard, so they could aim to get those three back into those same roles if they feel comfortable with what they were able to put onto the field in their limited action together, but the interior line could also be an area they attack in the portal.

With so many players having no eligibility remaining, it wouldn't be at all surprising to see Ohio State go into the portal and add starters or depth at multiple positions.

Another transfer portal entrant who was setting up a visit with Ohio State was former Purdue safety Dillon Thieneman, according to an On3 report that talked to his brother, Jake, as a source.

"It feels like every major program in the country has reached out," Jake Thieneman told On3.

The Buckeyes have also reportedly shown interest in junior Mansoor Delane, a Virginia Tech defensive back and the brother of 2025 signee Faheem Delane.

In 12 games this year, Delane had 54 tackles, one for loss, a team-high four interceptions, seven passes broken up and two forced fumbles. According to 247Sports, Oregon has not surprisingly also shown interest in Delane, and there is mutual interest shared with both the Buckeyes and Ducks.

OSU Target An OHSAA State Champion

Many Ohio State commits and targets in Ohio played in the OHSAA state playoffs, but only one ended up a state champion. On Dec 5 in snowy conditions, Avon, Ohio, four-star athlete Jakob Weatherspoon (5-10, 172) helped his school defeat Cincinnati Anderson 20-13 to complete a perfect 16-0 season and earn Avon's first-ever state championship.

The 2026 target, who is tabbed as the nation's 164th-best prospect, ninth-best athlete and seventh-best player from Ohio, was a big part of the win when Anderson came out of the half down 14-7 and scored a touchdown that could have tied the game up. But Weatherspoon blocked the extra point, keeping the score at 14-13, which would be all Anderson would score in its first loss of the season, finishing 15-1.

With under five minutes remaining in the game with the seven-point lead, Avon senior quarterback Nolan Good threw an interception at Anderson's 3-yard line, forcing the Raptors to try to drive 97 yards to tie the game. They were able to get 80 of those yards with six first downs, but a false start brought them back 5 yards, and three incompletions gave the Eagles the win.

"I couldn't be more proud," Avon head coach Mike Elder told Spectrum News. "I will tell you this, that I'm humbled to sit here with these guys and represent our coaching staff because this is done by numerous guys who have dumped their heart and soul into this. So I couldn't be more proud for our coaches and players."

After the state champions were crowned, All-Ohio teams were released, and as expected, Buckeye signees and targets were all over the lists.

At the Division I level, of the Buckeyes' 2025 signees, Lowe and Cook were named first-team All-Ohio offensive linemen.

In Division II, Lee was named the Defensive Player of the Year along with a first-team linebacker while St. Clair was the Offensive Player of the Year and a first-team quarterback in Division III. Gates Mills Gilmour Academy four-star tight end and Ohio State signee Brody Lennon (6-4, 220) was a first-team Division III tight end as well.

Ontario, Ohio, four-star wide receiver and Ohio State signee Bodpegn Miller (6-4, 185) was named a first-team quarterback and co-Offensive Player of the Year in Division IV, an honor he shared with Gnadenhutten Indian Valley 2026 running back Grady Kinsey (5-9, 197).

Other Notes And Tidbits

• Among the signees during the early signing period was Bradenton (Fla.) IMG Academy four-star linebacker Nathaniel Owusu-Boateng (6-1, 205), who was once a target for Ohio State and had the Buckeyes in his top six schools but ended up committing to and signing with Michigan on Dec. 4. The nation's 120th-best prospect and 12th-best linebacker helped the Wolverines reach the seventh-best 2025 recruiting class in the country and the third best in the Big Ten behind Oregon (No. 3 nationally, No. 1 Big Ten) and Ohio State (fifth, second).

• Mansfield (Texas) Lake Ridge four-star offensive tackle Felix Ojo (6-6, 285) told On3 that Ohio State is one of six schools that are recruiting him the hardest at the moment along with Michigan, Ole Miss, Oklahoma, Texas and USC. Over the fall, he was able to make visits to SMU, Texas and Texas A&M, and he is also reportedly planning visits to see Ole Miss and USC. Ojo originally earned an offer from Ohio State at a recruiting camp in June, and he is considered the No. 130 overall player in the country and the No. 11 offensive tackle in the 2026 class.

• Since the Buckeyes' Dec. 21 matchup against Tennessee falls during an NCAA recruiting quiet period, the Buckeyes will not be able to host any visitors and provide them with complimentary tickets for the first round of the College Football Playoff, as will be the case for any other team hosting a playoff game. Recruits are still permitted to purchase tickets and attend the game on their own if they want to do so.

For the latest in Ohio State football recruiting news, be sure to visit BuckeyeSports.com, available for free to all Buckeye Sports Bulletin subscribers.

Seahawks' Smith-Njigba Receives Passes And Praise

By CRAIG MERZ
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

The last Buckeye Sport Bulletin before the playoffs is a suitable time to catch up to a player featured in past "Buckeyes in the NFL," Seattle Seahawks wide receiver Jaxon Smith-Njigba.

After a successful rookie year in 2023, Smith-Njigba has stepped to the forefront as the Seahawks (8-6) vie for the NFC West title.

He went into the Dec. 15 game against the Green Bay Packers [Sunday night] having been the leading receiver for Seattle in the previous six games, which included five catches for 82 yards and a 19-yard TD against the Arizona Cardinals on Dec. 8.

Smith-Njigba extended the streak to seven games during a 30-13 loss to the Packers by catching half of the 20 completed passes by the Seahawks for 83 yards.

During that span, Smith-Njigba caught 48 passes for 675 yards and four touchdowns to move up to sixth in the NFL in receiving yards with 994 for the season off 85 receptions along with five touchdowns.

"He's doing a great job," Seahawks coach Mike Macdonald said. "And the other thing is we've got a guy on the other side of the field that commands a lot of coverage attention as well, so you can't double everybody. If they're going to do the stuff they're doing right now against us, then that allows them to do what he's been doing."

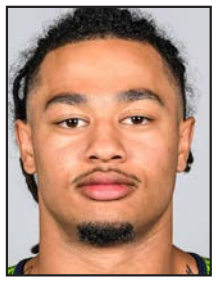
"That other guy" is wide receiver DK Metcalf, who has been drawing the attention of defenses since his rookie season in 2019. His numbers don't match Smith-Njigba's this season, but he's contributing in other ways.

"I just look at it as a sign of respect that I've gained from other defensive coordinators and just continue to do my job with it as blocking or being a decoy," Metcalf said. "The ball is going to find me one way or another, but if it doesn't, at least we get the dub and that's all that matters in this league is winning and to continue to win, and if you continue to win, you stay relevant. I'm just honing on just continuing to do my job. If the stats don't say so, then so be it. At least we get the win."

Quarterback Geno Smith, cousin of OSU freshman wide receiver Jeremiah Smith, said having Metcalf is a luxury that affords him the opportunity to get the ball to Smith-Njigba.

"(Metcalf) enjoys the fact that the entire offense can benefit from having a star X receiver like him," Smith said. "I think he's done a tremendous job. We've still got to find ways to get him involved, but if they're going to just load up the coverage, then we've got to do the right thing there.

"When defenses are loading up and they're putting two and three guys on the back side for him, it just creates more numbers to the front side for us. We're always going to take advantage of the right matchups. DK has done a great job at blocking downfield, being a leader in the huddle, just doing all the little things that he's always done. But he's understanding. He's drawing so much attention that it's opening up things for other guys, and him being the selfless player that he is, the selfless person that he is, he enjoys that."


Jaxon Smith-Njigba

Smith-Njigba against Green Bay set the franchise record with a sixth straight game of 70 or more receiving yards. Metcalf (2020) and Steve Largent (1985) each had five-game streaks.

The mark was nearly his alone already because Smith-Njigba had 69 yards against Buffalo on Oct. 27 in the game before the streak began.

On His Own

If there was a question if Smith-Njigba could produce without his sidekick, that was answered during his seven-game stretch as the top receiver when Metcalf missed the first two games because of a sprained ankle.

That 69-yard game for Smith-Njigba came in the first of those six, and he had seven catches for 180 yards and two touchdowns in the second game without Metcalf against the Los Angeles Rams on Nov. 3.

"It was just a matter of time," Metcalf said. "He's a great receiver. This is his opportunity to shine, and I'm glad he did it in the fashion that he did."

Smith-Njigba told Seattle's KING television the key to his success is simple.

"Just not trying to press or make any plays, just allowing the game to come to me, so to speak," Smith-Njigba said. "And you know always playing next to DK and (wide receiver) Tyler Lockett will free you up a little bit and Geno putting it where it needs to be, putting the ball where it needs to be will always help my game. So coming into this year, I knew that I just have to be myself and get better every day, and good results will happen."

Metcalf said JSN's development mirrors his ascension with the Seahawks as a young player being mentored by the veteran Lockett. Metcalf established the team record with 1,303 receiving yards in his second season of 2020 when Lockett was in his sixth season.

"I know Lock saw me make the transition to getting the numbers that (Smith-Njigba is) getting now, but just to see it from the other side, from the vet side is kind of great because last year he didn't really have any idea of what was going on or how to take it, 16 games, 17 games in a season," Metcalf said. "But now, just to see him put everything together, I mean it's kind of like a proud parent or a big brother moment just to see him have the success, and I know he's going to continue to have major success in this league."

Time Well Spent

Smith-Njigba was a five-star recruit from Rockwall, Texas, and part of a talented group of receivers for Ohio State in 2021 that featured future 2022 first-round picks Garrett Wilson (No. 10 overall to the New York Jets) and Chris Olave (No. 11, New Orleans).

Despite the presence of those two, Smith-Njigba had a breakout season in 2021, making a school-record 95 catches (fifth all-time in Big Ten history) for 1,606 yards to set a conference mark.

He starred in the 2022 Rose Bowl when C.J. Stroud connected with him for an FBS bowl-record 347 yards, a school-record 15 receptions and three touchdowns.

From that peak came the valley of the 2022 season when a hamstring injury limited him to three games. He had five catches for 43 yards.

Smith-Njigba in his KING interview explained how going to Ohio State made him a better player and person.

"Just being young and moving all the way to Ohio, just learning about yourself, having to grow as a person and just having good people around you, the development at Ohio State, I feel like it is second to none," he said. "Personality and your work ethic – you have everything to be great there. That's how I felt, and I just tried to take full advantage of everything that was there."

Drafted 20th overall by the Seahawks in 2023, he was stymied in the preseason by a fractured wrist but slowly developed into a dependable receiver.

His 63 receptions were second most by a Seattle rookie in history. Former Buckeye Joey Galloway had 67 in a 16-game season in 1995.

Smith-Njigba became the only rookie in the NFL since 1960 to have two game-winning touchdown catches in the final minute of the fourth quarter (vs. Cleveland and Philadelphia).

Prior to his first season as head coach, Macdonald in June praised Smith-Njigba.

"He's a guy that we can focus our offense around, along with other guys," he said. "Tyler Lockett is still a great player, DK Metcalf a phenomenal player. But (Smith-Njigba) is definitely going to be a massive piece of what we're trying to do offensively.

"JSN's a great player, and we're expecting big things out of him. He's had a great offseason, works his tail off. His practice habits are awesome. His moving ability is pretty elite. I think we got a really cool plan for him."

For Smith-Njigba it's a matter of upholding the tradition of standout receivers at Ohio State in recent years along with Olave, Wilson and Arizona rookie receiver Marvin Harrison Jr.

"(We take) much pride," Smith-Njigba said. "For the ones that are still there at Ohio State looking at us, or committed, we take much pride in that, to living up to the standard that the guys ahead of us had created."

No Rush

Olave, whose concussion history was chronicled in the Nov. 30 issue of BSB, missed his fifth straight game on Dec. 15 against Washington but may return before the end of the season.

He sustained his second concussion of the season on Nov. 3 vs. the Carolina Panthers and was placed on injured reserve six days later. He's had four concussions in his NFL career and one with the Buckeyes in the 2020 season.

Olave was eligible to come off the injured list before the Washington game, but the team is being cautious. Interim coach Darren Rizzi didn't rule out his return before the end of the season.

"All options are on the table there," he said. "I wouldn't close the door on that. I think Chris is in a much better place than he has been. I wouldn't say that his season is completely done. I would say let's see what the doctors and the specialists say and make sure that all is good there and then we'll discuss that.

"He's starting to get some rehab stuff. He's starting to move around. So we'll see."

Olave has attended team meetings and traveled with the Saints for the game against the New York Giants on Dec. 8.

"He's trying to get back in the swing of things," Rizzi said. "He's hitting meetings now. He's able to sit back in the meetings and do some of those things that the IR guys are allowed to do. So whatever meetings he's allowed to go to, all the weight room stuff he's allowed to do, all the rehab stuff, (he's) kind of following that protocol."

In 39 NFL games, Olave has 191 receptions for 2,565 yards and 10 touchdowns and surpassed the 1,000-yard mark in each of his first two seasons in the NFL.

Royal Hitting Stride For Hometown Buckeyes

By PATRICK ENGELS
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Associate Editor

Whether it is on the gridiron or the hardwood, there is simply something different about an athlete choosing to play for their hometown college team.

With several friends, family and former teammates close by, they are often faced with significant pressure and expectations to succeed, as many around the community are closely watching their careers and rooting for them to emerge as a "hometown hero" who can bring their team to a championship level.

That description matches the experiences of Ohio State's Devin Royal.

Royal, a nearby Pickerington Central product who was the top-rated prospect in Ohio for the class of 2023, could have left the Columbus area to play for a different program, receiving 24 offers from big-time schools such as Alabama, Michigan State, Miami (Fla.) and Wisconsin, among others.

Instead, he opted to stay home and play for then-head coach Chris Holtmann and the Buckeyes, committing to the program on Aug. 3, 2022, alongside his family and a large contingent of local media.

From the moment he put on his Ohio State hat and revealed his Buckeye T-shirt upon committing, the hype for the highly rated Royal became real.

He became the highest-rated player from central Ohio to commit to the Buckeyes since now-Houston Rockets forward and fellow Pickerington Central alum Jae'Sean Tate in 2014. Then later that year he became the 13th-ever OSU pledge to take home Ohio's Mr. Basketball award after a senior season in which he led the Tigers to a second consecutive Division I state title game appearance, averaging 19.6 points and 7.6 rebounds per game while shooting 64.9 percent from the field.

All of those accomplishments put expectations on Royal to succeed with the Buckeyes, ones which he may be inching toward exceeding in his sophomore season in Columbus.

After an up-and-down freshman campaign, Royal has emerged as the top frontcourt player on the team and a rising star in the Big Ten, a rapid ascension that head coach Jake Diebler said he expected from the Pickerington native.

"Devin Royal is a really good player, and we've always believed he was going to become a really good player," Diebler said on Dec. 7.

As mentioned earlier, Royal's emergence into an intimidating post presence for the Buckeyes did not come without some early hiccups.

Despite coming in with countless individual and team accolades from high school, he struggled to find playing time early in his freshman season while playing behind the likes of the now-departed Zed Key and Felix Okpara, averaging just 3.2 points and 1.9 rebounds through his first 22 games of his career while logging just nine minutes per contest.

Royal's first three months in college also featured some intense team struggles, where Ohio State limped out to a 14-11 start, going 4-10 to start Big Ten play.

Spending the beginning of your career riding the bench for a losing team is certainly not an ideal situation, especially when you come from a winning program like Pickerington Central. But Royal knew he had to stay patient and keep working through the adverse times.

"It's a process," he said last February. "Me being a freshman is a process, getting minutes, getting more time. For me, it's keep working. I've worked my whole life. Just keep working and strive for better."

That mentality seemed to pay off in a big way toward the end of the 2023-24 season, when the Buckeyes made an unexpected change in leadership, firing Holtmann on Valentine's Day and elevating Diebler to interim head coach.

With Diebler instituting a more fast-paced style of play that gave reserves added opportunities to show their worth in games, Royal became one of the more frequently used players off the Buckeye bench and took full advantage of those added opportunities.

In the final 11 games of the season, he averaged 7.6 points and 3.3 rebounds on 50.8 percent shooting, earning 17 minutes per game compared to the nine he had when Holtmann was leading the program.

Royal's efforts, which were headlined by his 14-point, two-rebound and two-steal outing in Ohio State's buzzer-beating 60-57 win at Michigan State on Feb. 25, helped the Buckeyes turn their season around and finish the season with eight wins in their final 11 games.

It was a strong ending to his freshman campaign that both he and Diebler attributed to the added comfort and confidence he had down the final stretch of the year.

"I think we're starting to see the game slow down for him a little bit, on both sides of the ball," Diebler said of Royal last winter. "We've been spoiled here, the last couple years, with some of what freshmen have been able to accomplish. And that's not the norm. And everybody's journey is different. I think Devin has figured out, these last six weeks, how to really run his race well."

"I think it went better from the beginning of the season," Royal added this summer. "I feel like I came in and showed a little bit of what I can do, but there is still a lot more to show for sure."

