

BUCKEYE SPORTS BULLETIN

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Vol. 44, No. 15

"For The Buckeye Fan Who Needs To Know More"

Feb. 1, 2025

A Day To Remember



Buckeyes Celebrate Championship As Knowles Takes DC Job At Penn State

SONNY BROCKWAY

FOUR EVER — The 2024 national champions will be immortalized for their unprecedented four-game blitz of Tennessee, Oregon, Texas and Notre Dame to win the inaugural expanded field of the College Football Playoff on Jan. 20. The team was feted in Ohio Stadium six days later with coach Ryan Day hoisting the championship trophy surrounded by (L to R) TreVeyon Henderson, Emeka Egbuka, Jack Sawyer (obscured) and OSU president Ted Carter.

By GREG WILSON

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Associate Editor

After the longest season in college football history, the 2024-25 national champion Ohio State team didn't waste any time getting back to celebrate its title win with fans in Ohio Stadium.

Not even a full week after the win over Notre Dame on Jan. 20, the Buckeyes were back at their home in Columbus with tens of thousands of Buckeye fans in the stands

and on the field cheering them on for a Jan. 26 celebration.

Once everyone had filed into their seats and the team came out from the tunnel to thunderous applause, athletic director Ross Bjork began speaking about this year's team. He began his speech with the invitation for fans to join in on the fun, booming into the microphone with an "O-H," that was met with a loud "I-O," the same way most speakers would begin when they made their way to the lectern, each of them getting at least an equally loud response.

After Bjork finished speaking, followed by Ohio Gov. Mike DeWine and Columbus Mayor Andrew Ginther, head coach Ryan Day was finally able to take center stage and speak about the season.

"You better know that the best damn team in the land resides right here in Columbus, and the national championship trophy is back where it belongs in the great state of Ohio," said Day, who was joined on the stage by Bjork, Ohio State president Ted Carter, DeWine, Ginther and Buckeye senior captains Emeka Egbuka, TreVeyon Henderson, Jack Sawyer and Cody Simon. "It took everybody to become national champions, and today we say thank you."

Of course, the Buckeyes have been celebrating together since the night of Jan. 20, but this was the first opportunity they were able to welcome the fans to their national championship party as well.

"Thank you to the best damn fans in the land," Day said. "Thank you for your support throughout the season, whether you were at our home games, traveled on the road during the season or traveled to Los Ange-

les, Dallas or Atlanta, or maybe you were watching at home on TV. Or maybe you were together with your friends at a restaurant or a bar.

"We felt and heard your support, loyalty, your passion and your energy all along the way, and we really felt you students. We appreciate you. Thank you so much."

During a celebration that included video clips of each of the Buckeyes' big games throughout the season shown on the Ohio Stadium scoreboard for fans to cheer on, Day took the time to thank all of his assistant coaches for the time they put in this season and made sure to talk about the players as well, saying they deserved the spotlight more than anyone else.

But he also made sure to give thanks to the four living former Ohio State coaches who have helped him along the way. The 45-year-old Day now stands among them as one of five who have won a national championship at Ohio State with Paul Brown,

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Keep The Historicals Coming

I had to write and let you know how much I've enjoyed Mark Rea's historical series of seasons ending in "4." The Nov. 16 edition of BSB highlighted the year 1974. I was a member of the OSU Marching Band from 1972-1975. We usually traveled to one "away" game each year (two if The Game was played in Xichigan).

In 1974 our away game was in East Lansing. That was the bizarre game where Levi Jackson broke free for an 88-yard scamper to put the Spartans in the lead, and the last-second touchdown by Champ Henson that wasn't. Time ran out and the outcome of the game wasn't decided for 45 minutes. We didn't get the "W." That was one long bus trip home!

I appreciate all the research it takes to put a series like this together, especially the early years. OSU football has such a rich history, and thanks to Mark for letting us relive it.

Stephen Sinkey

Lake Havasu City, Ariz.

Glad He's On Our Side

I continue to be surprised by so many Buckeye fans calling for Ryan Day's ouster. While he likely did let "pride get in the way of the bottom line" in our recent losses to Michigan, he certainly has learned his lesson and will do "whatever it takes" to win ballgames. We're all aware of the fact that his overall record is stellar, he continues to recruit at a very high level (high school and portal), he attracts and retains top assistants and his players are willing to "go to war" for their head coach.

We should also be aware of the fact that Coach Day, a head coach, has given up play-calling duties (which many of his peers, both in college and the NFL, have not) for the team's overall benefit. He has fired assistants who were not productive and was not shy about demanding a redo of our defensive strategy earlier this season. Coach Meyer refers to Coach Day as an "elite" coach, and he's right – we should all be thankful that Ryan is on our side!

Jim Terranova

Millbrae, Calif.

Still Sour About The Game

I want to add my voice to that of

other readers of BSB as regards to the Michigan game. There is a rule in war that one never fights one's enemy on that enemy's terms but rather on one's own terms. In the Michigan game, OSU failed to take into account its own strengths and Michigan's weaknesses.

OSU has arguably the best receiver corps in college football, and yet in The Game, we hardly ever threw the ball to them. Instead, OSU ran the ball into one of the best defensive lines in football – and the offensive line for OSU was patched together due to injuries. What was Chip Kelly thinking? Well, there's always next year!!

William E. Freeman, Jr.

Bowling Green, Ohio

Football And God

The recent interview with TreVeyon Henderson on Dec. 4 prompts this letter. It greatly encouraged me to hear of a spiritual awakening on campus.

In 1954, I listened to the radio broadcast of the OSU-Michigan game. My obsession with OSU football took root. The obsession became a god, if you will. Over the years, I collected lots of OSU stuff – T-shirts, jerseys and a helmet, to name a few. If Ohio State lost to Michigan, I was in a bad mood for days.

However, in 2019, I boxed much of the stuff and donated it to "The Buckeye Cruise For Cancer." It seemed like a big weight was lifted from me. I went from being a Buckeye who happened to be a Christian to being a Christian who happens to be a Buckeye. I still root for OSU, but the extreme obsession is gone. Praise God!

Everett Smith

Plymouth, Mich.

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.



From The Message Board

Ohio State capped off an impressive four-game run in the College Football Playoff with a hard-fought 34-23 win over Notre Dame in the national title game to earn its first national championship since the 2014 season. The Buckeyes' postseason run had many memorable moments and storylines that will forever be remembered in program history, and – just as we did in the previous issue – we asked readers and staff members on the BuckeyeSports.com Fan Forum to offer their favorite moments and plays from the championship run, as well as their overall thoughts on the championship win as a whole.

"For me, it was the first quarter of the Tennessee game. There were a lot of questions about how the team would respond after the loss to TTUN. After the first 15 minutes of the playoffs, it was clear to everyone that the Bucks had moved past that loss and were a serious threat to win the national championship."

– **bstu9**

"The MVP move of the entire CFP run was definitely Jack Sawyer's strip, scoop and score. In the championship game, among many memorable moments were Quinshon Judkins' stiff arm to the helmet of the Domer trying to tackle him on one of his TD runs."

– **Bob Cody**

"I'll say the most interesting moment for me during this run was that first game against Tennessee when Vols fans flooded the stadium in burnt orange, and the Buckeyes quickly quieted them and sent them to the exits. Imagine how different it would be if Tennessee had got off to a strong start and got those fans involved. That could have gotten ugly."

– **Patrick Engels, BSB**

"All these comments are good, but it just occurred to me that the most important play may have been the screen pass TD to Henderson in the final 30 seconds of the first half vs. Texas. Not more memorable than Sawyer scoop-and-score, but maybe more important.

"Thoughts on the playoff run? It's been said before, but I don't think any

team has ever beaten four consecutive teams as good as these four, and so decisively. To my knowledge, it's unprecedented."

– **Terrier Buck**

"Honestly, my favorite moment is during Jack Sawyer's scoop and score run, Texas running back Quintrevion Wisner was closing the distance on Jack, when Sonny Styles turned on the jets, sprinted right past Wisner, and then slowed down, blocking the chase. That Texas player grabbed Sonny's shoulder pads, trying to yank him aside, and when that failed, he ran out of bounds to get by. Sonny cool-stepped to his right and blocked that move. Jack scored, and the rest is history!"

– **Michael Bauer**

"The past three to four years, it seems the Buckeyes have had a streak of bad luck in the biggest of games. They've been in positions to win games and even win championships, but the ball would take a bad bounce, penalty calls would go against them, key players would get injured and other mistakes would happen. This postseason, this roster would not let those mistakes happen. They took control of games, and the players made plays from the opening kickoff to the final ticks came off the clock. They were not to be denied. They made the big play when they needed it. They left no doubt, even if it was with two minutes left in the game."

– **Byron McNutt**

Buckeye Sports Bulletin (USPS 705-690, ISSN 0883-6833.) is published 24 times a year (weekly September through November, biweekly January through April and monthly May through August and December) by:

Columbus Sports Publications
1200 Chambers Road, Suite 206
P.O. Box 12453
Columbus, Ohio 43212
(614) 486-2202
bsb@buckeyesports.com

Periodical class postage paid at Columbus, Ohio, and additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to: Buckeye Sports Bulletin, P.O. Box 12453, Columbus, Ohio 43212. Subscription rates: \$124.95/year.

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2024-25 PUBLICATION SCHEDULE (VOL. 44)

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The next issue (Feb. 15 cover date) will be mailed on Feb. 11.

Buckeye Sports Bulletin is a privately owned newspaper and is not affiliated directly or indirectly with The Ohio State University.

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Reliving National Championship Run

To borrow a few lines from a famous movie about baseball and fix them to fit college football: "Winning a national championship is supposed to be hard. If it wasn't hard, everyone would do it. The hard is what makes it great."

Ohio State made things look anything but hard as it chalked up double-digit wins in each of its four College Football Playoff games, but that was an illusion. Although the Buckeyes played and coached at top-level efficiency, let there be no mistake. Beating Tennessee, Oregon, Texas and Notre Dame – each a top-seven ranked opponent – was no easy chore.

If winning a national championship were easy, Ohio State would have at least a dozen more on its résumé. Two losses by a total of four points in 1974, a failed quarterback sneak at the goal line in the 1980 Rose Bowl, an inopportune slip by an All-America cornerback against Michigan in 1996, inexplicable regular-season losses a decade apart (1998 and 2008) to unranked opponents, a missed field goal on the final play of the 2022 playoff semifinal.

It's an interminable list that goes on and on, a nightmarishly long catalog of could-have-beens and should-have-beens. But that list of failures is also what makes the improbable run in 2002, the stampeo of 2014, and this year's mastery as mouthwateringly delicious as the finest of wines.

I'm sure you have your own personal highlights you'll file away for future celebrations. (Full disclosure: I've watched a replay of Jack Sawyer's fumble return against Texas at least 100 times, and I expect to watch it at least 100 more.) Anyway, what follows are some of my personal remembrances of the four-game playoff run.

Shaky Start – In the wake of what came after, it's difficult to fathom just how poorly Ohio State began its four-game run to the national championship.

Against Tennessee, the Buckeyes opened the festivities by losing the coin toss after which the normally sure-handed Emeka Egbuka dropped a certain first-down pass, and Will Howard was sacked for a 13-yard loss. Only a face-mask penalty against the Volunteers prevented Ohio State from being forced to punt away their first postseason possession, but then Quinshon Judkins was stopped for a 1-yard loss followed by a false-start penalty.

Then suddenly – almost as if they flipped a switch – the Buckeyes turned into an offensive machine. Howard connected on a short pass in the flat that TreVeyon Henderson turned into a 21-yard gain, and then the OSU quarterback dropped a high-arching pass into the arms of Jeremiah Smith in the end zone for a 37-yard touchdown. Technically, it was into the hands of Smith since Tennessee cornerback Ricky Gibson was holding onto the freshman receiver's right arm as the pass fell from the sky.

Just How They Draw It Up – Henderson's 29-yard run to make it 21-0 with 3:27 remaining in the first quarter of the tournament opener was a play taken right off the chalkboard.

It began with Egbuka going in motion to the left to effectively take one of Tennessee's safeties out of the play. After the snap, left guard Luke Montgomery – making the first start of his college career – engaged defensive tackle Jaxon Moi (all 307 pounds of him) in the hole and pancaked Moi to the ground. Meanwhile, left tackle Donovan Jackson took on linebacker Arion Carter and managed to move him into the path of Carter's fellow linebacker Edwin Spillman.

The rest was up to Henderson. As he moved through the gap, Henderson juked Volunteers safety Will Brooks off his feet to break into the clear. Cornerback Jalen McMurray got a hand on the runaway running back just inside the 10-yard line, but Henderson never broke stride, and neither did the Buckeyes.

EDITOR'S NOTEBOOK Mark Rea

Off Script Early – I long ago lost count of how many times over the past couple of years the Buckeyes began their first offensive possession with a sideline screen pass. More often than not, that play doesn't gain much yardage because every defensive coordinator in the nation has it on film.

Against Oregon in the playoff quarterfinal, Judkins lined up wide right in the back of a bunch formation, and when Howard turned Judkins' way and cocked his arm, Ducks linebacker Teitum Tuioti was ready to jump the route.

Except it was a perfectly-executed fake. Howard held onto the ball before lofting it over Tuioti's head to a wide-open Gee Scott Jr., who turned the play into a 30-yard gain. It was the first of 16 plays in the game that gained 10 yards or more for the Buckeyes, who turned their rematch against the top-ranked Ducks into a 41-21 Rose Bowl romp.

Game Changer – The Buckeyes had jumped out to a 17-0 lead against Oregon early in the second quarter, but that deficit was certainly manageable for a team that entered the game boasting the Big Ten's best offense in terms of total yardage.

It also made sense when the Ducks went for a fourth-and-3 on their side of the 50-yard line with 11:16 remaining in the second quarter. After all, they had converted 11 of 17 fourth-down plays during the season.

But when Cody Simon stepped in front of a pass intended for Oregon tight end Terrance Ferguson and batted it away, the Buckeyes took over on downs. Two plays later, Howard found Smith for a 43-yard touchdown, and less than two minutes after that, Henderson galloped away with a 66-yard score. Suddenly, Ohio State's lead had ballooned to 31-0 midway through the second quarter, and there was no coming back from that for the Ducks.

Momentum Switch – With 75 yards of real estate in front of them and only 29 seconds remaining in the first half against Texas, nearly no one expected the Buckeyes to do anything but run out the clock and head into the locker room with the score tied at 7.

But offensive coordinator Chip Kelly's go-for-broke postseason mentality showed itself with a spread formation that split three receivers to the right with Smith by himself on the left. As Howard backpedaled, Texas safety Jaylon Guilbeau sprinted past Henderson on a blitz, leaving the OSU running back all alone at the 20-yard line with center Carson Hinzman, Montgomery and fellow guard Tegra Tshabola flashing ahead of him.

Henderson made the catch, each of his linemen picked off a would-be tackler, as did Egbuka downfield, and Henderson did the rest. The 75-yard screen pass for a touchdown gave the Buckeyes a 14-7 lead, and more importantly stifled any momentum the Longhorns might have thought they had.

Setting Up Himself – Sawyer set the stage for his own heroics with an important

third-down pass deflection just one play before his scoop-and-score.

After back-to-back pass-interference penalties against the Buckeyes gave Texas a first-and-goal at the 1-yard line, the entire defensive line met Texas running back Jerrick Gibson at the line of scrimmage and stopped him for no gain. Then, the combination of Caleb Downs, Lathan Ransom and Davison Igbinosun smothered Texas running back Quintrevion Wisner on a sweep, throwing him for a 7-yard loss to set up third-and-goal at the 8.

That was followed by Sawyer splitting a double-team – including getting away from an obvious hold by Longhorns right guard Cole Hutson – to get in the face of QB Quinn Ewers' pass. That deflected it just enough so Texas receiver Ryan Wingo, who had gotten away from Igbinosun in the back of the end zone, never had a chance to make the catch.

Captain Jack's Escorts – Just as beautiful as Sawyer's scoop-and-score against the Longhorns was his convoy of teammates making sure their captain got to the end zone. First, there was Sonny Styles walling off Wisner along the sideline, preventing the desperate Texas running back from ever getting close to Sawyer.

Then there were Simon with his tender knee and JT Tuimolou with his heavily taped ankle trailing just behind before Jordan Hancock flashed past, arms outstretched to the sky before finally catching up to Sawyer at the goal line and jubilantly slapping his teammate on the back.

Finally, after carrying out his assignment to cover Wingo in the end zone, Downs watched from 100 yards behind the play before falling to his knees in the middle of the "O" in Ohio State, briefly raising both hands in exultation.

Blitz Pickup – Kelly got a lot of credit (and rightfully so) for his third-and-11 gambit late in the title game against Notre Dame, a pass from Howard to Smith who had gotten loose downfield from man coverage. But the 56-yard gain that pretty much assured victory might never have happened without Henderson, who stoned blitzing Notre Dame linebacker Jack Kiser at the line of scrimmage.

Kiser had just shot through a gap on the previous play to tackle Howard for a 1-yard loss. But when he came on the blitz this time, the 5-10, 212-pound Henderson was there to meet him, snapping back the 6-2, 231-pound linebacker's head at impact and allowing Howard just enough time to throw the game-clincher.

Fowler's Calls – Although I have watched ESPN's Chris Fowler provide play-by-play on a countless number of games, I guess I never really paid that much attention to his style until the Buckeyes' playoff run. Fowler fired off a pair of classics that should rank right up there with Brent Musburger's famous "Holy Buckeye!" from the 2002 Purdue game.

The first came during Sawyer's scoop-and-score that cemented the semifinal victory against Texas: "Pressure comes. Sawyer! Knocked it out and picks it up! Jack Sawyer headed down the sidelines! Ohio State! Scoop! And score! A dagger from (83) yards!"

The second was delivered as the Buckeyes clinched things against Notre Dame: "Heavy pressure. Howard delivers. Downfield! It's Smith! He's got it!! Jeremiah Smith hadn't had a touch in the second half until that potential game-clincher."

I have to admit I felt a chill once again after reliving those calls – which only serves to remind me that I'll never tire of reliving the 2024 national championship run.

OHIO STATE INSIDER

Igbinosun, Styles To Return For Senior Seasons

Less than a week removed from Ohio State's 34-23 national championship win over Notre Dame on Jan. 20, both linebacker Sonny Styles and cornerback Davison Igbinosun announced on Jan. 24 that they will be back on the Buckeye defense next season and will forgo the 2025 NFL draft.

With the Buckeyes set to lose eight of their starters on the defensive side of the ball, Styles and Igbinosun's decision to return to the team was great news for head coach Ryan Day as he tries to reload after a national championship win.

This season was Styles' first at the linebacker position after moving down from safety. He had 100 tackles, 10½ for loss, six sacks, five pass breakups and one forced fumble after earning the starting job out of fall camp over C.J. Hicks.

Since he is staying another year, he might now have the chance to start next to his brother Lorenzo Styles Jr., who was behind Jordan Hancock at the nickel position this year, since Hancock is off to the draft.

Igbinosun has started for two years in Columbus after transferring from Ole Miss, where he played his freshman season. He finished this year with 45 tackles, two for loss, two interceptions and nine pass breakups.

On the day of his decision, Igbinosun told ESPN, "I'm coming back to school to be a first-round pick."

One big way Igbinosun could raise his draft stock for next season is to eliminate the holding and pass-interference penalties that he had trouble staying away from with his physical play, drawing 16 flags in 16 games this year, the most by any corner in college football this season.

Tate, Smith To Remain At OSU

Two of Ohio State's top wide receivers are in high demand after the Buckeyes won the title, with On3's Pete Nakos reporting that Jeremiah Smith and Carnell Tate received offers from other programs to transfer.

Smith, Ohio State's Big Ten Receiver of the Year and Freshman of the Year, was reported-

ly offered between \$4.5-5 million from other programs after hauling in 76 catches for 1,315 yards and 15 touchdowns this year.

Tate didn't have quite as prolific of a season as Smith, but he was still dependable for the Buckeyes as a sophomore. The Chicago native finished the year with 733 receiving yards and four touchdowns on 52 receptions. Nakos said that Tate was receiving offers over \$1 million to enter the portal.

However, both Tate and Smith seemed to confirm on Twitter that they remain committed to the Buckeyes, responding to a tweet that hinted that the OSU "family is too loyal."

Eleven Warriors was also able to confirm from a source close to Tate that he will remain in Columbus for his junior season.

Judkins Declares For NFL Draft

Ohio State junior running back Quinshon Judkins will not be joining his former teammates back in Columbus for the 2025 season. Judkins announced on Jan. 24 that he was declaring for the NFL draft.

"My time here at Ohio State was like no other," Judkins told ESPN. "It was like no other place I've ever been. I enjoyed my time here so much. I'm ready to take the next step in my journey and prove I'm the best running back in the draft class."

Judkins, who had one year of collegiate eligibility remaining, leaves the Buckeyes after just one season with the program, albeit a highly successful one. The former two-time first-team All-SEC tailback at Ole Miss was one of the key contributors to Ohio State's national championship season, making a seamless transition from the SEC to the Big Ten by rushing for a team-high 1,060 yards and 14 touchdowns on 194 carries.

He made perhaps his most significant impact in Ohio State's four College Football Playoff games, totaling 255 rushing yards and an impressive six touchdowns on 47 carries, each of those scores coming from near the goal line.

Judkins' production came with another 1,000-yard rusher joining him in the backfield in TreVeyon Henderson, who added 1,016 yards and 10 touchdowns on 144 carries of his own. Judkins said that he and Henderson, who became just the third OSU rushing duo in history to both total 1,000 yards in a season, were able to coexist and have success in the backfield because of their selfless mentality and strong relationship they built with the Scarlet and Gray.

Judkins now will look to continue his production at the next level and prepare for the upcoming NFL draft from April 24-25 at historic Lambeau Field, where he is expected to be a second-round selection with a 17.3 percent chance to be picked in the first round, according to nflmockdraftdatabase.com.

He will add to a huge crop of Buckeyes who

2024 Ohio State Football Schedule

Date	Opponent	Result/Time (ET)	TV	Record, Last Result
Aug. 31	AKRON	W, 52-6	CBS	4-8, not bowl eligible
Sept. 7	WESTERN MICHIGAN	W, 56-0	BTN	6-7, 30-23 loss to South Alabama
Sept. 21	MARSHALL	W, 49-14	FOX	10-3, 31-3 win over Louisiana
Sept. 28	at Michigan State	W, 38-7	Peacock	5-7, not bowl eligible
Oct. 5	IOWA	W, 35-7	CBS	8-5, 27-24 loss to Missouri
Oct. 12	at Oregon	L, 32-31	NBC	13-1, 41-21 loss to Ohio State
Oct. 26	NEBRASKA	W, 21-17	FOX	7-6, 20-15 win over Boston College
Nov. 2	at Penn State	W, 20-13	FOX	13-3, 27-24 loss to Notre Dame
Nov. 9	PURDUE	W, 45-0	FOX	1-11, not bowl eligible
Nov. 16	at Northwestern	W, 31-7	BTN	4-8, not bowl eligible
Nov. 23	INDIANA	W, 38-15	FOX	11-2, 27-17 loss to Notre Dame
Nov. 30	MICHIGAN	L, 13-10	FOX	8-5, 19-13 win over Alabama
Dec. 21	TENNESSEE*	W, 42-17	ESPN	10-3, 42-17 loss to Ohio State
Jan. 1	Oregon#	W, 41-21	ESPN	13-1, 41-21 loss to Ohio State
Jan. 10	Texas^	W, 28-14	ESPN	13-3, 28-14 loss to Ohio State
Jan. 20	Notre Dame**	W, 34-23	ESPN	14-2, 34-23 loss to Ohio State

* - CFP first round
- CFP quarterfinal at Rose Bowl in Pasadena, Calif.
^ - CFP semifinal at Cotton Bowl in Arlington, Texas
** - CFP championship game in Atlanta

will enter the draft and likely be picked early, a group that includes Henderson, wide receiver Emeka Egbuka, defensive ends JT Tuimolou and Jack Sawyer, offensive linemen Donovan Jackson and Josh Simmons and cornerbacks Denzel Burke and Hancock, among many others.

OSU Ranked No. 1 In Final AP Poll

After winning their first national championship in 10 years, the Buckeyes were the unanimous No. 1 ranked team in the final AP top 25, receiving all 56 first-place votes while Notre Dame was ranked second.

The Buckeyes defeated every other team in the poll's final top five, including No. 3 Oregon, No. 4 Texas and No. 5 Penn State.

Including Ohio State, Penn State and Oregon, the Big Ten had five teams ranked in the final top 25 with Indiana at No. 10 and No. 16 Illinois. It was the third time in program history the Hoosiers finished a season inside the top 10.

Rounding out the rest of the final top 10 was No. 6 Georgia, No. 7 Arizona State, No. 8, Boise State and Ohio State's first-round playoff opponent, No. 9 Tennessee.

Three Buckeyes Enter Transfer Portal

Redshirt junior defensive tackle Hero Kanu, redshirt freshman cornerback Calvin Simpson-Hunt and senior kicker Austin Snyder were the only Buckeyes to enter the transfer portal after BSB last went to press.

Simpson-Hunt was the first of the three to enter the portal on Jan. 21, and he committed to Baylor two days later on Jan. 23. Snyder followed suit on Jan. 23 and Kanu on Jan. 24, neither of whom had yet to sign with a new team

before BSB went to press.

Simpson-Hunt, a Waxahachie, Texas, native, entered the portal and landed with his hometown Bears after playing just two seasons with the Buckeyes and appearing in 14 games. After taking a redshirt season in 2023, he played in nine games this year in a mostly special teams role, recording just two tackles. Because of the redshirt, the 2022 four-star has three years of eligibility remaining.

Kanu was also part of the 2022 recruiting class and came in as a four-star prospect out of Rancho Santa Margarita, Calif. During the 2024 season he was stuck behind Tyleik Williams and Ty Hamilton on the depth chart.

As the year went on, freshman Eddrick Houston made the switch from the edge to the interior of the defensive line and passed Kanu for more playing time.

Now that Hamilton and Williams won't be back in Columbus next season, there will be two openings at the position, but with defensive line talents such as Houston, Kayden McDonald, Tywone Malone and more, there will be no shortage of options to win the starting job for the Buckeyes in the 2025 season.

Kanu finished his Buckeye career with 14 tackles and one sack, and he will have two years of eligibility remaining at his next destination.

Snyder saw game action with the Buckeyes only in blowouts or when starting kicker Jayden Fielding struggled keeping the ball in-bounds on kickoffs against Marshall. Snyder finished this year making 3 of 3 extra point tries and kicked off three times against the Thundering Herd. Snyder has just one year of eligibility remaining.

Simpson-Hunt wasn't the only former Buckeye to find a new home since BSB last went to press.

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"We want to thank the many BSB readers who have stepped up and shown their support for Buckeye Sports Bulletin through the VIP program," BSB publisher Frank Moskowitz said. "It is a true vote of confidence in what we are doing now, what we have done the previous 43 years and what we plan to do in the future."

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Redshirt sophomore offensive lineman George Fitzpatrick signed on Jan. 23 with Howard's old team Kansas State, his agent, CJ Cavazos, told 247Sports.

Fitzpatrick – who entered the portal on Jan. 4 – joins the Wildcats after spending three seasons with the Buckeyes. The former four-star 2022 prospect was a backup offensive tackle for most of his time with the program and saw playing time as a backup guard in each of OSU's first two College Football Playoff games against Tennessee and Oregon.

Nina Day Talks Fan Criticism

Before Ohio State's first national championship since 2014, Day's team lost its fourth straight game to Michigan, and the negative response reached an all-time high for Day's family, according to Ryan's wife, Nina.

"The time between the Michigan game and the Tennessee game was as low and dark as you could possibly imagine," Nina Day told The Columbus Dispatch. "Extremely negative. Unprecedented hate."

After Ryan Day previously described Ohio

State's three losses to Michigan as one of the worst things to happen to him and his family in an interview with 10TV on Nov. 25, his squad's loss to an unranked 6-5 Wolverines team had some fans sending death threats to his son RJ on social media.

Nina's phone number was also found, and she was sent threats and insults, which included people who mentioned Ryan Day's father's suicide – which occurred when the OSU coach was 8 years old – to her in messages.

"They told me multiple times to have Ryan follow in his father's footsteps and kill himself," Day said.

The Day family's home address was also leaked, and they hired a private security firm as armed guards were sent to their home.

Nina considered leaving Columbus with her kids, but with the support of teachers, principals and her children's friends, they decided to stay. She said the abuse faced by the family was something her husband felt awful about.

"I think he, at times, second-guessed his decision to get into this and be in the spotlight that we're in," she said. "He felt responsible and just felt bad that he had put us in this posi-

tion. He promised us he'd get us out of it.

Four games later, Nina's husband brought the Buckeyes from one of the worst losses in program history to the mountaintop of college football.

For Day, one of the reasons the Buckeyes' accomplishment is so great is that her children have the chance to see their father be praised.

"My kids have only heard the negative things about Ryan for too long," she said. "There are only so many times you can hear,

'Ryan's a loser. Ryan can't win big games. Ryan was born on third base.' My kids need to hear positivity around their father, around the program. It's only healthy. I want my kids to enjoy this moment because they deserve it."

Even though the Day family faced extreme hardship after the Michigan game, Nina said her family still loves being Buckeyes.

"We have a life here that we love," she said.

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"We love being part of the community. We love being part of Ohio State. We're not going to let the haters run us out of town."

Howard, Sawyer Meet Fans At Cane's

Before their championship celebration at Ohio Stadium, Howard and Sawyer made a stop at Raising Cane's on Jan. 22.

The two Buckeyes "worked a shift" on Olentangy River Road in Columbus, serving chicken to customers during their time at Cane's but mainly spending time with fans as part of their championship celebration.

"It's been a good time," Sawyer said about the experience. "Obviously, we had a lot of fun the night after the game, hanging out with everybody and all the guys, and seeing the coaches and everybody the next day on the plane and

Football Recruiting Wrap-Up Is Up Next On Feb. 11

The next print edition of Buckeye Sports Bulletin, our popular Football Recruiting Wrap-Up, is scheduled to be mailed on Feb. 11. There is bound to be plenty of Buckeye news with last minute recruiting news, news on the Buckeye coaching search, follow-up on the national championship, and both basketball teams in full swing. There is no reason to miss any of the latest news between now and the next print BSB. The Buckeye Sports Bulletin staff will be reporting on all the breaking news in real time at the electronic BuckeyeSports.com, free to all BSB print subscribers.

The discussion should also be hot and heavy on the BuckeyeSports.com Forum, where subscribers and staff members interact, with all this activity.

BuckeyeSports.com also offers plenty of additional content not found in your paper. The BSB staff reports on the breaking stories, plus posts additional features.

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

We want to remind readers that the complete edition of each BSB is posted at BuckeyeSports.com immediately upon completion of the paper, making the site a must for the readers having continuing mail problems. This electronic service, while not a substitute for your print edition, is a stopgap as your paper winds its way through the postal system and is also free to subscribers.