Royal's end-of-year successes were just the start of his attempt to grow into an elite player.

After deciding to stick with Ohio State and Diebler – with whom he built a long-standing relationship from the time the coach heavily recruited him in high school – rather than transferring like many of his 2023-24 teammates did at the end of the year, Royal looked to take his game to another level, spending the summer months trying to improve upon his offensive game and three-point shooting.

But according to Diebler, his commitment to excellence lagged a bit once fall camp hit, forcing the first-year head coach to enact some tough love on his former recruit in order to kick him back into high gear.

"He and I were aligned on what we thought this year could be for him," Diebler said. "And I felt at times in the offseason he was really dialed in to getting there. And then at (other) times, maybe he wasn't as dialed in as I would have liked him to be. And the thing I love about Devin is you can coach him hard, and you can challenge him on that, and he's responded. Since fall camp hit, he has responded in the best way you would hope as a coach."

Royal's full-fledged commitment to getting better has paid dividends this season.

Now one of the focal points of a Buckeye frontcourt that also includes former five-star transfers Aaron Bradshaw and Sean Stewart along with sophomore center Austin Parks, Royal has blossomed into one of the more efficient scorers and post players on the team, ranking second on the roster in points at 14.1 per game while also leading the group with 7.2 rebounds per contest.

Royal's improvements were evident from the first game of the year when he burst on the scene with 16 points, three rebounds and one steal to help propel the Buckeyes to an 80-72 upset win over then-No. 19 Texas. He even connected on two of his four attempts from beyond the arc, almost eclipsing the three-point total he had last year (three in 20 attempts) in one game.

Royal has yet to have that same efficiency from beyond the arc since the Texas win, making just one three in the last 11 attempts, but he has been as productive as ever in every other facet of his game.

After scoring just six combined points on 3-of-12 shooting against Youngstown State on Nov. 11 and Texas A&M on Nov. 15, he has now reached double figures in each of his last seven games, scoring at least 17 points in five of those outings and 20 or more in two games.

He also recorded two double-doubles in that span, first against Evansville on Nov. 19 (20 points, 12 rebounds) and then against Green Bay on Nov. 25 (10, 11).

Royal's success in the paint has been aided by the extended absence of Bradshaw, who was away from the team for over two weeks and has missed the last six games due to a university investigation into an alleged domestic incident that occurred in his off-campus home, a development that has allowed Royal to start in his place.

But the significant strides he has taken on the court have less to do with Bradshaw's absence and more to do with the consistency and maturity he plays with every night, which Diebler thinks has allowed Royal to become a dominant inside force.

"He has earned the right to play well with the consistency that he's played with," Diebler said. "I think he is a mismatch problem for anybody in this league, but really anybody in college basketball. He's playing with the maturity and confidence that is directly responsible, in addition to his work ethic, for his efficiency."

Diebler, who spoke glowingly about Royal at his postgame press conference after the 80-66 win over Rutgers on Dec. 7, made sure to point out that it is not only the increasing confidence and maturity that has allowed him to flourish but also his innate physical tools and strong basketball instincts, traits that Diebler said simply cannot be coached and have been there since Royal's days at Pickerington Central.

"I saw this when he was in high school and played in the summer – he has great feel, he just has a knack around the elbow and in to produce," Diebler said after Royal's career-high 22-point, six-rebound performance in the win over the Scarlet Knights. "I wish I could tell you that it's all player development. I think certainly his buy-in to what we're doing has played a role.

"But he just has this natural knack and organic feel in that space. He has great length. He has a combination of soft touch and physicality that's pretty hard to teach. So a lot of (his efficiency in the paint) is a natural thing."

Royal seemed to agree with Diebler's assessment after his career-high outing, saying that his production in the paint is nothing new.

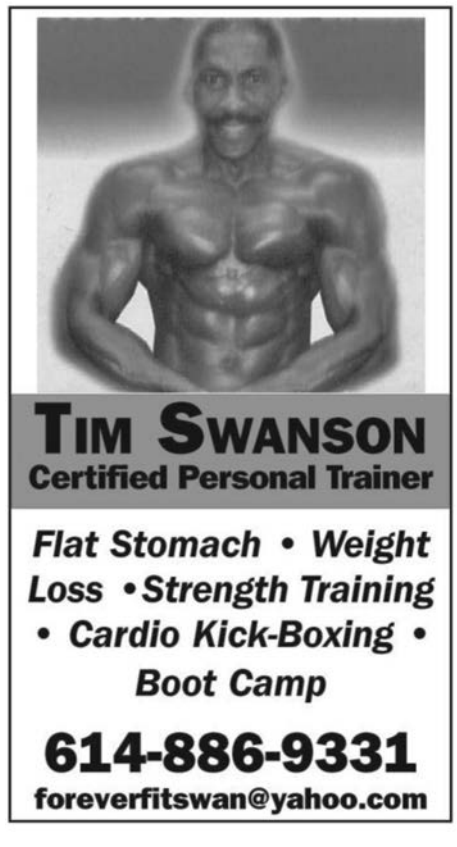
"I mean, it's just feeling where (the defense) is at," said Royal when asked about his post success. "I've been in the post scoring since my high school days, so it's nothing new. I'm just playing my game."

It's not just Royal's offense that has allowed him to take this big jump. Diebler also mentioned that the forward has improved significantly with his defense, where he has been able to guard both in the paint and on the perimeter, an area that used to be a weakness of his and often kept him off the floor early last season.

When putting all that together, Royal is on track to becoming a complete player for his hometown team in just his second year with the program, putting him on a potential path to stardom in the scarlet and gray that his head coach is confident he can reach.

"I have high, high belief in him," Diebler said of Royal. "I don't think he's done. I believe in him. He's a joy to be around. When we step foot on the practice floor every day, there's an edge. And I love that about him.

"He practices hard, but he has a joy to him when he walks in the building. He plays with physicality and toughness. You can coach him hard. He's really grown a lot. He deserves a lot of credit because he's worked for it."



Bradshaw Back With Team After Extended Absence

Ohio State sophomore forward Aaron Bradshaw has returned to the team following an over two-week absence that stemmed from a university investigation into an alleged domestic incident that occurred at his off-campus apartment.

Head coach Jake Diebler first announced the news of Bradshaw's return on his weekly radio show with 97.1 The Fan on Dec. 9.

"Aaron is back with our team after the university concluded its process," Diebler said. "There's going to be a return-to-play aspect. There's no firm timeline for what that looks like, but he will be back with our team. Regarding the process, we can't comment further."

COURT REPORT
Patrick Engels

Bradshaw, a 7-1 transfer big man from Kentucky who started the first four games for the Buckeyes, had been away from the team since at least Nov. 22, when the team announced in a statement just hours before the team's 104-60 win over Campbell that he was not participating in team activities due to a reason that could not be explained due to "federal privacy laws."

"Aaron Bradshaw is not currently participating in team activities," the statement read. "The university is following its established process. Due to federal privacy laws, we cannot share further information at this time."

Although the reasoning behind that statement or the university investigation was still unknown as BSB went to press, the alleged domestic incident forced Bradshaw – who averaged 7.8 points, 4.8 rebounds and 1.8 blocks before the absence – to miss five games for the Buckeyes as he stayed away from the team.

That stretch included nonconference wins over Campbell and Green Bay and a victory over Rutgers in Big Ten play on Dec. 7, as well as losses to Pittsburgh at home on Nov. 29 and Maryland on the road on Dec. 4.

Despite having about a week to reacclimate himself to the team with no games on the schedule following the Rutgers win, Bradshaw was held out of Ohio State's 91-53 blowout loss to No. 2 Auburn on Dec. 14 in Atlanta, making it six straight games the sophomore forward has missed. Two days before the game, Diebler said that Bradshaw – who did travel with the team to Atlanta and was seen on the bench during the game in street clothes – was still in the process of returning to his old form and working up to game speed after being away from basketball activities for an extended time.

"It's been good to get him back in the gym and start his return to play," Diebler said of Bradshaw on Dec. 12. "There is no real firm decision as to what the specific timeline is going to look like yet. I think we're still evaluating that. But he got a few workouts in, and I think that's kind of the extent of that right now.

"He has some room to get back to where he was," he added later. "How long that will take? We don't know yet."

SONNY BROCKWAY

SET TO RETURN — Sophomore forward Aaron Bradshaw, in his first season with the Buckeyes after transferring from Kentucky, rejoined the team after more than a two-week absence following a university investigation into an alleged incident at his off-campus housing.

When Bradshaw does return, it will be a welcome sight for an Ohio State team that has been operating with a rather thin frontcourt since Bradshaw left the team.

With sophomores Devin Royal and Sean Stewart serving as the two starting forwards and sophomore center Austin Parks also getting more playing time off the bench, Ohio State was outrebounded 193-179 in the five games it played against Power Four teams during Bradshaw's absence, including a lopsided 49-28 disadvantage on the glass against Auburn.

Parks Playing Best Ball Of Career

Bradshaw's return to the team likely means less playing time for Parks, but that doesn't mean he hasn't made the most of his opportunities when his number has been called upon.

After logging just 12 minutes in the first four games of the season, Parks appeared in each of the six games where Bradshaw was absent and logged 14 or more minutes in three of those contests. While some lightly used sophomores might be spooked by this added playing time, Parks instead used the extra time on the floor to take his game to another level, totaling a combined 15 points, eight rebounds, five assists and one block during those six games.

Parks' improvements were most notable in Ohio State's win over Rutgers, where he helped the Buckeyes secure their first Big Ten win with some high-intensity and active play, recording a career-high six points and four offensive rebounds to go with his first career block.

It was a career-best performance that Diebler said served as validation for the sophomore center who has put in the extra work during the weeks Bradshaw was away from the team to fine-tune his game on both sides of the floor.

"I think Austin Parks played his best game in an Ohio State uniform, and I told him that after the game," Diebler said after the win. "And he deserves a lot of credit because we coach him hard. I think you saw the extra work he's been putting in lately in ball-screen coverages and decision-making offensively. I thought it finally translated in a manner in which he deserved it to.

"So his stay-ready and just keep working mentality these last 10 days, couple weeks, I felt like really started to show today. I'm really happy for him to play the way he did."

Diebler went on to say it is those types of performances that give the coach the confidence to put Parks in the game despite his lack of experience. He logged only 20 minutes in nine games last season, recording just three points, five rebounds and one assist in that span.

"I've told him this. I believe that he has the potential to be a good player," Diebler said. "His lack of experience last year has maybe impacted his growth up to this point. But I have confidence in him, putting him in the game, because he plays tough. It felt like he was on the floor three times today. He secured a couple loose balls for us – four offensive rebounds, he competed."

Parks' role will almost certainly be diminished when Bradshaw returns, but that won't stop Diebler and his teammates from continuing to work him hard in practice to get him ready to play at an even higher level the next time he is called upon to produce in a big moment.

"We were on him a lot during practice because we needed him, and we know what he's capable of doing," junior point guard and three-time team captain Bruce Thornton said after the Rutgers win. "So we're going to keep pushing him. He showed up today, and we're going to keep pushing him for the rest of the season."

Mobley Finding More Ways To Produce

Aside from the emergence of Parks, another major bright spot for Ohio State so far in the 2024-25 campaign has been the stellar play of true freshman guard John Mobley Jr.

Since bursting onto the college scene in his first career game with 14 points on a perfect 4-of-4 shooting to help the Buckeyes secure an upset win over then-No. 19 Texas, the four-star prospect has served as one of Ohio State's more consistent and explosive offensive players, ranking third on the team behind Thornton and Royal in points with 12.4 points per game while shooting an impressive 54.0 percent from three, the latter mark ranking second in the country through Dec. 15.

Mobley's elite scoring and shooting off the bench have allowed him to be lauded as one of the top freshmen in the Big Ten, but with that extra hype and attention also comes more attention from opposing teams, who have begun to make the freshman one of the focal points of their defensive game plans for the Buckeyes.

With teams now trying to run Mobley off the three-point line and closely guard him wherever he is on the court, he has had to impact the game in different ways than his shooting, a challenge that Diebler said his freshman guard has met.

"I've been really impressed (with Mobley), and that's why I think he's a complete offensive player, because his decision-making with the ball in his hands has been really good," Diebler said on Dec. 2. "He has to now, be-

cause – it's hard for me to believe he was a secret to begin with – but now that he certainly is not a secret he has to be a great mover. He has to be able to get his shot off really quick."

As Diebler alluded to, Mobley has continued to shoot well from three this year – making six of his 13 attempts from the field since BSB last went to press – but he has also learned to impact the game in different areas, most notably making the right pass to open teammates off of drives and finishing well at the rim.

It is those abilities – along with his 13 total rebounds and 12 total assists – that Diebler believes make Mobley an all-around player who can impact the game in a positive way whether he is draining triples or not.

"Teams are running him off the three-point line, so (now) he's getting downhill," Diebler said. "He has great touch, and a lot of times the decision may be best for him to put it on the rim. Because he can score floaters, he can finish with both hands. But when that defense commits to him, and he has to find that next read, I think he's done that really well. He's gotten guys a couple lobs off drives because teams are helping over, so he's done a really good job with it."

Mobley's continued success means that teams will only put more attention and pressure on him as the season progresses, especially with the brunt of Big Ten play quickly approaching in 2025. But Diebler thinks it is a challenge that the guard is more than ready to meet.

"We have to help him with that, and it's something he and I have been talking about for months because he and I knew (teams paying more attention to him) was going to come," he said. "So I think he'll be ready. He'll continue to get better when he doesn't have the ball because that's ultimately going to be significant for him and us – for him to continue to have the impact that he's having."

Former Bucks Still Thriving For New Teams

Ohio State experienced a significant outflow of players to the transfer portal at the conclusion of the 2023-24 season, and at least through the first six weeks of the season, those former Buckeyes have each had success for their new teams.

Perhaps the player who has benefited most from a change of scenery is former Ohio State forward Zed Key, who, after an up-and-down senior season for the Buckeyes, has found new life with Dayton in his fifth collegiate season. Through 10 games, Key has notched career highs in points per game (12.4) and field-goal percentage (65.6), to go along with his 4.0 rebounds and 1.4 blocks per contest.

Key's strong fifth-year season has been highlighted so far by his 15-point, nine-rebound performance in the Flyers' 85-67 win over two-time reigning national champion UConn at the Maui Invitational on Nov. 28, as well as his 12-point outing in the team's 86-62 blowout win over Lehigh on Dec. 7 that helped him eclipse the 1,000-career point threshold.

Also having success for his new team in 2024-25 is former Ohio State center Felix Okpara, who is now one of the key frontcourt pieces on a loaded Tennessee team that was ranked No. 1 in the country in the latest AP top 25 poll released Dec. 16 starting each of his first 10 games with the program.

Okpara, who started 34 of 35 games for the Buckeyes at center last year before transferring in the offseason, has experienced a slight uptick in offensive efficiency for the Rick Barnes-led Volunteers, averaging 6.2 points per game on a career-high 58.7 percent shooting, while also maintaining the rim protecting skills he had at Ohio State, recording 6.1 rebounds and a team-high 1.6 blocks per game.

Okpara's best outing so far in a Volunteers uniform was in the team's 78-35 trouncing of UT Martin on Nov. 27, when he recorded his first double-double of the season with 10 points and 11 rebounds while also adding a season-high four swats.

Former Ohio State guard Roddy Gayle Jr. has made a similar impact on his own new team, the Buckeyes' archrival Michigan.

Like Okpara, Gayle has emerged as an everyday starter for a Wolverines team that is firmly in the AP top 25 behind the leadership of first-year head coach Dusty May, coming in at No. 24 in the latest poll.

Gayle has played a significant role in Michigan's return to the polls. Through 10 games – all starts – the former Buckeye-turned-Wolverine ranks second on the team in scoring at 12.3 points per game on 48.9-percent shooting while also adding 3.5 rebounds, 3.3 assists and a career-high 1.4 steals to his name.

Gayle, who started 35 of 36 games for Ohio State last season, is coming off a 13-point, three-rebound, two-assist and two-steal performance in Michigan's 89-87 loss to Arkansas at Madison Square Garden on Dec. 10, which ended with Gayle missing a midrange shot as time expired that would have sent the game into overtime.

Aside from starters Gayle, Key and Okpara, a few other former Buckeyes have also found success with new schools in a reserve role.

That group is headlined by now-Seton Hall sophomore guard Scotty Middleton, who has come off the bench in each of the Pirates' first 11 games and averaged 5.5 points, 2.0 rebounds and 1.1 steals in 17.4 minutes per contest, along with junior guard Bowen Hardman, who has produced a career-high 9.0 points on 48.1 percent shooting – 42.6 percent from three – in nine games (one start) for Akron.