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having a fun plane ride home, so it's been awesome. It's been nothing short of everything you ever dreamed of."

The two Buckeyes were visited by Sawyer's fellow defensive end Tuimoloau at the Cane's location, who also returned to the program alongside Sawyer despite being thought of as a probable high draft pick in the 2024 NFL draft.

Howard was only with the Buckeyes for one season, but according to the former Kansas

State transfer, his move to Columbus paid off.

"I'm just so thankful that God gave me a chance to be a Buckeye," Howard said. "Because getting to be here and play with guys like Jack and getting to be a part of this brotherhood, it's truly like nothing else. And I'm just so thankful we were able to get it done for this city and for our locker room, for the guys in that locker room and all the work that we put in, all the love that we have for each other."

Championship Win Draws 22.1 Million Viewers

Ohio State's national championship game win was witnessed by a vast national audience. ESPN announced on Jan. 22 that the title-game battle between the two college football powerhouses drew an average 22.1 million viewers with a peak of 26.1 million viewers from 8:30-8:45 p.m.

Ohio State's victory over the Fighting Irish continued an impressive run of viewership for Buckeye playoff games this season. It was the third time over 19 million people tuned into an Ohio State game in the CFP, joining the Buckeyes' 41-21 win over Oregon at the Rose Bowl (21.1 million) and their thrilling 28-14 Cotton Bowl victory over Texas at the Cotton Bowl (20.6 million).

Ohio State's first-round matchup against Tennessee drew 14.3 million viewers, but it was the most-watched game of that round, as were the Rose Bowl in the quarterfinals and the Cotton Bowl in the semifinals.

The Buckeyes – who, according to The Athletic, averaged 6.8 million viewers per game in the regular season, second most in college football behind Georgia with 8.6 million – also played in several of the most-watched games of the regular season. Those included Ohio State's losses to Michigan (12.3 million) and Oregon (10.2 million) and its top-five wins against Penn State (9.94 million) and Indiana (9.33 million).

Despite the high ratings for the Buckeyes in the championship game, they still drew a lower audience than Michigan did for its 2023 national title game win over Washington last January, which drew an average audience of 25.1 million.

The Buckeyes and Irish also drew the fifth-lowest audience for a title game since the debut of the Bowl Championship Series in 1998, according to Jon Lewis of Sports Media Watch.

Day Scheduled For 'Tonight Show' Appearance

Just after BSB went to press, Day was set to appear as a guest on the longtime late-night television show "The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon" on Jan. 27 to discuss Ohio State's national championship.

Day was scheduled to be the third guest of the Emmy award-winning show following actress Shailene Woodley and entrepreneur Martha Stewart. The show was scheduled to

50 Student-Athletes Earn OSU Degrees

Ohio State athletics was well represented during the university's autumn commencement ceremony held inside Value City Arena on Dec. 14, with 50 current and former student-athletes obtaining degrees.

Ryan Day's football program led all programs with 13 graduates, eight of whom were starters on the 2024 team. Those eight starters were cornerback Denzel Burke (sport industry), offensive linemen Josh Fryar (human development & family science) and Donovan Jackson (sport industry), running back TreVeyon Henderson (sport industry), quarterback Will Howard (master's in sports coaching), safety Lathan Ransom (diversity, equity & inclusion), defensive end Jack Sawyer (sport industry) and defensive tackle Tyleik Williams (sport industry).

Brian Maisonneuve's Big Ten champion men's soccer team followed the football program with seven graduates – a group highlighted by 2024 first-team All-Big Ten selections Michael Adedokun (sport industry), Sigi Magnusson (industrial and systems engineering) and Deylen Vellios (psychology) – while baseball and women's soccer trailed behind with four and three graduates, respectively.

Other notable graduates this fall include three-time Olympic gold medalist swimmer Hunter Armstrong, who earned a master's degree in sport industry just under five months after winning gold at the 2024 Paris Olympics, along with first-team All-American women's soccer player and Ohio State's all-time leading goal scorer Kailyn Dudukovich (actuarial science), two-time women's ice hockey national champion

Kenzie Hauswirth (master's in bioethics) and three-time All-American women's volleyball player Emily Londot (master's in kinesiology).

The complete list of graduates is below.

Baseball – Andrew Bachman, exercise science; Zachary Freeman, family resource management; Kade Kern, sport industry; Hank Thomas, finance.

Men's Basketball – Dale Bonner, master's in sports coaching.

Cheer – Tristan Cruz, neuroscience/medical anthropology; Rylie Davis, health and rehabilitation sciences.

Men's Cross Country – John Cuozzo, mechanical engineering.

Men's Fencing – Diego Cervantes Lopez, economics; Anitya Kumar, computer science and engineering.

Field Hockey – Abby Danson, construction systems management; Hanna Killeen, communication.

Football – Denzel Burke, sport industry; Joshua Fryar, human development & family science; TreVeyon Henderson, sport industry; Will Howard, master's in sports coaching; Donovan Jackson, sport industry; Casey Magyar, mathematics; Zenuae Michalski, sport industry; Jace Middleton, human development & family science; Lathan Ransom, graduate certificate in diversity, equity & inclusion; Chad Ray, graduate certificate in diversity, equity & inclusion; Jack Sawyer, sport industry; Tyleik Williams, sport industry; Toby Wilson, sport industry.

Men's Golf – Jackson Chandler, kinesiology.

Women's Gymnastics – Elexis Edwards, graduate certificate in health & wellness coaching.

Men's Hockey – Mason Klee, specialized master's in business analytics.

Women's Hockey – McKenzie Hauswirth, master's in bioethics.

Women's Lacrosse – Jamie Lasda, environment, economy, development & sustainability; Carolyn O'Brien, master's in social work.

Rowing – Katherine Reymann, master's in kinesiology.

Men's Soccer – Michael Adedokun, sport industry; John Parker Grinstead, marketing; Niall Logue, communication; Sigurdur Magnusson, industrial and systems engineering; Anthony Samways, psychology; Deylen Vellios, psychology; David Wrona, diversity, equity & inclusion.

Women's Soccer – Kailyn Dudukovich, actuarial science; Sydney Jones, communication; Peyton McNamara, international business.

Softball – Emily Ruck, operations management.

Men's Swimming – Joseph Hunter Armstrong, sport industry.

Women's Swimming – Morgan Kraus, master's in human nutrition.

Men's Tennis – Cannon Kingsley, diversity, equity & inclusion.

Men's Track & Field – Shaun Miller, air transportation.

Women's Volleyball – Emily Londot, master's in kinesiology; Rylee Rader, master's in kinesiology. **Wrestling** – Dylan D'Emilio, master's in education.

air at 11:35 p.m.

Day's appearance on the show – which is hosted by the longtime late-night talk show host and former “Saturday Night Live” actor Fallon – marked the second time an Ohio State coach shipped his bags to New York City to discuss a national title win with a notable late-night host.

Former Ohio State head coach Urban Meyer appeared on “Late Show With David Letterman” after he led the Buckeyes to the title in 2014.

LeBron Inspired By Bucks' Championship Win

Akron native and Los Angeles Lakers star LeBron James was in attendance for Ohio State's title game win over Notre Dame, and

the four-time NBA champion said the Buckeye performance was inspiring.

“To be there yesterday, with a lot of my family and friends, it was super cool to be able to have that moment,” James said after the Lakers' win over the Washington Wizards on Jan. 21. “We're all die-hard Ohio State fans back home. But anytime you see championship-caliber teams go out and play to a level of excellence, it's always inspiring. No matter if it's college or if it's pros, whatever the case may be, it is always inspiring. I'm always inspired by greatness.”

James – who narrated the Buckeyes' championship game hype trailer released on their social media accounts on Jan. 18 – has been on the sidelines for many Ohio State games throughout the years, the last instance being

when the Buckeyes hosted the Fighting Irish for a 21-10 win on Sept. 3, 2022, when his son and now Lakers teammate Bronny James visited Ohio State as a four-star basketball recruit.

He was also in attendance the last time the Buckeyes won a national championship for the 42-20 win over Oregon in January 2015 at AT&T Stadium in Arlington, Texas.

The 22-year veteran and four-time MVP is searching for his fifth title this season, and he will have to thank Day and company for the extra inspiration if he's able to accomplish that.

Four Bucks Opt Out Of Senior Bowl

It seems as though several of the national championship-winning Buckeyes aren't eager to get back on the field anytime soon.

Hamilton, Howard, Jackson and Sawyer all opted out of the Senior Bowl game set for Feb. 1 due to the short layoff between the national championship game and senior showcase event, according to Dane Brugler of The Athletic.

The four seniors were candidates to play in the game consisting of college football's best seniors in Mobile, Ala., but the Buckeyes' elongated 16-game season made for a quick turnaround from their last game against Notre Dame.

Senior Bowl executive director Jim Nagy said in a Twitter post that he understands the now-former Buckeyes' decision to sit out the showcase and rest their bodies after a long

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School-Record 147 Buckeyes Earn Academic All-Big Ten Honors

Ohio State athletics experienced historic success in the classroom this past fall semester, with a school-record 147 Buckeyes earning academic All-Big Ten honors as announced by the Big Ten on Dec. 12.

Ohio State broke its previous record of 140 set in 2021, while it also eclipsed its totals of 124 fall honorees set in both 2022 and 2023, which tied for the second most in school history at the time.

This fall's honorees include student-athletes from field hockey, football, men's and women's cross country, men's and women's soccer and women's volleyball. To be eligible for academic All-Big Ten selection, students must be on a varsity team, have been enrolled for a minimum of 12 months and carry a cumulative grade-point average of 3.0 or higher.

Ryan Day's championship-winning football program led all sports with a program-record 56 honorees, a list that includes starters Emeka Egbuka (human development & family science), Ty Hamilton (human development & family science), Jordan Hancock (human development & family science), TreVeyon Henderson (sport industry), Jack Sawyer (sport industry) and Cody Simon (human development & family science), among others.

Field hockey had 24 selections while women's cross country and men's and women's soccer trailed with 15 selections each, men's cross country had 12 and women's volleyball had 10 honorees.

Five Buckeyes were recognized for carrying perfect 4.0 grade-point averages, including men's cross country runners Jack Agnew (exercise science) and Will McGraw (operations management), women's soccer defender/midfielder Ava Bramblett (health sciences), women's volleyball defensive specialist Kaitlyn Hoffman (biology) and field hockey senior back Erin Little (biology) – who also finished with a 4.0 grade-point average last fall.

The following is a complete list of Ohio State's fall academic All-Big Ten honorees, including their class year and major. The list is in alphabetical order by sport. **Bold indicates 4.0 grade-point average**

Men's Cross Country – Colby Adams, Jr., marketing; **Jack Agnew, R-Fr., exercise science**; Kevin Agnew, Sr., electrical and computer engineering; Zach Beneteau, Jr., biology; Sean Carney, Sr., economics - business; John Cuozzo, Sr., mechanical engineering; Keegan Freyhof, Jr., electrical and computer engineering; Zubin Jha, Sr., computer science & engineering; Kaleb Martin, Sr., mechanical engineering; **Will McGraw, So., operations management**; Liam Shaughnessy, So., exercise science; Keegan Souhan, Jr., chemical engineering.

Women's Cross Country – Audrey DeSantis, Jr., exercise science; Lillian Eckels, So., criminology & criminal justice; Addie Engel, 5th-year, health sciences; Amelia Figler, 5th-year, history; Teodora Iovi, So., biochemistry; Ana Karmol, Jr., environment, economy, development & sustainability; Andrea Kuhn, Gr., statistics; Zoe Lehman, So., health promotion, nutrition and exercise science; Carina Napoleon, Sr., speech and hearing science; Sydney Paul, Jr., exercise science; Mia Robillard, So., mechanical engineering; Daniella Santos, Gr., social work; Lindsay Stull, Sr., human nutrition; Dillon Sweetman, So., pre-health sciences; Akemi Von Scherr, 5th-year, consumer and family financial services.

Field Hockey – Zella Bailey, Jr., sport industry; Emily Barker, So., pre-health sciences; Brenna Bough, So., pre-health sciences; Hallie Brost, Sr., health sciences; Makayla Carahaly, Jr., speech and hearing science; Abby Danson, Gr., construction systems management; Kelly Davis, Jr., insurance; Reagan Eickhoff, So., human resources; Katie Fichtner, Jr., criminology & criminal justice; Ellen Ford, So., international business; Cameryn Forgash, Sr., health sciences; Riley Hudson, Jr., political science; Loryn Jordon, Jr., sport industry; Hanna Killeen, Sr., communication; Anne Marie Krebs, So., biology; **Erin Little, Sr., biology**; Lucy Osherow, So., marketing; Sarah Richards, Gr., kinesiology; Camryn Standish, So., business; Lilly Sweeney, So., pre-health sciences; Claudia Thomas, Sr., marketing; Olivia Wallace, Jr., communication; Makenna Webster, Gr., kinesiology; Jenna Zunic, Sr., health sciences.

Football – Nolan Baudo, So., sport industry; Chase Brecht, Jr., marketing; Devin Brown, Jr., finance; Bennett Christian, Jr., communication; Alec DelSignore, So., communication; Emeka Egbuka, Sr., human development & family science; John Ferlmann, Sr., communication; Jayden Fielding, Jr., sport industry; Glorien Gough, So., marketing; Diante Griffin, Jr., sport industry; Ty Hamilton, Gr., human development & family science; Jordan Hancock, Sr., human development & family science; Malik Hartford, So., marketing; Zachary Hayes, So., business; TreVeyon Henderson, Sr., sport industry; Carson Hinzman, Jr., sport industry; Brandon Inniss, So., sport industry; Donovan Jackson, Sr., sport industry; Julian Jackson, Jr., criminology & criminal justice; Collin Johnson, Sr., marketing; Hero Kanu, Jr., hospitality management; Lincoln Kienholz, So., real estate and urban analysis; Max Lomonico, Sr., sports coaching; Mason Maggs, Jr., finance; Casey Magyar, Jr., mathematics; Tywone Malone, Sr., human development & family science; Kayden McDonald, So., communication; Joe McGuire, So., sport industry; Zen Michalski, Sr., sport industry; Josh Mickens, So., construction systems

management; Jace Middleton, Sr., human development & family science; Joop Mitchell, Sr., finance; Luke Montgomery, So., sport industry; Jason Moore, So., journalism; Jalen Pace, Sr., sport industry; Gabe Powers, Jr., criminology & criminal justice; Bryce Prater, Sr., construction systems management; Chad Ray, Gr., diversity, equity & inclusion; Arvell Reese, So., human development & family science; Ryan Rudzinski, So., finance; Jack Sawyer, Sr., sport industry; Brennen Schramm, So., business; Austin Siereveld, So., sport industry; Josh Simmons, Sr., human development & family science; Cody Simon, Gr., human development & family science; Calvin Simpson-Hunt, So., criminology & criminal justice; Will Smith, So., sport industry; Austin Snyder, Gr., sport industry; Reis Stocksedale, Sr., sport industry; Sonny Styles, Jr., sport industry; Lorenzo Styles, Sr., consumer and family financial services; Carnell Tate, So., sport industry; Jelani Thurman, So., sport industry; Joey Velazquez, Gr., sport industry; Miles Walker, So., health promotion, nutrition & exercise science; Toby Wilson, Sr., sport industry.

Men's Soccer – Michael Adedokun, Sr., sport industry; Ashton Bilow, Jr., sport industry; Marko Borkovic, Jr., consumer and family financial services; Tanner Creech, Jr., finance; Nathan Demian, Sr., computer & information science; Thomas Gilej, 5th year, Specialized Master Bus-Fin; Sigg Magnusson, 5th year, industrial and systems engineering; Jacob Maisonneuve, Jr., electrical and computer engineering; Luciano Pechota, Jr., finance; Andre Roberts, So., business; Anthony Samways, Sr., psychology; RJ Stoller, Jr., finance; Deylen Vellios, 5th year, psychology; Donovan Williams, Jr., marketing; David Wrona, 5th year, diversity, equity & inclusion

Women's Soccer – Tatum Adamson, Sr., biology; **Ava Bramblett, So., health sciences**; Lily Danner, So., pre-health sciences; Kailyn Dudukovich, Sr., actuarial science; Mirann Gacioch, Jr., sport industry; Natalie Garcia, So., marketing; Ella Giannola, Jr., sport industry; Sophia Louder, Jr., biology; Berkley Mape, So., psychology; Mai Ly Marella, So., environmental engineering; Peyton McNamara, Gr., international business; Peighton Northrup, So., sport industry; Molly Pritchard, Jr., sport industry; Amanda Schlueter, So., pre-health sciences; Sydney Walters, So., marketing.

Women's Volleyball – Eloise Brandewie, So., sport industry; Grace Egan, R-Fr., communication; Kamiah Gibson, Jr., social work; **Kaitlyn Hoffman, So., biology**; Emily Londot, Gr., kinesiology; Lauren Murphy, So., accounting; Rylee Rader, Gr., kinesiology; Zaria Ragler, R-So., social work; Sydney Taylor, Sr., marketing; Ella Wrobel, Jr., sport industry.

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four-game playoff run. He also said that players who opt out of the game will not be allowed to participate in any part of the four-day event, which includes practices from Jan. 28-30 and interview opportunities with NFL franchises.

"We anticipated likelihood that players who participated in CFP could/would be too banged up physically to be in Mobile on a short six-day window," Nagy wrote. "Had good con-

versations with all players that (Brugler) listed and wish them well the rest of the pre-draft process."

Barrett Named Bears' QB Coach

Former Ohio State quarterback J.T. Barrett landed his first positional coaching job on Jan. 24, joining new Chicago Bears head coach Ben Johnson's staff as the quarterbacks coach.

Barrett started his career in coaching as an offensive assistant for the Detroit Lions in 2022 while Johnson was the team's offensive coordinator. After one season in Detroit, Barrett became the team's assistant quarterbacks coach, a post he held for two seasons from 2023-24.

With Barrett's help, Detroit Lions quarterback Jared Goff had two of his better seasons in the NFL, completing 67.3 percent of his passes while throwing for 4,575 yards, 30 touchdowns and 12 interceptions in 2023.

This season, Goff was even better, completing 72.4 percent of his passes for 4,629 yards,

37 touchdowns and 12 interceptions while being named a pro-bowler for the fourth time in his career.

As the Bears' quarterbacks coach, Barrett will be tasked with leading former Heisman trophy winner and No. 1 overall pick Caleb Williams to the sort of success Goff has had with the Lions and Barrett had with the Buckeyes, helping lead them in their 2014 national championship season.

During his four-year playing career with Ohio State, Barrett was named the Griese-Brees Quarterback of the Year in the Big Ten in 2014, 2016 and 2017. He finished his career with Ohio State as the program's all-time leader in passing yards (9,434) and passing touchdowns (104).

Larkin Hired By Patriots, Clark Interviewed By Texas

Ohio State staffer Riley Larkin is headed to the NFL. The Buckeyes' offensive program assistant, who primarily worked with the quarterbacks since joining Day's staff in 2023, was

hired by the New England Patriots as an offensive assistant on Jan. 24.

Larkin – a former quarterback at John Carroll University in University Heights, Ohio, who worked as an offensive analyst with Middle Tennessee State before coming to Ohio State – will now join first-year Patriots head coach and former Ohio State defensive end Mike Vrabel's staff.

Larkin isn't the only Buckeye staffer who received interest from other teams following the national championship win. Graduate assistant LaAllan Clark isn't on his way out of Columbus like Larkin just yet, but according to 247 Sports' Chip Brown, he interviewed for a position on Steve Sarkisian's defensive coaching staff at Texas.

Clark also joined Ohio State's staff in 2023, working primarily with Larry Johnson's defensive linemen during his time in Columbus. The former college defensive end spent time as a defensive ends coach with Grambling State and Northwestern State before joining Ohio State.

From The Pages Of BSB

40 Years Ago - 1985

Before the Buckeyes' 20-17 loss in the Rose Bowl, an OSU-BYU matchup appeared to be a natural for the third Kickoff Classic, set for Aug. 27 in East Rutherford, N.J. It would have had defending national champ BYU going up against an Ohio State team which ended the season ranked in the top five in the nation.

The game would also have included a pair of the top names in college football, Keith Byars and Robbie Bosco. Byars was second in the Heisman voting and Bosco was third.

However, Ohio State's loss to Southern Cal, dropping them to No. 12 in the final AP poll, lowered the Buckeyes' stock for 1985. Kickoff Classic officials would have probably wanted to wait for a higher-ranked Ohio State team in the future.

Speculation was that game officials would select either Notre Dame, Ohio State or Boston College to play BYU. Notre Dame withdrew its name from consideration, and first-year Ohio State athletic director Rick Bay said Ohio State would not be invited.

"I think there's probably some political pressure to take a team from the East since the bowl is in the East," Bay said.

The game ended up being a BYU vs. Boston College matchup.

35 Years Ago - 1990

Ohio State center Perry Carter's season began with a lingering kidney bruise that kept him out of action for three weeks. The OSU captain returned to play and produced two stellar efforts – an 18-point showing against Mount St. Mary's and a 17-point, eight-rebound game against Oklahoma State.

Then Carter survived lackluster performances against North Carolina State, American University and South Carolina before breaking loose at the Sugar Bowl Classic in New Orleans.

Carter was named to the all-tournament team and was also named Big Ten player of the week after a 23-point, 13-rebound showing against LaSalle and a 22-point effort against New Orleans.

Upon coming into Big Ten play, though, Carter found double teams and collapsing defenses designed to stop him. A pair of five-point games against Indiana and Iowa and a three-of-13 shooting performance at Michigan State had everyone asking, "What's wrong with Perry Carter?"

Everyone except Carter, that is.

"I don't see any game as being a rough game for me because my attitude is to go out and play hard and accept the result," the OSU center said.

"Even if I don't score or do much, I think I have played well because I went out and gave it my all."

30 Years Ago - 1995

Ohio State inside linebacker Lorenzo Styles made it official on Jan. 10 – he was leaving OSU a year early for the NFL draft.

Styles joined his linebacker partner Craig Powell and All-America offensive tackle Korey Stringer as members of the 1994 Buckeyes who declared for the April 22-23 draft.

Those three were among a group of 32 underclassman, nationwide, highlighted by Heisman trophy winner Rashaan Salaam of Colorado and Ki-Jana Carter of Penn State, who were headed to the pros.

Styles, who led the Buckeyes in tackles the past two years, said he felt he was ready to make the jump to the pros.

"My career at Ohio State has been a memorable one," Styles said. "It's been a great learning experience for me here, but it's time for me to pursue my goals in the National Football League, so I'm making myself eligible for this year's draft.

"Playing in the NFL has been a longtime goal of mine, and I feel like the opportunity is there for me right now."

25 Years Ago - 2000

Throughout the 2000 season, Ohio State men's basketball coach Jim O'Brien had prefaced statements with, "If we can just hit shots ..."

That, of course, had proved to be somewhat elusive, as the Buckeyes, despite their start (11-3, 3-1) and national ranking, were connecting on just 44.6 percent of their field-goal attempts and had averaged 64.8 points in conference games, not exactly awe-inspiring totals.

"We have a goal chart in our locker room, and we have very few of our offensive goals circled," OSU guard Brian Brown said. "It's hard. Everybody's playing pressure defense all up and down the court. Guys are missing shots, but I think you have to credit the defense."

20 Years Ago - 2005

By mid-January 2001, head coach John Cooper was gone, and in his place came successful Division 1-AA coach Jim Tressel, who set about resurrecting an Ohio State program with a different type of player.

Where Cooper had combed the country looking for the best possible athletic talent – Tressel began to employ a recruiting approach that sought players for a specific system.

As a result, players such as Simon Fraser, Dustin Fox, Lydell Ross and Mike Nugent became part of the new head coach's first recruiting class in 2001 and went on to become the team co-captains for the 2004 season.

The ups and downs of the '04 season were perhaps a fitting coda to the senior class, which had experienced some of the highest highs and lowest lows during its career – everything from a national championship in 2002 to a seemingly endless stream of media criticism over the past few months.

"I guess it's true about the saying that whatever doesn't kill you makes you stronger – and we've got a very strong group of seniors," Fox said shortly after Ohio State's 33-7 Alamo Bowl win over Oklahoma State on Dec. 29. "I mean, we've been through it all. But you know something? I wouldn't trade any of it, and I don't think any of the other guys would either."

15 Years Ago - 2010

Ohio State created a stir Jan. 13 with the announcement that the football team's 2010 season-opening contest with Marshall had been moved ahead two days to Sept. 2, meaning the campaign would start on a Thursday, instead of Saturday, for the first time since 1997 when the Buckeyes hosted Wyoming in the Eddie Robinson Football Classic.

The move was met with enthusiasm by some fans who looked forward to the Buckeyes being part of what would likely be the first day any games were played throughout the country, but some were upset at the prospect of missing the opportunity to tailgate all day before a game. Others lamented that they would not be able to attend the game at all because of work on the day of the game as well as the day after.

Ohio State athletic director Gene Smith met with reporters at halftime of the women's basketball game Jan. 14 to clear up some things he seemed to think were misconceptions about the decision.

"So everyone understands, our real focus had nothing to do with TV," Smith said. "That's one of the things I'm hearing quite a

bit, but our decision had nothing to do with the TV. In fact, I have no clue who our carrier will be.

"Obviously we'll have a carrier, but this was a result of Jim (Tressel) and I sitting in California one morning before he went to practice. We were just chatting about this particular year and the things that we could do to position this team to get off to a good start. That's really where all this came from."

10 Years Ago - 2015

Ohio Stadium played host to the first-ever College Football Playoff champions and approximately 45,000 of the Buckeyes' biggest fans Jan. 24 for Ohio State's official championship celebration.

The team and coaching staff entered the stadium with smoke and fire creating a spectacle on a cold Saturday morning. After remarks from local politicians, Smith and university president Michael Drake, it was time for the main event as head coach Urban Meyer took the microphone.

"I'm very humbled and honored on behalf of our players and coaching staff to be able to bring back to the great state of Ohio the Big Ten championship trophy, the Sugar Bowl trophy and the first-ever College Football Playoff National Championship trophy," the three-time national championship coach said.

Five Years Ago - 2020

Another Ohio State staffer was on the move, raising Ohio State's tally of staffers changing jobs to seven in the offseason. The latest, Trey Holtz, was heading to Louisiana Tech, where he would be taking over as the inside wide receivers coach.

Holtz was joining a program run by his father, Skip, after three seasons as an offensive graduate assistant at Ohio State. He was the grandson of legendary head coach Lou Holtz, who served as one of Meyer's mentors during his time as a wide receivers coach at Notre Dame. In fact, it was Skip who helped Meyer break into big-time college football.

"I hired Urban Meyer at Notre Dame because of my son," Lou Holtz said. "I was at a convention, and Skip said, 'You need to talk to Urban Meyer,' I said, 'I don't know Urban and don't want to talk to him,' Then he said, 'Will you have lunch with me?' and I said yes, so I go to lunch and he said, 'Dad, I want you to meet Urban Meyer.'"

"That's how I met Urban Meyer and (eventually) hired him."

One Year Ago - 2024

In addition to safety Lathan Ransom and linebacker Cody Simon, both of whom were returning for their fifth seasons, the extensive list of returning juniors for the 2024 season included cornerbacks Denzel Burke and Jordan Hancock; defensive linemen Ty Hamilton, Jack Sawyer, JT Tuimoloau and Tyleik Williams; offensive lineman Donovan Jackson; running back TreVeyon Henderson; and wide receiver Emeka Egbuka.

Each of the returning players announced his decision during a two-week span at the beginning of January – in addition to Simon, who said on Dec. 12 that he would be returning – but Sawyer may have tipped his hand when Ohio State was down in Texas for the Cotton Bowl.

"When you've got a bunch of guys that could have gone to the NFL and they all come back and they've got 50-some seniors on their roster and everybody's experienced and all their top players are coming back, I think it helps the team win," he said on Dec. 26. "It's definitely something we've talked about."

News Of Knowles' Departure Dampens Mood

Continued From Page 1

Woody Hayes, Jim Tressel and Urban Meyer.

"I'd like to thank former Ohio State coaches Urban Meyer, Jim Tressel and John Cooper for their counsel and help along the way," Day said. "It's been an honor to walk in your shoes."

A common theme for all of the speakers was that this Buckeye team dealt with a lot of adversity and was able to fight through it. In any other year before this one, the No. 6-ranked, 10-2 Buckeyes would have been on the outside looking in due to their losses to Oregon and archrival Michigan in the regular season.

But even with Nov. 30 ending on the note that it did, Day was able to rally his team around each other and take on the "Ohio Against the World" mantra when they were being doubted – not only by the college football world but also by many Ohio State fans who were calling for the head coach's job after losing to the Wolverines for the fourth straight year.

It was an extremely tough road to the national championship for the Buckeyes, beating five top-five teams – three of those coming in the last three rounds of the playoff – and six top-10 programs throughout the year, something that both Carter and Bjork made sure to mention.

When Ginther was given the microphone, he revealed a street sign that would be put somewhere around the stadium, the specific road not being revealed during the ceremony. The sign reads "Champions Way," similar to other street signs that were put up for the last two championships the Buckeyes won.

The 2014 championship team was gifted a road sign that read "Undisputed Way," which still stands at the intersection of Lane Ave. and High Street near campus and replaced a sign from the 2002 champions which read "Champions Lane." Along with presenting a key to the city of Columbus to Day, Ginther also proclaimed that Jan. 26, 2025, was "Champions Day."

"It's fitting that we proclaim today in the city of Columbus as Champions Day," Ginther yelled as he held up the proclamation he had signed. "It's fitting that I present a key to the city of Columbus to this incredible coach and this team, but those might sit on a desk somewhere. They might be on somebody's wall. So I thought it was important that we let the whole world know where the national champions play football. This street sign is going up right outside."

On every player's face in the bleachers set up surrounding the stage, there was a big smile. But none was bigger than that of the outgoing senior Sawyer, who started his connection with Ohio State as Day's first ever commitment in 2019 and finishes it as a national champion.

Perhaps nobody mentioned at the celebration got as deafening a welcome as Sawyer did after his 83-yard scoop-and-score against Texas late in the fourth quarter that helped send the Buckeyes to the national championship. Day said he believes that will go down as the most legendary play in Ohio State history.

"It's just such an honor to be a part of

this great university, play for these coaches and play with my brothers who we've been through a lot of ups and downs with," Sawyer said when the captain got his chance to speak. "We just kept fighting. That's what I love about this team, is that we really embody what it's like to be from Ohio. You get punched in the mouth, get back up and keep fighting. That's what everybody in Ohio does and will continue to do."

Sawyer would go on to announce jokingly that he would be returning for a fifth year at Ohio State. After waiting a few seconds while fans screamed excitedly about the news, Sawyer burst their bubble, telling everyone that he was joking, but continued on with a more serious tone to finish his speech before passing the mic off to co-captains Egbuka, Henderson and Simon.