Other Notes And Tidbits

• Speaking of former Buckeyes, former Ohio State head coach Chris Holtmann continues to excel at DePaul. The Demon Deacons have gotten off to a strong 8-2 start this season, with their lone losses being to Texas Tech on Dec. 4 (76-62) and Providence on Dec. 10 (70-63, OT). Holtmann's team, which has already far eclipsed its season win total last year of just three, ranks 42nd in the nation and third in the Big East in scoring offense (83.2 points per game) and 81st and sixth in scoring defense (66.8).

• One of Holtmann's most notable transfer portal signings at Ohio State, guard Sean McNeil, agreed to a deal on Dec. 7 with the NBA G-League's Cleveland Charge, the developmental league affiliate of the Cleveland Cavaliers. McNeil, who transferred to Ohio State for the 2022-23 season from West Virginia and averaged 9.7 points, 2.0 rebounds and 1.3 assists in 35 games (26 starts), returns to the court after a brief stint as an assistant coach for his alma mater Union (Ky.) Cooper. He has appeared in three games for the Charge since being signed, averaging 4.0 points, 1.3 rebounds and 0.7 assists across 12.5 minutes per game.

• In addition to Bradshaw being out, Ohio State is still playing with a thin backcourt. Guards Ques Glover and Colin White both missed the Auburn game due to their respective ankle injuries which they suffered earlier this season. Glover, a sixth-year transfer from Kansas State, has been sidelined since suffering his injury during Ohio State's 78-64 loss to Texas A&M on Nov. 15, while the true freshman White has missed the last four games after showing flashes in nonconference play. Diebler said on Dec. 12 that both Glover and White are "moving in the right direction."

• In national recruiting news, Hurricane (Utah) Utah Prep five-star small forward AJ Dybantsa (6-9, 210) – the consensus top prospect in the nation for the 2025 class – announced live on ESPN's "First Take" on Dec. 10 that he is committing to BYU. Dybantsa, the projected No. 1 overall pick in the 2026 NBA draft, chose the Cougars over Alabama, North Carolina and Kansas, making him the highest-rated recruit in program history. Following the departure of Mark Pope to Kentucky this offseason, BYU is now led by Kevin Young, whose rich NBA background – he served as associate head coach of the Kevin Durant- and Devin Booker-led Phoenix Suns from 2021-24 – enticed Dybantsa. "At BYU, the whole staff from the head coach on down came from the NBA," Dybantsa told ESPN. "Head coach Kevin Young coached my favorite player (Durant) and Devin Booker. Both had a lot of good things to say about him."

• NCAA president Charlie Baker said at a conference hosted by Sports Business Journal at Las Vegas that he has been having productive conversations with television partners and members of the NCAA's basketball committees about expanding the NCAA basketball tournaments from its current 68-team bracket to a 72- or 76-team field in the future. Baker added that the field is unlikely to grow beyond 76 teams because of the limited window they have to schedule games between the time when conference championships end and coverage of the Masters begins, but he is "bullish" on the idea of an imminent expansion.

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Buckeyes Blown Out By Maryland, Auburn

By PATRICK ENGELS
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Associate Editor

Since BSB last went to press, Ohio State endured its worst period of play this season, with the Buckeyes suffering historic blowout losses to Maryland on the road on Dec. 4 then No. 2 Auburn in Atlanta on Dec. 14 as part of the Holiday Hoopsgiving Event, a poor stretch of play that has dropped the team's record to 6-4 (1-1 Big Ten) heading into the final stretch of 2024.

Sandwiched between those losses was a bit of a bright spot on Dec. 7, when the Buckeyes rebounded from their 24-point defeat to the Terrapins with an impressive 14-point victory over Rutgers at home which gave Jake Diebler his first official Big Ten win of his head-coaching career.

Although Ohio State's record is not the greatest heading into a tough stretch of play that includes a pair of difficult ranked matchups, it may be receiving a major reinforcement in the frontcourt because sophomore forward Aaron Bradshaw has returned to the team following his over two-week absence due to a university investigation into an alleged incident that occurred at his off-campus house in Columbus.

For more information on the return of Bradshaw – who did not play against Auburn but was with the team on the bench – head to page 32.

OSU Dominated On Road In B1G Opener

Ohio State (5-3, 0-1) began Big Ten play on Dec. 4 with its worst loss of the Diebler era, falling to Maryland (8-1, 1-0) 83-59 in front of 13,793 fans at the Xfinity Center due to an abysmal first-half performance.

Five days after a demoralizing buzzer-beating overtime loss to Pittsburgh at home, the Buckeyes found themselves in an insurmountable 50-17 hole at halftime in College Park, Md., due to their stagnant offense, which made just six of its first 21 shots in the first half (28.6 percent), missed each of its seven threes in the period and committed 12 turnovers that led to 18 Terrapin points.

The 33-point first-half margin was Maryland's largest ever in a Big Ten game and tied the largest first-half lead for a Big Ten team in any conference game since 1996-97, putting the Buckeyes in an immediate hole that they could never get out of.

"I think we prepared very well," Ohio State sophomore forward Devin Royal told The Columbus Dispatch after the game. "We knew what they were going to do. but we just didn't play hard enough.

"We didn't have that aggressiveness that Ohio State plays with. Second half, we did better, but first half, we just came out very lackadaisical. They were making their shots, and we weren't taking accountability."

Maryland's first-half blitz of the Buckeyes began right away. It made 10 of its first 18 shots and used its tenacious pressure defense to force six Buckeye turnovers and take a commanding 25-8 lead with 10:12 left after a pullup jumper from sophomore guard Rodney Rice.

The Buckeyes broke a 4:28 scoring drought with a Micah Parrish free throw at 9:44, and he split another pair from the line two possessions later to cut the deficit to 25-10. But that didn't deter Maryland, which continued to suffocate OSU on defense and went on a 15-2 run to lead 40-12 with 4:23 left after a free throw from freshman center Derik Queen.

Ohio State's Bruce Thornton hit a running jumper with 4:03 left to break the run, but that proved to be the Buckeyes' final field goal of the half, another long drought that allowed Maryland to take the historic 50-17 lead into the locker room.

The Buckeyes continued their offensive struggles out of the break, missing seven of their first 10 shots to allow Maryland to take its largest lead of the game. The Terrapins went up 40, 63-23, with 15:28 left after a triple by fifth-year guard Selton Miguel.

Ohio State finally got it going with back-to-back Royal layups and a John Mobley Jr. three – the team's first of the game in 11 attempts – which sparked a 17-5 run that allowed it to trail 68-40 with 9:15 left.

Diebler's team continued to play better in the second half and eventually cut the deficit to as low as 22, 78-56, with 3:03 left after a Mobley triple, but it was far too little, too late. Despite being outscored 42-33 in the second half, Maryland was still able to cruise to the 24-point win.

Ohio State was led in the loss by Royal, who scored a team-high 18 points and nine rebounds on 8-of-14 shooting. Mobley was the only other Buckeye in double figures with 15 points – all coming after halftime – while Meechie Johnson Jr. led with three assists.

Maryland was powered by junior guard Ja'Kobi Gillespie, who tallied a game-high 23 points on 7-of-11 shooting and four assists, while Queen earned his third double-double in nine career games with 17 points and 11 rebounds.

Ohio State improved its shooting mark to 43.2 in the second half (16 of 37) to finish 37.9 for the game (22 of 58).

Maryland 83, Ohio State 59

Dec. 4, 2024
XFINITY Center • College Park, Md.

	1	2	F
Ohio State (5-3, 0-1)	17	42	59
Maryland (8-1, 1-0)	50	33	83

Ohio State	Total Min	FG M-A	FT M-A	Reb. O-D	A	PF	Pts.
Royal	25	8-14	2-2	2-7	0	2	18
Thornton	32	4-7	1-2	1-3	2	1	9
Johnson Jr.	32	2-13	3-4	0-0	3	3	8
Stewart	18	2-4	0-1	1-2	0	4	4
Parrish	29	0-5	2-4	0-3	1	4	2
Mobley Jr.	24	5-11	2-2	0-4	1	3	15
Mahaffey	16	1-1	1-2	2-0	0	1	3
Parks	18	0-2	0-1	1-2	2	1	0
Njegovan	4	0-1	0-0	0-0	0	0	0
Baumann	1	0-0	0-0	0-0	0	0	0
Nash	1	0-0	0-0	0-0	0	0	0
Totals	**200**	**22-58**	**11-18**	**9-26**	**9**	**19**	**59**

Percentages: FG: 37.9%. **FT:** 61.1%. **Three-point field goals:** 4-19 (Johnson 1-6, Mobley 3-6, Parrish 0-3, Royal 0-2, Thornton 0-1, Njegovan 0-1). **Team rebounds:** 7. **Blocked shots:** 1 (Stewart). **Turnovers:** 17 (Parrish 3, Mobley 3, Royal 2, Thornton 2, Johnson 2, Stewart 2, Mahaffey, Parks, Team). **Steals:** 6 (Johnson 2, Royal, Thornton, Mobley, Parks).

Maryland	Total Min	FG M-A	FT M-A	Reb. O-D	A	PF	Pts.
Gillespie	29	7-11	5-5	0-1	4	1	23
Queen	31	6-10	5-6	1-10	1	2	17
Reese	22	4-9	2-4	1-6	2	2	10
Miguel	21	4-8	0-0	1-1	0	3	10
Rice	27	3-9	3-3	1-2	0	2	9
Gapare	19	5-7	1-2	1-2	0	1	12
Harris-Smith	21	0-4	2-4	0-3	1	1	2
Palmer	13	0-2	0-0	0-2	0	1	0
Young	13	0-2	0-0	1-2	2	3	0
Stephens	2	0-0	0-0	0-0	0	0	0
Sotell	1	0-0	0-0	0-0	0	0	0
Murphy	1	0-0	0-0	0-0	0	0	0
Totals	**200**	**29-62**	**18-24**	**10-29**	**10**	**16**	**83**

Percentages: FG: 46.8%. **FT:** 75.0%. **Three-point field goals:** 7-25 (Gillespie 4-8, Rice 0-6, Miguel 2-4, Palmer 0-2, Gapare 1-2, Queen 0-1, Harris-Smith 0-1, Young 0-1). **Team rebounds:** 4. **Blocked shots:** 3 (Reese, Gapare, Young). **Turnovers:** 11 (Gillespie 2, Queen 2, Reese 2, Miguel 2, Rice, Harris-Smith, Young). **Steals:** 6 (Queen 2, Reese 2, Gillespie, Harris-Smith). **Officials:** Carstensen, Floyd, Phillips. **Attendance:** 13,793.

Ohio State 80, Rutgers 66

Dec. 7, 2024
Value City Arena • Columbus

	1	2	F
Rutgers (5-4, 0-1)	31	35	66
Ohio State (6-3, 1-1)	39	41	80

Rutgers	Total Min	FG M-A	FT M-A	Reb. O-D	A	PF	Pts.
Harper	38	6-13	5-5	1-2	4	1	20
Bailey	33	6-16	0-0	2-5	1	3	12
Ogbole	25	4-5	2-3	2-3	2	2	10
Derkack	27	2-5	2-2	0-3	0	2	8
Williams	31	1-6	0-0	0-0	3	2	2
Sommerville	15	3-6	2-2	3-2	0	1	8
Acuff	10	1-2	0-0	0-0	0	0	3
Martini	9	1-2	0-0	0-0	0	3	3
Davis	5	0-1	0-0	0-0	0	0	0
Hayes	4	0-0	0-0	0-0	0	0	0
Grant	3	0-1	0-0	0-0	0	1	0
Totals	**200**	**24-57**	**11-12**	**10-17**	**10**	**15**	**66**

Percentages: FG: 42.1%. **FT:** 91.7%. **Three-point field goals:** 7-19 (Harper 3-7, Williams 0-3, Acuff 1-2, Martini 1-2, Derkack 2-2, Bailey 0-1, Sommerville 0-1, Grant 0-1). **Team rebounds:** 4. **Blocked shots:** 1 (Bailey). **Turnovers:** 14 (Bailey 4, Harper 3, Williams 3, Sommerville 2, Ogbole, Derkack). **Steals:** 4 (Harper 2, Derkack, Williams).

Ohio State	Total Min	FG M-A	FT M-A	Reb. O-D	A	PF	Pts.
Thornton	37	8-13	4-4	0-0	3	0	22
Royal	23	9-12	3-5	2-4	2	2	22
Parrish	35	4-10	2-2	0-4	2	2	12
Stewart	22	3-5	1-2	1-6	0	4	7
Johnson Jr.	31	2-8	0-0	0-4	4	2	4
Parks	16	3-4	0-0	4-0	0	3	6
Mahaffey	23	2-2	0-0	1-3	2	2	4
Mobley Jr.	13	1-4	0-0	0-0	1	0	3
Totals	**200**	**32-58**	**10-13**	**10-22**	**14**	**15**	**80**

Percentages: FG: 55.2%. **FT:** 76.9%. **Three-point field goals:** 6-18 (Parrish 2-6, Johnson 0-5, Thornton 2-3, Royal 1-2, Mobley 1-2). **Team rebounds:** 3. **Blocked shots:** 4 (Mahaffey 2, Stewart, Parks). **Turnovers:** 11 (Parrish 3 Stewart 3, Thornton, Royal, Parks, Mobley, Team). **Steals:** 4 (Mahaffey 2, Stewart, Parks).
Officials: Anderson, Reed, Sirmons. **Attendance:** 10,477.

OSU Bounces Back Vs. Rutgers For First B1G Win

Ohio State (6-3, 1-1) bounced back from the Maryland loss with an impressive 80-66 win over star-laden Rutgers (5-4, 0-1) on Dec. 7 in front of 10,477 fans inside Value City Arena.

Four days after the 24-point drubbing at Maryland, the Buckeyes came out a different team on their home floor. They shot an efficient 55.2 percent from the floor (32 of 58) and 33.3 percent from three (6 of 18), held a 46-18 advantage in paint points and limited future potential top-five NBA draft picks Ace Bailey and Dylan Harper to 12 combined field goals in 29 attempts (41.3 percent).

"I'm really proud of the collective response of this group," Diebler said after the win. "Obviously, we were extremely disappointed with the way we played in the first half of the previous game, and we took a great deal of ownership. I thought it was led by our upperclassmen, which, as a coach, is really encouraging if that's going to be an indication of how we handle adversity moving forward the rest of the year."

The Buckeyes immediately put the Maryland loss behind them when they made 14 of their first 22 shots – eight of those coming from Thornton and Royal – to take a 31-23 lead with 5:22 left in the first half.

Rutgers responded with six straight

Auburn 91, Ohio State 53

Dec. 14, 2024
State Farm Arena • Atlanta, Ga.

	1	2	F
Ohio State (6-4, 1-1)	**21**	**32**	**53**
Auburn (9-1)	**49**	**42**	**91**

Ohio State	**Total Min**	**FG M-A**	**FT M-A**	**Reb. O-D**	**A**	**PF**	**Pts.**
Royal	35	4-9	6-8	1-4	1	2	14
Parrish	28	4-7	1-2	0-3	2	3	10
Stewart	24	3-11	2-4	0-6	0	3	8
Johnson Jr.	30	1-4	2-4	0-0	2	1	5
Thornton	33	1-7	0-1	0-2	1	1	3
Mobley Jr.	25	3-8	0-0	0-3	1	0	8
Njevogan	7	1-1	0-0	0-1	0	0	3
Parks	8	1-2	0-0	0-0	0	1	2
Mahaffey	10	0-2	0-0	1-0	0	1	0
Totals	**200**	**18-51**	**11-19**	**5-23**	**7**	**12**	**53**

Percentages: FG: 35.3%. **FT:** 57.9%. **Three-point field goals:** 6-16 (Mobley 2-5, Thornton 1-4, Parrish 1-3, Johnson 1-2, Royal 0-1, Njegovan 1-1). **Team rebounds:** 7. **Blocked shots:** 4 (Stewart 2, Royal, Parrish). **Turnovers:** 8 (Parrish 2, Johnson 2, Thornton 2, Mobley, Team). **Steals:** 5 (Stewart 3, Royal, Johnson).