"I love this university," he said. "It's taught me a lot about how to grow up and be a man and what it takes to do something that's bigger than yourself. I thank God every day that I was able to be born in Columbus, Ohio, to be able to put on the scarlet and gray and bring a national championship back to this great city. So God bless Ohio State, God bless Columbus and God bless the state of Ohio."

Even while they were celebrating the 2024 win, those involved with the program couldn't help but look forward as well. Carter was the first to mention going for a second straight title, but it was Day's words that earned the most applause when he called for more.

Shortly after Bjork seemed to hint that the program was working on getting Day a contract extension to keep him with the team for many years to come – news that was confirmed by Carter after the ceremony, who told Eleven Warriors that the two sides were working to finalize a new deal – Day made sure to let Buckeye fans know that he wasn't satisfied with having just one ring on his fingers.

"Now let's go get another one of these. Go Bucks!" he said to wrap up the ceremony.

Party's Over

Day and Ohio State's quest for a second title turned significantly more difficult shortly while fans filed their way out of the stadium after the ceremony when news broke that Ohio State defensive coordinator Jim Knowles would be leaving to take the same position at Penn State.

The reported deal to get him to State College, Pa., to coach under James Franklin is around \$3.1 million per year for three years according to NBC Sports, making him the highest-paid assistant coach in all of college football as well as the highest-paid defensive coordinator in the history of the sport.

Knowles' decision to leave for the Nittany Lions came just one day after the Buckeyes reportedly also offered the 59-year-old coordinator a contract that would have made him the highest-paid assistant coach, but he decided to head closer to his hometown of Philadelphia.

The departure comes after the Buckeyes' national championship-winning team boasted the No. 1 scoring defense in the country,

allowing just 12.9 points per game, and the No. 1 total defense, giving up 254.6 yards per game.

It was a blow to the Buckeyes that took a lot of attention off the celebration, which Knowles did not attend.

Returning Ohio State players and incoming freshmen sounded off on social media when the news was reported, with cornerback Jermaine Mathews Jr., defensive end Kenyatta Jackson Jr., linebacker Tarvos Alford, defensive tackle Kayden McDonald and many more letting it be known on Twitter that they weren't happy with their now-former coach's decision.

With the deadline for players to leave through the portal or enter the NFL draft already passed, the ramifications of allowing Knowles to walk won't be known for the Buckeyes for a while, but given that so many of the players spoke so highly of him during his time at Ohio State, it begs the question whether the spring portal will be somewhat active.

Ultimately, Knowles spent three years with the Buckeyes, improving each year with the No. 24 scoring defense (21.0 points) and No. 13 total defense (321.5 yards) in 2022-23, followed by having the No. 2 scoring defense (11.2) and the No. 3 total defense (265.4) last season before becoming the nation's top unit in both categories in 2024.

In the champion's press conference on Jan. 21, before the Buckeyes left Atlanta, Day made it clear how much he valued Knowles on this team.

"I think he's the best defensive coordinator in the country," Day said. "He does an unbelievable job, did an unbelievable job throughout the season."

Knowles had also received some interest from both Notre Dame and Oklahoma – the latter of which seemed like the most likely destination at one point if he were to leave – but now the Buckeyes will have to go up against the guy they called the best in the country next season when the Nittany Lions come to Columbus on Nov. 1 after an off week.

No matter the reason for Knowles' decision, the 2025 defensive coordinator position at Penn State is an enticing one, with players such as defensive end Dani Dennis-Sutton, defensive tackle Zane Durant, linebacker Tony Rojas and cornerback A.J. Harris along with a couple of others returning for one more year, an offseason of retention for the Nittany Lions that is similar to the Buckeyes' "reload the clip" offseason last year.

There were no reported candidates to take over Knowles' spot at Ohio State when BSB went to press, but possibilities in-house would be cornerbacks coach Tim Walton and safeties coach Matt Guerrieri, who have both led defenses as coordinators before.

Walton led the Miami (Fla.) defense in 2007 and held the same role at Memphis in 2008, and he also has some experience at the NFL level as the defensive coordinator for the St. Louis Rams in 2013.

The 35-year-old Guerrieri – who spent the 2022 season as a senior advisor and defensive analyst under Knowles at Ohio State – doesn't have as much experience, but he was the co-defensive coordinator at Indiana in 2023 before he was rehired at OSU to lead the safeties. Day had good things to say about both of them at the celebration when he was giving credit to all of his assistants.

"The best secondary coach in the country," Day said about Walton. "He's the glue, the man who keeps it all together."

"One of the brightest minds in college football, and I'm telling you, a star in the making," Day would go on to say about Guerrieri, words that have made Buckeye fans do a double-take after the news about Knowles, wondering if he could get a promotion.

But no matter who will take over next season, it is going to be a tall task to try to get the defensive unit back to where it was this year. Eight of the 11 starters on that side of the ball won't be returning, including the entire front four. Safety Caleb Downs, linebacker Sonny Styles and corner Davison Igbinosun will be back for another season.

With the depth the Buckeyes had this season, it still remains a possibility that the defense could be great next year with Mathews, Jackson, Caden Curry, Arvell Reese and more possibly slotting into the starting spots that are opening up.

"I'm looking forward to settling into a leadership role, and I hope I can lead some young guys, just like some older guys did for me as well," Styles said after the ceremony. "I'm super excited for this team. We've got a great team coming back, a lot of great players, a lot of talented players and we're going to have to mesh and create our own identity."

"We won this year, and guys on the team were a part of that, but next year is a new team, so it's a clean slate. You have to create your own identity and create your own story."

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Sawyer's Scoop-and-Score Highlights Top Plays

By **BOBBY GORBETT**

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

For the first time since 2014, the Buckeyes finished their season perched on top of the college football world as national champions. Ohio State's four-game unbeaten playoff run as well as its 10-2 regular season campaign provided a plethora of highlight plays deserving of recognition.

Without further ado, here are Buckeye Sports Bulletin's picks for the top 10 plays from this past season, as voted on by the BSB staff.

10. Smith's One-Handed TD Grab (Michigan State - Sept. 28)

The Buckeyes were far from perfect in the first half of their Big Ten opener against Michigan State.

By the time of the Buckeyes' last drive of the first half, quarterback Will Howard had already thrown an interception and Michigan State had accumulated 192 total yards and seven points.

Leading 17-7 with the ball at their own 40-yard line with just 1:13 remaining in the half, the Buckeyes weren't in dire need of a touchdown, but with the support of their home prime-time crowd, the Spartans were still hanging around.

Howard found sophomore receiver Carnell Tate on the second play of the drive for a 16-yard completion and on the very next he lobbed up a pass in the direction of true freshman receiver Jeremiah Smith, who – despite being double-covered – jumped at the perfect time and needed only one hand to haul in the 27-yard pass.

Smith somehow found a way to one-up himself a few plays later. After Howard threw an incompleteness on first down to Emeka Egbuka, he took a hard hit on the next play that not only caused another incompleteness but forced him out of the game, prompting backup quarterback Devin Brown to replace him on a pivotal third-and-10 play with only 32 seconds remaining.

Brown received a huge block from senior running back TreVeyon Henderson, shuffled to his right, and threw a dart in the direction of a well-covered Smith.

Brown's pass was thrown in the perfect spot so that it could only be caught by Smith, and the sensational freshman made his biggest highlight play of the season to that point, reaching out with one hand to catch the ball and take it the rest of the way for a 17-yard touchdown.

Smith's efforts on the drive – which helped him finish the game with five catches, 83 yards and a pair of scores in the 38-7 win – left his head coach Ryan Day in awe.

"We at least have a field goal there, so we have to play smart," Day said after the game when asked about the catch. "Devin stepped up in a big way, came in for Will and delivered that throw. But what an unbelievable catch. I couldn't believe he caught it. Just a tremendous play."

9. Henderson's Record Rose Bowl Run (Oregon - Jan. 1)

Squaring off with one of only two teams to defeat them in the regular season, the Buckeyes sprinted out to an ideal start in

their College Football Playoff quarterfinal matchup against previously undefeated Oregon at the Rose Bowl.

Thanks to Smith and Egbuka combining for a trio of lengthy touchdowns, Ohio State grabbed a 24-0 lead before the 10:00 minute mark of the second quarter. The Buckeyes then forced Oregon into a three-and-out to get the ball back on their own 34-yard line, and on the very first play of their next drive, Henderson found a way to make the dream start even better.

Henderson took the handoff from Howard and watched as his offensive linemen created a gaping hole to run through on the right side of the line before surging through that hole and cutting past Oregon defensive back Kobe Savage to have only green grass in front of him.

Henderson sped down the sideline untouched for the last 60 yards to put the Buckeyes ahead 31-0. His 66-yard touchdown run was the longest by any Ohio State player at the Rose Bowl and put the Ducks in desperation mode, if they weren't already there.

8. Howard Fits Pass Into Tight Window To Egbuka (Oregon - Jan. 1)

Perhaps the Ducks were panicking even prior to the Henderson run. Much as it had been in the team's previous blowout of Tennessee, the Buckeye offense was virtually unstoppable against Oregon.

After a punt, Ohio State got the ball on its own 47-yard line with 8:36 left in the first and picked up a first down on two plays to get to the 42. It was there Egbuka ran a seam route through the heart of the Ducks' defense, and although he didn't create much separation, Howard threw a perfect pass right on the money to his senior receiver.

The ball was slightly deflected by Oregon defensive back Brandon Johnson, but that didn't bother Egbuka, who corralled the ball with his right hand and pinned it to his body before running into the end zone to put his team up 14-0.

The vertical attack was clearly an important part of former Ohio State offensive coordinator Chip Kelly's game plan, and after the game, Smith said the team's success completing deep passes was in part due to reps in practice.

"Will does a great job in practice just trusting us, just throwing the ball out there," he said. "We tell him, just throw it out there. We'll make a play for you. It doesn't matter if it's a bad ball or not, we'll make our quarterback look good."

7. Judkins Breaks Off Big Run (Notre Dame - Jan. 20)

For the third time in the playoffs, the Buckeyes took at least a two-score lead into halftime, holding a 21-7 advantage against the Fighting Irish in the national title game.

OSU got its lead due to a nearly flawless 14-of-15 start from Howard in the passing game and 87 rushing yards, allowing it to reach the end zone in each of its first three drives.

Running back Quinshon Judkins and the Ohio State offensive line showed they had no plans of slowing down in the second half.

Judkins took a handoff on second-and-10



SONNY BROCKWAY

JACKED — Defensive end Jack Sawyer (33) is escorted into the end zone by jubilant teammates cornerback Jordan Hancock (7) and defensive end TJ Tuimoloau (44) following his 83-yard scoop-and-score after a sack of Texas quarterback Quinn Ewers to seal a 28-14 victory in a CFP semifinal in the Cotton Bowl game on Jan. 10.

from Ohio State's own 25-yard line. He hesitated before his offensive line created a huge hole right up the middle, and the former Ole Miss transfer cut right and broke free with no defender between him and the end zone. Judkins started to run out of gas at Notre Dame's 40-yard line, but he wasn't tracked down until he reached the 5.

Kelly went right back to him a few plays later, allowing him to muscle into the end zone from the 1-yard line to record his third touchdown of the game.

Judkins finished the game with 11 carries for 100 yards. He was content after the game with his ability to move past Notre Dame's stiff defensive line with runs like his 70-yarder.

"When you look at Notre Dame's front and you look at how they scheme defensively, they have a lot of great players on that defensive line, and those guys are super big," Judkins told NBC Sports. "So the hardest thing was because they played two gaps, was getting those guys to shift over and move by the gap responsibility. I was able to do that today, so I'm super happy."

T-5. Igbinosun End-Zone Interception (Penn State - Nov. 2)

Two games removed from a poor showing in a 32-31 loss to Oregon, Ohio State's secondary and defense as a whole were desperate for a better showing in a top-five matchup against Penn State on Nov. 2

As the game approached halftime at Beaver Stadium, the Buckeye secondary had risen to the occasion. The defense had allowed only three points, but a couple of key mistakes by Howard, including a pick-six in the first quarter and a fumble at the goal line, meant the OSU lead was only 14-10 late in the first half.

The Nittany Lions had a chance to retake the lead before halftime, starting in great

field position at the Ohio State 49-yard line. The Nittany Lions went all the way down to the Buckeye 3-yard line with a 21-yard completion with cornerback Davison Igbinosun, in coverage, who allowed wideout Harrison Wallace III to haul in the catch while also being called for pass interference.

Igbinosun wasted no time in redeeming himself. With PSU quarterback Drew Allar looking for Wallace again in the back corner of the end zone, the ball initially hit Wallace's hands before being ripped away by Igbinosun.

Although it appeared for a moment as if the play might have just been an incompleteness – which would have given Penn State at least two more chances to punch it in and take the lead – Igbinosun instead secured the ball just as he got his right foot down in bounds to come up with the game-altering interception.

It was one of the biggest defensive highlights of the season and arguably the play of the game for the Buckeyes, who would go on to escape State College, Pa., with a statement 20-13 win over then-No. 3 Penn State.

Despite it being one of the biggest plays of the season from both an importance and skill standpoint, after the game Igbinosun – who is known as a trash-talker on the field – downplayed the difficulty of his takeaway.

"I want to say I did something crazy, but it was God who put the ball in my hands," he said. "I didn't really do much, to be honest with you."

T-5: Downs Ends Punt-Return Drought (Indiana - Nov. 23)

The story of sophomore safety Caleb Downs' electrifying 79-yard punt-return touchdown in Ohio State's 38-15 beatdown of then-undefeated Indiana actually starts all the way back before the season began when Day guaranteed Ohio State's first

punt-return score since 2014.

"I'm going to guarantee it this year," Day said on his radio show on Aug. 29. "I'm putting it out there."

86 days after that statement, Day's proclamation came true.

Just over two minutes into the second half, Ohio State looked poised to increase its 14-7 lead on Curt Cignetti's Hoosiers when the defense forced a quick three-and-out and IU lined up for a punt at its own 27-yard line.

Backing up near the 20-yard line, Downs brought in a bouncing punt from Indiana's James Evans and took it from there. He picked up a couple of good blocks, spun past the first Hoosier defender in his way and found a crease down the sideline.

Downs then sped past a couple more would-be tacklers as he passed midfield, and at the 40-yard line, he cut past the last defender toward the middle of the field before coasting his way into the end zone.

Downs' 79-yard punt return touchdown not only electrified those inside chilly Ohio Stadium but helped kick-start a dominant second half where the Buckeyes outscored the Hoosiers 24-8 en route to the 23-point victory.

It was also the Buckeyes' first punt-return touchdown since Jalin Marshall returned one for 54 yards against Indiana almost exactly 10 years prior.

"There was no doubt that I was going to field it. There was space there, and everybody did a really good job blocking on punt-return unit," Downs said. "We talked about it all week, that we had a real opportunity to do it this week. Just a true blessing from God to be able to put it in the end zone."

4. Sawyer Interception Gives OSU Hope (Michigan - Nov. 30)

It looked like almost a certainty that Ohio State was going to secure a spot in the Big Ten Championship Game after the win over Indiana. The one roadblock in the Buckeyes' way was a 6-5 Michigan team, which had long been eliminated from Big Ten and CFP contention, but the Wolverines proved to be more of a threat than their record suggested.

Howard helped Michigan score its first touchdown after throwing an interception to Wolverines defensive back Aamir Hall and ended a red-zone chance with another interception thrown to Michigan safety Makari Paige in the third quarter. Those mistakes, paired with two field-goal misses from kicker Jayden Fielding, had the game tied at 10 heading into the fourth quarter.

The Wolverines were on one of their few successful drives of the game, and after picking up five first-down conversions, they found themselves facing a first-and-goal from the 3-yard line with only 7:57 remaining.

With everyone expecting a run, Michigan quarterback Davis Warren faked a handoff to Kaleb Mullings and pulled virtually every Buckeye defender to the line of scrimmage, leaving Michigan tight end Hogan Hansen wide open in the end zone. However, just before Warren released the ball, senior defensive end Jack Sawyer – who originally was engaged with Michigan left tackle Myles Hinton to start the play – drifted back into the tracks of Hansen and came up with what seemed to be a game-saving interception

at the goal line before returning the ball 12 yards.

"It was a great play by Jack on the goal line," Day said after the game, "just an unbelievable effort right there to give the offense a chance."

Sawyer's heroic efforts ended up being a bittersweet moment, though. The interception was followed by a three-and-out from the Ohio State offense, and Michigan again got into Buckeye territory to kick a game-winning field goal in the last minute of the game, handing Ohio State an unimaginable 13-10 loss that at the time looked to derail its season.

3. Henderson Scores On Screen Pass (Texas - Jan. 10)

Ohio State's College Football Playoff semifinal matchup against fifth-seeded Texas at the Cotton Bowl felt a lot like its struggle against Michigan at times.

After a strong defensive effort throughout much of the first half, Ohio State was tied with Texas 7-7 with mere seconds remaining before halftime after the Longhorns and former Buckeye quarterback Quinn Ewers engineered a seven-play, 59-yard touchdown drive.

With just 29 seconds left when the Buckeyes got the ball back, it seemed as if both teams may have been content with going into the locker room with a tie ballgame. But Kelly and the Buckeye offense had different plans.

On first-and-10 from their own 25-yard line, Kelly and Day dialed up an often practiced but rarely employed screen pass, which had actually become a bit of a joke inside the locker room.

"The screen, we were laughing a little bit in the locker room, having some fun with it because we do screen drill (in practice)," Day said after the Cotton Bowl. "I think sometimes these guys are like, 'Are we ever going to call a screen?' And I actually said to the coaches, 'We're going to stop doing screen drill because we don't call any big screens.' So sure enough, 'What do you want to run? You want to run the ball? You want to take a knee?' I said, 'No, just run the screen.'"

Practice made perfect for the Buckeyes when Howard drifted to his left to avoid pressure and lobbed a pass down to Henderson a few yards behind the line of scrimmage. Texas brought a corner blitz, meaning Henderson had no one but his own offensive linemen directly in front of him when he caught the pass.

With help from Carson Hinzman, Luke Montgomery and Tegra Tshabola, Henderson burst through an open hole and hit the 40-yard line with no one left to stop him, allowing him to sprint 60 more yards untouched into the end zone to give the Buckeyes the 14-7 lead just before halftime.

Henderson's rush turned momentum in favor of the Buckeyes for the second half, while it also was the third-longest touchdown reception of CFP semifinal history.

"I don't think anyone thought that was going for 75 yards," Howard said of the historic score. "I mean, (we were) trying to set something up. That's kind of a drive starter in that two-minute scenario. But when you have a guy like (Henderson) who can make plays like that – Carson Hinzman made some unbelievable blocks down the field, the receivers stayed on their guys and (Henderson) took off. That was a huge play for us, a huge swing."

erson) took off. That was a huge play for us, a huge swing."

2. Smith's 56-yard Third-Down Catch (Notre Dame - Jan. 20)

In the time since Judkins' 70-yard run in the national championship game, the Buckeyes saw their 28-7 lead dwindle down to a one-possession lead late in the fourth quarter due to a pair of touchdown passes and two conversions from the Irish and a key fumble from Egbuka.

Down 31-23 with 4:15 left, Marcus Freeman's team still needed one more stop to get the ball back and potentially tie the game with a touchdown and two-point conversion.

After Howard rushed for 8 to get a quick first down with 3:31 left, Notre Dame seemed to be well on its way to getting that stop when it tackled Howard for no gain and a 1-yard loss on back-to-back quarterback power runs to bring up a difficult third-and-11 from Ohio State's 34-yard line.

With 2:45 left, the Buckeyes likely needed one more big play to ice the game and hold onto the championship win, and they got exactly that.

Lining up in the shotgun, Howard took the snap and immediately faced an all-out blitz from Notre Dame. Howard was protected well by the offensive line and Henderson, however, giving him time to find Smith one-on-one running a fade route on Irish defensive back Christian Gray.

With a clean pocket, Howard lobbed a nearly perfect pass to an open Smith, who easily completed the grab before running an extra 20 yards for the 56-yard gain, putting Fielding well in range at the 10-yard line.

"It's man on man," Smith said of his catch. "I've been doing it for a long time. It's football. At the end of the day, I just have to go out there and beat the man in front of me."

Smith's catch-and-run put a fitting cap on his sensational freshman season, while it also allowed Fielding to make a chip-shot 33-yard field goal to put OSU up 34-23 and clinch the Buckeyes' first national championship in a decade.

1. Jack Sawyer's Scoop-And-Score (Texas - Jan. 10)

The Longhorns bounced back well from the blow of the lengthy Henderson touchdown to end the first half. A couple of stops from their defense put the offense on the field to tie the game, and Ewers took advantage of that chance, leading his team to a 67-yard touchdown drive in the third quarter to tie the game at 14.

The Buckeyes responded with a touchdown drive of their own to go back up by seven with just 7:02 left, but the Longhorns were again in the red zone with a chance to tie the game after a couple of long passes from Ewers.

Then, Texas inched closer to tying the game when two straight pass-interference penalties put the ball on the 1-yard line on first-and-goal with just 3:56 to play.

The Longhorns' attempt to run the ball up the middle against the Buckeyes' defense was unsuccessful on first-and-goal. So, on second-and-goal, the Longhorns tried a toss play to running back Quintrevion Wisner, but Downs immediately broke through the offensive line to disrupt the play.

Safety Lathan Ransom finished the job, tackling the Longhorns' running back all the

way back at the 8-yard line. Ransom's tackle for loss on its own was one of BSB's honorable mentions, as it completely changed the game plan for the Longhorns on the next two plays. Ewers threw an incompleteness on third-and-goal, setting up a do-or-die fourth-and-goal from the 8-yard line.

On the play, Ewers took the shotgun snap and drifted to his left, and just as he was about to release his pass, the ball was slapped out of his hand by his former Ohio State roommate Sawyer. The nearby Pickerington native, who got a great jump on the snap and instantly shot around Texas right tackle and potential early-round NFL draft pick Cameron Williams, picked up the loose ball with his fellow defenders-turned blockers clearing a path. No Texas player came close to Sawyer, who easily dashed in for the game-sealing and life-altering 83-yard touchdown return for the Buckeye lifer.

"It just means everything to me," Sawyer said of his score. "What a play. I kind of blacked out on the run over (to the end zone) when I picked it up, but I was just put into a great position by the coaches. I saw the ball popped out right to me after I tackled (Ewers), and I was just thinking, I just need to stay on my feet, because like I said, I almost blacked out when I scooped it and I saw nothing but green grass ahead of me."

Sawyer's scoop-and-score was poetic justice for the Buckeye defensive end considering his Michigan interception will likely not go down in program history as one of the greatest plays of all time when factoring in the final score of that game.

This one will, though, as it is the unquestioned top play of the 2024 championship season, one that will be talked about among Buckeye fans for generations to come.

"To make a play like that in that moment. You want to leave a legacy behind? You become a legend. He just became a legend at Ohio State," Day said after the game.

Honorable Mentions

Joining Ransom's crucial tackle for loss in BSB's honorable mention list is Smith's 37-yard touchdown reception to open Ohio State's blowout win over Tennessee on Dec. 20.

Needing a good start after the loss to Michigan, the Buckeyes came out firing with a couple of successful pass plays to get into Tennessee territory. It was from the 37-yard line that Howard threw a perfect pass to Smith, who rotated his body away from Tennessee sophomore defensive back Ricky Gibson III and made the catch in the end zone to give his team an early 7-0 lead that they would never relinquish.

Nickel cornerback Jordan Hancock's game-sealing interception in Ohio State's 21-17 win over Nebraska on Oct. 26 also earned a spot on the honorable mention list. In the last two minutes of the game, the Cornhuskers had the ball on their own 37-yard line a few plays after a controversial targeting call on OSU linebacker Arvell Reese.

The Buckeyes backed them up on two straight plays to force a third-and-19 when former Ohio State commit and Nebraska freshman quarterback Dylan Raiola misfired a pass straight into the arms of the senior Hancock, who secured the interception and ended any chance at a Huskers upset win and second straight loss for Ohio State.

Bucks Offense Hits New Gear During CFP Run

By **PATRICK ENGELS**

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Associate Editor

Following an up-and-down 2023 season on offense, Ohio State and head coach Ryan Day worked hard during the offseason to find the right mix of players and staff members who could get the Buckeyes back to their once-dynamic selves.

Day's first order of business seemed to be a sufficient start to achieving that goal – that being the hiring of NFL veteran Bill O'Brien as offensive coordinator last January – but when O'Brien abruptly left the program to serve as head coach at Boston College, Day and his staff had to turn to option B.

That pivot turned out to be a blessing in disguise for the Buckeyes, as Day brought in his former head coach at New Hampshire and longtime friend Chip Kelly to lead the unit, merging an elite offensive mind in Day with one of the more successful offensive play callers of college football's modern era in Kelly.

With Kelly now in charge of the unit and having plenty of explosive playmakers at his disposal, many believed that the Buckeyes would boast a dominant offensive attack all season. For the most part, that was the case for the Scarlet and Gray.

Featuring a new-look offense that was led by fifth-year transfer quarterback Will Howard and a diverse set of skill players such as wideouts Emeka Egbuka, Jeremiah Smith and Carnell Tate as well as all-conference running backs TreVeyon Henderson and Quinshon Judkins, among others, Ohio State's offense looked more like it did during 2019-22 as opposed to 2023.

The Buckeyes ranked 14th in the nation in scoring offense at 35.7 points per game and 30th in total offense at 429.4 yards per contest, both of those numbers eclipsing the group's 2023 marks of 30.5 points (44th) and 407.9 yards (47th).

While those numbers are impressive, Kelly's offense wasn't perfect all year. After

Rating The Offense

Here is where the OSU offense ranked among the Big Ten and nationally through Jan. 20.

Category	Stats	NCAA	Big Ten
Rushing Offense	166.4	58th	4th
Passing Offense	263.0	29th	4th
Total Offense	429.4	30th	4th
Scoring Offense	35.7	14th	2nd
Turnovers Lost	16	46th	9th
Third Down Con.	43.8	33rd	7th

coming out of the gates hot and averaging 43.5 points per game through Week 7, the Buckeyes hit a bit of a wall during the bulk of Big Ten play, scoring 27.5 points per contest and putting 40 on the scoreboard just once in their final six regular-season games.

Those struggles were most apparent in Ohio State's darkest moment of the season, a brutal 13-10 loss to 6-5 Michigan on Nov. 30 that had the Buckeyes repeatedly run into the teeth of the Wolverines' talented defensive line and muster up just 252 total yards and 77 yards on the ground on 26 carries (3.0 per rush).

"When you look at the offensive side of the ball, it was not a good day," Day said when asked about the Michigan loss on Dec. 4. "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."

Kelly's questionable offensive decision-making against the Wolverines may have been one of the worst in his entire coaching career, but, as it did for the entire team, that failure seemed to light a fire underneath him and the unit during the College Football Playoff. The Buckeyes' offense flipped the script on the season in Ohio State's four postseason games, seemingly scoring with ease against four straight formidable defenses.

In its playoff wins against Tennessee, Oregon, Texas and Notre Dame, Ohio State averaged 36.3 points and 447.0 yards per



SONNY BROCKWAY

PEAKED - The offense fell into a lull in the latter half of the regular season, reaching rock bottom in the loss to Michigan, but quarterback Will Howard (above) had the team at full throttle in four College Football Playoff games to win the national championship.

game, a dominant stretch that helped propel the Scarlet and Gray to its seventh consensus national title.

The Buckeyes' postseason success on offense was due in large part to them getting the ball in the hands of their perimeter playmakers, but it could also be due to the impressive balance the unit showed. In those four games, Ohio State averaged 289.0 yards through the air and 157.0 on the ground.

Day attributed these successes to both the squad coming together as a cohesive unit and to Kelly and his coaching staff putting the right plan in place as the season progressed.

With that in mind, here are Buckeye Sports Bulletin's offensive grades for both the second half of the season and the entire season as a whole.

Quarterbacks

When Howard first arrived at Ohio State as the presumed starting quarterback last January, he said that the main reasons he came to Columbus were to raise his NFL draft stock and lead the Buckeyes to an elusive national championship.

Fast-forward over one year later, and Howard has achieved both of his goals during his one-and-done year in scarlet and gray.

The Kansas State transfer was Ohio State's unquestioned leader on offense all year, and he also displayed his high football IQ and command of the huddle to help take the Buckeyes to the promised land.

"When I first met Will, I saw something in him," Day said of Howard after the title game win. "A football IQ intelligence. I saw him play on film at Kansas State and win championships and win big games and be able to make an impact with his feet but also throw with accuracy and anticipate throws, and those are things that are hard to find. Then you meet

him, and his football IQ and maturity is what kind of captured me."

Those traits Day mentioned were obvious from the start of his time in Columbus. He quickly earned the starting job from redshirt sophomore Devin Brown and immediately went to work, completing 121 of his 165 passes (73.3 percent) for 1,574 yards, 14 touchdowns and three interceptions while adding five more rushing scores in his first six games of the season.

Howard made it look effortless at the beginning of the year, but like Ohio State's offense as a whole, his production hit a bit of a lull during the second half of the regular season.

Although he was still an efficient thrower, completing 71.1 percent of his passes (106 of 149) and throwing for 13 touchdowns in the final six games of the regular season, Howard struggled to take care of the ball, throwing five interceptions in that span compared to the three he had in the first six games of the year.

These turnover issues were most prevalent against Michigan, when he had one of the worst performances of his career. He completed just 19 of his 33 passes (57.6 percent) for 175 yards and one score to two interceptions, one of those being a near pick-six in the first half and the other being a red-zone turnover in the third quarter.

But just like the entire team, Howard would turn his struggles into motivation in the College Football Playoff, where he put together the best stretch of his career in the biggest games of his life.

Howard began his brilliant play during OSU's two blowout wins against Tennessee and Oregon, tapping his deep-ball ability and finding his talented pass catchers on the perimeter to throw for a combined 630 passing



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yards and five touchdowns to one interception.

He wasn't as effective against Texas' vaunted defense and secondary, throwing for 289 yards and one touchdown to one interception, but he stepped up when it mattered most in the clutch.

With the game tied at 14 midway through the fourth quarter, Howard led a game-winning 13-play 88-yard touchdown drive by completing seven of his nine passes for 52 yards and rushing for another 19 yards, 18 of those coming on a crucial fourth-and-2 keeper from the Texas 34 that kept the drive going.

He carried that big-game play into the national championship game, where he arguably saved his best performance for last, completing a CFP national title game-record 13 of his first 13 passes and finishing 17 of 21 for 231 yards and two touchdowns along with a season-high 57 rushing yards on 16 carries.

"He did it with his legs, his arm and his brain," Kelly said of his quarterback's championship game performance. "He's awesome. We put a ton on his plate. He goes to the line of scrimmage with two, sometimes three plays and he puts us in the right play all the time."

Howard's four-game CFP run forever cements him in Ohio State's storied history, and he also has a place in the record books following this year. His 73.0 completion percentage was the highest by an OSU quarterback in a single season in program history, besting C.J. Stroud's mark of 71.9 percent set in 2021.

As for Ohio State's other quarterbacks on the roster, Brown, now at California – he entered the transfer portal in December but

stayed with the team throughout the CFP run – showed flashes when his number was briefly called this season, none more than his 17-yard touchdown pass to Smith against Michigan State on Sept. 28.

True freshman Julian Sayin also showed off his potential when he went in the game during garbage time, throwing for 84 yards and a touchdown on just five completions, while redshirt freshman Lincoln Kienholz proved to be a serviceable fourth string.

**BSB Midterm Grade: A-
BSB Second-Half Grade: A
BSB Final Grade: A**

Running Backs

Entering the season, the prevailing opinion of those who closely followed Ohio State was that Henderson and Judkins would emerge as the most formidable one-two punch in all of college football.

When it was all said and done this year, that may have been exactly the case.

With egos thrown out the window, the two experienced tailbacks turned in outstanding seasons out of first-year running backs coach Carlos Locklyn's backfield.

Like Howard, Henderson and Judkins made history this year, becoming just the third rushing duo to both total at least 1,000 yards on the ground in a season, joining Carlos Hyde (1,521) and quarterback Braxton Miller (1,068) in 2013 and Archie Griffin (1,577) and Pete Johnson (1,059) in 1975.

Judkins, who transferred to the Buckeyes after back-to-back first-team All-SEC seasons

at Ole Miss, said he and Henderson were able to not only coexist but thrive in the same backfield because of their selflessness and team-first mentality.

"TreVeyon is such a great player," he said after the championship game. "I think it's just the relationship that we have between each other, how we balance off each other and how good our game is. No matter who's in the game, we're both going to perform, and I think we do a great job of supporting each other throughout that. We learned so much from each other as well. So I think it paid off in the end."

As Judkins stated, both he and Henderson – who finished the year with 1,060 yards and 14 touchdowns on 194 carries and 1,016 and 10 on 144, respectively, seemed to complement each other perfectly on the field. The veteran

Henderson proved to be the more explosive back out of the two, recording seven rushes of over 25 yards compared to Judkins' two.

That home-run ability was most prevalent in the College Football Playoff, when Henderson had touchdown runs of 29 and 66 against Tennessee and Oregon, respectively. His dash against the Ducks in the CFP quarterfinals, which saw him zoom past every defender untouched on his way to the end zone, set an Ohio State record for the longest touchdown run at the Rose Bowl.

Henderson also came close to another record in the Cotton Bowl out of the passing game when he took a 75-yard screen pass to the house before halftime to give the Buck-

eyes a 14-7 lead, making it the third-longest reception in CFP history.

Judkins, on the other hand, was more of the every-down back for OSU this season. He worked to grind out gains in short-yardage situations and keep his body moving forward, averaging a steady 5.5 yards per carry.

That bruising mentality was best exhibited in the red zone. Judkins scored 11 of his 14 touchdowns from inside the 10-yard line, seven coming from the 1-yard line. Like Henderson with his explosiveness, Judkins showed off that physicality in the playoff, where each of his six touchdowns runs came from inside the 10, two of those coming in the championship game.

His 9-yard score against the Irish may have been his most impressive of the season, where he stiff-armed Notre Dame linebacker Jaiden Ausberry at the line of scrimmage before breaking two more tackles and barreling into the end zone to give OSU a 14-7 lead in the second quarter.

Both Judkins' and Henderson's stellar seasons can be attributed to not only their selflessness but also the fact that they lightened the workload for each other by splitting carries. Henderson said as much during Ohio State's national championship media day in Atlanta on Jan. 18.

"(Splitting carries with Judkins) has helped in so many ways, taking that wear and tear off each other's bodies," he said. "Me learning from Quinshon, Quinshon learning from me, we're encouraging each other. That's what it's all about. I'm so thankful that



Quinshon Judkins

Continued On Page 14

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God has allowed Quinshon to be here.”

With Henderson and Judkins dominating the carries, Ohio State’s running back depth was a nonfactor this season. True freshman James Peoples did show some promise with 197 yards and two scores on 49 attempts, while fellow first-year Sam Williams-Dixon appeared in just four games (53 yards) before transferring on Jan. 6.

BSB Midterm Grade: A

BSB Second-Half Grade: A+

BSB Final Grade: A+

Wide Receivers

Ohio State under the tutelage of Brian Hartline has reloaded at wide receiver almost every season, and this year was certainly no different. Despite losing program great Marvin Harrison Jr. to the NFL’s Arizona Cardinals in last year’s draft, the Buckeyes did not miss a beat and emerged as one of the most, if not the most, dynamic and deepest wide receiver rooms in the country.

Throughout the season, Ohio State boasted three capable No. 1 wide receivers in its starting lineup – Egbuka, Smith and Tate – and out of those three, it was the youngest one in the room who had the most dominant season.

Smith, last year’s consensus No. 1 high school prospect and the highest-rated wide receiver recruit since 2012, entered Ohio State with loads of hype and expectations, and in many people’s opinions, he far exceeded them this year.

The Hollywood, Fla., native instantly turned heads in spring practice with his freakish athleticism and circus catches and never looked back, earning the starting job in fall camp and then emerging as the team’s most dynamic offensive player with a team-high 1,315 yards and 15 touchdowns on 76 catches.

Smith’s sparkling freshman season, which included eye-opening one-handed catches and a number of long touchdowns, allowed him to smash each of Cris Carter’s single-season OSU freshman records of 41 catches, 648 yards and eight touchdowns by Ohio State’s ninth game of the season.

But while setting records is an impressive feat, Smith entered legendary status when he put his talents on full display in the playoff. The 6-3, 215-pound Smith was nearly unstoppable in the team’s first two postseason games against Tennessee and Oregon, capturing the nation’s attention with a combined 13 catches for 290 yards and four touchdowns.

Then, after getting shut down by Texas’ elite secondary with just one catch for 3 yards, he put the cherry on top of his special year with a five-catch, 88-yard performance in the championship game, no catch more im-

portant than his game-sealing 56-yard snag on third-and-11 late in the fourth quarter.

“It’s clear to see, like we said from the jump, he is a generational talent,” Day said of Smith after the game. “He’s a special player, but he’s a great person. Just to see the way he came up clutch in that game but also in some of the other games. ...What a season for such a young player who we all know is special.”

While Smith was the featured star in that room, the Buckeyes – unlike last year with Harrison – had an elite one-two punch with him and Egbuka. The senior bounced back from his injury-plagued 2023 season and turned into Howard’s most reliable target alongside the home-run hitter Smith, hauling in a team-high 81 catches for 1,011 yards and 10 touchdowns.

“We’re ‘Wide Receiver U,’ ” Egbuka said after the title game when asked to describe his and Smith’s production this year. “We’re going to pump out (star wideouts) year-in-and-year-out.”

Egbuka’s 81 catches this season allowed him to finish his career as the program’s all-time receptions leader with 205, breaking the previous mark held by K.J. Hill (201).

As Egbuka alluded to, Ohio State’s wide-out production did not stop with him and Smith. Tate was also a very reliable pass catcher for Howard, breaking through during his sophomore season with a strong 733 yards and four touchdowns on 52 catches. Two of those scores occurred in his hometown of Chicago during Ohio State’s Nov. 16 win over Northwestern at Wrigley Field.

Fellow sophomore Brandon Inniss also showed promise this year, catching 14 passes for 176 yards and a touchdown, setting up yet another potentially lethal three-headed monster in Hartline’s room next year consisting of him, Smith and Tate.

BSB Midterm Grade: A

BSB Second-Half Grade: A+

BSB Final Grade: A+

Tight Ends

With so many talented wide receivers on the roster, the tight end position is rarely a significant part of Ohio State’s passing game, and that was more of the same this year.

The Buckeyes’ five most-used tight ends – starter Gee Scott Jr., constant contributor Will Kacmarek and reserves Bennett Christian, Pat Gurd, and Jelani Thurman – combined for 42 catches, 448 receiving yards and four touchdowns in the extended 16-game season. That’s just 6.5 percent of the Buckeyes’ total yardage this season.

Despite this lack of usage in the passing game, the tight ends still made a difference in the blocking game, where they consistently opened holes for the Buckeye runners in short-yardage and goal-line situations as well as for the receivers in the passing game.

Scott – who led Keenan Bailey’s tight end room this year with a respectable 253 yards and two scores on 27 catches – said that his unit took pride in their blocking this season, regardless of what type of production they are getting in the passing game.

“We take a lot of pride in blocking on the perimeter,” Scott said in October. “Anywhere we’re blocking, we take pride in it. It’s not a joke.”



Gee Scott Jr.

While Scott and his teammates did a sound job blocking all season, the Buckeye veteran did start to gain a little bit more traction in the passing game as the year progressed, especially in the College Football Playoff.

He was a reliable intermediate target for Howard during the team’s four-game playoff run, recording 103 yards on 11 receptions, good for a 9.4-yard average.

Scott also made two of the more notable plays of the championship run when he raced down the sidelines for a tone-setting 30-yard gain on the first play of the Rose Bowl and then willed his way to a 7-yard gain on the Buckeyes’ previously mentioned game-winning drive against Texas to set up the Howard fourth-down run.

Outside of Scott, there wasn’t much production in the passing game from the tight end room, with Bennett, Gurd, Kacmarek and Thurman combining for just 15 catches worth 195 yards and two touchdowns. But Kacmarek said that his group didn’t care about stats this season but rather about producing for the team in any way possible.

“Us getting our jobs done, I don’t think a lot of people really notice how that kind of plays into the outcome of each play,” he said on Jan. 15. “But we have our job, and once we get it done, that helps a lot of other people out.”

BSB Midterm Grade: B

BSB Second-Half Grade: A

BSB Final Grade: A-

Offensive Line

It’s been a roller coaster of a season for Justin Frye’s offensive line.

Entering the season as the most scrutinized unit on the team, the Buckeye big men shut down all the criticisms in the first five games of the year, paving the way for the OSU rushers to average 222.2 yards on the ground per game – a mark that was 16th in the nation as of Oct. 11 – while allowing just four sacks.

But things changed on a dime when they were hit hard by the injury bug, losing starting left tackle and projected first-round draft pick Josh Simmons for the year due to a knee injury he suffered in the regular-season loss to Oregon.

Simmons’ injury – along with the knee injury to his backup Zen Michalski two weeks later against Nebraska on Oct. 26 – caused Ohio State and Frye to shuffle some personnel on the line, moving All-Big Ten left guard Donovan Jackson to left tackle and sophomore Carson Hinzman to left guard.

But even with this instability, the new-look Buckeye offensive line meshed well after the Nebraska game, bullying Penn State’s star-studded defensive front and allowing the Buckeyes to rush for an impressive 176 yards, 58 of those coming on the game-clinching,

11-play drive that started from OSU’s own 1-yard line, featured all runs and spanned the final 5:13 of the game.

“We just had to drop our nuts,” Jackson notably said after the game when asked how the patchwork offensive line found success against the Nittany Lions.

Ohio State’s offensive line success did not last for long in the regular season, however, due to another disastrous season-ending injury to a key starter. This time, it was Rimington Award-winning center and consensus first-team All-American Seth McLaughlin, who tore his Achilles tendon just days before the team’s top-five tilt against No. 5 Indiana.

That injury caused more reshuffling on the line, forcing Hinzman back to center – where he started each of the Buckeyes’ 12 regular-season games last year – and redshirt sophomore Austin Siereveld to left guard.

McLaughlin’s injury did not make much of a difference in the team’s 38-15 rout of the Hoosiers, but his impact was certainly missed one week later against Michigan, where the unit put together its worst performance of the year.

The line could not get any traction against Michigan’s NFL-ready defensive linemen, causing the Buckeyes to rush for the previously mentioned 77 rushing yards while allowing four tackles for loss.

But Ohio State’s offensive line rebounded in a huge way and performed masterfully with their backs against the wall in the College Football Playoff.

Featuring a bit of a new look on the line that had redshirt freshman Luke Montgomery rotating at left guard – which would later turn into the starting job for Montgomery – and Siereveld rotating at left and right guard, Frye’s line bulldozed its way through its four tough CFP opponents by playing with much more aggression and physicality.

The front five cleared the way for numerous significant touchdown runs throughout the playoff – many of those coming in short-yardage situations at the goal line – and allowed just four total sacks, two in each of the last two games.

The offensive line’s dominance in the College Football Playoff was a remarkable bounce back for the unit after it had been shamed after the Michigan loss, one which Jackson and Fryar said is attributed to the group’s ability to fight through the tough times and stay the course.

“We just had to thrive in adversity, that’s the end of it,” Jackson said. “We faced a lot of flak, a lot of stuff, we faced a lot of injuries, a lot of guys playing positions that they weren’t comfortable with. But we just had to figure it out in the end.”

“I think all of us banded together as a unit and said, ‘Hey, we can still do this thing.’ And obviously, it goes to show. Look what we have done,” Fryar told BSB on Jan. 18.

Fryar is among a large group of starting linemen who will never suit up for the Buckeyes again, but even if that core group is departing, the positive momentum they created down the stretch can serve as a strong launching point for some of the younger players, many of whom played a large part in this bounce back.

BSB Midterm Grade: A

BSB Second-Half Grade: A

BSB Final Grade: A

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Bucks' Return Game Shows Big Improvement

By **GREG WILSON**

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Associate Editor

Going into the season as a complete unknown after the firing of Parker Fleming, Ohio State's special teams did show improvement in some areas throughout the year, but it still proved to be a unit that wouldn't stand out for the national championship-winning Buckeyes.

With the former special teams coordinator gone, the other position coaches took over the duties of coaching the unit, splitting responsibilities between themselves with head coach Ryan Day overseeing the entire operation to make sure that it would be running as smoothly as possible. This was one of the things Day had more time for after he embraced his role as the CEO of the team.

"I'm going to be very much involved with that," Day said in the spring of special teams. "(Quality control coach) Rob Keys, who's one of our analysts, he's allowed to coach the coaches. He can do a lot of legwork in terms of off-the-field stuff, breaking down the film, helping get things organized for us as we get into the meetings."

Safeties coach Matt Guerrieri and linebackers coach James Laurinaitis took over punt and kickoff duties while tight ends coach Keenan Bailey and wide receivers coach Brian Hartline ran the return game.

In the first half (which BSB graded after just six games of what ended up being a 16-game season), the areas in which the team improved were tough to see and were few and far between. But the 10 games after were much better, specifically for the return game.

Here are Buckeye Sports Bulletin's final grades for Ohio State special teams.

Kicking Game

Junior Jayden Fielding had his fair share of issues in the first half of the season, namely the problem he had on Sept. 21 against Marshall when he booted three straight kickoffs out of bounds, allowing the Thundering Herd favorable field position.

Of course, in that game, it was not a big deal. Day gave him the opportunity to work through whatever might have been plaguing him – which was later revealed to be a minor hip injury – but senior Austin Snyder ultimately replaced him when it was obvious that it was going to keep happening.

But other than that, Fielding didn't get many opportunities. The Buckeye offense was so unstoppable that he was sent out for a field goal only three times in the first six games of the regular season, making two 40-yard tries (against Akron and Oregon) and a 30-yarder against Michigan State.

But the issues with field goals began after the off week following the loss to the Ducks, when Fielding was tasked with making a 42-yard field goal against Nebraska when the Buckeyes had a 14-3 lead in the second quarter.

From just inside the left hash mark, Fielding pushed the kick about 10 yards wide right, not coming close to extending the lead to two touchdowns. It was the only chance he had in the 21-17 win, but he was back to his usual reliable self for the next few games, helping earn a 20-13 win at Penn State with two makes.

But when Nov. 30 came around and the

Rating The Specialists

Here is where the OSU specialists ranked among the Big Ten and nationally through Jan. 20.

Category	Stats	NCAA	Big Ten
Net Punting	39.00	67th	13th
Punt Return Avg.	8.50	59th	10th
KO Return Avg.	10.20	132nd	17th
Punt Return Def.	6.45	55th	4th
KO Return Def.	16.00	9th	3rd

Buckeyes' offense was stalled by Michigan, Fielding had three chances. He made a 29-yard attempt on OSU's first drive of the game but missed a 38-yarder in the second quarter when the Wolverines had a 7-3 lead.

In the third quarter, after Caleb Downs intercepted a pass to give the Buckeyes great field position, the offense couldn't get anything going again, setting Fielding up for a 34-yard chip shot that he missed as well.

With two misses in a 13-10 loss to a Michigan team over which Ohio State was favored by 20 points, Fielding faced a large amount of blame from fans for the loss. It became more of a question whether Day trusted Fielding to kick with the offense opting to go for it on fourth down all season, many of those attempts with more than just a few yards to gain, and while Fielding had to prove he still deserved his spot, Day said he still trusted him.

"I think his teammates have been good in terms of support and knowing that we wouldn't have put him in the game if we didn't trust him," Day said prior to the College Football Playoff. "He also knows that he's got to do his job. Everyone's got to do their job around here, and it's very important to win the games that everyone does their job. His job is to make field goals and so he's got to have a good day today, and Austin will be right in there too."

His lack of range also became obvious, having never made a kick longer than 46 yards this season, and when he got the chance for a 56-yarder right before halftime against Tennessee, the ball barely made it to the front of the end zone before it hit the ground.

However, he made two kicks against Oregon in the Rose Bowl and came through in the national championship as well, going 2 for 2 while nailing a 33-yarder with 26 seconds remaining to secure the title win for the Buckeyes. There were some bright spots, but there is a lot of room for improvement.

Overall on kickoffs, the Buckeyes had 74 touchbacks, keeping the ball out of the hands of the returners, a big positive for Fielding, and were tied for ninth in the country with just 16.0 yards allowed per return. But the missed kicks in big moments really hurt the grade for the second half.

BSB Midterm Grade: B-

BSB Second-Half Grade: C

BSB Final Grade: C+

Punting Game

The Buckeyes had a new punter this season with Joe McGuire ending up getting the nod over 6-7 freshman Nick McLarty, who going into the season was supposed to give Ohio State an elite leg on special teams.

"Going into last week, I felt like Nick was ahead of Joe," Day said after the season opener against Akron when McGuire trotted onto the field for a punt despite McLarty being named

the starter in the week leading up to the contest. "Joe had a much better week of practice leading up to (the game). We felt like Joe's experience in the program, being here for a year, was better. We wanted to go with the experienced guy in Week 1."

McLarty ended up getting only two tries the entire season, with a 35-yard boot against Western Michigan and a 30-yarder against Marshall in the next game. He never saw the field after that, and at one point was even removed from the travel roster with Anthony Venneri taking his spot, though McLarty did make his way back onto the travel team.

The Buckeyes finished the season 67th in the country in net punting with 39.0 yards per punt on 49 kicks, with McGuire getting 47 of those, only three of them touchbacks and 14 inside the 20-yard line.

Meanwhile, former Buckeye punter Jesse Mirco, who transferred to Vanderbilt last off-season, helped the Commodores finish 13th in the country in that same metric with 42.2 yards per kick on 51 tries, putting 21 of his inside the 20. He was named a first-team All-SEC selection after the season.

McGuire averaged 42.1 yards per kick, a slight improvement from the first half of the season but a far cry from Mirco's 48.0-yard average on his kicks, second in the country. If McGuire had qualified to be ranked – punters must kick a minimum of 3.6 punts per game and play in 75 percent of the team's games – he would have slotted in at 52nd in the country.

There were times when McGuire gave opposing offenses better field position than he could have, but there were also no major issues that he caused which put the Buckeyes in a position to lose games.

Ultimately, McGuire was perfectly competent at the position, but at Ohio State, the standard is not competence.

The Buckeyes were also average when it came to punt-return defense, ranking 55th in the country for giving up 6.5 yards per return.

BSB Midterm Grade: C-

BSB Second-Half Grade: C+

BSB Final Grade: C

Return Game

One area that had the most obvious improvement was punt returns. At the beginning of the season, Day guaranteed a return for a touchdown just two days before the first game against Akron, and it seemed like Brandon Inniss, who started the year with the job, would get there at some point, coming close to breaking free multiple times in the first few games.

But that momentum slowed heavily after four returns for 60 yards against the Zips, earning just 49 yards on returns in the next five games combined. Through that stretch, changes were made and multiple others got opportunities as well.

It had been since Nov. 22, 2014, that the Buckeyes returned a punt for a touchdown, and just after the 10-year anniversary of Jalin Marshall's touchdown against Indiana, Caleb Downs caught a bouncing punt and weaved his way through a Hoosier return defense for a 79-yard score to end that streak on Nov. 23, 2024.

"Give Caleb all the credit he deserves," Day said after the Indiana win. "I felt like we had a chance to return it based on what had happened earlier in the game if the jammers gave us a chance. The punt was a little short, and I

said, 'Ah, here we go again,' because we've had a lot of short punts. It bounced off the turf, and Caleb decides he's going to return it. He made a few guys miss and then made just a great effort on that play to go turn good into great. A game-changing play."

"There was no doubt that I was going to field it," Downs said of his score. "There was space there, and everybody did a really good job blocking on the punt-return unit. And we talked about it all week that we had a real opportunity to do it this week. Just a true blessing from God to be able to put it in the end zone."

There were also major improvements made in terms of getting to the opposing punter. There were three straight games in which the Buckeyes had either a blocked punt or were able to take advantage of a botched snap, the latter one also occurring against Indiana when Caden Curry brought down Hoosiers punter James Evans for a 23-yard loss that set the offense up at Indiana's 7-yard line a quarter before Downs' return.

The previous two also involved Curry, where he first blocked a Purdue punt that caused a turnover on downs and an eventual Will Howard rushing score and then hurried Northwestern punter Hunter Renner after a botched snap, causing the attempt to be blocked by David Adolph, setting the Buckeyes up at the 1-yard line for an eventual Quinshon Judkins touchdown.

"When you're in the special teams' meetings every day and putting the work in that these guys are putting in, it's a great example to the other players that you might not see the results, but if you trust the process, good things are going to happen," Day said of those special teams impact plays. "Now we've had three weeks in a row a punt block and now a punt return for a touchdown. Those are big plays in matchup games. Those are the things we have got to have."

That punt return defense also showed up in the national championship when Notre Dame attempted to fake a punt and was unable to complete a pass, giving the Buckeyes great field position while up by three touchdowns already.

One area where there wasn't an improvement, and the Buckeyes actually got much worse, was in kickoff returns. Out of 133 teams in the FBS, Ohio State was 132nd with just 10.2 yards per return on 15 tries, falling from 19.9 per return on 13 attempts last season (67th).

Many different returners were given a chance with Emeka Egbuka, Inniss, TreVeyon Henderson and Jayden Ballard rotating through with a few others, but none of them were able to find the answer.

There is something to be said about the kick return game not doing much harm, only taking 11 kicks back and either allowing touchbacks or calling for a fair catch on the rest, which is a good thing when they aren't doing well on returns.

The punt return and the blocked punts can make up for a lot of negatives in the kickoff-return game since improvements were promised, and big ones were made throughout the year.

BSB Midterm Grade: D+

BSB Second-Half Grade: A

BSB Final Grade: B

OSU Defense Dominant In Championship Run

By **BOBBY GORBETT**

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

At the midway point of the season, Ohio State's defense appeared to be a talented unit in search of an identity.

Coming off of a 32-31 loss to Oregon on Oct. 12 in which the Buckeyes gave up nearly 500 yards of total offense and failed to sack Heisman trophy finalist quarterback Dillon Gabriel, many of the leaders of the Buckeyes' championship run – including cornerbacks Davison Igbinosun and Denzel Burke, defensive ends Jack Sawyer and J.T. Tuimoloau and especially former defensive coordinator Jim Knowles – were all under fire from the media and Ohio State's fan base.

Instead of getting discouraged, though, the Buckeyes went to work to make improvements, and not long after the loss to the Ducks, Knowles' unit saw progress.

In an early-November top-five matchup against Penn State – the team for which Knowles now serves as defensive coordinator after leaving the Buckeyes on Jan. 26 – the Ohio State defense allowed only two field goals and 270 yards in a 20-13 win. The Buckeyes then looked like one of the most disruptive units in all of college football three weeks later when they allowed only 151 yards in a 38-15 win over an eventual playoff team in Indiana on Nov. 23.

Head coach Ryan Day described it as a “re-engineering” process that helped the Buckeye defense go from a liability in the Oregon loss to one of the best units in the country, but according to Knowles the improvements were as simple as alignment.

“It's just a process of going back to the basics,” Knowles said on Nov. 5 about adjustments his team made after the Oregon game. “Things got out of whack in that game somewhat, and we just tried to give the players every chance to succeed. For me, it's all about going back to the basics.”

“You can get yourself out of whack sometimes trying to match people up and get everybody in the right places and be perfect. We realized it's more important just to have guys with their feet set and ready to play when the ball is snapped.”

Although Knowles' unit worked out the kinks to return to its dominant form after the Oregon game, the Buckeyes weren't done facing adversity this season.

One week following the blowout win of Indiana, Ohio State suffered a devastating defeat to archrival Michigan. The Buckeyes weren't perfect defensively, but they gave up only 234 total yards, meaning another re-engineering process wouldn't be necessary.

Instead, the Buckeyes picked up right where they left off in the College Football Playoff, and after stifling Tennessee's offense in round one at home on Dec. 21, Knowles' defense helped avenge the midseason loss in the 41-21 win over Oregon in the Rose Bowl on New Year's Day by holding the Ducks to just 276 total yards and sacking Gabriel eight times.

Two more strong outings later and the Buckeyes' defense not only became national champions but the nation's top unit in the country in terms of scoring defense (12.9 points allowed per game) and total defense (254.6 yards allowed per game).

Rating The Defense

Here is where the OSU defense ranked among the Big Ten and nationally through Jan. 20.

Category	Stats	NCAA	Big Ten
Rushing Defense	87.6	3rd	2nd
Passing Defense	167.0	3rd	2nd
Total Defense	254.6	1st	1st
Scoring Defense	12.9	1st	1st
Sacks/Game	3.31	3rd	1st
Third-Down Def.	35.1	30th	4th

Defensive Line

Much like the 2023 season, Ohio State's star-studded defensive line truly caught its stride late in the season.

The Buckeye pass-rushers weren't necessarily nonexistent but were quieter than some fans may have hoped early in the season, and that was made evident during the midseason Oregon game when Gabriel was not only not sacked but rarely bothered.

Those pass-rushing woes continued in the ensuing weeks, when Sawyer and Tuimoloau combined to record only 2½ sacks from the Oregon game through the Northwestern game on Nov 16.

Like the rest of the defense, though, the Buckeye pass-rushers peaked at the right time.

Sawyer and Tuimoloau, playing at their highest level in Buckeye uniforms, combined for 11 sacks in Ohio State's four playoff wins.

Sawyer and Tuimoloau's combined sack total was as many as any other team had in the entire playoffs – Penn State had 11 sacks in its three CFP games – and as a team, the Buckeyes forced 18 sacks.

For the season, Tuimoloau finished tied for fifth in the country in total sacks with 12½ while Sawyer wasn't far behind with nine sacks, which had him in a tie for 20th.

Of course, looking back now it seems normal that the supremely talented Sawyer and Tuimoloau would both find themselves among the nation's leaders in sacks, but few would have guessed the five-stars would be so productive after that quiet performance against Oregon.

According to Knowles, it wasn't just the edge rushers who deserved the credit for the increased production.

“I think we've disguised our coverages better and been able to put them in better situations to execute the pass rush,” Knowles said on Jan. 14 before the national championship. “But they've been great. In my mind they've been great, and they're always doing their job. Sometimes the numbers don't show that. But it's nice as a coach to be able to see them get their due.”

As Knowles pointed out, the pass-rushing numbers for defensive linemen often don't tell the full story of just how impactful they are on the field, and at least in October for Sawyer, that was the case.

After a couple of close calls in the Buckeyes' previous games, Sawyer registered a season-high three quarterback hurries in Ohio State's win over Northwestern but didn't have a sack.

“It definitely is frustrating,” Sawyer said when asked after the game about his lack of sack production. “But the plays are going to come. We're not worried about that. We know

that we're going to make that tackle nine times out of 10, and for whatever reason that's not happening. We don't know why yet. So you just have to keep playing, keep trusting the guy (next to you).”

Sawyer's trust in the process paid off more than anyone could have imagined. Not only did the sack numbers come in droves, but the Pickerington, Ohio native solidified himself as a Buckeye legend with an iconic interception in the Michigan game and made arguably the play of the season with a strip-sack and subsequent 83-yard game-sealing scoop-and-score in the Buckeyes' 28-14 win over Texas at the Cotton Bowl on Jan. 10.

Rotational edge rushers such as Caden Curry and Mitchell Melton weren't used as much toward the end of the season as they were at the beginning of the season – perhaps prompting Melton to transfer to Virginia one day after the national championship – but the former still came up with a sack in Ohio State's Rose Bowl win.

Curry, who will likely be expected to take on a much bigger role in 2025, had a very solid season as a backup player, finishing the year with 2½ sacks and 22 total tackles (3½ for loss) along with two forced fumbles.

Of course, the Buckeyes' high-flying defense couldn't have been the reliable unit it was down the stretch of the season without its veteran interior defensive linemen. Ty Hamilton and Tyleik Williams may have been lost in the shadow of Sawyer and Tuimoloau during the CFP, but both players played a significant role in stopping opposing teams' run games.

The Buckeyes allowed only 60.0 rushing yards per game in the playoff on less than 2 yards per tote.

It wasn't a perfect season for the Buckeye interior defensive linemen. Against Michigan, most of the little offensive production the Wolverines managed came on the ground, with the Maize and Blue totaling 172 yards on 42 attempts (4.1 average).

Those struggles were headlined by a 27-yard carry by Michigan tailback Kalel Mullings that had Hamilton miss the tackle at the line of scrimmage, allowing Mullings to scamper down to Ohio State's 17-yard line to set up an eventual game-winning field goal.

Hamilton recovered in the playoff, however, totaling 11 tackles (two for loss) and a sack in those four games. The Pickerington Central product finished the season with career-high totals of 51 tackles and 3½ sacks.

Williams didn't boast career-high numbers like Hamilton, but he still earned All-Big Ten honorable mention by totaling 46 tackles (eight for loss) and 2½ sacks.

BSB Midterm Grade: B

BSB Second-Half Grade: A+

BSB Final Grade: A

Linebackers

The easiest way to evaluate Ohio State's 2024 linebacker play is to break it up into three responsibilities.

As blitzers and run stoppers, graduate Cody Simon and junior Sonny Styles were two of the Buckeyes' most reliable defenders. The two players were the only ones on the team to reach the 100-tackle threshold by the end of the season – Simon leading the team with 112 tackles (12½ tackles for loss) and Styles recording 100 stops (10½ for loss) – and they

each also ranked among the team's leaders in sacks, Simon with seven and Styles with six.