Auburn	**Total Min**	**FG M-A**	**FT M-A**	**Reb. O-D**	**A**	**PF**	**Pts.**
Broome	26	9-18	2-3	7-13	6	1	21
Jones	26	5-6	0-0	0-1	1	0	14
Cardwell	26	5-10	0-0	3-5	2	2	10
Baker-Mazara	21	2-7	4-4	1-3	0	2	8
Kelly	15	3-8	0-0	0-0	0	3	8
Howard	12	3-4	3-3	0-0	0	0	11
Pettiford	24	3-8	0-0	0-4	5	2	9
Johnson	18	1-4	3-4	2-2	2	4	5
Hudson	5	2-6	0-0	0-0	0	1	5
Moore	13	0-0	0-0	1-2	0	1	0
Pegues	9	0-1	0-0	0-2	2	1	0
Muschalek	3	0-0	0-0	0-0	0	0	0
Patterson	2	0-0	0-0	0-0	0	0	0
Totals	**200**	**33-72**	**12-14**	**16-33**	**18**	**17**	**91**

Percentages: FG: 45.8%. **FT:** 85.7%. **Three-point field goals:** 13-30 (Kelly 2-6, Jones 4-5, Hudson 1-4, Pettiford 3-4, Baker-Mazara 0-3, Broome 1-3, Johnson 0-2, Howard 2-2, Pegues 0-1). **Team rebounds:** 3. **Blocked shots:** 13 (Cardwell 4, Broome 3, Johnson 2, Kelly, Howard, Hudson, Moore). **Turnovers:** 5 (Jones 2, Pettiford 2, Howard). **Steals:** 4 (Kelly 2, Broome, Pettiford).
Officials: Jarrett, Oglesby, Shortt. **Attendance:** N/A.

points – all coming from freshman center Lathan Somerville – to trail by two with 3:27 remaining, but the Buckeyes closed the half strong with an 8-2 run that was finished off by consecutive threes from Thornton and Mobley to take a 39-31 lead into the locker room.

After shooting just 28.6 percent from the floor and turning the ball over 12 times in the first half against Maryland, the Buckeyes made 17 of their first 30 shots (56.7 percent) and committed six turnovers in the game's first 20 minutes against Rutgers.

It seemed like Ohio State was in store for another tight finish early in the second half when Bailey and Harper – the nation's second- and third-best prospects in the 2024 class and the projected second and third picks in the 2025 NBA draft per ESPN – began to showcase their talents, scoring 16 of the Scarlet Knights' first 18 points of the half to put their team down just five, 54-49, with 11:32 left.

But the Buckeyes had other plans. Despite the continued efforts of the two star guards, Ohio State was able to increase its lead to 10 twice in the ensuing minutes, the second coming on a three-pointer from Parrish that ignited a quick 7-0 run that put the Buckeyes up 14, 70-56, with just 3:58 left.

Rutgers tried to mount a comeback out of the final TV timeout by deploying a full-court press, but the Buckeyes broke it easily and scored on an alley-oop from Royal to Sean Stewart to put them up 74-59 with 3:02 left.

Ohio State then closed out the win by holding Rutgers to one made field goal in four attempts over the final 2:34 while also connecting on each of its last six free throws, four of those from Thornton.

The Buckeyes were led in the win by Royal, who notched a career-high 22 points on 9-of-12 shooting. Thornton also added 22 points on 8-of-13 shooting. Parrish added 12, while Stewart grabbed a team-high seven rebounds.

Rutgers was led by Harper and Bailey, who scored 20 and 12 points, respectively. The 6-10 Bailey grabbed a team-high seven boards while Harper dished out a team-high four assists.

OSU Pummeled By Auburn In Atlanta

Ohio State (6-4, 1-1 Big Ten) suffered its largest loss in three decades on Dec. 14 at State Farm Arena in Atlanta, falling 91-53 to No. 2 Auburn due to a dismal shooting performance and poor showing in the paint.

Ten days removed from its blowout against Maryland where they trailed by as much as 40, the Buckeyes found themselves down by as much as 44 points late in the second half as the mighty Tigers dismantled the Buckeyes in nearly every statistical category, with the most egregious discrepancy being in rebounding, where they held a 49-28 advantage on the glass to help give Auburn a 38-20 advantage in the paint.

"It started with us not executing well," Diebler said of the team's struggles against the Tigers. "They made us pay, especially early on, with their shot-making when we didn't execute our defensive game plan. The disappointing thing is the execution component. We didn't see anything we weren't anticipating, really on either side of the ball. They may be the best team in the country right now. They have a lot of experience, and they made us pay when we made a mistake."

Auburn's dominance began right away when, after OSU got out to an early 3-0 lead, it used smothering defense and lights-out three-point shooting to erupt on a 25-5 run and lead 25-8 with 12:22 remaining. Eleven of those points came from Tigers superstar senior forward/center and Naismith Player of the Year candidate forward Johni Broome.

Ohio State provided a brief response when Royal connected on a driving layup with 11:23 left, igniting a 6-0 run to trail 25-14 with 7:49 left after a Stewart steal and dunk.

But that was the final breath of life Ohio State had all game.

Auburn broke a 6:41 scoring drought with a Broome three-point play to go back up 28-14 with 5:41 left, and it never looked back, exploding for 24 of the halves' final 31 points to take a resounding 49-21 lead at the break.

Auburn's first-half avalanche was in large part due to the heroics of Broome, who almost outscored and outrebounded the Buckeyes on his own, notching 17 points and 14 rebounds compared to the 21 and 14 from the entire Scarlet and Gray team. The Tigers also shot 56.3 percent (9 of 16) from three-point range compared to the one made three for the Buckeyes in five attempts and just six total field goals in 24 tries (25.0 percent).

Ohio State showed some life out of the break on offense, making five of its first nine shots to trail by 27, 59-32, with 14:05 left after an alley-oop dunk by Royal from Mobley. But any hope of the team taking anything positive from the game quickly evaporated when Auburn went on a 15-5 run to go up 74-37 with 7:50 remaining after an emphatic dunk by Dylan Cardwell.

Even with the game squarely in reach, Bruce Pearl's squad did not let up, increasing its lead to 44, 89-45, with just 1:56 left before Ohio State closed on an 8-2 run to narrowly avoid its first defeat of at least 40 points since losing 112-71 to BYU on Dec. 22, 1965.

Ohio State's lopsided loss was in large part due to the struggles of Thornton, who scored a season-low three points on 1-of-7 shooting in his return to his hometown. Royal (14) and Parrish (10) were the only Buckeyes in double figures, while Stewart added eight points and a team-high six rebounds.

Auburn was led in the win by Broome, who notched his seventh double-double in his last eight games with 21 points and a career-high 20 rebounds. He also dished out six assists and blocked three shots. Senior guard Denver Jones (14), freshman forward Jahki Howard (11) and graduate center Cardwell (10) also reached double figures.

Ohio State will play six games before BSB next goes to press, including home games against Diebler's alma mater Valparaiso on Dec. 17 (8 p.m., Peacock), Indiana State on Dec. 29 (noon, BTN), Michigan State on Jan. 3 (8 p.m., FOX) and Oregon on Jan. 9 (6 p.m., BTN), a road contest against Minnesota on Jan. 6 (9 p.m., FS1) and a marquee neutral-site game against No. 4 Kentucky on Dec. 21 at Madison Square Garden as part of the CBS Sports Classic (5:30 p.m., CBS).

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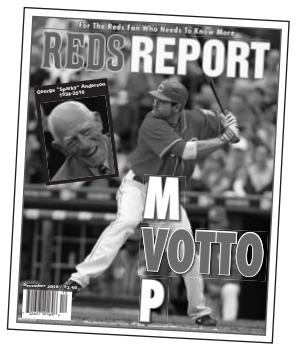

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OSU Picks Up First Ranked Win in 3-0 Week

By BOBBY GORBETT
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

Ohio State picked up three straight wins since BSB last went to press to improve to a perfect 10-0 on the 2024-25 season. The Buckeyes were unchallenged in sizeable home victories over nonconference foes Ball State on Dec. 10 and Youngstown State on Dec. 14, and they rose to the occasion in their first Big Ten game of the year on Dec. 8 with a nine-point victory over No. 21 Illinois at Value City Arena, which also gave them their first ranked win of the season.

Ohio State's two undefeated weeks did not come without some adversity, though, as freshman point guard Jaloni Cambridge suffered a shoulder injury and missed her first game of the season against Youngstown State. The Buckeyes did get junior forward Cotie McMahon back from her extended absence due to injury, though. She has excelled since her return with two games of 25 or more points.

Bucks Start B1G Play With Ranked Win

Sparked by lengthy scoring runs in the second and third quarters, No. 12 Ohio State (8-0, 1-0) started Big Ten play with an 83-74 home victory over No. 21 Illinois (7-2, 0-1) on Dec. 8 in front of 6,668 fans in Value City Arena.

In her first game back from a lower-leg injury since the Belmont game on Nov. 17, McMahon made her presence known early in the first quarter, making a three-pointer at 8:33 and then an old-fashioned three-point play at 5:53 to help give OSU a 13-6 lead.

The Fighting Illini made runs at both the end of the first quarter and the start of the second quarter to take a 23-20 lead with 7:17 remaining in the first half, but a triple from Chance Gray on the next possession sparked a 20-3 run for the Buckeyes that put them up 40-26 at the half.

Gray followed her three with a layup off a Taylor Thierry steal. Illinois responded with a Berry Wallace layup to tie the game at 25, but on the Buckeyes' next offensive possession, Gray scored again off a perfectly timed backcut to put her team back up, leading 27-25 with 5:58 left.

Chance Gray

After Thierry added to the lead with a three, Gray struck again with a steal and dish to Thierry for a basket, which was followed by four straight points from McMahon to put Ohio State up 36-25 with 3:36 left. Illinois responded with an Adalia McKenzie free throw on the other end, but that was the last points the Illini got all half, allowing Ohio State to increase its lead to 14 points at the intermission. Gray had nine points in the quarter.

Illinois cut into Ohio State's double-digit lead at the start of the third quarter with a pair of layups from senior guard Genesis Bryant following a bucket by Makira Cook, which put the Illini within 11, 43-32, with 8:31 left, but the Buckeyes again tightened up their defense to fuel a 14-6 scoring run that helped them take a 61-43 lead into the final period.

The Fighting Illini had a few more runs in them in the final quarter, and they cut the Buckeye lead all the way down to eight, 73-65, with 3:04 to go after a Bryant three-pointer, but Ohio State responded by scoring the next seven points to go back up 15 with 58 seconds left before coming away with the nine-point victory.

Ohio State was led in the win by McMahon, who showed no rust in her first game back from injury, scoring a team-high 25 points on 7-of-12 shooting to go with her five rebounds and three assists.

"We're certainly better with her in the lineup," head coach Kevin McGuff said of McMahon after the game. "I thought she was pretty aggressive today but under control. She rebounded pretty well, she also had three assists when they came to crowd her when she got the ball around the basket, so I think it was a great performance by her."

Thierry (14) and Gray (13) also cracked double figures in scoring on a combined 10-of-20 shooting, while Ajae Petty had a team-high five assists and Elsa Lemmilä grabbed a team-high eight rebounds.

The Buckeyes were efficient offensively in their Big Ten opener, shooting 29 of 60 from the field (48.3 percent), but made just six of their 21 attempts from long range (28.6 percent).

Bryant was Illinois' biggest difference maker with 22 points on 8-of-14 shooting, but her efforts were doomed by the Fighting Illini shooting only 29 of 70 from the field (41.4 percent) and 5 of 13 from three (38.5 percent).

Illinois, led by Kendall Bostic (13) and Brynn Shoup-Hill (11), had a substantial edge on the boards, 44-32.

Bucks Crush Cards Despite Cambridge Injury

Short rest didn't affect the Buckeyes Dec. 10 at Value City Arena.

Just two days after the ranked win over Illinois, Ohio State (9-0, 1-0) earned a convincing 80-48 win over Ball State (6-4) in front of 4,977 fans, a victory that came despite Cambridge suffering a shoulder injury in the third quarter.

It took the Buckeyes only 4:02 to create a double-digit advantage as they started the game on a 14-2 scoring run, six of those points coming from Gray on a three-pointer and old-fashioned three-point play.

The Cardinals found their footing with a couple of baskets to cut the Buckeye lead to 16-6 with 4:44 left in the period, but freshman guard Ava Watson came off the bench to contribute four points, one assist and one steal in 4:03 of action to help Ohio State end the first quarter on an 8-2 run to lead 24-8.

The Buckeyes were less efficient in the second quarter and connected on only one field goal in a span of 5:40 (8:00 to 2:20), but their defensive intensity didn't let up. Ohio State allowed just 12 points and forced nine turnovers in the second period to help the home team go up 38-20 at the half.

Ball State managed to hang around for parts of the third quarter and trailed 40-24 with 8:35 to go in the period, but Ohio State created a significant advantage with an 14-2 scoring run. Gray started the sequence with her third three-pointer of the game and later added a pair of baskets.

Midway through the run, though, Cambridge was slow to get up after making a hard drive to the basket. When she got on her feet, she held her shoulder and eventually went to the locker room.

Cambridge – who McGuff said after the game "banged her shoulder," but he didn't provide an update beyond that – later returned to the bench but stayed there the rest of the way, being replaced by graduate guard Madison Greene.

Despite the injury, Ohio State was still able to close the third quarter strong on a three by Watson and a buzzer-beater by Eboni Walker to lead 69-36 heading into the final period.

With the game squarely in hand, McGuff gave almost every minute to his backups in the fourth quarter. The Buckeyes scored only 11 points on 5-of-16 shooting from the field in the period, but they mostly protected their lead to preserve the 32-point win.

With 21 points on 8-of-16 shooting including 4 of 9 from three-point range, Gray was the Buckeyes' leading scorer.

Watson contributed 15 points on 5-of-12 shooting, the second-highest scoring total for the freshman this season. Watson's strong offensive outing didn't come as a surprise to McGuff.

"We've seen it in practice, her ability to do that, and now she's kind of starting to get caught up with the speed of the game in college and those shots are starting to fall because she's a really capable scoring threat," McGuff said.

Thierry (12) and Petty (10) also reached double figures in scoring on a combined 11-of-18 shooting, helping OSU shoot 31 of 65 (47.7 percent) on the night.

Petty tied with for the team lead in rebounds with eight, while Greene led the Buckeyes with six assists off the bench.

Ball State, which shot just 39.2 percent from the field (20 of 51) and 19.0 percent from three (4 of 21), was led in scoring by graduate forward Maliyah Johnson, who scored 10 points on 5-of-8 shooting and added seven rebounds, tied for the team high with Elise Stuck.

The Buckeyes had a large advantage in turnovers, giving up 11 miscues while Ball State was charged with 27.

McMahon Helps Bucks Cruise To Win Over YSU

Ohio State (10-0, 1-0) passed one of its last remaining nonconference tests with flying colors in an 87-39 win over

Ohio State 83, Illinois 74

Dec. 8, 2024
Value City Arena • Columbus

	1	2	3	4	F
Illinois (7-2, 0-1)	16	10	17	31	74
Ohio State (8-0, 1-0)	18	22	21	22	83

Illinois	Min	Total M-A	FT M-A	Reb. O-D	A	PF	Pts.
Bryant	35	8-14	2-3	0-4	2	4	22
Bostic	39	7-15	3-4	5-8	1	1	17
Cook	26	2-11	2-2	0-2	3	5	6
McKenzie	20	2-6	1-2	1-1	3	3	5
Shoup-Hill	30	1-7	0-0	6-5	1	5	2
Brown-Hagger	28	6-13	2-3	3-2	2	2	14
Wallace	20	3-4	1-2	1-2	0	3	8
Allen	2	0-0	0-0	0-0	0	2	0
Totals	**200**	**29-70**	**11-16**	**19-25**	**12**	**25**	**74**

Percentages: FG: 41.4%. **FT:** 68.8%. **Three-point field goals:** 5-13. (Bryant 4-8, Cook 0-2, Shoup-Hill 0-2, Wallace 1-1). **Team rebounds:** 4. **Blocked shots:** 2 (Bostic, Shoup-Hill). **Turnovers:** 19 (Bryant 6, Brown-Hagger 4, Bostic 2, McKenzie 2, Shoup-Hill 2, Cook, Wallace). **Steals:** 2 (Bryant, McKenzie).