Their contributions in the run game and as disruptors generating tackles for loss cannot be overstated, but for a defense that allowed very little offensive production late in the season, both of their shortcomings as pass defenders were noticeable in the postseason.

Although most of the plays occurred after Ohio State grabbed a virtually insurmountable 34-0 lead, Simon and Styles were often the target of the Ducks' pass attempts in the Rose Bowl, where Gabriel used the Buckeyes' vulnerability in short-to-intermediate pass coverage to score 15 straight points.

Styles – who was in his first year playing linebacker this season after making the transition from safety during the offseason – was again a target as a pass defender one week later when he couldn't keep up with Texas running back Jaydon Blue on a wheel route late in the first half, leading to an 18-yard passing touchdown from Quinn Ewers that tied the score at 7.

In the national championship game, it was Simon who conceded a couple of completions toward the middle of the field as Notre Dame attempted a late comeback.

At least for Simon, though, another element of his game makes up for some of his issues in pass coverage.

As the green-dot wearer, Simon received play calls from Knowles before every play through his helmet and distributed it to the rest of the defense. Acting as a quasi-quarterback of the defense, he was tasked with making sure every player on the field was where he was supposed to be, which, according to Knowles, was one of his strengths.

“He's playing great,” Knowles said of Simon days before Ohio State's matchup against Texas. “He's in all the right spots, making checks from the defense. He understands how I think. We've been together three years. It's easy for me to say something to him and he can change it on the spot.”

Perhaps the biggest surprise was the lack of playing time received by other linebackers in the second half of the season. Sophomore linebacker Arvell Reese seemed poised to make a splash as a rotational player defensively in the Buckeyes' 4-3 formation early in the year, when he recorded 17 tackles (two for loss) during his first five games.

But as the season went on, Knowles stuck with his reliable 4-2-5 alignment, limiting Reese's playing time and production. Regardless, Reese still finished the season with 43 total tackles, including 3½ for loss.

2024 was also a disappointing season for junior C.J. Hicks, who – after being in the running for the starting Will linebacker position with Styles during fall camp – recorded just 22 tackles and two sacks this year. Knowles previously indicated that he might consider moving Hicks to defensive end, but with the coordinator now headed to Penn State, the junior's impact on the team next season is unclear.

Midterm grade: B

Second-half grade: A-

Final Grade: A-

Cornerbacks

There were certainly some bumps in the road for Ohio State's cornerbacks, but they ended the year as a reliable unit in Knowles'



SONNY BROCKWAY

A Sterling D — Linebacker Cody Simon (0) was integral to Ohio State shutting down some of the best teams in the country during the postseason run. He was joined in celebrating a tackle in the CFP championship game against Notre Dame by defensive end Kenyatta Jackson Jr. (97), safety Lathan Ransom (8) and cornerback Jordan Hancock (7).

and Tim Walton's secondary.

Back in October, there was plenty of reason for concern about the Buckeyes' cornerbacks. As much as the defensive linemen struggled in the loss to Oregon, it's hard to argue any player played worse than senior cornerback Denzel Burke.

The former first-team All-Big Ten honoree was routinely targeted by Gabriel in the mid-season matchup, and time after time Burke failed to make a play, giving up a pair of touchdowns to Ducks wideouts Tez Johnson and Evan Stewart.

Junior cornerback Davison Igbinosun had his issues too. The former Ole Miss transfer — who is returning for his senior season in 2025 — ended the season with 16 penalties committed, which was the most by any cornerback in college football.

On the inside, senior nickel Jordan Hancock was arguably the most consistent of the Buckeyes' starting cornerbacks, but even he allowed a 30-yard touchdown pass from Notre Dame quarterback Riley Leonard to wideout Jaden Greathouse in the fourth quarter of the national championship game that put the Irish within one score of the Buckeyes.

In short, all of the Buckeye cornerbacks had their issues at points in the season, but one saving grace in the second half of the year was the emergence of redshirt freshman cornerback Jermaine Mathews Jr.

Starting the year as a depth player next to fellow cornerback Lorenzo Styles Jr., Mathews worked his way up to becoming a player of importance for Knowles.

"He's been getting in there more, and we consider him a starter kind of like Cody Simon was for the first two years I was here," Knowles said on Dec. 27. "He's that next guy, but we can put him in the game at any time, and if anything happens, he can play the whole game."

As it turned out, Mathews' opportunity came one game later when Burke got banged up in the first half of the Texas game. The often-brash sophomore took his opportunity well and rarely stepped out of line while the

Buckeye defense allowed only seven points in the last 30 minutes of the game.

One of Mathews' faults in his time on the field against Texas was he was one of three players in the secondary to commit a penalty. His pass-interference penalty set up Texas at the 1-yard line on first-and-goal late in the fourth quarter, but Sawyer's play a few downs later likely made Buckeye fans quick to forgive and forget the young cornerback's slip-up.

Perhaps the hope now for the Buckeyes in 2025 is that Mathews doesn't deal with the same penalty issues Igbinosun did.

Igbinosun is naturally a physical, handsy cornerback, meaning at least some penalties are to be expected. Knowles didn't want that style of play to change even after some penalty concerns flared up during the middle of the season.

"I still want him to play physical," Knowles said on Oct. 29. "I just want the finish to be different, and we have to find ways to help him."

Knowles' attempted solution to fix that problem — to make him wear gloves in practice before the Penn State game — didn't really fix that problem.

Three weeks following a great performance against the Nittany Lions, where Igbinosun made an acrobatic interception before halftime, he was flagged for three pass-interference penalties against Indiana.

The issue lingered all the way into the College Football Playoff, where he committed three combined penalties in his last two games, including two in the national championship.

Igbinosun's penalties weren't ideal for the Buckeye defense, but a free 10 or 15 yards and a first down certainly beats chunk plays and touchdowns.

To the credit of the Buckeyes' secondary, the unit banded together after that dreadful performance against Oregon and rarely allowed big plays the rest of the season even against other good teams. They didn't allow another passing touchdown until their second game against the Ducks. That's a seven-game stretch without a passing score, an impressive

feat that was in large part due to the cornerbacks doing their jobs.

During that stretch, the Buckeyes held All-Big Ten quarterback Kurtis Rourke to only 68 passing yards when he and the Hoosiers traveled to Columbus. They then sought revenge on Gabriel in the Rose Bowl and let him throw for just 299 passing yards, much of that production coming after Ohio State took a huge lead.

Ewers arguably had the best performance against Ohio State's defense down the stretch of the season, throwing for 283 yards and two touchdowns, but even he struggled to find a rhythm in much of the first half of that game and completed 59.0 percent of his passes with a late-game interception on the night.

Each of these performances contributed to the Buckeyes finishing the season as the third-ranked passing defense in the country, allowing only 167.0 yards per game.

The cornerbacks also made their presence felt in the run game. Burke and Hancock both registered 48 tackles on the season, while Igbinosun recorded 45 stops and Mathews finished the season with 22 tackles.

Lorenzo Styles also added 16 tackles along with four pass breakups, answering the call when his number was called throughout the year.

Midterm Grade: C+
Second-Half Grade: A
Final Grade: B+

Safeties

Ohio State's 2024 safety duo of sophomore Caleb Downs and senior Lathan Ransom were not just one of the best pairings in college football, but arguably among the best in the recent history of the sport.

Downs, perhaps the Buckeyes' most-anticipated addition over the offseason, somehow lived up to the expectations bestowed upon him before the 2024 season.

In his first year with the Buckeyes, the former Alabama transfer finished the season with 81 total tackles (7½ for loss), intercepted two passes and tallied six pass breakups.

These stats allowed him to be named the Big Ten's Tatum-Woodson Defensive Back of the Year and become the Buckeyes' 34th different unanimous All-American.

When asked to describe Downs' overall play this season, Knowles was quick to point out his exceptional instincts and timing, traits that are a product of him putting in a significant number of hours in the film room.

"That's just who he is," Knowles said of Downs' timing Jan. 19. "He is exceptional. He makes those plays all the time. And they show up. It's because he's very talented, but he also studies and recognizes the play before it happens."

"When you can be a player of his talent who also has the kind of work ethic that he has and preparation, you see things and you're able to react even faster. So, (he's) very skilled but also a great student of the game, too."

Coming in as the reigning SEC Freshman of the Year at Alabama, Downs' first few games as a Buckeye were slightly underwhelming. The former five-star didn't do anything wrong early on, but he also didn't necessarily have the impact some fans expected.

But by the end of the year, the amount of clutch tackles Downs made to save long gains or touchdowns were hard to keep track of, especially considering how few tackles he actually missed.

Even Knowles wasn't sure how Downs is so good at tackling in the open field when he was asked about it before the national championship.

"I don't know if I have an answer to that," Knowles said. "Great players make great plays. You just can count on them in those critical situations. And he's shown it time and time again."

Somehow, Ransom was able to make close to as much impact as Downs did. Finishing the year with 76 tackles (nine for loss), two pass breakups, one interception, one sack and a 27-yard fumble recovery for a touchdown, Ransom was one of the Buckeyes' most reliable playmakers. He also served as a key leader for Ohio State's secondary with 41 games under his belt heading into the season.

Perhaps the perfect encapsulation of the importance of the Buckeyes' starting safeties came in the fourth quarter of the Cotton Bowl when the Longhorns were closing in on a game-tying touchdown with the ball at the Ohio State 1-yard line on second-and-goal.

On the play, Texas tried the perimeter of Ohio State's defense with a pitch play, but Downs was ready for it, got into the backfield, and forced Texas running back Quintrevion Wisner to lose momentum. Downs couldn't quite bring him down, but his partner in crime, Ransom, was there to tackle Wisner for a 7-yard loss to bring up a third-and-long scenario and set up the Sawyer scoop-and-score.

The Buckeyes didn't stray far from the pairing of Downs and Ransom much this season. Freshman safety Jaylen McClain was usually the first safety off the bench when games became blowouts, appearing in eight games and recording 15 tackles (one for loss) and a pass breakup. Sophomore Malik Hartford was also used sparingly and earned eight tackles and a PBU.

Midterm grade: A
Second-Half Grade: A+
Final Grade: A+

Fourth Straight Loss to U-M Tops 2024 Stories

By CAMERON MOONE
Special To Buckeye Sports Bulletin

Another 366 days (leap year in 2024) meant another year chock full of championships, heartbreak and record-breaking moments. With a bitter fourth straight loss to archrival Michigan in football and a second national championship in three seasons for women's ice hockey, 2024 was intriguing for sports at Ohio State.

Wide receiver success and a failed quest for vengeance that ultimately paid off with a national championship as well as women's hoops madness and new leadership within the Buckeyes' athletic department all highlight some of the top moments from the past year in Columbus.

The Buckeyes winning their first playoff game against Tennessee played on Dec. 21 was included on this list, but since the rest of the playoff wins happened in the calendar year of 2025, they will be included in next year's top stories.

The following moments are the most notable stories from 2024 as voted on by the Buckeye Sports Bulletin staff.

1. OSU Loses Fourth Straight To U-M, Postgame Brawl Ensues

Following Ohio State's heartbreaking loss in 2023 to a top-heavy Michigan team, a Wolverine squad that went on to hoist the national championship trophy about seven weeks later, many Buckeye fans expected their team to finally snap the losing skid to their archrival.

After all, Michigan lost 13 players to the NFL draft, including offensive stars in quarterback JJ. McCarthy and running back Blake Corum as well as standout defenders such as cornerback Mike Sainristil and Junior Colson. The losing skid, a streak that dated back to Ohio State's last win in 2019 because the 2020 edition of The Game was canceled, was surely set to end in 2024, most Buckeye fans thought.

Michigan dropped its second game of the season to then-No.3 Texas in Ann Arbor and had not-so-pretty results against Fresno State in the season opener (30-10 win) and Arkansas State on Sept. 14 (28-18 win). The Buckeyes came out of the gates firing throughout the season, slipping up only against then-No.3 Oregon by one point in Eugene, Ore., on Oct. 12.

But then the unthinkable happened. As nearly 21-point favorites, the Buckeyes fell to Michigan 13-10 in Columbus, marking the fourth straight season of heartbreak on the last Saturday of November and knocking the Buckeyes out of a spot in the Big Ten Championship Game, also for the fourth straight year.

As inexplicable as the loss was, many figured that a different outcome was in play had the Buckeyes not run the ball into the teeth of Michigan's defense all game long. Second-half offensive woes ultimately cost Ohio State the game, and the lack of production from the Buckeyes' star-studded wide receiver corps, especially in the second half, didn't help much.

It wasn't just the loss that marked the disaster of a day for Ohio State. Much like former Buckeye head coach Earle Bruce



SONNY BROCKWAY

(UN)FORGETTABLE DAY — Michigan quarterback Davis Warren (16) rejoices as the final seconds tick away in the Wolverines' shocking 13-10 victory over the heavily favored Buckeyes in Ohio Stadium on Nov. 30.

called a 1988 loss to Indiana one of "the darkest days" in Ohio State history, that black cloud came back out after the game. With triple zeros on the clock, a host of Wolverines, including defensive end Derrick Moore, brought a flag in hand with the Michigan block "M" on it and galloped to midfield of Ohio Stadium with the hopes of planting the flag.

Ohio State defensive end Jack Sawyer, among other Buckeyes, had different plans in mind. Sawyer, a Pickerington, Ohio native, ripped the flag away from the midfield scrum before it was ultimately grabbed by a staffer on the field.

"They aren't f—ing planting a flag on our field again, bro," a heated Sawyer said on the field after the game. "F— that s—, man. F— these guys. Planting a flag on our field, f— you."

The brawl lasted for several minutes, many Michigan players were pepper-sprayed by police at the game, and the conflict served as an ugly final scene on a disappointing day. Although the loss lingered, it may have ultimately galvanized Ohio State to capture its first national championship since 2014.

2. Smith Shatters Freshman Receiving Records

Coming into Columbus as the consensus No. 1 overall recruit in the class of 2024, wideout Jeremiah Smith promised to be a great player at Ohio State, but it wasn't clear how quickly that would happen until spring practices began and word

started getting around that he was already a great player at the college level.

Smith's season got off to a rocky start, dropping his first target in scarlet and gray during Ohio State's season-opening 52-6 win over Akron on Aug. 31. Seemingly using that drop as motivation, the freshman quickly bloomed into a star right before Buckeye Nation's eyes, catching six passes for 92 yards and two touchdowns the rest of the way for quite the opening game for Smith's college career.

"I don't really feel pressure," Smith said after that game. "I just want to go out and play football and win games. I know all the hype around me was crazy coming in, and I just wanted to come in and be a guy, just work and just not be about all the hype. I mean, I just want to impress my coaches and impress my peers around me."

The Hollywood (Fla.) Chaminade-Madonna Prep product continued his strong start to the season, scoring a touchdown in each of the team's first seven games for a grand total of eight receiving touchdowns and one rushing score, the latter occurring in Ohio State's win at Michigan State on Sept. 28. Smith performed highlight-reel catches one after another, including a 17-yard touchdown on a one-handed grab against the Spartans and following up a week later with a single-hand snag for a score against Iowa on Oct. 5.

Smith used his strong 2024 regular season to catapult him into a postseason to remember, as the phenom freshman tallied 19 catches for 381 yards and five

touchdowns — highlighted by his seven-catch, 187-yard, two-touchdown performance against No. 1 Oregon in the Rose Bowl on New Year's Day.

While he was on his way to a national title win in his first year, he was also shattering Cris Carter's freshman receiving records. All in all, Smith wrapped up the 2024 campaign with a whopping 76 receptions, a team-leading 1,315 yards and 16 total touchdowns. His single-season receiving yards mark now ranks fourth all-time in Ohio State history, surpassing Marvin Harrison Jr's mark of 1,263 yards in 2022.

3. Ohio State Football Lands Major Transfers

Looking to bolster a team that lost only four players to the NFL draft — the fewest in 11 years — Ohio State added several key additions in the transfer portal over the offseason, a core group that proved to be crucial members of the 2024 national championship team.

There likely wasn't a bigger addition than former Alabama safety and All-American Caleb Downs, who came to Columbus on Jan. 19, 2024, after longtime Crimson Tide head coach Nick Saban announced his retirement.

It's not often that an incoming sophomore is the most sought-after athlete in the transfer portal, but Downs' production made it so. Having racked up 107 total tackles in 2023 at Alabama — the first freshman to lead the Crimson Tide in tackles dating back to at least 1970 — Downs continued his success in Columbus with another All-America season and tacked on the Tatum-Woodson Defensive Back of the Year, given to the best defensive back in the Big Ten.

The Hoschton, Ga., native poured in 81 tackles (7½ for loss) and two interceptions. He also had Ohio State's first punt-return touchdown since 2014 when he had a 79-yard return against Indiana on Nov. 23.

Former Kansas State quarterback Will Howard, who was once benched by the Wildcats and saw several seasons go to waste while playing limited time, arrived at Ohio State as an experienced quarterback. He left a national champion.

Howard was as efficient as they come through the air, breaking the Ohio State record for passing completion in a season (73.0 percent) while throwing for 4,010 yards and 35 touchdowns to 10 interceptions.

Coming off back-to-back seasons being in the top two in rushing yards in the SEC, former Ole Miss running back Quinshon Judkins had a big billing to fulfill. It wasn't just that Judkins was a superstar in Oxford, Miss., it was the added fact that he was going to have to share carries with senior back TreVeyon Henderson. Adding Judkins could not have worked out better for the Scarlet and Gray.

He had a relatively quiet regular season, at least by his standards, having totaled 805 rushing yards through the team's first 12 games of the season. However, he finished his season with a strong playoff run.

Ohio State also relied on Rimington

THE YEAR IN REVIEW

Award winner and Alabama transfer center Seth McLaughlin, whose season ended during a Nov. 19 practice after suffering a torn Achilles.

But McLaughlin served as an important leader for the offensive line that dealt with its own adversity throughout the season, helping the front five improve into the playoffs.

4. Holtmann Fired, Interim Diebler Promoted To Full-Time

Chris Holtmann, who had served as the head coach for Ohio State men's basketball since the 2017-18 season, was fired by the Buckeyes on Valentine's Day in 2024, a sour ending to what had been a strong start for the coach.

Holtmann's firing likely resulted from a string of poor Januarys and Februarys and a lack of success in the postseason. After Ohio State went a combined 47-30 over the months of January and February during Holtmann's first five seasons, the Buckeyes strung together just six wins over the next two seasons under Holtmann in those same months, including a 1-14 stretch in early 2023.

Postseason woes also plagued Holtmann. Ohio State won only three games in the NCAA Tournament while missing the event the final full season under Holtmann – and it was on pace to miss it before his firing in 2024. None of those March heartbreakers were worse than when the Buckeyes held a No. 2 seed and fell to the 15th-seeded Oral Roberts 75-72 in March 2021, effectively marking the beginning of the end for Holtmann in Columbus.

Holtmann's firing came as a surprise to even him and was an all-around tough decision for the Ohio State athletic department, with athletic director Gene Smith having only months left before he retired.

"I just felt like looking at the last few games that this team needed different leadership, so I made the change," Smith said after Holtmann's firing. "I felt like at this particular time with six regular-season games left and a Big Ten Tournament and whatever the postseason brings, a spark of energy was needed. It's about the program in the end, and I have to set aside my personal feelings and go with what's best for the program."

Holtmann's replacement was his staffer Jake Diebler, a Valparaiso graduate and Ohio native who got his baptism by fire when he was tasked with taking on then-No. 2 Purdue in Columbus. The motivated Buckeyes shocked the college basketball world when they took down the Zach Edley-led Boilermakers 73-69, giving Diebler his first win as a head coach in his first game.

Diebler was promoted to full-time head coach on March 17 after a strong 6-2 finish to the season, which the Buckeyes parlayed into two wins in the NIT.

5. Seniors "Reload The Clip," Return For One More Year

After Ohio State's disheartening end to the 2023 season, in which the Buckeyes ended the campaign on a two-game skid with losses to then-No. 3 Michigan 30-24 in Ann Arbor followed by an ugly 14-3 Cotton Bowl loss to Missouri, there was a certain amount of doubt about the 2024 season.

That was until a slew of key contributors announced their return, such as Jack Sawyer, Tyleik Williams, TreVeyon Henderson and JT Tuimoloau, among many others.

The core members of the recruiting classes of 2020 and 2021 returned to Columbus in hopes of achieving three goals that had eluded them their entire collegiate careers: beat Michigan, win the Big Ten championship and win a national championship.

Sawyer was brief in his announcement to return on Jan. 5, 2024, posting just, "I'm back. #ReloadtheClip."

Also returning were linebacker Cody Simon, cornerbacks Denzel Burke and Jordan Hancock, safety Lathan Ransom, defensive tackle Ty Hamilton, wide receiver Emeka Egbuka and offensive lineman Donovan Jackson, all of whom had witnessed their college careers to that point go about as quietly as possible by Ohio State standards.

Now, even more than usual, they had plenty of expectations on their shoulders heading into the 2024 season. The Buckeyes had brought in a host of key transfers and were expected to cash in all of their chips in the hopes of achieving all three goals set out every year for the team.

6. Ohio State Quiets Vols Fans, Turns Season Around Against UT

In the weeks after the stunning loss to Michigan on Nov. 30, 2024, it seemed that many Ohio State fans had seen enough of the 2024 team. They would undoubtedly still make the College Football Playoff, but making a four-game run didn't seem likely after the way they had looked against the Wolverines.

It was decided after the Buckeyes watched the Big Ten Championship Game from the outside looking in that they had earned the No. 8 seed in the expanded playoff system and were set to host No. 9 Tennessee on Dec. 21, 2024, at Ohio Stadium for the first ever Buckeye playoff game in Columbus.

Although there was a slight buzz to the anticipated matchup against the Volunteers, it was quickly put to the wayside when Tennessee fans expressed their intent to "invade" the Horseshoe and instead of the usual scarlet and gray presence, there was to be checkered burnt orange and white dotting the seats.

Many Volunteer fans took their excitement to social media, both sharing their ease in getting presale tickets and overall elation toward the upcoming game.

"Good morning Vol Twitter," @VolFan4Life21 posted on Twitter on Dec. 11, 2024. "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."

Fans of Tennessee also added their thoughts on how easy it was to secure presale tickets, with the rather easy-to-guess code "OSUFB" being used for early access purposes. Bjork even chimed into the heavily anticipated presence of Rocky Top faithful.

"Don't sell your tickets," Ohio State athletic director Ross Bjork said on Dec. 13, 2024. "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."

Volunteer fans even went as far as renaming the field Neyland North on the navigation app Apple Maps and seemed to be somewhat successful when the game began, with much more orange in the stands of Ohio Stadium than any OSU fans expected there to be.

However, it quickly went south for the traveling fan base, and the Vols fans were sent back down South after they peeled out of the stadium early.

The Buckeyes jumped out to a 21-0 lead in the first quarter and ultimately won 42-17, giving all the juice and excitement about a potential national championship back to the fans.

"We called this game more aggressively," Ohio State head coach Ryan Day said after the game. "There's no question about that. But also, I think we did some things in this game that maximize what we have in terms of our strengths and minimize our deficiencies.

"We did have balance. We had some good runs, and those hit for us, which makes a big difference when you have that run, pass balance that we're looking for. So, this has got to continue. This has got to build momentum."

7. AD Smith Retires, Bjork Hired To Replace Him

Smith had become a staple of Ohio State athletics. Serving as the chief of the department since 2005, the Cleveland na-

tive had been a part of Ohio State sports for nearly 20 years when he stepped down in 2024. Smith had seen 14 wins over Michigan and oversaw a 2014 football national championship and 2022 women's ice hockey national championship among many other big wins.

Smith was set to step down in June 2024, but before that, a replacement had to be found to navigate the passing of the torch in Columbus. The athletic director who had been a mainstay announced his upcoming retirement on Aug. 9, 2023, and on Jan. 17, 2024, Bjork, the former Ole Miss and Texas A&M athletic director, was handed the keys to the program.

"I wasn't born and raised in Ohio, but I'm a product of Ohio," Bjork said when he was introduced last January. "For my family and myself, this is a surreal feeling to be standing up here."

Bjork, who was 51 at the time of his hiring, had been a part of Texas A&M's Name, Image and Likeness success, an effort that had the Aggies raise \$6.2 million during the 2022-23 athletic calendar, an impressive number in the early days of NIL.

The new athletic director's first task once in Columbus was replacing Holtmann, a decision that was made easy after Diebler finished the 2023-24 season on a high note.

Once Smith fully stepped down on July 1, Bjork became the man in charge, with the program seemingly reaping many benefits since then.

Continued On Page 20



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Women's Icers Win Second National Title

Continued From Page 19

Under Bjork, it is speculated that Ohio State football spent nearly \$20 million to keep its roster intact for the 2024 season – a process that likely wouldn't have been possible without Bjork's prior experience in NIL. Now a full year removed from his initial hiring, Bjork has a football national championship and women's ice hockey national crown under his belt and heads into year two of his tenure as BSB went to press.

8. Women's Ice Hockey Wins Second National Championship

It wasn't just success on the gridiron for Ohio State athletics in the 2024 season. The Ohio State women's ice hockey team captured its second national championship in three seasons on March 24 with a 1-0 victory of rival Wisconsin in Durham, N.H.

There were big expectations for the Buckeyes heading into the 2023-24 season, but those lofty goals were the result of a national runner-up spot in 2023 and the program's first title win the year before. Ohio State fell to that same Wisconsin team 1-0 in March 2023 and much like the football team did, many Buckeye skaters decided to reload the clip in the hopes of capturing a national title.

Key skaters such as forward Jenn Gardiner and Jenna Buglioni came back, but the Buckeyes also brought in a slew of freshmen and transfers, such as former Boston College standouts forward Hannah Bilka and defenseman Cayla Barnes as well as Penn State star forward Kiara Zanon.

There were the freshmen also, like forward Joy Dunne, who followed in the footsteps of her older sisters, Jincy and Jessica, in playing for Ohio State, as well as forward Jocelyn Amos.

All in all, it appeared the Buckeyes were the team to beat for the 2023-24 season. After a season-opening loss to No. 4 Colgate, Ohio State ripped off 13 straight wins and six straight sweeps of opponents. A Dec. 1, 2023, slip-up against St. Cloud State then catapulted the Buckeyes into another hot stretch that saw them win 16 straight games.

Heading into postseason play, the Buckeyes were the top-ranked team in the country and top-ranked group in Western Collegiate Hockey Association play, but they fell to Wisconsin in the WCHA Final Faceoff championship game 6-3 in Minneapolis. After that loss, the Buckeyes did not lose again, marching through the NCAA tournament with wins over WCHA foe Minnesota-Duluth (9-0), Clarkson in the NCAA semifinals (4-1) and over Wisconsin in the national championship game – a matchup that had Dunne score the game-winning goal at 12:48 in the third period.

The Buckeyes were an offensive juggernaut all season long, averaging 5.2 goals per game while scoring seven-plus goals 10 times throughout the season and holding opponents to just 1.3 goals per game.

Bilka led the team in total points with 48 and was second in goals, just behind Dunne's mark of 24 on the season. The freshman also won the Julie Chu National Rookie of the Year honor after her stand-out campaign, totaling 42 points with 18 assists while Barnes led all Buckeye blue-liners with 36 points (11 goals, 25 assists). Standout goaltender Raygan Kirk, who notched 22 wins on the season, was the WCHA goaltending champion, allowing an average of 1.02 goals per game while saving 94.5 percent of shots.

9. O'Brien Leaves, Kelly Hired As Offensive Coordinator

Bill O'Brien didn't spend too much time in Columbus after he was hired to be Ohio State's offensive coordinator on Jan. 18, 2024. Just three weeks into his tenure with the Buckeyes – a tenure during which he never coached a practice – O'Brien left the Buckeyes to become the next head coach at Boston College, much closer to his hometown of Dorchester, Mass.

O'Brien's absence was quickly filled, as mere hours later former UCLA head coach Chip Kelly was announced as the next offensive coordinator for the Buckeyes. Kelly brought with him 34 years of both college and professional coaching experience, many of those as a head coach. He led Oregon for three seasons, including to a 2011 national title game berth, and roamed the sidelines for both the Philadelphia Eagles (2013-2015) and San Francisco 49ers (2016) before his six-year stint with the Bruins.

Kelly's most recent stint before Columbus as the head coach in the City of Angels was up and down, with the Bruins going 10-21 in his first three seasons before posting a 25-13 record in his final three seasons. However, the ties were there for Kelly and Day.

Kelly was Day's offensive coordinator for three seasons when Day played quarterback for New Hampshire from 1998-

2001 and had Day on his staff at two NFL stops, including as the quarterbacks coach for the Eagles in 2015 and in the same position with the 49ers in 2016.

"For (Kelly) to come and leave the head coaching position, to come work with me, meant a lot, because he's obviously someone who's a mentor to me, and I certainly would not be where I am without him," Day said. "He has just a great feel for the game. He really helped me this year spend more time outside of the quarterback room. I was certainly involved very much with the offense, but he allowed me to spread out a little bit, spend more time with the guys on defense."

"I think it brought us all together. I think the guys would agree we wouldn't have got that done without Chip."

10. Wrestler Sasso Returns After Gunshot Injury

After Sasso's injury was featured in the 2023 edition of top-10 BSB stories in the No. 9 spot, Sasso's name returns on this list this season in a much more triumphant manner. The Buckeye wrestler made his debut after suffering a gunshot wound on Aug. 18, 2023, that derailed his life.

Sasso spent 41 days in the hospital after the shooting, which occurred outside a Kroger near Ohio State's campus, and returned to the team after his discharge from the hospital. Sasso spent the entire 2023-24 season off the mat, and once the 2024-25 season rolled around, he made his debut on Nov. 14, 2024, after nearly 20 months since his national-runner up spot in the 149-pound weight class in 2023.

"I feel good," Sasso said after his return, a 12-6 win over Chattanooga's Jackson Hurst at 165 pounds. "I feel good that I got the first one out of the way, definitely knocking some dust off. But I just felt good to be competing again and to be in front of a crowd."

Ohio State wrestling head coach Tom Ryan, who has been Sasso's coach his entire collegiate career, understood the magnitude of Sasso's return after an incident like the one he endured.

"I've been involved in this sport for a long time, and as an individual, winning is just so important," Ryan said after Sasso's return. "As much time as you put into it, it's like, 'I want to win the counties, I want to win the states, I want to win the nationals.' You've got this focus on winning as an individual, and, of course, as a coach, you're focused on winning as a team and winning championships. In the midst of that, there's amazing stories that occur."

"There's always amazing life moments that occur for each person along this journey, and tonight was amazing. It was one of the most impressive things I've ever witnessed."

Sasso has since posted a 12-6 record this season as BSB went to press, falling in his most recent match in the 157-pound class to top-ranked wrestler Jacori Teemer of Iowa by a decision of 10-5 on Jan. 25.

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Uncertainty Where Wilson, Fields Play In 2025

By **CRAIG MERZ**
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

With their NFL seasons over, former Ohio State players Garrett Wilson and Justin Fields have uncertain futures with their current teams heading into the offseason.

For Wilson, it has nothing to do with the wide receiver's performance with the New York Jets. In fact, he is coveted by many teams.

But Wilson's dissatisfaction at times with how he was used in the Jets' offense has led to speculation that he is seeking a way out, especially with the unknown future of aging quarterback Aaron Rodgers, who, if he stays, will be working with a new head coach (Aaron Glenn) and new general manager (Darren Mougey).

In the case of Fields, his one-year stint as quarterback of the Pittsburgh Steelers proved to be good and bad. He became the starter the first six games when Russell Wilson was injured then watched from the bench the remainder of the season as the Steelers reached the high of a 10-3 record and the low of four straight defeats to end the regular season followed by a first-round loss in the AFC playoffs to the Baltimore Ravens.

While Mike Tomlin remains the Steelers' coach, the organization must decide whether to go forward with the 36-year-old Wilson and/or Fields, 25, or start over at the most important position in the sport.

Jet Blue

Garrett Wilson, 24, this past season had career highs in receptions (101), yards (1,104) and touchdowns (seven) while becoming the fifth player in NFL history with 80 receptions and 1,000 yards in each of his first three seasons for the Jets (5-12).

"I'm always a performance-based person, as far as the team," he said. "And we didn't play to the standard we wanted to play at. I don't think I played to the standard I wanted to play at. But down the road here, I'm sure I'll look back and be proud that I have some benchmark numbers that I hit to go along with the rest of my career, and that's kind of the extent of it. Now, yeah, it's cool."

The Jets tried to take the defense's attention away from the No. 10 pick in the 2022 NFL draft by acquiring receiver Davante Adams. Rather than see him as competition, Wilson welcomed the opportunity to develop his mental approach.

"I think the cerebral side of it and just knowing things that are not just on game day, but practice week," he said of the acquisition. "Knowing how to manage your body, knowing what you're going to get, how to study film, and having someone like (Adams) in the room and seeing how he goes about his business. Definitely a year that I learned a lot, and it wasn't all for nothing. I feel like, regardless of what the stats would have said to finish, or how our record is, I took a lot away from this season, and I'll be better off."

Wilson wasn't the big-play threat in 2024 that he was in previous seasons with his longest catch being 42 yards. He had a 60-yard reception in his rookie season and a 68-yarder in 2023.

"Whatever it may be in downfield routes,



FILE PHOTO

QUITE A CATCH — Former Ohio State receiver Garrett Wilson would draw interest from many teams if the New York Jets decide to move him. The 2022 AP Offensive Rookie of the Year had career highs in receptions, yards and touchdowns in 2024.

that's what I want to do," he said. "That's what I feel like I do best. And I haven't been able to show that through my early part of my career. So, I don't want anyone to think it's because I can't. I have to prove it to myself that I'm still that person down the field that's going to catch more than he's not."

But all is not rosy with the Jets. Wilson and Rodgers have not been on the same page since a blowout during training camp.

Following a 19-9 loss to the Los Angeles Rams on Dec. 22, Wilson indicated he was not happy with his role even though he had six catches for 54 yards on seven targets.

"I'd like to be involved, love to make an impact on the game, but people see it differently," he said. "That's out of my control."

He was referring to becoming Rodgers' second favorite target after Adams arrived in Week 7.

From that point to the end of the season, Wilson had 87 targets with 60 catches for 705 yards and four TDs while Adams was targeted 114 times with 67 catches, 854 yards and seven TDs.

In fairness to Rodgers, he and Adams have connected since their days with the Green Bay Packers. They have 83 touchdowns, the third-most receptions between a quarterback and a wide receiver in NFL history.

Still, Jets interim head coach Jeff Ulbrich acknowledged after the Rams game that it was the staff's responsibility to get Wilson more touches.

"At the end of the day, we have to find ways to get Garrett the ball more often," Ulbrich said. "He's one of the best players on our team, if not one of the best players in this league, especially at his position. The progression, for a lot of different reasons from a coverage standpoint, took (Rodgers) off Garrett. But at the same time, we have to find ways to get him the ball for sure."

Wilson is eligible for a contract extension, and his career totals of 279 catches for 3,249 yards and 14 TDs make him a high-value player.

The Jets received calls from teams interested in trading for Wilson after Adams joined the team, but that was under the old regime. With a new coach and general manager in place, there may be different thoughts within the organization. And there's still the unknown if Rodgers will return.

That's why speculation abounds. The Behind The Steel Curtain publication thinks the Steelers could get Wilson and a third-round pick (No. 96) in exchange for the No. 21 pick.

The Chargers-centric LAFB views Wilson as their No. 3 offseason target to complement quarterback Justin Herbert.

Steel There?

Fields was traded to the Steelers on March 16, 2024, and nearly 11 months later the conversation centers on his future in Pittsburgh.

The former Ohio State signal caller (2019-20) spent three seasons with the Chicago Bears after being drafted 11th in the 2021 NFL draft. In 40 games (38 starts), Fields threw for 6,674 yards with 40 touchdowns and 30 interceptions while rushing for 2,220 yards and 14 scores.

He got the opportunity to be QB No. 1 for the Steelers after Russell Wilson was unable to play in the season opener because of a lingering calf injury.

Fields led the Steelers to a 4-2 record before Wilson returned to become the starter for the rest of the season. He went 6-6, including the playoff loss.

Wilson had a 64.1 percent completion rate for 2,752 yards (229.3 yards per game), 18 touchdowns and five picks. Fields completed 65.8 percent of his passes for 1,106 yards (110.63) with five touchdowns against one interception. Fields rushed for 289 yards and five TDs. Wilson ran for 155 yards and two scores.

Sports Illustrated's Albert Breer opined in his Jan. 12 column what the Steelers would do with Fields.

"Wilson and Fields are both free agents. Will either be back in Pittsburgh?" he wrote. "There was frustration with Wilson down the stretch, so I'm not sure how far the Steelers will be willing to go to keep him. Meanwhile, the team would love to keep working with Fields, but it might not be as a starter."

Names like Rodgers, Kirk Cousins and Sam Darnold have been mentioned as possible solutions to the quarterback dilemma.

Gerry Dulac of the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette believes Fields will be wearing black and gold next season.

"At this point, I believe Justin Fields will be re-signed," Dulac wrote. "But I don't think it will be anything crazy."

Tomlin on Jan. 14 gave Fields a vote of

confidence.

"I think he took (the right steps)," Tomlin said. "I thought that the way that he managed his professional circumstance was really impressive. I thought he brought an urgency to his day-to-day work regardless of his role. I thought he got continually better within our system, evolved throughout the process. I thought the way he conducted himself made that a legitimate thought or idea to the structure (of the quarterback room in 2025)."

Conversely, Fields might have suitors outside of Pittsburgh. Teams such as the Cleveland Browns, Las Vegas Raiders, New York Giants, the Jets and the New Orleans Saints could be in the market for a veteran like Fields who can either compete for the No. 1 spot or be a competent backup.

Wilson spoke to reporters on Jan. 13 while Fields politely refused to discuss his future. Wilson expressed a desire to remain with the Steelers although talks on a contract extension have not taken place.

"That's the plan," he said. "I love it here and everything else. I think we have a great football team. Obviously, it didn't end the way we wanted it to, and I think there's a lot more to do."

"I think they've known that I've always wanted to be here and play here, but it is also a process. We haven't had those meetings yet, so we will have those, and we'll go from there."

Tomlin seemed as unsure as everyone regarding what the team is planning.

"We don't have a quarterback under contract and so we have some major discussions there," he said. "I am certainly open to considering those guys, but there's a lot of work ahead of us."

"The major work obviously starts first and foremost with just understanding what our options are, what the field looks like in terms of free agency and what the draft pool looks like. Then, beginning the process in terms of decision making based on known variables."

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Smith Sulks, Then Leads Way To Stunning '04 Finish

Throughout the 2024 football season, with a respite for playoff action, *Buckeye Sports Bulletin* has been publishing historical stories from seasons ending in the numeral "4." In this issue we return to look back at the up-and-down 2004 season that eventually paved the way for a disgruntled backup quarterback to become a Heisman Trophy winner.

By **MARK REA**

BSB Managing Editor Emeritus

To say the Ohio State football program was in a state of flux in late September 2004 might have been a slight overexaggeration, but it wasn't that far from the truth.

The Buckeyes had followed their improbable 2002 national championship with a 2003 season overshadowed by a firestorm ignited by star running back Maurice Clarett. What could have been – and quite frankly should have been – a run to a second straight national title disintegrated into a season-long suspension for Clarett and allegations from the running back regarding improprieties into how head coach Jim Tressel ran his program with regard to academics.

However, by the fall of 2004, the dark clouds hovering over the Woody Hayes Athletic Center had begun to dissipate. Clarett had left the program in an attempt to challenge the NFL and its rule that a player must wait three years after graduating from high school to apply for the draft, but one disgruntled player was replaced by another.

Troy Smith had signed with Ohio State in 2001 as a highly regarded athlete out of the Cleveland Glenville pipeline that would produce talent for the Buckeyes well into the next decade and beyond. There were just two problems, however. Smith wanted to play quarterback, but the Buckeyes thought his athletic talents might be put to better use at another position. Plus, OSU had recruited another in-state high school quarterback in 2001, one who seemed destined for greatness.

Justin Zwick was considered "the next big thing" when he was setting records first at Orrville High School and later at Massillon Washington. In fact, according to the official 2003 Football Media Guide, Zwick was "probably the most highly regarded quarterback to enroll at Ohio State in four decades (only Rex Kern in 1967 and Art Schlichter in 1978 were as well-publicized)."

Once national championship QB Craig Krenzel had exhausted his college eligibility following the 2003 season, the program was ready for a battle between Zwick and Smith to become the starter in 2004. But Smith had an inkling that the race was being rigged against him.

Smith was acknowledged as the more athletic of the duo, and he seemed confident he would be able to win the starting job. The race seemed neck and neck during the spring of 2004 with whomever performed better during the annual spring game poised to have the edge heading into fall camp.

But the coaching staff decided to protect its quarterbacks during the scrimmage, requiring Zwick and Smith to don noncontact yellow jerseys, meaning the quarterbacks were off-limits to any kind of tackling. As a result, Smith felt hamstrung in that his strength – the added element of slash and dash that he brought to the position – was neutralized.



FILE PHOTO

BLUE BLOOD – Seeing the Michigan colors brought out the best in quarterback Troy Smith, here throwing a pass to Anthony Gonzalez. Smith won all three of his starts against the Wolverines, including racking up 386 total yards during the 37-21 win in 2004.

The yellow jerseys were gone by the time the final scrimmage of fall camp was held, and the combatants had nearly equal stats. Zwick completed 14 of 24 attempts for 114 yards and a touchdown while Smith had a 12-for-20 performance for 89 yards as well as a rushing touchdown.

Tressel adopted his usual noncommittal persona heading into the season, saying, "They both want to be our starting quarterback. I'd be disappointed if it were any other way."

When it came time for the Buckeyes to open their 2004 season, however, Zwick was under center for an eventual 27-6 victory against a Cincinnati team led by first-year head coach Mark Dantonio. Zwick finished the game with 213 yards and a touchdown through the air but committed three turnovers – a pair of interceptions and a fumble.

Smith, meanwhile, entered the game for the third offensive series – something that was clearly scripted by Tressel and quarterbacks coach Joe Daniels – and then didn't return until the last two possessions, which resulted in the final 10 points of the contest. Smith finished the game with just 29 yards and a touchdown through the air and a modest 7 yards rushing on five carries.

"It felt good to get in there and get a taste," Smith told reporters after the game. "Those last couple of drives was when I started getting a rhythm. I was just thankful to get some playing time and show what I could do."

"I made some mistakes, Justin made some mistakes – but we'll learn from them and continue to try and make one another better. I thought this was a good starting point for both of us."

That era of good feeling didn't last long.

'They Have Puppet Strings'

Smith received another scripted series the following week, entering the game against Marshall early in the second quarter with the

Buckeyes enjoying a 14-7 lead. This time, however, the sophomore QB presided over a quick three-and-out possession that consisted of two incomplete passes and a quarterback keeper that was stopped for no gain.

Zwick returned to the lineup on the next series and played the remainder of the game, a 24-21 win against the Thundering Herd that kicker Mike Nugent won with a 55-yard field goal on the final play. Zwick turned in the first (and ultimately only) 300-yard passing performance of his career, throwing for 324 yards and three touchdowns. But he completed only 18 of 30 attempts and pitched two critical fourth-quarter interceptions.

The following week, the Buckeyes were forced to rely upon Nugent again during a 22-14 win at rain-soaked North Carolina State. The OSU kicker tied a single-game program record with five field goals, bailing out a dismal offensive attack that saw the Buckeyes limited to just 137 total yards. It was the lowest total since a 23-7 loss to Michigan State in 1999 produced only 79 yards from scrimmage.

Zwick was just 10 for 21 through the air for 73 yards, and he was sacked twice. Smith never got off the bench, trudging back to the locker room drenched and silently seething. By the time the Buckeyes landed back in Columbus, he had decided to remain silent no longer.

During the open week between the win at North Carolina State and the Big Ten season opener at Northwestern, Smith aired his displeasure about a lack of playing time.

"As a human being, I'm not happy," he told reporters after the team's practice just four days before the conference opener. "I'm not going to sit here and say everything is peaches and cream, that I have no feelings, because this is my life."

"Ninety percent of the guys on the team, this is what they want to do after college. They want to go to the NFL and make some money and take care of their immediate families back

home – their mothers, their sisters and nieces and nephews. I'm not going to say they're playing with my life, but it's sort of like they have puppet strings."

The "they" to whom Smith referred was the Ohio State coaching staff and Tressel specifically. It was Tressel who had maintained since the spring that Zwick would likely start but that Smith would receive his share of playing time. But after three games, Zwick had attempted 77 passes while Smith had thrown only five. Meanwhile, Smith's playing time had steadily decreased from several series during the opener against Cincinnati to one against Marshall to none against N.C. State.

Smith said he had received no explanation from Tressel, Daniels or any assistant as to why Zwick had pulled so far ahead of him in the quarterback race.

"(Coach Tressel) hasn't told me anything," Smith said. "I know that they don't really owe us an explanation, but at the same time, if there's a situation where this guy isn't doing all the wrong things, then I think that something needs to be said."

"It's not like I'm going out missing reads and calling the wrong plays and things like that. I think that sometimes when it's a situation like that, something needs to be said."

Smith said he didn't want to become a problem, admitting frustration but adding that he wanted to do whatever was best for the team. But when pressed, he also admitted he believed he had merited more playing time.

When asked by reporters if he thought he had been given a fair shot at the starting position, Smith replied, "That's for you guys to decide. I really can't say anything on that because I don't want to put myself in a situation when I say this and then the repercussions of what I said to the media have something to do with my playing time or my future here, so that's for you to decide."

The following day, Tressel claimed he didn't

take time to read the comments made by Smith before adding he knew the basics of the statements. He said he felt it probably wasn't the best thing for the team but didn't believe it would become a distraction.

"We're all competitors here," the coach said. "I'd be angry if he wasn't a little upset. It was probably more a poor question and a poor answer because it didn't focus on Northwestern, which is what we need to do.

"But these things have a way of taking care of themselves. It's kind of like when a quarterback throws an interception and comes back and says he didn't see the safety. It's a learning experience, one that you need to go through to become a better person and a better player."

The next time reporters were able to visit with Smith, he was a bit more contrite.

"You have to roll with the punches," he said days later. "Everything is not given to every player all the time. Some players have to work hard. Obviously, I'm one of them, and I will continue to do that."

Whether or not Smith's comments served as any kind of distraction for the team, there is no denying what happened when the Buckeyes resumed their season after the week off. Northwestern outgained Ohio State by a 444-308 margin, Nugent uncharacteristically missed a 40-yard field-goal attempt in overtime, and the Wildcats scored a 33-27 upset victory, their first win against the Buckeyes in 33 years.

Smith again never got into the game, watching as Zwick completed just 18 of 38 pass attempts for 211 yards with one touchdown and one interception. He was also sacked four times, equaling the total he had been sacked in the previous three games combined.

Players downplayed Smith's comments, saying they had absolutely nothing to do with the loss.

"Distractions, off weeks, bulletin board stuff – none of that matters when you hit the field," OSU linebacker Bobby Carpenter said. "You have to carry out your assignments, tackle well and do your job. We didn't do that tonight."

The offensive deficiencies continued to manifest themselves when the Buckeyes returned home the following week to face an undefeated Wisconsin team. Ohio State raced out to a 10-0 lead after a 65-yard punt return from Ted Ginn Jr. and a 42-yard field goal from Nugent, but it was pretty much all Badgers after that as the visitors ran away with a 24-13 victory.

Wisconsin got a 168-yard rushing performance from tailback Anthony Davis, nearly twice what the Buckeyes got from their ground game. Antonio Pittman led OSU with 48 yards as his team totaled only 99 yards rushing, marking the fourth straight game in which the Buckeyes had failed to crack the century mark.

Zwick again went the entire way at quarterback, throwing 31 times for only 125 yards and getting sacked five times.

Through five games, Ohio State had a 3-2 record and had started the Big Ten season with two losses for the first time in 12 years. In those two conference games, the offense was averaging just 266.0 yards per game – just 98.0 of it on the ground – and Zwick was struggling with a 47.8 completion percentage (33 for 69) for 336 yards, one touchdown, one interception and nine sacks.

And just when things looked like they couldn't get any worse, they did.

Hitting Rock Bottom

Through the years, Iowa had typically been the medicine for whatever ailed the Buckeyes.

The Hawkeyes had counted only three victories and a tie in their last 33 meetings with Ohio State. But this was a different Iowa team – one that was on its way to a Big Ten co-championship – and it took no prisoners during a 33-7 win, its largest margin of victory ever against the Buckeyes, eclipsing a 35-12 win in 1960.

OSU managed only 27 yards rushing against a relentless Iowa defense that forced three turnovers and registered eight tackles for loss.

Meanwhile, Zwick completed only 6 of 14 attempts for 74 yards and an interception until he was knocked out of the game early in the third quarter. Attempting to get away from the Iowa rush, the QB was swarmed under, fumbled the ball away and gave the Hawkeyes possession at the Ohio State 30-yard line. Five plays later, Iowa scored a touchdown to make it 17-0.

Meanwhile, Zwick was on the sideline with team trainers and physicians assessing what was initially described as an injury to his throwing shoulder. When his team got the ball back, Tressel had no choice but to insert Smith into the lineup, and the sophomore responded with modest numbers that included eight pass completions on 12 attempts for 76 yards.

More importantly, though, Smith engineered OSU's only scoring drive of the game, a fourth-quarter possession that covered 73 yards in only four plays, culminating in a 23-yard touchdown pass to tight end Rory Nicol. Granted, it was a scoring drive accomplished against Iowa's second-team defense, and Smith was among the first to point that out.

"When I went into the game, it was 17-0 and we weren't out of it by any means," he said. "But I couldn't get done some of the things that I wanted to. Two scores and we were right back in it. We just couldn't capitalize on some things."

No one knew it at the time, but Zwick had taken his final snap of the regular season. His shoulder injury kept him sidelined for the final five games while his successor made the most of his opportunity.

Faced with their first 0-3 start to a conference season since 1988, the Buckeyes returned home for a 30-7 win against Indiana. The ground game finally got rolling again with a season-high 282 yards, and Smith was an efficient-if-unspectacular 12 for 24 in the passing department, good for 161 yards, two touchdowns and no interceptions.

That was followed by an uninspiring 21-10 home win against a Penn State team headed for a 4-7 season, and a 32-19 comeback victory at Michigan State achieved only when the Buckeyes scored two touchdowns inside the final 1:37 of the game.

Whatever euphoria the team gained from its come-from-behind win against the Spartans quickly evaporated when Purdue marched 80 yards during the final 3:50 minutes to pull out a 24-17 victory over the Buckeyes in West Lafayette. Smith was sacked three times and threw three interceptions, two of them in the fourth quarter.

Ohio State returned home to finish the regular season with a 6-4 overall record and a 3-4 league mark. Awaiting the Buckeyes was archrival Michigan, a team needing only one more victory to achieve an undefeated conference season and its second consecutive undisputed Big Ten championship.

Little did the Wolverines know that the first chapter in the legend of Troy Smith vs. Michigan was about to be written.

Stellar In 'The Game'

Smith had played well enough during the 4½ games since Zwick's injury. He had completed 56.4 percent of his passes (53 for 94) for 626 yards with five touchdowns against three interceptions, and he had rushed for 187 yards and a touchdown. But he was more of a scrambler than a true running threat as evidenced by a modest average of 3.2 yards per carry over that stretch.

Adding more intrigue was the fact that Zwick had rehabbed his shoulder to the point where he received medical clearance to play against Michigan.

Whether Tressel planned to use Zwick at some juncture of the game was quickly rendered moot when Smith took the game's opening snap and scampered 8 yards on first down. Four plays later, he stayed away from pocket pressure just long enough to allow wide receiver Anthony Gonzalez to get a few steps on Michigan safety Ernest Shazor. Just before absorbing a hit, Smith launched a 40-plus yard heave that fell into the arms of Gonzalez, who proceeded to race into the end zone for a 68-yard touchdown.

It was the beginning of a thorough 37-21 win by the Buckeyes, a game during which Smith ran for 145 yards and a touchdown and threw for 241 yards and two more scores. His 386 yards of total offense represented the highest total for any Ohio State player against Michigan and was the third most in a single game in program history behind Art Schlichter (412 vs. Florida State in 1981) and Joe Germaine (388 vs. Penn State in 1997). Ironically, both Schlichter and Germaine set their marks during losing efforts.

After the game, Smith initially tried to downplay his accomplishment.

"You just have to do the things necessary to keep moving the ball down the field," he told reporters. "If it was one of the legendary performances (in the rivalry), I'm very grateful and thankful for the opportunity to do that."

Later, allowing a huge smile to cross his face, Smith said, "My hat's off to Michigan, but today is Ohio State's day."

Smith wasn't able to bask in the glow of the Michigan victory very long. Just two days before the team was scheduled to depart for San Antonio and an appearance in the Alamo Bowl, the quarterback was suspended for accepting improper benefits from a booster.

Zwick returned to the starting lineup and threw for 189 yards and a touchdown while helping to lead the Buckeyes to a 33-7 romp against Oklahoma State.

Smith's suspension lingered into the beginning of the 2005 season, and he and Zwick shared snaps during an early-season home loss to eventual national champion Texas.

But by midseason, Smith had regained a firm hold on the starting position, and he finished with another excellent game during a 25-21 win against Michigan. That served as a springboard for his 2006 season, a campaign during which Smith ran away with the Heisman Trophy, thanks in part to another sterling performance vs. Michigan, this one that included 316 yards and four touchdowns through the air as the top-rated Buckeyes took a 42-39 victory against the second-ranked Wolverines in a game many billed as "The Clash of the Titans" while others called it "The Game of the Century."

"I was fortunate to be surrounded by some of the greatest players in Ohio State program history," Smith told BSB recently. "Right place, right time? For sure. It was both a privilege and a blessing to be able to play in all of those games, but especially the ones against Michigan."

"If how I performed in those games, if that's going to be my legacy, I'm totally comfortable with that. I wouldn't trade those memories for anything."

And of his sophomore rant concerning playing time?

"I was just a kid, but no matter how old you are, you have to stand up for what you believe in," Smith said. "I never meant anything bad to anyone. I just believed in myself, and that's all I was saying. I'm just glad no one ever held that against me."

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Recruits Attend Championship Celebration

Just under a week after winning the national championship, Ohio State held a celebration at Ohio Stadium to take in the win with its fans.

But while players and fans were cele-

RECRUITING OUTLOOK Greg Wilson

brating, coaches couldn't have their full attention on that since it was also a recruiting opportunity. Many different prospects were on site for the celebration to take in the campus and see what it could look like for them in the future if they come to Ohio State and win a national championship.

Only one commit attended, with Avon, Ohio, four-star cornerback Jakob Weatherspoon (5-10, 172) on campus.

Uncommitted prospects who made the trip were Delaware (Ohio) Hayes four-star running back Favour Akih (6-0, 190); Lewis Center (Ohio) Olentangy three-star safety Kaden Gebhardt (6-2, 200); Akron Hoban four-star offensive tackle Sam Greer (6-7, 310); Washington Court House (Ohio) Miami Trace four-star offensive tackle Adam Guthrie (6-7, 285); and

Avon Lake, Ohio, four-star offensive tackle Maxwell Riley (6-5, 280).

Akron Hoban five-star cornerback Elbert Hill (5-10, 175) was invited by cornerbacks coach Tim Walton to the celebration, but he was out of town over the weekend on a visit to USC that was already planned, so he wasn't able to attend, according to 247Sports.

Also unable to attend were Cincinnati Moeller three-star quarterback Matt Ponatoski (6-2, 190) – whom the Buckeyes have been taking a closer look at after he won Ohio Mr. Football for his impressive 2024 high school season – as well as Matthews (N.C.) Weddington brothers Aiden Harris (6-3, 240), a four-star defensive lineman, and four-star defensive lineman Andrew Harris (6-2, 235).

However, offensive coordinator and quarterbacks coach Chip Kelly is reportedly going to be visiting Ponatoski soon, and the Harris brothers are working on setting up a visit to Columbus at another time.

Even recruits who weren't at the celebration are paying attention to the Buckeyes because of their championship run. The No. 1 prospect in the 2026 class, Nixa, Mo., five-star offensive tackle Jackson Cantwell (6-8, 300), took notice of how good the team looked over those four games, especially the improvement of offensive line coach Justin Frye's unit

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.	

during that run.

"Congratulations to (Ohio State) for getting it done!" Cantwell tweeted. "Heck of a postseason run. Their OL room is getting the job done no matter what..."

The Buckeyes also got some praise on Twitter from Guthrie; Coatesville, Pa., four-star offensive tackle Maxwell Hiller (6-5, 300); Mineral (Va.) Louisa County five-star running back Savion Hiter (5-

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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
Jakob Weatherspoon	CB	5-10	172	★★★★	Avon, Ohio

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.

11, 182); Hill; Fort Lauderdale (Fla.) St. Thomas Aquinas interior offensive lineman Jayden Dean (6-3, 277); Vero Beach, Fla., four-star interior offensive lineman Micah Smith (6-6, 305); and Cleveland Glenville four-star linebacker Cincere Johnson (6-3, 225).

Among the OSU commits who took notice were Wayne, Ohio, five-star wide receiver Jamier Brown (5-11, 170); Weatherspoon; Huntington Beach, Calif., five-star quarterback Brady Edmunds (6-5, 215); and Santa Ana (Calif.) Mater Dei five-star wide receiver Chris Henry Jr. (6-5, 205).

Henry talked to On3 after the championship win about being able to watch the Buckeyes make their run through the playoffs and his thoughts on head coach Ryan Day.

"It was big for me," Henry said regarding Ohio State's title. "Knowing what they've been through this year it showed how resilient they are for sure. They definitely deserved that, and now I'm even more excited to be up there!"

"(Day) just gives us great opportunities to make plays and go out there and ball,"

Henry continued. "I like Coach Kelly. He's a great coach. He's been to the league. He knows what he's doing. I like Coach Chip a lot."

After the celebration, the Buckeye coaches will get right back on the road working on getting ready for the future. Greer told 247Sports that he believes both Day and Frye would be in town to see him on Jan. 27, as did Riley.

2026 OL Riley Down To Two

With National Signing Day coming on Feb. 5 and the Buckeyes unlikely to make any late additions to their third-ranked recruiting class for 2025, all of the attention is on 2026 prospects.

One area Day wants to improve when it comes to recruiting is on the offensive line, saying during his early signing period press conference that he believes the program needs to do better when it comes to recruiting the front five.

"Moving forward into the next few weeks, we have to (address it)," Day said on Dec. 4 about offensive line recruiting. "All three of (Carter Lowe, Jayvon McFadden and Jake Cook) we feel good about,

but at the end of the day we have to make sure we have the numbers that we need and make sure we have the depth that we need."

After the playoff run the Buckeyes made with the patchwork offensive line putting together as impressive a performance as it did, Day's tune might be a bit different about Frye at this point due to what he was able to do with a challenging situation. However, the 2026 class is a great opportunity for them to get going on the recruiting trail with so many offensive linemen in the state of Ohio.

Riley, Guthrie and Greer are all from the Buckeye State and seem to like the Buckeyes so far, but whether Frye will be able to get commitments from them is the question.

Riley tweeted on Jan. 21 that he was officially narrowing his scholarship list down to two schools, Ohio State and Clemson.

"I would say that their cultures are next-level," Riley told 247Sports. "Compared to other schools, (Ohio State and Clemson) have great offensive line coaches that I have a lot of respect for."

He was also asked about what he thought of the Buckeyes' offensive line

during their playoff run.

"I am happy for them," he said. "For Coach Day and Coach Frye, I am happy for them too. They earned it. They had a lot of backlash, I think which was undeserved, but I think they shut a lot of people up, respectfully – to put it in nice terms."

Riley also talked about the development of transfer portal additions at Ohio State that have impressed him, noting that Josh Simmons will likely be an early pick in the 2025 NFL draft and that Seth McLaughlin ended up winning the Rimington Trophy under the teaching of Frye.

Some insiders believe that Clemson is the favorite for Riley over Ohio State at this point, but he has also received a "Crystal Ball" to commit to Ohio State. With so much time left for the 2026 class, the Buckeyes have a lot of time to land a solid 2026 line.

Getting Riley to Columbus for the championship celebration could be big for the Buckeyes in convincing the four-star – who has said he wants to make his decision in January or February – to commit to Ohio State.

Continued On Page 26

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National Title Game In Georgia Aids Recruiting

Continued From Page 25

2027 QB Edmunds Talks Ohio State

The Buckeyes already have the quarterback position covered for the 2027 class with Edmunds seemingly locked in with the Buckeyes after he committed on Dec. 2.

After Ohio State won the national championship, he talked to 247Sports about his recruiting process and how he got to where he is now.

"In sixth grade, when I decided to play quarterback, I went to my notes screen and (my goals were) like five offers before my freshman year, Gatorade Player of the Year, All-American and the last one was commit to Ohio State," Edmunds told 247Sports. "That was always the dream. And when I got the opportunity, I didn't want to wait on it."

The No. 13 player in his class is doing pretty well with his list of goals. He

received an offer from the Buckeyes after attending a recruiting camp in June and needed only six months to make his decision.

But according to the high school sophomore, it's surprising he didn't commit even faster.

"When I got the offer in June, I was kind of ready to commit but I waited until after the season," he said. "My grandpa grew up in Cuyahoga Falls (Ohio). My grandpa grew up a fan, my dad grew up a fan and it was passed on to me."

Being a fan and a commit, it was special for Edmunds to be able to watch the Buckeyes win the national championship for the first time in 10 years.

"After the Michigan game, everybody doubted them," he said. "I think it is really big for Coach Day and everybody in that program to do what they're doing."