Ohio State	Min	Total M-A	FT M-A	Reb. O-D	A	PF	Pts.
McMahon	34	7-12	9-12	1-4	3	3	25
Thierry	35	5-7	2-2	1-3	0	2	14
Gray	38	5-13	2-2	0-3	2	2	13
Petty	21	4-7	1-2	2-2	5	4	9
J. Cambridge	23	4-9	0-0	0-2	4	5	8
Greene	17	1-1	5-6	0-1	1	2	8
Lemmila	19	2-6	0-2	1-7	1	2	4
K. Cambridge	9	1-3	0-0	2-0	0	1	2
Watson	2	0-2	0-0	0-0	0	0	0
Walker	2	0-0	0-0	0-0	0	0	0
Totals	**200**	**29-60**	**19-26**	**8-24**	**16**	**21**	**83**

Percentages: FG: 48.3%. **FT:** 73.1%. **Three-point field goals:** 6-21 (Gray 1-6, McMahon 2-5, Thierry 2-3, J. Cambridge 0-2, K. Cambridge 0-2, Lemmila 0-1, Watson 0-1, Greene 1-1). **Team rebounds:** 3. **Blocked shots:** 9 (Lemmila 4, Petty 2, McMahon, Thierry, K. Cambridge). **Turnovers:** 14 (Petty 3, McMahon 2, Gray 2, Greene 2, Thierry, J. Cambridge, Lemmila, K. Cambridge, Watson). **Steals:** 9 (Greene 3, Thierry, Gray, Petty, J. Cambridge, K. Cambridge, Watson).
Officials: Tim Daley, Felicia Ginter, Kelsey Reynolds.
Attendance: 6,668

Ohio State 80, Ball State 48

Dec. 10, 2024
Value City Arena • Columbus

	1	2	3	4	F
Ball State (6-4)	8	12	16	12	48
OSU (9-0, 1-0 Big Ten)	24	14	31	11	80

Ball State	Min	Total M-A	FT M-A	Reb. O-D	A	PF	Pts.
Becki	32	3-7	2-2	0-5	4	2	8
Stuck	22	3-4	2-3	3-4	1	3	8
Kiefer	28	2-5	0-0	2-2	1	3	5
Austin	31	1-11	0-0	0-1	2	1	2
Bischoff	1	0-0	0-0	0-0	0	0	0
Johnson	29	5-8	0-0	2-5	2	1	10
Kingery	22	3-5	0-0	0-3	0	1	8
Ransom	15	2-6	0-0	1-0	2	1	5
H. Smith	4	1-1	0-0	0-0	0	0	2
Bolden	9	0-1	0-0	0-2	1	0	0
Towers	6	0-3	0-0	0-0	1	0	0
O. Smith	1	0-0	0-0	0-0	0	0	0
Totals	**200**	**20-51**	**4-5**	**8-23**	**14**	**12**	**48**

Percentages: FG: 39.2%. **FT:** 80.0%. **Three-point field goals:** 4-21. (Austin 0-6, Ransom 1-4, Kingery 2-4, Kiefer 1-3, Becki 0-1, Stuck 0-1, Johnson 0-1, Bolden 0-1). **Team rebounds:** 1. **Blocked shots:** 6 (Becki 2, Stuck, Kiefer, Kingery, Towers). **Turnovers:** 27 (Stuck 7, Kiefer 7, Austin 3, Ransom 3, Team 3, Johnson 2, Becki, Kingery). **Steals:** 7 (Becki 4, Austin 2, Kiefer).

Ohio State	Min	Total M-A	FT M-A	Reb. O-D	A	PF	Pts.
Gray	32	8-16	1-1	0-1	4	1	21
Thierry	26	6-9	0-2	3-4	3	0	12
Petty	20	5-9	0-0	2-6	1	0	10
McMahon	23	1-5	4-6	0-0	0	2	6
Cambridge	18	1-6	2-2	0-0	2	0	4
Watson	24	5-12	2-2	0-0	1	1	15
Lemmilä	20	2-2	2-2	1-7	0	0	6
Walker	15	2-3	0-0	3-0	2	1	4
Greene	22	1-3	0-0	0-0	6	3	2
Totals	**200**	**31-65**	**11-15**	**12-21**	**19**	**9**	**80**

Percentages: FG: 47.7%. **FT:** 73.3%. **Three-point field goals:** 7-22 (Gray 4-9, Watson 3-8, McMahon 0-3, Thierry 0-1, Cambridge 0-1). **Team rebounds:** 6. **Blocked shots:** 2 (Gray, Lemmilä). **Turnovers:** 11 (Petty 4, Walker 2, Gray, Thierry, McMahon, J. Cambridge, Watson). **Steals:** 10 (Watson 3, Gray 2, Greene 2, Thierry, McMahon, J. Cambridge).
Officials: Bryan Enterline, Maggie Tieman, Gina Cross.
Attendance: 4,977

Ohio State 87, Youngstown State 39

Dec. 14, 2024
Value City Arena • Columbus

	1	2	3	4	F
YSU (6-5, 2-0 Horizon)	14	4	12	9	39
OSU (10-0, 1-0 Big Ten)	23	29	18	17	87

YSU	Min	Total M-A	FT M-A	Reb. O-D	A	PF	Pts.
Magestro	25	2-7	2-2	0-1	0	2	8
Burch	31	3-8	1-3	0-8	1	3	7
Watkins	26	3-10	1-1	0-2	1	4	7
Rosalez	21	2-3	0-0	0-0	1	1	4
Gregory	19	1-3	0-0	0-3	0	5	2
Barrier	13	2-4	0-0	0-1	0	1	5
King	16	2-7	0-0	0-0	1	0	4
Thierry	16	0-2	2-2	0-4	1	1	2
Liber	14	0-2	0-0	0-2	0	1	0
Samz	11	0-0	0-0	1-3	0	2	0
Lewandowski	8	0-0	0-0	0-0	0	2	0
Totals	**200**	**15-46**	**6-8**	**5-25**	**5**	**22**	**39**

Percentages: FG: 32.6%. **FT:** 75.0%. **Three-point field goals:** 3-20. (Magestro 2-7, Watkins 0-5, King 0-3, Barrier 1-3, Liber 0-2). **Team rebounds:** 5 **Blocked shots:** 6 (Burch 2, Gregory 2, Barrier, King). **Turnovers:** 34 (Watkins 8, Magestro 4, Burch 4, Rosalez 4, Gregory 3, King 3, Team 3, Samz 2, Lewandowski 2, Barrier). **Steals:** 3 (Burch, Rosalez, Thierry).

Ohio State	Min	Total M-A	FT M-A	Reb. O-D	A	PF	Pts.
McMahon	29	9-21	8-11	1-4	3	3	29
Petty	25	9-13	1-2	7-5	2	3	19
Gray	23	3-9	4-4	1-1	3	0	12
Thierry	30	4-6	0-2	1-6	1	4	9
Greene	36	2-4	4-4	0-2	4	3	8
Watson	23	2-8	0-0	0-1	2	1	5
Lemmila	12	1-3	1-2	2-2	0	1	3
Walker	22	1-5	0-0	1-2	2	1	2
Totals	**200**	**31-69**	**18-25**	**15-25**	**17**	**16**	**87**

Percentages: FG: 44.9%. **FT:** 72.0%. **Three-point field goals:** 7-15 (Watson 1-5, Gray 2-5, McMahon 3-4, Thierry 1-1). **Team rebounds:** 4. **Blocked shots:** 6 (Lemmila 4, Petty, Gray). **Turnovers:** 13 (Greene 4, Petty 3, Lemmila 2, McMahon, Thierry, Gray, Team). **Steals:** 17 (Thierry 7, Greene 3, Gray 2, Watson 2, Walker 2, Petty).
Officials: Trey Miles, Julie Krommenhoek, Michael McConnell. **Attendance:** 5,659

Youngstown State (6-5, 2-0 Horizon) on Dec. 14 behind 29 points from McMahon.

Despite the early 11 a.m. tipoff time, McMahon started her sensational offensive performance immediately, scoring 11 of the team's first 16 points to help the Buckeyes take a 16-3 lead with 4:34 left in the first quarter.

The only thing as impressive as McMahon's 11 early points was Thierry's four steals in that same time span, which helped Ohio State force 11 turnovers in the first quarter to take a 23-14 lead at the end of the period.

Taylor Thierry

McMahon erupted for 16 points in the first quarter on 5-of-8 shooting to outscore the entire YSU team.

The Penguins cut the lead to seven early in the second quarter after a layup by freshman guard Erica King, but any semblance of offensive rhythm for them was halted when Ohio State went on a huge 25-0 run that spanned 7:32, put the Buckeyes up 48-16 with 1:42 left in the first half and was fueled by some aggressive team defense.

The scoring run was truly a team effort, with Greene – who started in place of the injured Cambridge – McMahon and Petty combining for 18 of those points during the sequence.

The Penguins finally broke their scoring drought when senior guard Haley Thierry – Taylor Thierry's twin sister – knocked down two free throws to make it 48-18 with 1:39 left in the half.

Haley Thierry's free throws only momentarily stopped the bleeding. The Buckeyes scored the last four points of the half on a jumper by Walker and layup by Lemmilä to take a 52-18 lead into halftime.

The Buckeyes' substantial halftime lead didn't break their sense of urgency in the third quarter. Instead, they scored the first six points of the period to take a 58-18 lead with 7:07 left after a Petty layup.

Youngstown State broke a 13:33 field-goal drought with 5:56 left in the third quarter with a layup from senior guard and Columbus native Jewel Watkins, and they added another one 23 seconds later when a Petty turnover led to a Sophia Gregory layup that put the Penguins down 58-22 with 5:33 left.

But the Buckeyes closed the quarter strong, holding the Penguins to just three field goals in 10 attempts the rest of the period to go up 70-30.

Ohio State continued to pour it on in the fourth quarter with the game squarely in hand, outscoring the Penguins 17-9 to cruise to the 48-point win.

Despite winning by its second-biggest margin of the season, McGuff wants the Buckeyes to be more consistent over 40 minutes.

"I thought we had some really good moments," McGuff said. "It's just a matter of getting closer to 40 minutes of playing the game the way we want to play it. We had some stretches that were great, then we got a little sloppy with the ball, (and) the defensive intensity kind of let down. We're aiming to do that for 40 minutes. It's not an easy task, but that's the goal."

Ohio State – which shot 44.9 percent from the field (31 of 69) and 46.7 percent from three (7 of 15) was led by McMahon with the previously mentioned 29 points on 9-of-21 shooting along with five rebounds and three assists, while Petty had her second double-double of the year with 19 points and 12 rebounds.

Battling against her sister, Thierry finished the game with a career-high seven steals to go along with nine points and seven rebounds.

Youngstown State, which shot just 32.6 percent from the floor (15 of 46) and missed 17 of its 20 three-point attempts (15.0 percent), was led by graduate guard Malia Magestro with eight points on 2-of-7 shooting. The Penguins were guilty of 34 turnovers, resulting in 45 OSU points, while the Buckeyes were charged with only 13.

Ohio State will play six games before BSB next goes to press, including home games against Grand Valley State on Dec. 17 (noon, B1G+), Northwestern on Jan. 5 (1 p.m., B1G+) and Oregon on Jan. 12 (1 p.m., B1G+), road games at Rutgers on Dec. 29 (2 p.m., B1G+) and Michigan on Jan. 8 (7 p.m., B1G+) and a "neutral" site game on against Stanford on Dec. 20 (8:30 p.m., FS1) at the Chase Center in San Francisco as part of the Invisalign Bay Area Women's Classic.

The Cardinal were 8-3 (0-1 in ACC) as BSB went to press in their first year without longtime head coach and former Ohio State leader Tara VanDerveer, who retired after last season.

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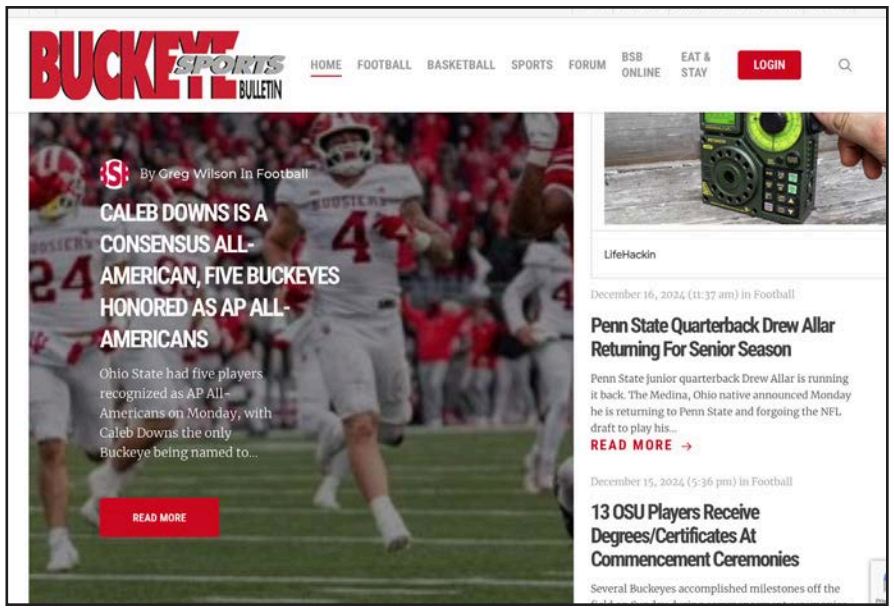

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McMahon Used Injury To Gain New Perspective

Ohio State didn't necessarily need junior forward Cotie McMahon in the games she missed against Ohio (W, 106-42), Bowling Green (W, 96-53), Old Dominion (W, 70-47) and Utah State (W, 87-51) while dealing with a lower-leg injury, but in her first game back against No. 21 Illinois on Dec. 8, she reminded fans why she was an AP All-America honorable mention a season ago.

DOUBLE DRIBBLE
Bobby Gorbett

In the Buckeyes' 83-74 win over the Illini, the former Big Ten Freshman of the Year led the team with 25 points while shooting 7 of 12 from the field and added five rebounds and three assists.

McMahon's return, which helped the Buckeyes get on the board in conference play with their first Big Ten victory of the season, was a welcome sight for head coach Kevin McGuff, who said the junior starter simply makes everyone around her better when she's on the floor.

"We're significantly better with her out there, and I thought we moved the ball pretty well today and played in space and we gave her space to play in," McGuff said of McMahon's return. "She's hard to guard. I thought she was really smart about how she attacked and she was under control, so it was a really good game for her and hopefully she can continue down that path for us."

McMahon missed three weeks for the Buckeyes, who won each of their four games against inferior mid-major opponents in that span by 23 points or more, but clearly, her rehab time was time well spent.

Prior to this injury, McMahon had never missed a game for the Buckeyes in her two-plus seasons with the program. According to McMahon, this rare time off the court allowed her to see the game in a new light.

"I thought the process was very needed," McMahon said after the Illinois game. "Everything happens for a reason, and during this process, it really opened my eyes to kind of building a stronger connection with my teammates, but also just seeing areas where we needed help from a player standpoint, but on the bench. Honestly, me being out kind of helped in a lot of areas."

Heading into the season, McMahon was viewed as Ohio State's vocal leader and best player, and in her first three games, she lived up to that billing. She averaged 16.3 points, 3.3 rebounds and 1.7 assists per game on 45.0 percent shooting during that span, a stretch that was headlined by her team-high 21-point performance in the Buckeyes' narrow 67-63 win at Belmont on Nov. 17.

But McMahon's positive momentum was halted soon after the Belmont win when she suffered the injury to her lower leg in practice, forcing her to sit out the four games.

With McMahon's previously flawless injury record at Ohio State in mind, the three-week break must have felt like a three-month break, but when her opportunity came to return to the court against Illinois, she didn't let her emotions get the best of her. That was in part because she had her former AAU teammate by her side, junior guard Chance Gray.

"It was pretty important," McMahon said of her season-high 25 point-outing against Illinois. "I know that my team wanted me back more than I kind of wanted to be back, so I thought it was very important. My mindset going into this was just playing my normal game.

"My team does a really good job of making sure that I'm confident in what I do – and especially Chance (Gray) just because we have that relationship, and we've had it for a long time. So I was making sure that I was still building my confidence and staying confident within certain things."

McMahon had a bit of an off night in Ohio State's 80-48 win over Ball State on Dec. 10, scoring a season-low six points on just 1-of-5 shooting, but she bounced back on Dec. 14 in the team's 87-39 win over Youngstown State with a sensational offensive performance that included a team-high 29 points.

OSU Works On Defense During Nine-Day Break

The Buckeyes have only two games remaining in their nonconference slate this season, and outside of the close call with Belmont, one of the more difficult hurdles has simply been the long time between games.

After playing two games in two days in the Daytona Beach Classic from Nov. 28-29, Ohio State had to wait nine days before it took on Illinois to kick off Big Ten play.

That lengthy break went to good use, though. Despite cruising to convincing double-digit wins in their previous four nonconference games, the Buckeyes examined what they could improve upon ahead of the ranked clash with Illinois.

"I think it was good time," Gray said of the break. "We got to focus on more details about us and who we are as a program and then later we focused on Illinois, but we had a lot of changes we needed to make for our program and ourselves, and that carried over into the game today (against the Illini)."

The Buckeyes' main focus of improvement was on the defensive end, where they had allowed more than 53 points only twice in the seven games leading up to the Illinois matchup. Regardless, McGuff wanted to see more from his team.

"It was a little bit of everything – our intensity, sustained intensity and full-court pressure, transition defense, guarding the ball," McGuff said after the Ball State game when asked what he wanted to see his team improve upon during the break.

The Buckeyes did give up a season-high 74 points against Illinois, but considering the difficulty of the opponent, McMahon was pleased with how the team played.

"I think defense was kind of our main thing," McMahon said. "I feel like we really stepped up this game a lot, and honestly I couldn't say that we were lacking in really any area in 22 (half-court defense). I thought we did really well, much better from when we started, and I was really proud of that."

The Buckeyes followed up that performance by shutting down Ball State two days later and conceding only 48 points, limiting the Cardinals to 39.2 percent shooting from the floor while also playing with the exact intensity McGuff wished for by forcing 27 turnovers that led to 33 points.

They had a similar defensive outing in their win over Youngstown State, limiting the Penguins to 39 points on 32.6 percent shooting while forcing another 34 turnovers.