But it isn't just his fandom that is making him want to be with the Buckeyes. He also liked what he saw from the offense

this year with Kelly calling plays.

"Coach Kelly is probably the best play-caller in college football right now," Edmunds said. "He is unique with how he does it. To spread the ball around the way they do with the playmakers and have two running backs that are probably two top-five running backs in college football, they have a really, really unique offense and they are taking advantage of it."

Edmunds still has two years until he will be able to get to Columbus if he enrolls early, but he also told 247Sports that he isn't going to be listening to other coaches' recruiting pitches much since he knows that Ohio State is where he wants to be.

OSU Sends Out More Offers

Despite being busy with the national championship win in Atlanta, the Buckeyes still made sure they were taking advantage of the trip to the Peach State with

the assistant director of recruiting strategy Nick Murphy making his way around Georgia to visit some players and give out more offers.

One of those was given to Atlanta Pace Academy four-star safety Adryan Cole (6-2, 190), who is in the 2027 class. He already has offers from 25 Division I schools, including Arizona State, Auburn, Georgia, Indiana, Miami, Michigan State, Nebraska, Oklahoma, Ole Miss, Penn State and Tennessee.

He is considered the No. 39 recruit in the class, the No. 3 safety and the No. 6 player in the state of Georgia.

Another scholarship offer was given to Norcross (Ga.) Greater Atlanta Christian School four-star defensive end Dre Quinn (6-4, 228). He is the No. 328-ranked player in the 2026 class and the No. 27 defensive end.

His offer list of 32 schools includes Alabama, Auburn, Clemson, Florida State, Georgia, Indiana, LSU, Nebras-

A Look Back At Recruiting From The Pages Of BSB

40 Years Ago — 1985

In 1983, the Ohio State football team looked to Middletown (Ohio) High School and picked up Sonny Gordon, who became a starting defensive back for the Buckeyes.

The next season, the Buckeyes tapped Middletown for wide receiver Cris Carter, who ended up as a starter his freshman year, as well as Sean Bell and Dwight Smith.

For the 1985 recruiting season, Ohio State coaches were again making their way to Middletown, where it appeared that there were four players ready to move on to major-college programs.

According to Middletown coach Art Jones, perhaps the best of the four, outside linebacker Dee Dee Howard, had already decided to attend Ohio State.

"One of his strongest assets is his dedication to the game," Jones said. "He's a hard worker in the offseason, and he knows what it takes to be a winner and to be a player. The last few years, he's done that and has had success."

The other three players were offensive linemen Bill Smith, Russell Viel and Gardner Sorrell.

35 Years Ago — 1990

The strangest recruiting story of the season seemed to be the plight of Yellow Springs, Ohio, linebacker Jon Roberts.

Listed as a potential All-American by several recruiting services including that of expert Tom Lemming, Roberts seemed to be getting little notice from the major Division I colleges.

A similar situation had occurred the year before with Toledo defensive back Myron Bell. He was considered one of the top defensive back prospects in the Midwest, yet the Buckeyes chose to back off recruiting him, saying he was just a tad too small and maybe a step slower than what they wanted.

But that didn't seem to be the case with Roberts. He was a legitimate 6-4 and 218 pounds and ran the 40-yard dash in 4.6 seconds.

Roberts was at a loss for why major colleges wouldn't give him a chance.

"I really don't know why that is," Roberts told BSB. "They all said they liked my game films. And I've got the grades so I don't know what's wrong."

30 Years Ago — 1995

An outside linebacker the Buckeyes were recruiting was Sean Banks (6-3, 200) of Youngstown (Ohio) Mooney.

Banks was tentatively scheduled to visit OSU the weekend of Jan. 20. He visited his only other school, Michigan State, Jan. 13 and verbally committed to new Spartans coach Nick Saban. However, he was still considering making an official visit to OSU.

"Everything just kind of worked out," said Banks' father, Dick. "They had everything there that we felt was best for Sean, especially the academics."

"I just think Coach Saban has done a hell of a job. When he was there before, they went to the Rose Bowl and won it. He did a good job at Toledo, and of course, the Browns led the league in defense."

25 Years Ago — 2000

Ohio State got one big fish over the weekend of Jan. 14-17, but another one got away.

The Buckeyes received good news Jan. 14 when Cedarhurst (N.Y.) Lawrence offensive lineman Shane Olivea (6-5, 315) committed to the Buckeyes over Georgia Tech.

But a day later, news broke out of Lexington, Ky., that Canton (Ohio) McKinley five-star offensive lineman Antonio Hall (6-9 295) – the Buckeye state's top prospect and the nation's No. 1-ranked offensive lineman – had issued a verbal commitment to Kentucky.

In what qualified as a major shock, Hall picked the Wildcats over a pair of Big Ten schools steeped in football tradition in Michigan and Ohio State.

The Buckeyes also got a commitment over the weekend from Ft. Lauderdale (Fla.) Dillard linebacker Thomas Matthews (6-1, 210).

20 Years Ago — 2005

While Ohio State fans came away from the U.S. All-American Bowl festivities with something to smile about, it was probably an anticlimactic weekend at best for the Buckeye coaching staff.

The best news for OSU came just before the All-American Bowl's kickoff, when Jacksonville (Fla.) Sandalwood four-star running back Maurice Wells (5-9, 180) – a longtime target of the Buckeyes – announced that he would be playing his college ball at OSU.

It was good news for head coach Jim Tressel and company, to be sure, but Wells' decision was something that the coaching staff had known about since Thanksgiving. The prep star had simply chosen to wait to announce until he had the opportunity to make it known to a nationwide audience.

"I told (recruiting analyst) Tom Lemming I would announce at the game," Wells told BSB. "I thought it would be cool to announce my decision on national television. I wasn't really trying to keep it a secret, but I thought that would be a good opportunity for me."

15 Years Ago — 2010

In landing the latest member of Ohio State's class of 2010, Tressel plucked a player from another coach's tree.

On Jan. 13, the Buckeyes received a verbal commitment from three-star cornerback Bradley Roby of Suwanee (Ga.) Peachtree Ridge. He was the third consecutive three-star prospect to join the class and the eighth overall, but he was the first member of the class to have been previously committed to another program.

The 6-1, 171-pounder initially committed to Vanderbilt in late July, picking the Commodores over the likes of Auburn, Purdue, Wake Forest and West Virginia, all of which had offered scholarships.

But the Buckeyes jumped into the picture in mid-December when they issued him an offer, and that proved to be too much for Roby to pass up.

10 Years Ago — 2015

With less than two weeks until National Signing Day, Ohio State's CFP National Championship might not have paid notice-

able dividends for the 2015 class. It was clearly having a positive impact on the next two classes, both of which were stockpiling talent at an alarming rate.

The latest coups for Ohio State head coach Urban Meyer came Jan. 25 when 2016 Cincinnati Moeller four-star tight end Jake Hausmann (6-5, 235) and 2017 Miamisburg, Ohio, five-star offensive tackle Josh Myers (6-5, 285) both committed to Ohio State.

Hausmann was the No. 80 overall prospect in the country and the No. 5 tight end. The fact that the depth chart at the position appeared to be favorable in the years to come was one of the selling points the Buckeyes used. Senior Jeff Heuerman had no more eligibility, and junior Nick Vannett would also be gone by the time Hausmann enrolled.

"That's a big thing for me," Hausmann said before committing. "They only have three tight ends on the roster right now. It's a big deal to go in with limited players at your position. You get more playing time. That's what is really intriguing me with Ohio State right now."

Five Years Ago — 2020

Hoping to pair another running back with Cincinnati Winton Woods three-star Miyan Williams (5-10, 210), Ohio State was set to host Dalton, Ga., four-star running back Jahmyr Gibbs (5-9, 191) on an official visit the weekend of Jan. 18.

But with 86 possible scholarship players already on the roster and Muskegon, Mich., four-star athlete Cameron Martinez' (5-11, 183) possible signature putting the Buckeyes even further over the 85-scholarship limit, the staff abruptly decided to end its pursuit of Gibbs just days before he was set to arrive on campus.

"The numbers are pretty tight now, so probably not," head coach Ryan Day said when asked if Ohio State would add another 2020 running back. "But we'll see how things go."

One Year Ago — 2024

Ohio State had put the finishing touches on the program's 2024 recruiting class, adding a commitment on Jan. 20 from Painesville (Ohio) Riverside four-star defensive lineman Dominic Kirks (6-4, 255).

Kirks was the No. 251 overall prospect and No. 33 defensive lineman in the class and was offered by the Buckeyes during an official visit to Columbus the weekend of Jan. 13-14.

He had been committed to Washington since June, but he did not sign with the Huskies in December and stepped back from his pledge on Jan. 12 following Kalen DeBoer's departure to become the head coach at Alabama.

"I am an Ohio kid and I love my state, so I get to stay close to home and play for Ohio State," Kirks told On3. "Ohio State has that brotherhood. I am a big family guy, and they treat their players with tough love and care. That is what I am looking for."

"I am about development, competitiveness and family. I will get that at Ohio State. Ohio State is a great fit for me."

ASK AN ANALYST

With Marc Givler of Buckeye Huddle

How much do you expect winning the national championship will help Buckeye recruiting in the immediate future, if at all? Have you seen it heating up?

"I think it definitely adds proof of concept to the recruiting pitches they are giving these guys, and one of the big pitches of Ohio State is competing for championships. When you win one, it obviously validates all the things you're telling these guys. It will definitely help them in the short term for the (2026 class) but where I think it will really help is the (2027 class). We usually see a one-year delay.

"We've seen that in past Ohio State championship runs – and past national championship runs at other programs – where with the current class it helps, but the relationships in that class are largely established at that point. So that next cycle, they are still kind of feeling out the process, and usually you get a big bump in that class. I suspect we will see a nice uptick in 2026, but I think they'll see their biggest bump in 2027. Talking to recruits, there's definitely a lot of buzz around Ohio State right now and what they did this past month and the general trajectory of the program."

With National Signing Day coming up very soon, are you expecting Ohio State to make a late push for a last-minute addition to its 2025 class?

"Not at this point. I think the late push would be transfer-portal stuff. Once the hay was in the barn for the early signing period, I think they immediately turned their attention to filling any holes through the transfer portal. There aren't really guys out there right now that they're really looking at for the late signing period.

"Something could always pop up here in the next week or so, but right now that's looking unlikely, and the transfer portal is going to be the way they enhance their roster here moving forward until the 2026 class signs."

The Buckeyes have yet to find a 2026 quarterback. They seem to be paying some attention to Ohio Mr. Football and Cincinnati Moeller four-star quarterback Matt Ponatoski (6-2, 190). Is there a chance that he ends up playing football in Columbus?

"There is a chance. I think, right now, he's maybe even the front-runner to be the quarterback in Ohio State's 2026 class even though he does not currently have a scholarship offer. I know the coaching staff is very interested in him. They've only turned up the heat after the season he's had. He's been on campus, so they've gotten to be around him and his family a little bit.

"I think one thing that's going to be interesting here is the baseball component. He's a really good baseball player. I am not a baseball expert or a baseball guy, but

I've been told that he is arguably the No. 1 prospect in Ohio in baseball. That is something that may be a hurdle for the Buckeyes, depending on how much he wants to play baseball, and if that would help other Southern programs that have better baseball programs. That's kind of yet to be seen. In terms of his ability as a football player, I know Ohio State's very interested, and I think he's definitely one of the top couple of possibilities right now."

The state of Ohio has a solid defensive back class in 2026. Which of them, if any, do you believe are most likely to end up at Ohio State?

"Obviously, they did just get Avon, Ohio, four-star cornerback Jakob Weatherspoon (5-10, 172) a few weeks ago, so we'll count him in. I think they have a great chance of landing Akron Hoban four-star cornerback Elbert Hill (5-10, 175). Toledo Central four-star cornerback Victor Singleton (6-0, 160), at this point, I would have maybe trending away from Ohio State.

"Then there's Lewis Center (Ohio) Olentangy three-star safety Kaden Gebhardt (6-2, 200), who I think Clemson has just started to make a push for, but Ohio State has a good chance of getting that one as well. Those are some of the guys they're looking the hardest at right now, just kind of where things stand there."

ka, Northwestern, SMU, Tennessee and USC, among others. Last season, he recorded 42 tackles, 9½ for loss, 2½ sacks, a forced fumble and a fumble recovery while also catching seven passes for 129 yards on offense.

Running backs coach Carlos Locklyn also gave an offer to Martin (Tenn.) Westview running back Asa Barnes (6-0, 195) of the 2027 class. The Buckeyes are early to the party with the unranked Barnes, who has only one other scholarship offer from Florida State.

"Me and Coach Locklyn have been in touch recently, and he called my coaches to let them know he had offered me," Barnes told 247Sports. "I was beyond happy. Being offered by the national champions is like a dream come true."

Barnes also told 247Sports that he plans on visiting Columbus in the spring.

TE Bowman Reclassifies To 2026

A top recruit from the 2027 class has decided early on that he wants to head to college a year earlier than he would have been able to otherwise. Santa Ana (Calif.) Mater Dei four-star tight end Mark Bowman (6-5, 225) will now be in the 2026 class.

"This is a big opportunity for me, especially when talking to the coaches that have been recruiting me, and it's a change we felt was best for me," Bowman told 247Sports. "Now with the recruiting process being more accelerated, we're going to really dig into all the schools, pray about it and see what my parents' opinions might be. I want to take my time and get to a bunch of different schools."

Before he reclassified, Bowman was ranked the No. 4 player in the country and the top-ranked tight end. With the change, he will now be able to make official visits over the summer, and he already has plans on where he will be using some of those, although nothing has been final-

ized yet.

So far, Georgia, Oregon and Texas are the three programs that have stood out to him the most, but the Buckeyes are still in the running for the talented tight end.

"I know I'll probably take officials to those three (Georgia, Oregon and Texas), and we're also planning to hit Florida, Florida State, Tennessee and Ohio State in April," Bowman said.

"Those are some schools that we haven't yet been to, so we're excited to see some new places and then start planning out the officials."

In 12 games as a sophomore, Bowman had 32 catches for 435 yards and eight touchdowns.

Ohio State does already have a tight end committed in the 2026 class with Jacksonville (Fla.) The Bolles School four-star Corbyn Fordham (6-4, 215) pledging his services in November, but the Buckeyes have had two straight recruiting classes in which they signed at least two tight ends, so that should not stop them from going after Bowman as well.

Other Notes And Tidbits

• Locklyn, who has been very active on the recruiting trail ever since the Buckeyes hired him, paid a visit to Cibolo (Texas) Steele four-star running back Jonathan Hatton Jr. (6-1, 205). Locklyn has been after the No. 41 prospect in the 2026 class for a while now but will have to compete against schools like Oklahoma, Texas, and Texas A&M among many others. Hatton has 26 Division I offers and ran for 1,222 yards on 242 attempts with 21 touchdowns in his sophomore season. He ran for 1,147 yards on 121 carries with 14 rushing touchdowns this past season, also adding 55 receiving yards.

• Oradell (N.J.) Bergen Catholic 2026 four-star defensive lineman Jermaine Kinsler (6-7, 260) told 247Sports that he will be taking a visit to Columbus at

some point this summer when his class is allowed to take official visits. He visited Ohio State for the game against Purdue this season and will also try to make it for a visit in the spring as well. Kinsler, the 172nd-ranked player in his class, No. 22 defensive lineman and No. 1 player in the state of New Jersey, is the former high school teammate of wide receiver Quincy Porter, who signed with the Buckeyes in December.

• Fort Myers (Fla.) Evangelical Christian School wide receiver Landon Dowden (6-1, 170) put the Buckeyes in his top five after receiving an offer from them on Jan. 6. He isn't ranked by 247Sports composite but seems to be quickly rising as a

prospect, receiving 23 of his 32 offers in December and January.

• Johnson, who was one of the prospects who tweeted about Ohio State winning the national championship, put the Buckeyes in his top 10 when he revealed it on Jan. 24. Along with OSU were Alabama, Kentucky, Louisville, Notre Dame, Oklahoma, Oregon, Penn State, Stanford and Texas A&M. The Cleveland Glenville prospect has taken multiple visits to Columbus over the past year, earning an offer from linebackers coach James Laurinaitis after the Marshall game on Sept. 21. He is the 108th-best prospect in the country, the No. 7 linebacker and the No. 4 player in the Buckeye state.

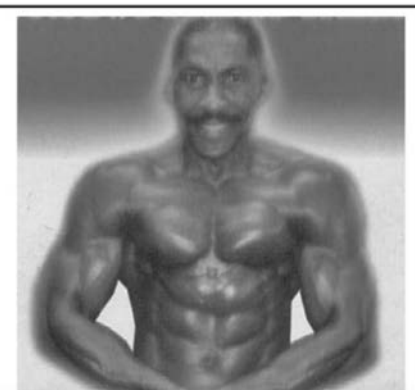
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U-M Star Safety Moore Returning For Fifth Year

After witnessing their archrival win a national championship for the first time since 2014, Michigan and Sherrone Moore are looking to return to the mountaintop in the Big Ten, and they took a significant step to get back there on Jan. 23 when two-time All-Big Ten safety and team captain Rod Moore announced in an Instagram video that he is coming back to the Wolverines for a fifth and final season.

BIG TEN NOTES Patrick Engels

Moore, who ended the Instagram highlight video he posted by fading to black and including the bolded words, "I'm back," returns to Michigan after missing the entire 2024 season due to a torn ACL he suffered during a spring practice. Moore spent the whole season with the team, where he was known as "Coach Rod," serving as a liaison between coaches and players.

Moore, when healthy, was one of the top defensive backs in the Big Ten. After earning All-Big Ten honorable mention as a sophomore in 2022, he racked up 38 tackles (one for loss) three pass breakups and two interceptions in 12 games his junior season, helping lead the title-winning Wolverines to the nation's top scoring defense and total defense.

Moore's strong junior season – which included a game-sealing interception of former OSU quarterback Kyle McCord late in the Wolverines' 30-24 home win over the Buckeyes that November – earned him a third-team All-Big Ten selection from the coaches, while it also allowed him to emerge as one of the top overall draft prospects if he decided to leave for the NFL.

The Dayton native will now look to further boost his draft stock as the unquestioned best and most experienced player on a Wink Martindale-led Wolverines defense that is losing a number of starters to the NFL draft this season, especially in the secondary.

Starting cornerbacks Aamir Hall and Will Johnson as well as safeties Makari Paige, Quinten Johnson and Wesley Walker have all either exhausted their collegiate eligibility or declared for the NFL draft early.

Wolverines Interested In Former Irish Linemen

While Michigan is working to retain its

top players for next year, it is also looking to add talent through the transfer portal.

According to EJ Holland of The Wolverine, Michigan is targeting both Notre Dame starting center Pat Coogan and starting right guard Rocco Spindler, who both entered the transfer portal following the Irish's 34-23 loss to Ohio State in the national championship game on Jan. 20.

Coogan and Spindler served as stalwarts on a 2024 Irish offensive line that gave up 1.6 sacks per game on the year – the 45th fewest in the nation on a per-game basis – and helped pave the way for the offense to rush for 200.9 yards per game (19th).

They also both served as key leaders of the unit. Coogan, who was originally the backup center entering the year but was thrust into the starting role after starter Ashton Craig tore his ACL in Week 3, was considered the heartbeat of the Irish offense, often giving impassioned speeches during pregame.

"(Coogan) is an unbelievable leader," Notre Dame head coach Marcus Freeman said this season. "He is passionate about this place. He is passionate about his position. He never complained about his role, just worked, and now he's starting at center and battling."

Spindler, on the other hand, started 23 games during his four years with the program at right guard, including the final 13 games of this season.

Michigan seems to have the upper hand in the portal battle. The program heavily recruited both players out of high school before losing out to the Irish. The Wolverines were a finalist for the former three-star Chicago Marist prospect Coogan in 2021, and he has a pre-existing relationship with the Wolverine head coach.

Spindler, on the other hand, is a native of Clarkston, Mich., and also considered the Wolverines out of high school, but the recruitment had a reportedly "rocky" ending when he committed to Notre Dame over the Wolverines. That rocky end occurred with former lead recruiters Ed Warinner and Matt Dudek in charge, both of whom are no longer on Michigan's staff.

The addition of one or both of the Irish offensive linemen – who both have one year of eligibility left – would be a big boost for a Wolverine offensive line that is losing three starters either to the NFL or the transfer portal.

Finebaum Says BIG, Not SEC, Owns CFB

Since the turn of the century, the SEC has been widely considered the king of

college football, capturing 14 BCS or College Football Playoff titles and sending numerous future stars to the NFL during that span.

While the conference – which has now expanded to 16 teams with the addition of Texas and Oklahoma last offseason – still churns out countless NFL prospects and has its teams in contention for a national championship every year, the SEC has taken a back seat to the Big Ten over the past two years, as that conference has now secured the last two national titles with Michigan winning in 2023 and Ohio State taking home the title this season.

Both Michigan and Ohio State had to take care of SEC powerhouses on their way to their respective national titles. Last season, Jim Harbaugh and the Wolverines ended Alabama's season and Nick Saban's coaching career at the Rose Bowl with a 27-20 overtime victory.

Then, the Buckeyes defeated two SEC schools during their four-game College Football Playoff stretch, first throttling Tennessee 42-17 in the first round and then taking down Texas 28-14 in the semifinals held at the Cotton Bowl.

Each of these results – as well as the SEC's 8-7 record in bowl games this year compared to the 11-6 mark of the Big Ten – signals a potential changing of the guard in college football, one which longtime SEC Network radio host Paul Finebaum said is certainly real after the Wolverines' and Buckeyes' championships.

"The answer is yes, the Big Ten, at the moment, owns college football," Finebaum said on a Jan. 21 appearance on ESPN's "Get Up." "There's no way you can say it doesn't. When you go back-to-back, that's generational. In Ohio State's case, they beat two SEC schools along the way.

"There's an old saying that was emanated in 1828 when Andrew Jackson was elected president. A senator from New York said, 'To the victor, belong the spoils,' and that's exactly where the Big Ten is this morning. It's an uncomfortable feeling for the SEC, which has owned the sport. But it's a reality this morning."

Finebaum, who has been in tune with SEC fans for decades, including the past 12 years as the host of the SEC Network's "The Paul Finebaum Show," has been notoriously critical of the Big Ten in the past, most notably criticizing Ohio State head coach Ryan Day for his inability to win big games, especially against SEC teams such as Alabama and Georgia.

But Finebaum has since walked back those statements, saying on that same "Get Up" appearance that Day has completely changed his legacy by going on the historic four-game postseason run.

"He has been fully vindicated," Finebaum said. "Yes, Michigan is important, losing four in a row, but winning the national championship trumps everything in the poker game of college football, and today he stands on the top of it.

"It was a remarkable run. The fact that he did not have to play in a conference championship may have been the key. It gave him time to decompress, to talk to his team, to get over that Michigan loss, to get

on one of the most incredible runs we have ever seen."

Finebaum, who added that he still is putting two-time champion and Georgia head coach Kirby Smart as his top coach in college football over Day, might have more optimism regarding the SEC heading into 2025, though.

Outside of Ohio State, which is the favorite to win it all at +450 odds, nine of the 16 teams with the best odds to win a national title come from the SEC, with Texas leading the way in the conference just behind Ohio State at +650.

USC Hires Former NFL DC Ryan

USC and head coach Lincoln Riley made a notable addition to their 2025 staff on Jan. 18 when they named longtime NFL defensive coordinator Rob Ryan as their assistant head coach for defense and linebackers coach. Ryan, 62, replaces Matt Entz on the Trojans staff after he left to become head coach at Fresno State on Dec. 4.

"Rob Ryan is one of the most accomplished defensive coaches in NFL history," Riley said. "With over two decades of NFL experience, he will immediately bolster our staff as we continue our climb here at USC."

Ryan, the twin brother of former NFL head coach/defensive coordinator Rex Ryan and son of the late former Philadelphia Eagles and Arizona Cardinals head coach Buddy Ryan, joins USC's staff with 35 years of experience as an assistant football coach, including 24 years in the NFL with nine franchises.

He served as defensive coordinator of the Oakland Raiders (2004-08), Cleveland Browns (2009-10), Dallas Cowboys (2011-12) and New Orleans Saints (2013-15), and won two Super Bowl rings with the New England Patriots as the franchise's linebackers coach from 2000-03.

Ryan spent the last three seasons as the Las Vegas Raiders' senior defensive assistant under Antonio Pierce, a period when the franchise ranked 26th in the league in scoring defense both in 2022 and 2024 with a ninth-place finish in between in 2023.

The Raiders' defense featured one of the top pass rushers in the league during those years in defensive end Maxx Crosby, who was named a pro bowler in each of those seasons with Ryan on staff, including one second-team All-Pro nod in 2023.

Ryan will now look to help take USC's defense to another level after a promising 2024 campaign in which it drastically improved its numbers from 2023 under first-year defensive coordinator D'Anton Lynn, ranking 56th in scoring defense (24.1 points per game allowed) and 77th in total defense (377.1 yards per game allowed), a far cry from the No. 118 (34.4) and No. 116 (432.8) finishes it had a year ago.

Ryan has a previous relationship with Lynn dating back to their time on the defensive staffs of the Buffalo Bills (2016) – where they worked under Rex Ryan – and the Baltimore Ravens (2021).

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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, W 42-17.
Jan. 1 Oregon, CFP quarterfinals, W 41-21; **10** Texas, CFP semifinals, W 28-14; **20** Notre Dame, CFP championship game W 34-23.

MEN'S BASKETBALL (11-8, 3-5)

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, W 95-73; **21** vs. Kentucky at CBS Sports Classic, New York, W 85-65; **29** INDIANA STATE W 103-83.
Jan. 3 MICHIGAN STATE, L 69-62; **6** at Minnesota, W 89-88 (2OT); **9** OREGON, L 73-71; **14** at Wisconsin, L 70-68; **17** INDIANA, L 77-76 (OT); **21** at Purdue, W 73-70; **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 (19-1, 8-1)

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, W 82-57; **20** vs. Stanford at Bay Area Women's Classic, San Francisco, W 84-59; **29** at Rutgers, W 77-63.
Jan. 5 NORTHWESTERN, W 92-62; **8** at Michigan, W 84-77; **12** OREGON, W 69-60; **16** at Wisconsin, W 80-69; **19** at Penn State, L 62-59; **23** MARYLAND, W 74-66; **26** at Nebraska, W 72-66.
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 Philadelphia Invitational at Philadelphia, Men 4-1, Women 5-0; **19** St. John's Duals at Queens, N.Y., Men 1-3, Women 0-4.
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 GYMNASTICS (3-0)

Jan. 10 West Point Open at Army, 1st/6; **17** GREENVILLE, W 319.700-303.150; **25** at Stanford Open, 1st/3.
Feb. 2 OKLAHOMA; **9** PENN STATE; **21** WINTER CUP; **23** WINTER CUP.
March 8 at Nebraska; **15** at Michigan; **25** ILLINOIS.
April 4-5 Big Ten Championships at Ann Arbor, Mich.; **18-19** NCAA Championships at Ann Arbor, Mich.

WOMEN'S GYMNASTICS (2-3, 1-1)

Jan. 11 Sprouts Farmers Market Collegiate Quad in Oklahoma City, Okla., vs. Arkansas (W 196.425-195.875), Kentucky (L 196.500-196.425) & UCLA (L 139.550-196.425); **18** IOWA, W 196.275-195.200; **24** MICHIGAN STATE, L 196.800-195.750; **31** at Michigan.
Feb. 7 at Illinois; **16** MINNESOTA; **22** at Penn State.
March 2 BIG FOUR MEET vs. RUTGERS, NEBRASKA & UCLA; **7** at NC State; **16** WEST VIRGINIA & KENT STATE.

MEN'S ICE HOCKEY (15-7-2, 8-5-1)

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, W 4-3; **5** at Michigan, L 3-2 (OT); **10-11** MINNESOTA, W 5-1; L 6-1; **24-25** at Penn State, T 6-6 (OT, SL), L 3-2 (OT); **30-31** MICHIGAN STATE.
Feb. 7-8 at Notre Dame; **14-15** WISCONSIN; **21-22** at Minnesota; **27-28** MICHIGAN.

WOMEN'S ICE HOCKEY (20-5-3, 14-5-3)

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, L 6-0; **4** at Wrigley Field in Chicago vs. Wisconsin, T 3-3 (OT SW); **10-11** BEMIDJI STATE, W 6-0, W 4-0; **17-18** at Minnesota Duluth, W 3-1; W 2-1; **21** at Mercyhurst W 5-1; **24-25** MINNESOTA STATE, W 5-2, W 4-1; **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 SWIM & DIVE (4-1, 1-0)

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, L 188-112; **24** Tim Welsh Classic at South Bend, Ind., NTS
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 (5-1, 1-0)

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, L 197.5-102.5; **24-25** Tim Welsh Classic at South Bend, Ind., NTS.
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.

TRACK & FIELD

Jan. 10-11 McCravy Invite at Louisville, Ky., Men T-3rd/16, Women 2nd/16; **18** Hoosier Horsepower Classic at Indianapolis, NTS; **24-25** Crossroads of America Invite at Indianapolis, NTS; **31** Notre Dame Meyo Invite at South Bend, Ind.; Texas Tech Invite at Lubbock, Texas.
Feb. 1 Notre Dame Meyo Invite at South Bend, Ind.; Texas Tech Invite at Lubbock, Texas; **14-15** David Hemery Valentine Invitational at Boston; Clemson Tiger Paw Invite at Clemson, S.C.; **28** Big Ten Indoor Championships at Indianapolis.
March 1 Big Ten Indoor Championships at Indianapolis; **14-15** NCAA Championships at Virginia Beach, Va.; **21-22** USF Invite at Tampa, Fla.; **27-29** Raleigh Relays at Raleigh, N.C.; **28-29** Texas Relays at Austin, Texas.

April 18-19 Tom Jones Invite at Gainesville, Fla.; **25-26** Drake Relays at Des Moines, Iowa.

May 2-3 JESSE OWENS CLASSIC; **16-18** Big Ten Outdoor Championships at Eugene, Ore.; **28-31** NCAA East Prelims at Jacksonville, Fla.

June 11-14 NCAA Championships at Eugene, Ore.

MEN'S VOLLEYBALL (3-3)

Jan. 3-4 BRIGHAM YOUNG, L 3-1; L 3-1; **10-11** FORT VALLEY STATE, W 3-0; W 3-0; **17** at First Point Collegiate Challenge in Austin, Texas, vs. Stanford, L 3-0; **18** at First Point Collegiate Challenge in Austin, Texas, vs. UCLA, W 3-1; **31** Big Ten Challenge vs. Penn State, UCLA & USC.
Feb. 1 **31** Big Ten Challenge vs. Penn State, UCLA & USC; **8** LOYOLA; **10** at Purdue Fort Wayne; **15** LINDENWOOD; **20** at McKendree; **22** at Lindenwood; **27** at Ball State.
March 1 PURDUE FORT WAYNE; **7-8** at New Jersey Institute of Technology; **13** QUEENS UNIVERSITY OF CHARLOTTE; **15** QUEENS UNIVERSITY OF CHARLOTTE; **20** at Loyola; **22** at Lewis; **27** MCKENDREE.
April 3 BALL STATE; **5** LEWIS; **11-12** at Quincy; **19** MIVA Tournament Quarterfinals.