Despite the improvements the Buckeyes have made, McGuff knows the important thing is what the team does next.

"We've gotten better. Now we just have to continue to improve, and we have to continue to be more consistent within games and sustain those good stretches," McGuff said.

Cambridge Sisters Deal With Injuries

True freshman guard Jaloni Cambridge and her sister, redshirt sophomore guard Kennedy Cambridge, missed some game time with injuries during the Buckeyes' three-game stretch before BSB went to press.

Although neither injury is expected to be a long-term issue, Kennedy Cambridge missed the entire Ball State game with a lower-leg injury, while Jaloni Cambridge started against Ball State but was removed from the game with a shoulder ailment and didn't return.

Jaloni, a five-star recruit who immediately burst onto the scene for the Buckeyes with 31 points, six rebounds, six assists and five steals in her first collegiate game against Cleveland State on Nov. 5, also suffered an injury in her second game when she made a hard drive to the basket against Charlotte and landed on her back.

Although she didn't return to that game with the back injury, Jaloni did get back into the lineup for Ohio State's next game against Belmont and has played in all of the Buckeyes' games up until their matchup with Youngstown State, scoring in double figures in five of her last seven games.

Cambridge has struggled with efficiency at times, netting just eight and four points on a combined 5-of-15 shooting against Illinois and Ball State, respectively, and shooting above 50.0 percent in just two games so far this season, but she still is the third-leading scorer on the team, averaging 13.9 points per game.

Kennedy was not as highly touted as her younger sister coming out of high school and transferred to the Buckeyes after one year at Kentucky, but she has provided valuable minutes for McGuff's team this season.

She started all four games for the Buckeyes while McMahon was out with injury and averaged 7.3 points, 4.3 rebounds, 2.5 assists and 2.3 steals per contest during that span while shooting 43.3 percent from the field.

McGuff described Kennedy Cambridge's lower-leg injury as day-to-day after the Ball State game.

Jaloni and Kennedy Cambridge didn't return to the lineup during Ohio State's win over Youngstown State on Dec. 14. After the game, McGuff provided an update on the extent of Jaloni Cambridge's injury.

"Maybe," McGuff said when asked if Cambridge would have played if their opponent had been a Big Ten team. "She's day-to-day, but we'll see. She took a pretty hard fall, but I don't think it's anything long, long, long-term."

Petty Named B1G Player Of The Week

Ohio State senior forward Ajae Petty was named Big Ten Player of the Week on Dec. 2 after an outstanding two-game stint in the Daytona Beach Classic. In two games against Utah State and Old Dominion, Petty averaged 20.5 points, 10.0 rebounds and 1.0 blocks per game while shooting a strong 76.0 percent from the field, making 19 of her 25 shots.

Petty's high-scoring outings in Daytona Beach, Fla., came on the heels of a somewhat slow-scoring start to her 2024 season. After leading her previous team, Kentucky, in scoring in 2023-24 with a career-high 14.2 points per game, Petty was averaging only 8.2 points per contest heading into Ohio State's Thanksgiving Day clash with Utah State.

Much of Petty's decreased volume as a scorer can be attributed to the fact that she hasn't played very much. Despite starting in every game for the Buckeyes, Petty has logged more than 25 minutes for the Buckeyes in only one game this season, due to either her dealing with foul trouble or the games already having been decided by the beginning of the fourth quarter.

Regardless, Petty is still averaging 12.0 points per game on 60.7 percent shooting (54 of 89), while also bringing down a team-leading 7.8 rebounds per game.

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Mendez Wins Second Straight Cliff Keen Title

After a long break to give the Buckeyes some time to celebrate Thanksgiving, the Ohio State wrestling team was back in action at the Cliff Keen Tournament in Las Vegas from Dec. 6-7, where Jesse Mendez left with another title win.

ON THE MAT
Greg Wilson

The reigning NCAA champion, Mendez was the only Buckeye to take home a title, his second straight year winning the event at 141 pounds. That same day, two others were able to win their brackets at the Cleveland State Open. Rocco Welsh won the 184-pound bracket while wrestling unattached, and Brandon Cannon won at 157 pounds with a 5-0 record at that event representing Ohio State.

Mendez' win in the championship was over No. 4 Tagen Jamison of Oklahoma State in a 5-2 decision, a match that improved him to 11-0 in matches on the season. He was able to use his elite speed to gain the advantage in the third period, getting to Jamison's left leg before slowly fighting his way behind his opponent to earn a takedown that secured the final score that earned him another win.

He also had to get through Iowa State's Jacob Frost after a first-round bye, doing so with ease and needing just 4:27 to force a 19-4 tech fall, along with No. 8 Sam Latona of Virginia Tech (8-6 decision) and No. 5 Joshua Koderhandt of Navy (5-1 decision).

Also in the Cliff Keen, Nic Bouzakis fought his way through the consolation bracket with some very big wins over No. 15 Dylan Ragusin of Michigan (13-6), a 17-7 major-decision win over No. 8 Tyler Knox of Stanford and a 13-10 decision over No. 19 Reece Witcraft of Oklahoma State.

It was a very encouraging showing for Bouzakis, a redshirt sophomore, who last year occasionally had trouble in consolation brackets after he lost in the championship bracket.

At 157 pounds and 184 pounds, respectively, Paddy Gallagher and Seth Shumate took fourth place in their respective brackets, losing the third-place match. For Gallagher, it was a 4-1 decision in the semifinals to No. 3 Antrell Taylor of Nebraska that sent him to consolations. After being placed in the consolation semifinals, he beat Jared Hill of Wyoming before he medically forfeited in the third-place bout, giving Caleb Fish of Oklahoma State the win.

After a win in the second round, which Shumate was placed in with a bye, he lost to No. 2 Parker Keckeisen of Northern Iowa 19-3 in the quarterfinals. But Shumate was able to make a run through the consolation bracket until the third-place match, where he lost to No. 8 Bennett Berge of South Dakota State.

At 125 pounds, Brendan McCrone came in fifth place after also losing 3-0 in the quarterfinals to Troy Spratley, the No. 3-ranked wrestler in the country at that weight. Eventually the sixth-ranked McCrone fell 6-3 to No. 5 Carter Smith of Nebraska, which got him a spot in the fifth-place bout, where he defeated Maximo Renteria of Oregon State.

Nick Feldman also wrestled for the Buckeyes at Cliff Keen, ultimately finishing in sixth place at heavyweight. He started off well for Ohio State, winning his first match by major decision and the next two by tech fall to earn himself a spot in the semifinals. But No. 3 Wyatt Hendrickson of Oklahoma State gave Feldman too much trouble the next match, beating the Buckeye 6-0. Feldman would medically forfeit the next two bouts, which got him his sixth-place finish.

In the Cleveland State Open, Cannon worked his way through five straight wins, taking one win by tech fall and the rest by a decision, beating Cody Chittum of Iowa State in the finals. There were three Buckeyes in the semifinals at the 157-pound weight class, with Brock Herman falling to Cannon 7-6 and true freshman Landon Desselle medically forfeiting to give Chittum his place in the finals.

Welsh shoved his way to a title win through brute force, winning four of his five matches by tech fall, with the other win being a pin that he needed just 3:43 to achieve. He was up 15-4 in that match before the pin, well on his way to another tech fall had he not gained six points instead.

The dominance of Welsh proved that he is still near the top of his weight class, and whenever he does get another chance to wrestle attached to the Buckeyes for a full season, it will be a season to pay attention to.

Bucks Storm Back To Beat Pitt

When the Buckeyes matched up against Pittsburgh on Dec. 13, they were able to make an impressive comeback after going down to an early 14-0 deficit.

The night started off with freshman e'Than Birden getting the call at 174 pounds for Ohio State against No. 17 Luca Augustine, whom he was able to take into a second overtime period before eventually falling 2-1 to give the Panthers an early 3-0 team lead.

Shumate was up next and also took his bout down to the wire against No. 11 Reece Heller, but his early 3-1 lead after three minutes wasn't enough of a cushion, losing 6-5 after three periods, suffering a late takedown that was the difference.

Ryder Rogotzke struggled in his 197-pound match, losing 8-2 to No. 16 Mac Stout, and facing a 9-0 deficit, the Buckeyes were beginning to run out of breathing room, which became even worse when Hogan Swenski – who was filling in for the injured Feldman – fell 16-1 to No. 14 Dayton Pitzer, to increase the gap to 14-0.

But McCrone was able to gain some momentum for OSU with a major-decision win over Matt Marlow at 125 pounds before Bouzakis defeated Vinnie Santaniello 14-4 to bring the team score within six points.

Mendez continued the Buckeyes' streak of big wins with a 16-1 tech-fall win over No. 21 Anthony Santaniello, and Dylan D'Emilio gave Ohio State its first team lead when he scored a four-point near-fall in the third period on Finn Solomon to win 7-4 at 149 pounds.

Gallagher clinched the team win for Ohio State with a 13-4 major decision over Dylan Evans before Sammy Sasso fell 13-11 to Jared Keslar, finalizing the 20-17 score.

Up Next

The No. 6 Buckeyes are off for eight days between duals after beating Pitt and have the Collegiate Duals to look forward to, where they emerged victorious last season with big wins over NC State and Northern Iowa, also handily taking down Lock Haven there as well.

This year it will be No. 22 North Carolina (3 p.m.), Lock Haven (5 p.m.) and No. 12 Iowa State (7 p.m.) that Ohio State faces off against in Nashville at Ensworth Frist Campus on Dec. 21.

Before BSB next goes to press, Ohio State will also have a home dual against Oregon State on Jan. 5 at 1 p.m. on B1G Plus and will go on the road for its first Big Ten dual of the year against Illinois (Jan. 10, B1G Plus).

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Let's Play Two: Bucks On Ice At Wrigley Field

With the Ohio State men's hockey team on a holiday break following its series against Notre Dame at Value City Arena on Dec. 13 and 14, many of the players headed home to spend time with their families and friends.

IN THE CREASE
Craig Merz

It's an opportunity to relax, get away from school and recuperate from the grind of the season.

What the players can't do is take it too easy. Sure, there's going to be plenty of time for get-togethers and maybe to stray just a bit from their diets, but they all have added incentive to make sure they are in prime shape when they return for their first practice after Christmas.

That's because the Buckeyes not only will play Michigan in their first game back on Jan. 3, but it will be at Wrigley Field in Chicago (BTN, 5 p.m.).

The Buckeyes will practice on Dec. 27 and 28 then have Sunday the 29th off.

"That puts us back on our normal game-week schedule because we'll travel on Thursday (Jan. 2)," coach Steve Rohlik said. "I thought that was important because the guys are going to have a good 10-12 days off."

When the players go home, they'll be given workout and dietary guidelines by strength and conditioning coach Taylor Brown.

"Some guys are going to follow it, some guys aren't," Rohlik said. "Hopefully, as a team we're going to understand how important it is to, one, get away and recharge, but two, you can't let your body slip for 10-12 days and think we're going to come back and be where we need to be."

With the No. 15 Buckeyes having a 28-player roster, a half dozen players will not make the gameday lineup when they take to the ice at the iconic 110-year-old home of the Chicago Cubs.

"That's the worst part of my job," Rohlik said. "Especially in an event like that, to tell some of those guys they're not going to be able to play in that game is unfortunate."

It could be even more difficult because there will not be an opportunity to practice on the temporary rink either the day before or the morning of the game as a consolation prize.

"The first time we touch the ice will be warmups before the game. It's the same for every team," Rohlik said.

It is unclear if the entire roster will be able to participate in the pregame skate.

Normally, as was the case nearly two years ago for the most recent Buckeye outdoor game, the teams get a full practice to adjust to the ice conditions, the boards and stadium around them.

Been There, Done That

The matchup with the Wolverines is part of set of games at Wrigley Field highlighted by the NHL's Winter Classic on New Year's Eve between the Chicago Blackhawks and the St. Louis Blues.

Ohio State is part of The Frozen Confines: Big Ten Hockey Series. Penn State plays Notre Dame in the second game on Jan. 3 while the next night Wisconsin meets Michigan State.

Also, the OSU women play Wisconsin in a Western Collegiate Hockey Association game on Jan. 4 at 5:30 p.m. (BTN). It's a rematch of the 2024 Frozen Four title game won by the Buckeyes 1-0.

"That's fantastic," Rohlik said. "Think about their game, the two best teams in the country. To have our men's and women's programs there, showcasing what's going on, is incredible."

You don't have to be Cubs fans to appreciate the setting, said sophomore forward Thomas Weis of Madison, Wis., and an avowed Milwaukee Brewers supporter.

"The Cubs are my least favorite team, but I still respect their stadium," he said. "I think it's a pretty cool place. I'm definitely going to have some Brewers merch and maybe bring my baseball glove too.

"It's just one of the most iconic stadiums in all pro sports. So to be able to play an outdoor game in a place like that, it's going to be unbelievable."

For sophomore forward Max Montes, it will be sort of a homecoming for the Hartland, Wis., native,

"I haven't played an outdoor game yet, so I'm really excited, especially being really close to home," he said. "I'm going to have a bunch of family and friends go to that game. I mean, the Cubs? They're an OK team, but I'm so excited to play at Wrigley Field."

As might be expected, he's a Milwaukee Brewers fan and admitted he never considered going to Wrigley for a baseball game.

Freshman forward Noah Powell from Northbrook, Ill., is the opposite, having gone to the ballpark several times this past season to see his Cubbies, although he couldn't envision playing hockey there at the time.

"It was just not something I was thinking about in the middle of the summer."

He is among the players who have played an outdoor game whether it be in high school, junior hockey or college, as was the case for junior defenseman Damien Carfagna.

Graduate forward Gunnarwolfe Fontaine is the veteran having played at Fenway Park in Boston for Northeastern and at the Cotton Bowl in Dallas as part of the 2020 Winter Classic when he was with the Chicago Steel junior team.

"It was 50, 60 degrees in Dallas," he said. "It was actually really nice, like, you're sitting on the bench, got a nice cool breeze. So it was obviously interesting.

"But then going to Fenway, where it was a little bit colder, and it rained in the morning, so the ice wasn't great. Obviously, a lot of different conditions and I'm just excited to see what Wrigley is all about. I've seen the Cubs play, but being able to go on the field and play a hockey game is going to be really special."

Like Fontaine, senior goalie Logan Terness was at the Frozen Fenway on Jan. 7, 2023, but for Connecticut.

"I was the backup," he said. "It was still a cool experience to see what it was like, but unfortunately I didn't get in that one."

Ice Age

Ohio State has a history of outdoor games.

It will be the second for the women after the No. 5 Buckeyes lost 2-1 to the top-ranked Minnesota Gophers before 2,100 fans at Parade Stadium in Minneapolis on Jan. 18, 2020.

The men have played four previously, winning once:

• Feb. 11, 2006: A crowd of 40,890 at Lambeau Field in Green Bay, Wis., saw the Badgers win 4-2 at the Packers' home.

• Jan. 15, 2012: Michigan downed the Buckeyes 4-1 in front of 25,864 at Progressive Field, home of the Cleveland Guardians.

• Jan. 17, 2014: A 1-0 loss to Minnesota in sub-freezing conditions drew 45,021 to TCF Bank Stadium (now Huntington Bank Stadium) where the Golden Gophers play football.

• Feb. 18, 2023: The Buckeyes prevailed 4-2 over the Wolverines before the largest crowd to see OSU play (45,523) at First Energy Stadium (now Huntington Bank Field), home of the Cleveland Browns.

Davis Burnside, a junior forward from Scottsdale, Ariz., who grew up in Chicago, played in the Cleveland game and has advice for his teammates as they prep to play at Wrigley Field.

"Just take it all in," he said. "It's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, although I'm fortunate now to be able to be able to play in two. Enjoy the moment. That's the message to all the new guys playing in it. We're all just really looking forward to having a good time, especially against The Team Up North."

Of course, the hockey programs were preceded to Wrigley Field by the OSU football team playing Northwestern on Nov. 16. Men's hockey had a game that afternoon, but the players said seeing highlights from the venue got them even more pumped for their outdoor game.

"I definitely could see us packing the place like we did in Cleveland," graduate forward Patrick Guzzo said. "Obviously the rivalry is the biggest thing there, and I'm sure everybody in Chicago is excited for it and so are we."

That's where Rohlik has to find the right balance. It is a huge deal to be involved in the game, but it's still an important Big Ten contest, and two days later the Buckeyes will play in Ann Arbor to complete the weekend series.

"We've talked a lot about enjoying the experience," he said. "That's why you come to Ohio State. That's why you have these opportunities to enjoy it. How many times do guys get to play in Wrigley Field?"

Carfagna, from Wood-Ridge, N.J., played at the New York Mets' Citi Field in conjunction with the 2018 Winter Classic and plans to use that experience to prepare for Wrigley Field.

"It's a cool setting and all that, but you've still got to take care of business on the ice. It's still a hockey game," he said. "It goes toward the Big Ten standings and national standings. So we've just got to focus on the task at hand.

"I think there's going to be times before, maybe even after the game, that we sit down and just take it all in. It's going to be something really special, but once the national anthem stops and the puck is dropped, it's all business for playing The Team Up North. It's a rivalry game at that point."

Hot Streak

The Buckeyes won all four games, earning home sweeps of Big Ten foes Penn State and Notre Dame, since BSB last printed with sophomore goaltender Kristoffer Eberly allowing a total of four goals in those games.

The Buckeyes are 13-4-1 overall and 6-2-

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0 in conference play with 16 regular-season games to play. They were 14-20-4 and 4-18-2 last season.

Taming The Lions

After ending a six-game trip with consecutive losses to Princeton, Ohio State returned home to defeat Penn State 4-0 and 4-2 at Value City Arena on Dec. 5 and 6.

Eberly was the star of the series with a 22-save shutout, his second of the season, in the opener and a 27-save outing in the rematch vs. the Nittany Lions (6-9-0, 0-8-0) to earn Big Ten third star of the week honors.

Fontaine had two goals and James Hong two assists in the opener while defenseman Aiden Hansen-Bukata registered three assists in the next game for the Buckeyes.

By sweeping the Nittany Lions, the Buckeyes equaled the number of conference wins for all of last season (4-18-2). That fourth win didn't come until Feb. 23 at Michigan State as part of a three-game winning streak.

Montes and Guzzo had goals in the second period vs. PSU in the series opener, and Fontaine added a power-play goal and an empty-net tally in the third.

The following night, Carfagna in the first period made it 1-0 during a major power play, and Riley Thompson scored on a 5-on-3 power play at the 11:38 mark before Penn State countered with a major power-play score as well.

It was 2-2 in the third when Joe Dunlap fed Jake Rozzi for the go-ahead marker at 13:06, and Montes potted his eighth of the season into an empty net at 18:40.

No Luck Of The Irish

The Buckeyes prevailed 2-1 over Notre Dame in overtime on Dec. 13 and pulled away for a 3-1 victory the next night while limiting the Fighting Irish (6-12-0, 1-9-0) to a combined 32 shots.

Defenseman Brent Johnson scored twice in the series, including the OT winner, and Fontaine had a goal and two assists.

In the first game, OSU trailed until Burnside scored a power-play goal at 8:20 of the third period. In overtime, the Irish had a 2-on-1 but hit the post for the fourth time in the game.

The Buckeyes turned the play up ice, and Fontaine passed to Johnson for the winner at 1:53.

Another tight defensive effort in the second game had Johnson open the scoring in the first period. After Notre Dame tied it early in the second, Guzzo scored the go-ahead tally at 16:02 of the middle period, and Fontaine added a power-play goal at 18:50 of the third.

Net Results

Eberly, from Pinckney, Mich., is the Varsity Club Icer of the Month for December after winning all four starts and stopping 81 of 85 shots (.953 save percentage).

Against Notre Dame he made 18 and 14 saves, respectively, to run his record to 9-1-0 with a 1.35 goals-against average, a .941 save percentage and his first two career shutouts.

For complete recaps of the Penn State and Notre Dame series, go to the BuckeyeSports.com website, free to all Buckeye Sports Bulletin subscribers.

BUCKEYE SCOREBOARD

FOOTBALL (10-2, 7-2)

Aug. 31 AKRON, W 52-6.

Sept. 7 WESTERN MICHIGAN, W 56-0; **21** MARSHALL, W 49-14; **28** at Michigan State, W 38-7.

Oct. 5 IOWA, W 35-7; **12** at Oregon, L 32-31; **26** NEBRASKA, W 21-17.

Nov. 2 at Penn State, W 20-13; **9** PURDUE, W 45-0; **16** vs. Northwestern at Wrigley Field, W 31-7; **23** INDIANA, W 38-15; **30** MICHIGAN, L 13-10.

Dec. 21 Tennessee, CFP first round.

MEN'S BASKETBALL (6-4)

Oct. 18 at Cincinnati (Exh.), L 80-62.

Nov. 4 vs. Texas at Hall of Fame Series, Las Vegas, W 80-72; **11** YOUNGSTOWN STATE, W 81-47; **15** at Texas A&M, L 78-64; **19** EVANSVILLE, W 80-30; **22** CAMPBELL, W 104-60; **25** GREEN BAY, W 102-69; **29** PITTSBURGH, L 91-90 (OT).

Dec. 4 at Maryland, L 83-59; **7** RUTGERS, W 80-66; **14** vs. Auburn at Holiday Hoopsgiving, Atlanta, L 91-53; **17** VALPARAISO; **21** vs. Kentucky at CBS Sports Classic, New York; **29** INDIANA STATE.

Jan. 3 MICHIGAN STATE; **6** at Minnesota; **9** OREGON; **14** at Wisconsin; **17** INDIANA; **21** at Purdue; **27** IOWA; **30** at Penn State.

Feb. 2 at Illinois; **6** MARYLAND ; **9** at Nebraska; **12** WASHINGTON; **16** MICHIGAN; **20** NORTHWESTERN; **23** at UCLA; **26** at USC.

March 4 NEBRASKA; **8** at Indiana; **12-16** Big Ten Tournament, Indianapolis

WOMEN'S BASKETBALL (10-0)

Nov. 5 CLEVELAND STATE, W 104-69; **12** CHARLOTTE, W 94-53; **17** at Belmont, W 67-63; **20** at Ohio, W 106-42; **24** BOWLING GREEN, W 96-53; **28** vs. Old Dominion at Daytona Beach Classic, Daytona Beach, Fla., W 70-47; **29** vs. Utah State at Daytona Beach Classic, Daytona Beach, Fla., W 87-51.

Dec. 8 ILLINOIS, W 83-74; **10** BALL STATE,, W 80-48; **14** YOUNGSTOWN STATE, W 87-39; **17** GRAND VALLEY STATE; **20** vs. Stanford at Bay Area Women's Classic, San Francisco; **29** at Rutgers.

Jan. 5 NORTHWESTERN; **8** at Michigan; **12** OREGON; **16** at Wisconsin; **19** at Penn State; **23** MARYLAND; **26** at Nebraska.

Feb. 2 WASHINGTON; **5** at UCLA; **8** at USC; **13** MINNESOTA; **17** IOWA; **20** at Indiana; **23** PURDUE; **26** MICHIGAN STATE;.

March 2 at Maryland; **6-10** Big Ten Tournament, Indianapolis.

FENCING

Sept. 28 OSU Open, NTS; **29** OSU Duals, Men 5-0; Women 5-0.

Nov. 2-3 West Invitational at La Jolla, Calif. Men 5-1; Women 7-1; **17** Elite Invitational at Philadelphia, Men 2-4, Women 2-4.

Jan. 18 St. John's Duals at Queens, N.Y.; **19** Philadelphia Invitational at Philadelphia.

Feb. 1-2 Northwestern Duals at Evanston, Ill.; **22-23** CCFC Championships at Detroit.

March 8 NCAA Midwest Regionals, TBA; **20-23** NCAA Championships at University Park, Pa.

MEN'S ICE HOCKEY (13-4-1, 6-2-0)

Oct. 6 Niagara (exh.) W, 3-2 (OT); **11-12** AMERICAN INTERNATIONAL, T 3-3; W 5-2; **18-19** at Wisconsin, W 2-1 (OT); W 2-1; **25-26** BOWLING GREEN, W 3-1; W 2-0.

Nov. 1-2 LAKE SUPERIOR STATE, W 9-3; W 6-2; **8-9** at Michigan State, L 4-2; L 4-1; **15-16** at Lindenwood, W 5-2; W 3-2; **29-30** at Princeton, L 3-1; L 3-1.

Dec. 5-6 PENN STATE, W 4-0; W 4-2; **13-14** NOTRE DAME, W 2-1 (OT); W 3-1.

Jan. 3 vs. Michigan at Wrigley Field in Chicago; **5** at Michigan; **10-11** MINNESOTA; **24-25** at Penn State; **30-31** MICHIGAN STATE.

Feb. 7-8 at Notre Dame; **14-15** WISCONSIN; **21-22** at Minnesota; **27-28** MICHIGAN.

WOMEN'S ICE HOCKEY (13-4-2, 8-4-2)

Sept. 21-22 MINNESOTA DULUTH, L 2-1; L 4-3; **27-28** at Bemidji State, W 8-2; W 3-0.

Oct. 4-5 at St. Lawrence, W 3-2 (OT), W 5-3; **11-12** MINNESOTA, W 4-3; T 1-1 (SOW); **18-19** at St. Cloud State, W 5-1; T 3-3 (SOL); **22** MERCYHURST, W 5-1; **25** ICEBREAKER TOURNAMENT vs. STONEHILL, W 11-0; **26** ICEBREAKER TOURNAMENT vs. CORNELL, W 7-3.

Nov. 1-2 at St. Thomas, W 5-1; W 1-0 (OT); **15-16** WISCONSIN, L 4-2; W 3-2; **22-23** at Minnesota State, W 2-1; L 4-1.

Dec. 2 at Mercyhurst, PPD.

Jan. 2 at Wisconsin; **4** at Wrigley Field in Chicago vs. Wisconsin; **10-11** BEMIDJI STATE; **17-18** at Minnesota Duluth; **24-25** MINNESOTA STATE; **31** at Minnesota.

Feb. 1 at Minnesota; **7-8** ST. THOMAS; **21-22** ST. CLOUD STATE; **28** WCHA Quarterfinals.

March 1-2 WCHA Quarterfinals.

MEN'S SOCCER (16-2-4, 7-1-2)

Aug. 22 CLEVELAND STATE, T 1-1; **25** at Akron, W 2-0; **29** SIUE, W 4-0.

Sept. 1 UNLV, W 3-2; **8** XAVIER, W, 3-1; **13** BUTLER, W 1-0; **17** at Penn State, W 5-0; **22** RUTGERS, W 3-0; **27** INDIANA, T 2-2.

Oct. 4 at Michigan, W 6-3; **7** WASHINGTON, W, 2-0; **11** at UCLA, L, 2-1; **19** at Wisconsin, W 3-2; **25** NORTHWESTERN, W 2-0; **29** MICHIGAN STATE, T 2-2.

Nov. 3 at Maryland, W 2-1; **10** Big Ten Tournament semifinals vs. Washington, W 3-1; **17** Big Ten Tournament finals vs Michigan, W 1-0; **24** NCAA TOURNAMENT VS. WESTERN MICHIGAN, W 2-1.

Dec. 1 NCAA Tournament vs. Stanford W 0-0 (4-2 PK); **7** NCAA Tournament Quarterfinals vs. Wake Forest, W 3-0; 13 NCAA Tournament Semifinals vs. Marshall, L 1-0.

WOMEN'S SOCCER (14-6-3, 6-3-2)

Aug. 15 DUKE, W 1-0; **22** MILWAUKEE, W 4-0; **25** ASHLAND, W 3-1; **29** SOUTH CAROLINA, T 1-1.

Sept. 5 at Navy, W 4-0; **8** at Auburn, L 1-0; **12** at Indiana, W 3-0; **15** BROWN, W 2-0; **19** IOWA, T 1-1; **22** NORTHWESTERN, W 2-1; **26** MICHIGAN STATE, T 2-2; **29** at Michigan, W 2-1.

Oct. 4 MARYLAND, W 3-0; **10** MINNESOTA, L 3-2; **13** at Purdue, W 4-2; **17** at USC, L 1-0; **20** at UCLA, L 1-0; **27** PENN STATE, W, 4-1; **31** vs. Wisconsin at Big Ten Tournament in Minneapolis, W 1-0.

Nov. 1 vs. Wisconsin at Big Ten Tournament in Minneapolis, W 1-0; **4** vs. USC at Big Ten Tournament in Minneapolis, L 1-0; **15** NCAA TOURNAMENT vs. JAMES MADISON, W 4-1; **22** NCAA Tournament at Winston-Salem, N.C., vs. Auburn, W 2-1; **24** NCAA Tournament at Winston-Salem, N.C., vs. Wake Forest, L 1-0.

MEN'S SWIM & DIVE (4-0)

Oct. 19 KENTUCKY W 191-107; **25** DENISON, W 182-116; **26** ALUMNI MEET, NTS.

Nov. 1-2 at Virginia Tech, W 177-176; **8** PENN STATE, W 173-127; **21-23** OHIO STATE FALL INVITATIONAL, 3rd/2,164 PTS.

Jan. 18 at Michigan; **24** Tim Welsh Classic at South Bend, Ind.

Feb. 1 at Pittsburgh; **14-16** OHIO STATE WINTER INVITATIONAL; **26-March 1** Big Ten Championships at Minneapolis.

March 9 LAST CHANCE MEET; **10-12** NCAA ZONE DIVING; **13-15** CSCAA National Invitational at Ocala, Fla.; **26-29** NCAA Championships at Federal Way, Wash.

WOMEN'S SWIM & DIVE (5-0)

Oct. 19 KENTUCKY, W 218-80; AKRON, W 224-74; **25** DENISON, W 180-115; **26** ALUMNI MEET, NTS.

Nov. 1-2 at Virginia Tech, W 196-157; **8** PENN STATE, W 243-57; **21-23** OHIO STATE FALL INVITATIONAL, 2nd/2,413.50 PTS.

Jan. 18 at Michigan; **24-25** Tim Welsh Classic at South Bend, Ind.

Feb. 1 at Pittsburgh; **14-16** OHIO STATE WINTER INVITATIONAL; **19-22** BIG TEN CHAMPIONSHIPS.

March 2 LAST CHANCE MEET; **10-12** NCAA ZONE DIVING; **13-15** CSCAA National Invitational at Ocala, Fla.; **19-22** NCAA Championships at Federal Way, Wash.

WOMEN'S VOLLEYBALL (14-16, 7-13)

Aug. 30 at Dayton Flyer Invitational vs. Florida International, W 3-0; **31** at Dayton Flyer Invitational vs. Northern Iowa, W 3-1.

Sept. 6 at Florida Tournament vs. Southern Indiana, W 3-1; **7** at Florida Tournament vs. South Florida, L 3-2; **8** at Florida Tournament vs. Florida, L 3-1; **13** MIAMI (FL), W 3-0; **14** BUFFALO, W 3-2; **15** WRIGHT STATE, L 3-1; **20** at Bowling Green, W 3-1; **22** BOWLING GREEN, W 3-0; **27** at USC, L 3-2; **29** at UCLA, L 3-1.

Oct. 3 OREGON, L 3-0; **6** at Indiana, L 3-1; **10** at Northwestern, W 3-0; **13** MICHIGAN, L 3-1; **18** PENN STATE, L 3-2; **19** NEBRASKA, L 3-0; **23** at Purdue, L 3-0; **27** MINNESOTA, L, 3-2; **31** IOWA, W 3-0.

Nov. 3 at Michigan State, W 3-1; **8** at Michigan, W 3-2; **9** at Illinois, L 3-0; **15** MARYLAND, L 3-1; **16** RUTGERS, W 3-0; **22** WASHINGTON, W 3-0; **24** INDIANA, W 3-2; **27** at Wisconsin, L 3-2; **29** at Minnesota, L 3-1.

WRESTLING (4-0)

Nov. 3 Clarion Open at Clarion, Pa., NTS; **14** UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE AT CHATTANOOGA, W 36-6; **17** at Edinboro University of Pennsylvania W 40-4; **24** HOFSTRA, W 38-6.

Dec. 6-7 Cliff Keen Invitational at Las Vegas, 3rd of 10; **13** at Pittsburgh, W 20-17; **21** Collegiate Duals at Nashville.

Jan. 5 OREGON STATE; **10** at Illinois; **12** RUTGERS; **19** PURDUE; **25** at Iowa.

Feb. 1 at Michigan; **7** MINNESOTA; **9** at Indiana; **14** PENN STATE.

March 8-9 Big Ten Championships at Chicago; **20-22** NCAA Championships at Philadelphia.

Day's Future Still Cloudy Despite Bjork's Message

It could be something, or it could be nothing.

Either way, it's going to shape the future of the Ohio State football program for the foreseeable future.

THE FACTS MAN
Mike Wachsman

There are a whole lot of upset people in Buckeye Nation, folks who believe that action should have already been taken on coach Ryan Day following a fourth straight loss to hated rival Michigan. The fact that this was one of the weaker Wolverines units in recent memory only adds to the frustration and has made some fans label Day as "John Cooper 2.0."

OSU athletic director Ross Bjork does not see it that way and offered what amounted to a vote of confidence to Day during a recent appearance on 97.1 The Fan.

"Coach Day is awesome," said Bjork, who came from Texas A&M to replace the retiring Gene Smith last summer. "He's great to work with. He totally gets it. He loves being a Buckeye. So we're going to support him at the highest level."

The final result was not the only lingering memory of the Buckeyes' loss to Michigan. Also indelible was the image of Day standing back and doing nothing while his players were involved in postgame melee. He had a faraway look in his eyes, and rather than showing the toughness fans demand, he was a bystander. That caused even more consternation from Ohio State fans, who couldn't believe that Day wasn't given his walking papers on the walk back to the locker room.

Bjork framed it more as a look toward the future than a look back at the recent past.

"The reason we had to say something after (the Michigan) game is, we're still breathing, we're still alive," Bjork said. "The season's not over. The book is not closed."

Day and the Buckeyes came into the season with huge aspirations, assembling a roster of talent that was the envy of most of college football. Their stated goals were beating Michigan, winning the Big Ten and winning the national title. Two of those are off the table, and there doesn't seem to be much optimism that the third is attainable.

For many, winning the national title is the only way Day can save his job – and even then, a few believe it isn't enough. They will want him gone regardless, believing a national title that does not include a win over Michigan to be tainted.

Bjork no doubt lost a faction of Buckeye Nation when he said that the conversation has to be approached differently than it is currently.

"What we have to do is this whole 'championship or bust' mentality, you want that as the goal, but it has to be about the process," Bjork said. "To me, we have to maybe change some conversations a little bit. I think we need to maybe just approach things a little bit differently."

Bjork has been down this road before, saying one thing before eventually delivering another.

Prior to his arrival in Columbus, Bjork oversaw a buyout of Jimbo Fisher at Texas A&M that changed the landscape of college football contracts. The Aggies went 5-7 in 2022 after inking a huge recruiting class, and fans in College Station were understandably restless. It's well known how seriously they take their football in Texas, and the fact that rival Texas was once again becoming relevant made the Aggies' impotence sting even more.

Fans wanted a change, but Bjork stepped in and offered up a long-term approach.

"Build to last. That's my mantra," Bjork said to ESPN at the time. "There's no panic here. You can't be a blow-by-the-wind program in how you make decisions and expect to win championships in the SEC. Sure, last year was disappointing for all of us, but I look at where we're headed, and so does Jimbo."

By mid-November of 2023, with A&M at 6-4, Fisher was gone, and the school owed him over $75 million, which it would be paying him until 2031. It was a huge monetary hit, though a lot of it was covered by boosters and disgruntled A&M alums who felt the Aggies should be big players on the championship stage.

Bjork had apparently decided well before the actual firing that the move was necessary.

"The assessment that I delivered (to the school president) was that we are not reaching our full potential" Bjork said in a news conference. "We are not in the championship conversation, and something was not quite right about our direction and the plan.

"We should be relevant on the national scene."

While Ohio State is a far cry from sliding into irrelevance – it has, after all, won at least 10 games in every season of Day's tenure (outside of the shortened 2020 season when the Buckeyes went 7-1) – the lack of championships, both Big Ten and national, and continued futility against Michigan has made Day's status a hot-button issue.

Bjork's words had to be expected. What is an athletics director going to say? "Ryan has to win or he's out"? Even if Bjork has reached a decision to the contrary, he must present a strong front to the public. It may turn off fans who have already tuned out, but it's the thing that's best for business. If fans and players know their coach is a lame duck, then things have already spiraled out of control.

And that *definitely* means something – a something that is not good.

Renewed Energy

There are reasons to be excited about Ohio State's CFP showdown with Tennessee.

For one thing, it's a marquee matchup. Blue-blood conference against blue-blood conference. Blue-blood program against a program that isn't quite to that level but one that has been very good and that has been a contender on the national scene within the last decade. Tennessee fans have an inflated sense of just where their program is in the hierarchy of college football, but nonetheless the Vols are very good and are a relevant, dynamic program that has all of the resources to be a yearly contender in the national title chase.

Like Ohio State, the Vols have made their bones this season on defense. Tennessee ranks fourth nationally in yards allowed per play, just a couple of spots below the Buckeyes, and their 13.9 points per game allowed is tied for fourth best in college football.

While Tennessee is not as good defensively as the Buckeyes, they could be a nightmare matchup because the Vols are built from the inside out – a snarling front that gets after the quarterback and was rated 12th nationally in pressure rate by Pro Football Focus. That could be a real problem for an OSU offensive line that still has not found solid footing since injuries to Josh Simmons and Seth McLaughlin upended the unit.

Day knows that getting the offensive line right is the top mission for the Buckeye coaching staff. If that part does not work, the entire offense will bog down, and Ohio State will be looking at an early exit.

To his credit, he does not sound like a man who feels a ton of heat.

"I don't think right now that that's the case because coming off of that last game, is there pressure to win that game? Yes," Day said. "And I just think that we have moved on from that. It didn't go well. Did people press? You can say yes or no on that, but we don't want that anymore. We want to make sure that when we're playing in this game, we're playing free, we're playing with our focus on winning the game and not worried about the consequences. And so that's what we're going to do. We're fired up to be at home, too. This is a historic event for everybody. This has never been done before, and I think our guys are going to have that approach."

Ohio State was in somewhat of a similar spot following the 2022 loss to Michigan. It got into the four-team CFP and had what looked to be an impossible semifinal game against No. 1 Georgia. There was fear the Buckeyes would get Dawg walked, but instead they came out loose, hit some big plays and had Georgia on its heels for most of the game before ultimately losing 42-41 on a missed field goal at the end of the game.

Day took shots downfield, schemed a great game, and never allowed Georgia to get comfortable until the clock read triple zeroes. With a one-and-done challenge looming, he and the coaches will need to adopt that mindset again.

"I think you have to be that way," he said. "I think it's how you coach, it's how you approach it. It's how the guys play, it's confidence. It's all those things. We've got to do that in all three phases. We have to be that way, and we will. Every year when you get into these games, you have to be aggressive. We have to game plan the right way. And a big part of that is the confidence going to the game, making sure that you know what you're doing, that you feel like the game plan is clean and that you can execute at a high level, and then you go to work.

"And when you look at the guys around you, you know you have good players next to you. We'll do everything we can to address the issues coming off the last game so that we can attack and we can be aggressive in the game."

There is some legitimate concern about just how into the game Ohio State fans will be. Many have already checked out of the season, and even the prospect of a rematch with Oregon and a run at the national title is not enough to get them back on board. While the Misery Bunch decides to sit this one out, Day hopes the majority of Buckeye Nation is dialed in and loud and raucous and makes Tennessee uncomfortable.

Because he is supremely confident that his charges will be ready.

"When you have a target and a mission, that's where your focus goes," Day said. "We kind of felt like this may shake out like this, and now we're in it. Now you know exactly what it is. Now you're really diving into it, and I'm telling you right now, our guys are excited about it. This is an opportunity that we have to jump on. And I just think back to what this game could be – a Saturday night game, 8 p.m., first playoff game ever in the Horseshoe. It's going to be electric. It's going to be where the fans feed off the players, the players feed off the fans – a historic game. So there is a lot to be excited about."

No Class? No Surprise Coming From Wolverines

THE VIEW FROM 15TH & HIGH
Frank Moskowitz, Publisher

I've had about two weeks now to digest Ohio State's stunning loss to Michigan on Nov. 30, and I still haven't digested it. It remains in the pit of my stomach. A win over Tennessee and maybe more would serve as Pepto-Bismol and offer me some relief, but it won't cure me of what ails me – a fourth straight loss to Michigan, and this one the most painful of the bunch.

The only thing that is going to cure me is a win over Michigan.

So pardon me if, even though the Tennessee game is rapidly approaching, I am still talking about The Game.

Just a few short weeks ago in this space, I quoted former Buckeye linebacker Zach Boren as he tried to explain the complicated nature of the Ohio State-Michigan rivalry.

"I don't know if there's more of a game that you play during a season where you respect anyone more, and what I mean by that is you get into that game and you hate each other so much, but on the back end, you respect each other so much because it's Ohio State and Michigan," Boren explained. "It's the blue bloods of college football, like you are the elite of the elite and you are putting everything on the line. It's one of those games where you have this massive hate for the other team but also such a huge respect for them because of who they are, what they do.

"And that's one thing that I love about it is you just respect the hell out of them, and that's what makes the winning of that game even more special because it's not like you're beating Purdue. It's not like you're being Illinois. You're beating Michigan, and that's the great thing about it is when you have so much respect for an opponent and you actually beat them, there's just no better reward."

I thought about Zach's quote when I heard Michigan running back Kalel Mullings talking after the game, after the brawl that broke out before Ohio State had even finished singing "Carmen Ohio."

"For such a great game, you hate to see stuff like that after the game," Mullings said. "That's just bad for the sport, bad for college football. But at the end of the day, some people gotta – they gotta learn how to lose, man. You can't be fighting and stuff just because you lost a game. We had 60 minutes, four quarters to do all that fighting. And now they want to talk and fight. That's wrong. That's just bad for the game. Classless, in my opinion. People gotta be better."

Classless?

The actions of the visitors were completely contrary to Boren's feelings about the rivalry and disrespectful to any player or coach who ever played in The Game – Buckeye or Wolverine. I know "classless" when I see it and more importantly when I hear it.

When Mullings started talking, I honestly thought he was getting ready to apologize for the Wolverines attempting to plant a Michigan flag in the Ohio Stadium turf. Silly me.

It's all part of the arrogance up there that I have been talking about for months now, since the sign-stealing scandal broke. They just act like nothing is wrong with the sign stealing, the flag planting, Jim Harbaugh running off to the NFL ahead of the NCAA posse and escaping any punishment – anything.

You know what my biggest fear is now? If Ohio State finally breaks the streak next season in Ann Arbor, some misguided Buckeye will attempt to plant the flag. And I will be just as critical then.

But first the Buckeyes have to win one.

Other Painful Losses

The last time I remember Ohio State fans being so unanimously angry after a Buckeye loss was in 1994, when the Buckeyes were thrashed by Penn State, 63-14. OSU coach John Cooper was already on thin ice for many reasons, not the least of which was he hadn't beaten Michigan in his first six seasons (the first win would actually come just a few weeks after this humiliating loss to the Lions.).

I asked our resident historian, managing editor emeritus Mark Rea, if he recalled any other games where the reaction within Buckeye nation was so unanimously negative. He came up with a good one – the 1991 31-3 loss at Michigan. It was the widest margin for a Michigan victory over Ohio State in 45 years.

In that case it wasn't just the lopsided score in Cooper's fourth straight loss to the Wolverines to start his tenure that set the faithful off. There was another circumstance that made the loss even worse in the eyes of Buckeye fans, and this one wasn't really Coop's fault.

In the press box before the game at the Big House, athletic director Jim Jones made the ill-fated decision to announce a three-year contract extension for Cooper when, according to Rea, "99.99 percent of Buckeye Nation was sure they were finally rid of Coop."

When pressed by the stunned media types, who wondered, "Why now?" Jones had this to say:

"Why not today? It appeared to be coming together. Why not today? What day is more appropriate than any of the others? For one thing, this sends a message that the decision is not based upon winning or losing to the University of Michigan."

But back then, and maybe now, the decision to retain or let loose a coach at Ohio State *is* based on wins in The Game.

It wasn't a particularly good moment in Ohio State football history, and to add insult to injury, that was the game where Desmond Howard famously struck his Heisman pose after a lengthy punt return.

"I thought the phones at BSB the following Monday were going to melt," Rea said.

Speaking of Howard and his Heisman pose, it shows Michigan's disrespect for The Game even then. In fact, the arrogance dates back to Harbaugh guaranteeing a Wolverine victory in 1986.

Losing His Spot In History

When Jack Sawyer picked off a Davis Warren pass early in the fourth quarter of Ohio State's loss to the Wolverines with the score tied at 10, I think nearly every Buckeye fan thought that this was Ohio State's moment. I know I did. The Buckeyes would rally for the win and Sawyer, who has had a solid but somewhat checkered career with Ohio State, sometimes struggling to meet expectations, would join that elite group of Buckeyes who made their names with big plays against Michigan.

Instead, the Buckeyes registered a three-and-out featuring two running plays, and it was the Wolverines who would go on to win the game.

Did Sawyer lose his shot at immortality?

BSB reached out to three Buckeyes who will forever be remembered for plays they made to beat the Wolverines to talk about Sawyer and the state of the current Ohio State team. The three were linebacker Jim Laughlin, who blocked a punt to secure a win against the Wolverines in 1979, fullback Vaughn Broadnax, who blocked two defenders to spring Art Schlichter for the game-winning touchdown in 1981, and defensive back Tyvis Powell, who intercepted a two-point conversion attempt to preserve Ohio State's victory in 2013.

All three are very quick to explain how their plays in The Game changed their lives.

"Oh God, it was the greatest thing in the world," Laughlin said when asked about his block. "I was down on the ground, getting up on my knees, and I'm watching like, 'Todd Bell is going to score. He's going to score. I just blocked the punt. We're going to score and win. This is unbelievable. Oh, my Lord, this is incredible.' Me and Mike D'Andrea blocked it. He never gets enough credit for it, but he actually got more of it than I did.

"(Former Ohio State coach) Jim Tressel in his first year, he had me come talk to the team about that," Laughlin said of his famous play. "You tell them that you're one play away from being famous if you do it in the Michigan game. Like I told them, I blocked three other kicks for touchdowns at Ohio State in my career. Nobody remembers any of those. But when you block one against Michigan and you win – it's just one play, one interception, one long run, and you'll be another Hop Cassady. People still know me 30, 40 years later."

Broadnax recalls his big moment as well.

"I remember that play clear as the day it happened. Carlton Rose – may he rest in peace – he kind of got up under me, and I had to regain leverage," he explained. "So, I got under his shoulder pads and was able to recontrol the situation and push him into another guy. That was doing my job. Sometimes we worry about making this spectacular play instead of doing our job as designed.

"I'll always be tied with Art Schlichter because of that block," he said. "Had Art not made it into the end zone, we could have kicked a field goal and taken the lead as well. But it was the moment that made the block special, and the fact that it was against Michigan made it historic. There are great plays throughout this game's history and great moments throughout this game's history, and I'm just proud to have one of those many moments."

By the time Powell preserved that 2013 win, social media had come into play, and it didn't take him long to realize the significance of what he had done.

"In the moment, it felt like nothing," Powell said. "I didn't realize the impact the play had. 'All right, I made a play, I stopped them. Good job, Tyvis.' But everything after that, I was like, 'OK, this was huge.' I didn't understand the magnitude of the play until I got on social media, until people on campus were thanking me, people were leaving signs on my mother's door. That was when I was like, 'OK, this is big.'

"It's a play that really changed my life. To have one of those moments that people are like, 'I know exactly where I was when you made that play.' That's an iconic moment. I'm just a regular guy who had a decent career at Ohio State and in the NFL. To have that play that people are going to remember me for, that's why you do football. That's why you want to come to Ohio State, to leave a legacy. Now that I'm not playing anymore, to have a moment like that, it means a lot to me."

Powell had actually been prepped for the moment by his coach, Urban Meyer, undefeated in seven tries against That Team Up North (can't say Michigan with Urban.).

"Coach Meyer would say that in this game, careers are made and legends are born," Powell said. "In 2012, that was the first time I heard him say it, but I didn't really understand it. To make that play and see how it impacted my life after that, some people call me a legend. I don't feel like a legend at all, but people are like, 'You're a legend for that,' just because I made a play. He was right on par with that."

So, what about Sawyer and his theft and place in history?

"It got diminished a little bit," Powell said about the interception. "It was an unbelievable, huge play. I think it should still make the documentary, but it didn't lead to them winning the game. That's the problem. I think people will still remember Jack Sawyer for that play because it was such a big play and such a pivotal moment in the game, but obviously the loss waters it down."

"That was a great play, and everybody thought it was going to be a turning point," Laughlin said. "Everybody thought, 'OK, now here we go,' and it just didn't happen. People forget if you lose. They only remember if you win. They remember you forever if you win The Game."

For the complete story with the three Buckeye legends, see pages 20-21 of this issue. Hats off to BSB associate editor Greg Wilson for his persistence in tracking the three down for the story.

BSB/CFP Scheduling Note

The next print issue of Buckeye Sports Bulletin, the Jan. 18, 2025 edition, is currently scheduled to be mailed on Jan. 14. However, if Ohio State advances to the CFP national championship game on Jan. 20, the print date will be pushed back to Jan. 22, and we will return to our regularly posted schedule on Jan. 28 (Feb. 1 cover date).

With so many potential games and so few BSB print issues to cover them, don't forget that the BSB staff will be covering all the action, including complete game coverage, daily at the electronic BuckeyeSports.com, free to all BSB subscribers. If you are not already following the Buckeyes daily at BuckeyeSports.com, see the simple sign-up instructions on page 10 of this issue. This would also be a great time to jump on the Forum, as the discussion between readers and the BSB staff is bound to be lively.

And remember, the complete edition of each print BSB is posted at BuckeyeSports.com immediately upon publication. This is a great stopgap measure for those of you who are continuing to have mail delivery problems.

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