WRESTLING (11-1, 3-1)

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 vs. North Carolina, W 23-11; vs. Lock Haven, W 36-6; vs. Iowa State, W 29-10.
Jan. 5 OREGON STATE, W 40-3; **10** at Illinois, W 24-9; **12** RUTGERS, W 17-15; **19** PURDUE, W 34-10; **25** at Iowa, L 24-13.
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.



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Veteran Leadership Key In OSU's Win At Purdue

When Ohio State headed to the locker room at Mackey Arena on Jan. 21 facing a 13-point halftime deficit to No. 11 Purdue, it seemed like it was the same old story for the Buckeyes.



Due to poor first-half shooting and sloppy play, Jake Diebler's team was just 20 minutes of game time away from a fourth straight Big Ten loss and fifth conference defeat in the last six tries, which – like the Buckeyes' similar January struggles in 2022-23 and 2023-24 – would have dropped them even further down the Big Ten standings with two more challenging months in the Big Ten still ahead of them.

Ohio State fans had seen that movie before in previous seasons with Chris Holtmann leading the charge. But this time around, Diebler and his team made sure they would write a much different script that night.

Thanks to a lights-out second-half performance from fifth-year wing Micah Parrish and some elite all-around play from junior guard Bruce Thornton, the Buckeyes turned that double-digit halftime deficit into a potentially season-saving 73-70 win over the mighty Boilermakers, giving the Scarlet and Gray new life heading into the bulk of conference play.

While the duo of Parrish and Thornton showed out on the court in the second half from a statistical standpoint – combining for 25 points, 10 rebounds and seven assists – Diebler said it was not so much their play but their veteran leadership that allowed the Buckeyes to exit raucous Mackey Arena with another ranked win.

2024-25 Ohio State Men's Basketball Statistics																
11-8 Overall (3-5 Big Ten)																
Statistics through games of Jan. 22																
Player	G-GS	Min.-Avg.	FG-FGA	Pct.	3P-3PA	Pct.	FT-FTA	Pct.	Rebounds		PF-FO	A	TO	BS	ST	Pts.-Avg.
									O-D	T-Avg.						
THORNTON, Bruce	19-19	666-35.0	104-199	.523	33-79	.418	83-98	.847	7-52	59-3.1	30-0	82	32	3	17	324-17.1
ROYAL, Devin	18-14	490-27.2	87-164	.530	6-30	.200	71-95	.747	40-91	131-7.3	51-1	24	29	8	19	251-13.9
MOBLEY JR., John	19-9	471-24.8	74-179	.413	43-100	.430	43-48	.896	1-29	30-1.6	32-0	34	22	2	13	234-12.3
PARRISH, Micah	18-18	535-29.7	72-158	.456	30-78	.385	27-36	.750	9-74	83-4.6	50-1	30	40	5	22	201-11.2
JOHNSON, Meechie	10-10	288-28.8	32-90	.356	20-56	.357	7-14	.500	0-25	25-2.5	16-0	27	23	2	11	91-9.1
BRADSHAW, Aaron	12-4	218-18.2	32-69	.464	4-25	.160	17-23	.739	14-23	37-3.1	30-0	1	2	9	9	85-7.1
STEWART, Sean	18-18	333-18.5	45-85	.529	1-2	.500	17-31	.548	23-86	109-6.1	61-2	13	21	15	10	108-6.0
GLOVER, Ques	11-0	203-18.4	22-56	.393	8-17	.471	13-18	.722	6-13	19-1.7	25-1	17	12	0	3	65-5.9
MAHAFFEY, Evan	19-3	391-20.6	38-53	.717	1-2	.500	8-21	.381	25-38	63-3.3	38-2	20	14	21	16	85-4.5
ETZLER, Kalen	5-0	14-2.8	4-5	.800	2-2	1.000	0-0	.000	0-3	3-0.6	1-0	0	1	0	1	10-2.0
NJEGOVAN, Ivan	11-0	58-5.3	9-14	.643	2-5	.400	1-3	.333	7-9	16-1.5	6-0	1	0	4	0	21-1.9
WHITE, Colin	11-0	102-9.2	6-16	.375	3-9	.333	3-6	.500	5-7	12-1.1	15-0	6	5	3	4	18-1.6
PARKS, Austin	12-0	105-8.8	7-13	.538	0-0	.000	3-7	.429	5-6	11-0.9	17-0	5	5	1	2	17-1.4
NASH, Braylen	7-0	12-1.6	1-1	1.000	1-1	1.000	2-2	1.000	0-0	0-0.0	1-0	0	1	0	1	5-0.7
BAUMANN, Colby	7-0	15-2.1	0-2	.000	0-1	.000	0-0	.000	0-0	0-0.0	0-0	2	0	0	0	0-0.0
Team									29-36	65			12			
Total	19	3900	533-1104	.483	154-407	.378	295-402	.734	171-492	663-34.9	373-7	262	219	73	128	1515-79.7
Opponents	19	3900	447-1119	.399	127-435	.292	334-440	.759	210-433	643-33.8	362-8	206	231	68	81	1355-71.3

"Parrish and Thornton deserve all the credit," Diebler said after the game. "I've been challenging them to lead even more than they were doing. I thought their leadership was the most important key to tonight's result.

"It speaks to their toughness. It speaks to their care factor. There are a lot of adjectives we can throw out there. Both these guys stepped up, hit big shots, but I was just so impressed with their leadership tonight. I thought that was the difference in the game."

Diebler explained that he wanted his two veterans – who have played a combined 242 games with 201 starts in their respective college basketball careers – to keep their younger teammates engaged and believing that a comeback was possible throughout the game by being vocal and positive on the court, which he thinks both Thornton and Parrish did well in the second half.

"Specifically, I've really challenged

them on using their voice in the flow of the game," Diebler said. "Not just calling out coverages or execution things but making sure we're connected. Like, 'We're getting a step now. Let's go.' That type of (ability to) keep us connected in tough moments was the best it's been (against Purdue)."

Thornton and Parrish knew a comeback was possible because they had been there and done that in their careers before, Thornton in the Big Ten with Ohio State and Parrish in the Horizon League and Mountain West Conferences with Oakland and San Diego State, respectively.

Parrish said he learned from his experiences that coming back on the road takes patience, while the three-time Buckeye captain Thornton added that he knows exactly what it takes to win marquee games in the Big Ten, a formula that he believes his team followed on Jan. 21 and must continue to follow the rest of the season.

"It takes mental toughness," Parrish said. "One play at a time. You can't get a 30-point shot. We're preaching on the court one bucket at a time. That's what we did today."

"Leading these guys in the way that – just to win big-time games, I know what it takes," Thornton added. "I've played in this league for three years. And I feel like if we keep doing what we're doing, we'll be in great shape."

White, Glover Injured Against Boilers

It wasn't all positive vibes for Ohio State when it left West Lafayette, Ind., on Jan. 21.

The Buckeyes were hit hard by the injury bug during the win, with both freshman guard Colin White and sixth-year guard Ques Glover suffering ailments that kept them out of the game in the second half.

Starting with White, the former three-star Ottawa (Ohio) Glandorf standout suffered another injury to his left foot late in the first half when he came down awkwardly while battling for a rebound, causing him to exit the game with 4:59 left in the first half. When the Buckeyes emerged from the locker room in the second half, White was wearing a protective boot and did not return to the game.

White suffered a similar injury in Ohio

State's 102-69 win over Green Bay on Nov. 25, which caused him to watch the next six games from the sideline in a walking boot.

When asked about the injury after the game, Diebler said that White suffered a "tweak" to that same leg but he was unsure of its extent or severity.

"Colin seemed like he tweaked a previous injury, but I don't want to speculate," Diebler said.

White, when healthy, has been a solid contributor off the bench for Ohio State in his freshman season. He has totaled 18 points, 12 rebounds, six assists, four steals and three blocks in 101 minutes of action this year.

Like White, Glover has also been a key reserve for the Buckeyes when healthy, averaging 5.9 points, 1.7 rebounds and 1.5 assists per game in his 11 games played. But that production was halted against Purdue when he suffered what was reported to be a left shoulder injury in the second half that forced him to miss the final 5:32 of the game.

Glover, who has already missed eight games this season due to an ankle injury, was seen getting his left shoulder checked out by team trainers during the game. It was unknown when exactly the injury took place.

Diebler did not comment on the severity of Glover's injury immediately after the win, but he did say that the six-day gap that occurred between the Purdue win and the Buckeyes' next game against Iowa on Jan. 27 – which occurred just after BSB went to print – would have allowed his banged-up players to rest up and recover before the next challenging part of their Big Ten schedule begins.

That break could have also benefited players such as freshman guard John Mobley Jr. and sophomore forward Devin Royal, who were playing through minor eye/face and wrist injuries, respectively, against the Boilermakers.

Because BSB went to press before tip-off between the Buckeyes and Hawkeyes, it was unclear if that break proved beneficial and allowed Glover, Mobley, Royal and White to get healthy, although Diebler did say that Glover should be fine and that

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OHIO STATE MEN'S BASKETBALL

White was a long shot to return against Iowa.

OSU "Last Four In" In Lunardi's Bracketology

Ohio State's upset win over Purdue was enough to put the 11-8 Buckeyes (3-5 Big Ten) back into NCAA Tournament consideration, according to ESPN "Bracketologist" Joe Lunardi.

In Lunardi's latest "Bracketology" projection released on Jan. 24, the Buckeyes were among his "Last Four In" in the 68-team bracket, joining Pittsburgh – to which the Buckeyes fell 91-90 in overtime at home on Nov. 29 – San Diego State and Texas, which OSU defeated 80-72 in its season opener on Nov. 4 when the Longhorns were ranked 19th in the initial AP poll.

Ohio State's "Last Four In" title means it is projected to compete in the First Four round of the NCAA Tournament held at Dayton's UD Arena from March 18-19, where it would square off against Parrish's former team San Diego State.

The winner of that matchup would move on to face No. 6 seed Arizona in Seattle in the West region of the bracket, with a rematch against No. 3 seed Oregon – which they lost to 73-71 at home on Jan. 9 – looming in the round of 32 if the Buckeyes were to get past both the Aztecs and Wildcats.

Ohio State's return to Lunardi's projected bracket is likely in large part due to the amount of quality wins it has earned so far this season. As BSB went to press, Diebler's team had earned three Quad 1 victories, which included home wins against teams ranked within the top 30 of the NET rankings, neutral-site wins against teams within the top 50 and away wins against teams within the top 75.

According to the NET rankings, an algorithm used by the NCAA Tournament Selection Committee to reward teams with quality wins, those three victories came against Kentucky (12th in the NET) on Dec. 21 at the CBS Sports Classic at Madison Square Garden, Purdue (9) and Texas (33).

The Buckeyes also have six losses

against Quad 1 teams, those coming against Auburn (1) on Dec. 14, Texas A&M (13) on Nov. 15, Michigan State (16) on Jan. 3, Maryland (19) on Dec. 4, Wisconsin (22) on Jan. 14 and Oregon (23).

Ohio State, which is ranked No. 28 in the NET, will have the opportunity to further boost its NCAA Tournament résumé with several more Quad 1 wins in Big Ten play the rest of the season, including home games against Maryland on Feb. 6 and Michigan (20) on Feb. 16 and road games at Penn State (49) on Jan. 30, Illinois (10) on Feb. 2, Nebraska (54) on Feb. 9, UCLA (34) on Feb. 23 and USC (71) on Feb. 26.

Five-Star PF Wilson Chooses UNC Over OSU

As expected, Ohio State lost out on the recruiting battle for Atlanta Holy Innocents Episcopal School five-star power forward Caleb Wilson (6-9, 205). The highly coveted prospect committed to Hubert Davis and blue blood North Carolina over the Buckeyes and Kentucky on Jan. 23 while appearing on TNT's "Inside the NBA" show.

"I want to thank God, and I want to thank my family, all the people that supported me and helped me make this decision and get to the level I'm at today," Wilson said alongside NBA Hall of Famers Charles Barkley and Shaquille O'Neal, Hall of Fame broadcaster Ernie Johnson Jr. and former Tar Heel Kenny Smith. "I'll be taking my talents to Chapel Hill."

Wilson, the nation's sixth-best prospect and third-best power forward in the 2025 class, had built a strong relationship with Diebler and Ohio State this year, with the Buckeye coach taking an in-home visit to his Atlanta home earlier this fall and the five-star returning the favor and going on an official visit to Ohio State the weekend of Oct. 26.

"I've enjoyed over this weekend getting to enjoy every last one of them," Jerry Wilson, Caleb's father, told The Columbus Dispatch following the visit. "They seem to have one main, focused goal of getting Ohio State University back to the powerful tradition of high-level basketball where it should be."

While the interest seemed real between OSU and Wilson, the Buckeyes ultimately lost out to the allure and tradition of North Carolina in this recruiting battle, which has become an all-too-familiar trend for Diebler and his staff this year.

The Buckeyes also lost out in the recruiting battle for Ohio native and Napa (Calif.) Prolific Prep five-star combo guard Darryn Peterson (6-5, 195) to Kansas on Nov. 1, while they also missed on Peterson's Prolific Prep teammate and five-star

power forward Niko Bundalo (6-10, 215) to Washington as well as Branson (Mo.) Link Academy four-star guards Jerry Easter (6-3, 185) and Davion Hannah (6-5, 175) to USC and Alabama, respectively.

It was unknown as BSB went to press if Ohio State would look to add to its two-man 2025 recruiting class of Easter and Hannah's teammate, four-star center A'Mare Bynum (6-8, 225) and Cleveland Richmond Heights four-star shooting guard Dorian Jones (6-4, 160).

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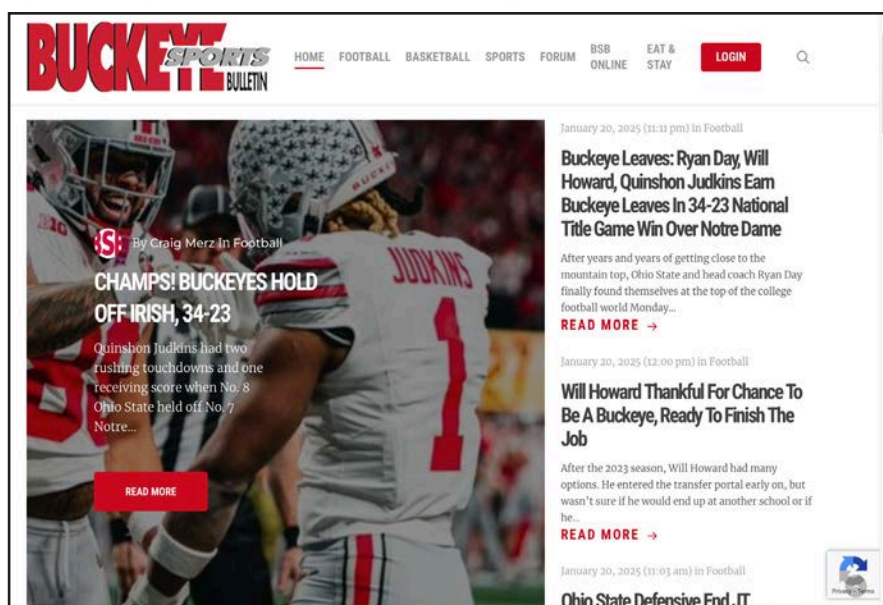


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OSU Stuns 11th-Ranked Purdue In Mackey Arena

By **PATRICK ENGELS**

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Associate Editor

It was an enjoyable two days for Buckeye fans from Jan. 20-21.

Just one day after the football team's national championship game win over Notre Dame, the Ohio State men's basketball team (11-8, 3-5) broke its three-game losing streak on Jan. 21 with a 73-70 upset victory over No. 11 Purdue (15-5, 7-2) in front of 14,876 stunned fans inside Mackey Arena.

The statement win – in which Ohio State came back from a 16-point deficit in the first half – handed Purdue its first home loss in 26 games while giving the Buckeyes their third top-20 win of the season and head coach Jake Diebler his second win in as many tries against the Boilermakers.

"The past couple games have been rough," Micah Parrish said after the game. "We couldn't get over the hump, been losing by the little things. Not tonight. We did the little things to win."

It didn't appear like an upset was in the cards for Ohio State in the early going. Similarly to previous road games this season, the Buckeyes fell behind early, making four of their first 15 shots and committed six early turnovers to trail by 16, 29-13, with 5:35 left in the first half.

Ohio State found its rhythm in the ensuing minutes to trail 33-23 with 2:40 left after a turnaround jumper by Parrish, but the Boilermakers scored eight of the half's final 13 points to lead 41-28.

OSU shot just 38.1 percent (8 of 21) in the first half compared to Purdue's 60.0 percent (15 of 25).

The Buckeyes completely flipped the script after halftime, opening with a dominant 25-9 run to lead 53-50 with 9:50 left after a layup from freshman guard John Mobley Jr. They hit five threes in six attempts during the stretch, two coming from Parrish alone.

After Purdue responded with a 9-0 run to lead 59-53 with 7:22 left, Parrish caught fire again, making three triples in 2:23 to help ignite a 15-0 run that gave the Buckeyes their largest lead of the night, 68-59, with 2:42 left.

Last year's national runner-up did not go down without a fight, however. Aided by a costly pair of turnovers from Parrish and Mobley, Purdue stormed back with an 8-0 run – all of those points coming from junior forward Trey Kaufman-Renn – to trail by one, 68-67, with 1:02 left.

But just like Ryan Day's team the night before, Ohio State looked to its freshman phenom to avoid a blown second-half lead. After a Diebler timeout with 45 seconds left, a driving Parrish found a wide-open Mobley in the corner, who buried a deep two-pointer with his foot on the three-point line to put OSU up 70-67 with 29 seconds remaining.

Purdue had one last gasp when it forced a Parrish turnover and Braden

Smith hit two free throws to trail by one with nine seconds remaining, but sophomore forward Devin Royal made three free throws in four tries on OSU's next two possessions to close out the win.

Ohio State – which shot 66.7 percent from both the field (16 of 24) and beyond the arc (8 of 12) in the second half – was led by Parrish with 22 points on 8-of-10 shooting (6 of 8 from three). He also grabbed a team-high seven rebounds. Royal (16) and Bruce Thornton (11) also reached double figures, with Thornton also dishing out a team-high five assists.

Purdue, which had its seven-game winning streak snapped despite it scoring 30 points off 18 Buckeye turnovers, was led by Kaufmann-Renn with 26 points on 11-of-16 shooting. Junior guard and Big Ten Preseason Player of the Year Smith was limited to just 12 points on 3-of-14 shooting.

Ohio State will look to build off this win in its five games before BSB next goes to press, which include home games against Iowa on Jan. 27 (8 p.m., FS1) and Maryland on Feb. 6 (7 p.m., FS1) and road contests at Penn State on Jan. 30 (6:30 p.m., FS1), No. 18 Illinois on Feb. 2 (1 p.m., CBS) and Nebraska on Feb. 9 (2 p.m., BTN).

Ohio State 73, Purdue 70

Jan. 21, 2025
Mackey Arena • West Lafayette, Ind.

	1	2	F
Ohio State (11-8, 3-5)	28	45	73
Purdue (15-5, 7-2)	41	29	70

Ohio State	Total	FG	FT	Reb.	O-D	A	PF	Pts.
Parrish	31	8-10	0-0	0-7	2	3	22	
Royal	36	4-9	8-10	1-5	1	3	16	
Thornton	38	3-7	2-2	2-4	5	1	11	
Mobley Jr.	19	3-6	2-2	0-0	1	0	9	
Stewart	20	2-2	0-0	0-3	1	4	5	
Bradshaw	16	3-5	0-0	1-0	0	4	6	
Glover	23	1-5	2-3	1-0	3	2	4	
Mahaffey	7	0-0	0-0	0-0	0	3	0	
White	3	0-1	0-0	0-0	0	2	0	
Njegovan	0	0-0	0-0	0-0	0	0	0	

Totals 200 25-59 14-17 6-22 13 22 73

Percentages: FG: 53.3%. FT: 82.4%. **Three-point field goals:** 11-23 (Parrish 6-8, Thornton 3-6, Mobley 1-3, Bradshaw 0-2, Royal 0-1, Glover 0-1, White 0-1, Stewart 1-1). **Team rebounds:** 4. **Blocked shots:** 3 (Royal, Stewart, Mahaffey). **Turnovers:** 18 (Royal 5, Parrish 4, Thornton 3, Mobley 2, Stewart, Bradshaw, Glover, White). **Steals:** 5 (Thornton 2, Parrish, Bradshaw, Glover).

Purdue	Total	FG	FT	Reb.	O-D	A	PF	Pts.
Kaufman-Renn	38	11-16	4-7	4-3	2	4	26	
Loyer	39	6-12	3-3	1-2	0	1	15	
Smith	30	3-14	5-6	1-4	8	2	12	
Cox	24	4-6	1-1	1-1	0	3	9	
Furst	25	0-2	0-1	1-2	1	2	0	
Harris	18	2-2	2-2	0-1	1	4	8	
Heide	15	0-0	0-0	1-1	2	0	0	
Colvin	9	0-2	0-0	0-1	0	1	0	
Burgess	2	0-0	0-0	0-0	1	0	0	

Totals 200 26-54 15-20 9-17 15 17 70

Percentages: FG: 48.1%. FT: 75.0%. **Three-point field goals:** 3-9 (Smith 1-3, Loyer 0-2, Harris 2-2, Cox 0-1, Colvin 0-1). **Team rebounds:** 2. **Blocked shots:** 0. **Turnovers:** 10 (Kaufman-Renn 3, Cox 2, Loyer, Smith, Furst, Harris, Burgess). **Steals:** 5 (Kaufman-Renn, Loyer, Smith, Furst, Harris). **Officials:** Anderson, Comer, Nunez. **Attendance:** 14,876.

Bucks Making A Habit Of Huge Scoring Runs

Midway through their 74-66 win over No. 8 Maryland on Jan. 23, the Ohio State women's basketball team seemed to be headed toward a second straight loss. One game removed from a 62-59 defeat to Big Ten bottom-feeder Penn State on Jan. 19, Ohio State was struggling to find a rhythm offensively. It made just 8 of 35 first-half field goals (22.9 percent) to fall behind 34-27 against a shorthanded Maryland team playing without a couple of its key contributors.

DOUBLE DRIBBLE Bobby Gorbett

Ohio State finally started to make some shots in the second half, but defensively, head coach Kevin McGuff's team was even worse, allowing 16 points in the first 4:08 of the third quarter to trail 50-40.

After a timeout by McGuff, Ohio State completely turned the game around in mere minutes with a 15-0 scoring run to jump in front 55-50.

It was far from the first time Ohio State changed the outlook of a game in a matter of minutes. The opposite was true, as in Big Ten play the Buckeyes have begun to make a habit of their game-changing runs.

One of the Buckeyes' signature huge runs occurred back in early December during their 83-74 Big Ten-opening win over Illinois.

Trailing 23-20 with 7:17 left in the second quarter, the Buckeyes started to force some turnovers and get to the foul line to embark on a 20-3 scoring run and lead 40-26 by halftime, a dominant sequence that was instrumental in McGuff's team picking up the win.

The Buckeyes took it up a notch in their 69-60 win against Oregon on Jan. 12. Trailing the Ducks 15-10 early in the second quarter after a poor shooting start, the Buckeyes basically ended any hope for their opponent by scoring 27 straight second-quarter points.

One common thread for all of those runs is that they occurred at Value City Arena, and for Ohio State – a team with the 13th-highest average attendance in the country at 6,097 fans – it's easy to understand why.



Kevin McGuff

"I think that we have a style in terms of our pace where we can score quickly, we can also press and turn teams over," McGuff said after the Maryland game when asked what makes his team so good at going on scoring runs. "I also thought one thing that was really critical tonight was the crowd. In the third and fourth quarters when we would go on a run, the crowd was absolutely outstanding."

With the crowd behind them against the Terrapins, Ohio State's defensive intensi-

2024-25 Ohio State Women's Basketball Statistics

19-1 Overall (8-1 Big Ten) Statistics through games of Jan. 26

Player	G-GS	Min.-Avg.	FG-FGA	Pct.	3P-3PA	Pct.	FT-FTA	Pct.	Rebounds		PF-FO	A	TO	BS	ST	Pts.-Avg.
									O-D	T-Avg.						
MCMAHON, C.	16-16	509-31.8	92-217	.424	18-56	.321	60-91	.659	14-65	79-4.9	38-0	38	32	4	20	262-16.4
CAMBRIDGE, J.	6-16	390-24.3	92-199	.462	10-41	.244	42-53	.792	6-64	70-4.4	34-1	63	37	4	33	236-14.8
GRAY, Chance	20-20	567-28.3	101-232	.435	52-135	.385	39-47	.830	7-31	38-1.9	19-0	33	21	2	32	293-14.7
THIERRY, Taylor	20-20	598-29.9	85-142	.599	19-35	.543	31-49	.633	48-66	114-5.7	50-1	25	26	11	48	220-11.0
PETTY, Ajae	20-20	443-22.1	88-148	.595	0-0	.000	26-40	.650	52-94	146-7.3	52-1	32	52	8	18	202-10.1
WATSON, Ava	19-0	291-15.3	38-122	.311	24-81	.296	10-10	1.000	2-17	19-1.0	14-0	17	11	0	25	110-5.8
CAMBRIDGE, K.	18-4	310-17.2	38-85	.447	4-25	.160	12-29	.414	23-35	58-3.2	31-1	23	17	5	30	92-5.1
GREENE, Madison	20-4	383-19.1	28-76	.368	10-28	.357	28-37	.757	5-15	20-1.0	35-0	37	23	3	31	94-4.7
LEMMILÄ, Elsa	20-0	290-14.5	32-62	.516	0-5	.000	26-37	.703	31-71	102-5.1	35-0	14	16	37	12	90-4.5
WALKER, Eboni	19-0	221-11.6	24-51	.471	0-1	.000	0-0	.000	24-14	38-2.0	9-0	25	9	4	15	48-2.5
Team									29-36	65		12				
Total	20	4000	618-1334	.463	137-407	.337	274-393	.697	241-508	749-37.5	317-4	307	256	78	264	1647-82.4
Opponents	20	4000	439-1146	.383	111-402	.276	191-284	.673	228-516	744-37.2	369-8	224	470	59	112	1180-59.0

ty only seemed to heighten after it picked up the first couple of steals of its 15-0 run. Kennedy Cambridge, who played a large role in the Buckeyes' 15-0 outburst against the Terrapins, said the snowball effect of a run is certainly a factor.

"I wish that you all could be in it," Cambridge said to the media. "It's also our teammates with the energy. You see (McMahon) yelling, but it's the energy, and energy feeds."

Cambridge Connection Uplifts Bucks

The Buckeyes' lengthy run against Maryland wouldn't have been possible without the connection of sisters Jalon and Kennedy Cambridge. The duo combined for seven of the 15 points during the run, but their impact stretched far beyond the scoreboard.

The sequence started at the 5:35 mark when Jalon missed a three-point jumper, but her 5-8 sister came up with the rebound and dished to McMahon, who drew a foul and sank both free throws.

After senior guard Taylor Thierry forced a steal and scored a layup, the elder Cambridge had her own steal and again found McMahon for a score.

Kennedy was only in the game for a total of 43 seconds at that point in the third quarter, and although she wasn't yet in the scoring column for the second half, her hustle helped turn the tide of the game in favor of the Buckeyes, according to their head coach.

"I thought she was terrific, her energy was contagious, and she just really uplifted us when she came in the game," McGuff said of her performance. "She was really pesky on defense, she was getting the tough rebounds, making the hustle plays. Just great minutes from her tonight."

Kennedy's hard work was finally rewarded with a couple of points after a great pass from McMahon to put OSU down just 50-48 with 3:51 left in the quarter. Trailing by only two points, the Buckeyes forced yet another turnover, and Jalon found her sister in perfect position to hit a go-ahead three-point shot.

One quarter later, with Ohio State up six, Kennedy Cambridge returned the favor when she forced a steal and bounced a perfect pass to her trailing sister for an easy layup.

The back-and-forth between the two sisters left some reporters wondering about a special connection between them. After the game, Kennedy all but confirmed that connection exists.

"Not that I (actually) know what she's thinking, but I know what she's thinking, and vice versa," Kennedy said. "There are a lot of plays that I try and make with other people that don't really work, but I feel like we played with each other our entire lives, so it's the small things like that that I feel like she knows before I even know what I want to do."

Lemmilä Receives Increased Playing Time

It isn't just Kennedy Cambridge who has made an impact coming off McGuff's bench. Freshman center Elsa Lemmilä has been thrust into the lineup even in the most important moments of games.

Lemmilä, who received only six minutes of action in Ohio State's loss to Penn State, was consistently featured on the floor one game later against Maryland, earning 23 minutes, her second-highest total of the season.

The 6-6 freshman has received at least 18 minutes of playing time in eight games this season for the Buckeyes, but much of that time came in replacing graduate forward Ajae Petty if she was in foul trouble or the game was already decided.

What was particularly noteworthy in the Maryland game was that Petty had committed only two fouls, but McGuff still elected to put her in the game for only eight minutes, giving more playing time to the freshman.

When asked about his decision to keep Petty on the bench in favor of Lemmilä, McGuff credited his first-year center.

"I thought when Elsa went in she looked really good and really impactful," McGuff said, "So we just went with her for a little longer than we might otherwise."

Lemmilä made the most of her opportunity on the court and recorded five points on 2-of-3 shooting along with five rebounds and four blocks, the latter of which was one shy of a career high.

Considering her abilities as a rim-protector and rebounder, it's easy to see why McGuff would want Lemmilä out on the court as much as possible. Still, Petty was considered one of the most, if not the most, important transfer additions in the off-season after she led Kentucky with 14.2 points and 10.6 rebounds per game last season.

It hasn't all clicked for Petty with the Buckeyes, though. Despite starting in all of Ohio State's 20 games and recording 10.1 points and 7.3 rebounds per game, the aforementioned issues with foul trouble have allowed her to play only 22.1 minutes per game, the least amount of the team's five starters.

In Ohio State's win over Nebraska, Lemmilä again received more playing time than Petty, earning 22 minutes to Petty's 16. The former Wildcat had just four points on 2-of-3 shooting while Lemmilä finished with two points but once again made her presence felt in the paint, recording nine rebounds and two blocks.

OSU Slides In AP Poll After First Loss

Ohio State's loss to Penn State came with a corresponding slide in the AP top 25 the next day on Jan. 20. The Buckeyes slipped from No. 9 down to No. 12, their lowest ranking in the poll since week five when they were also No. 12.

Luckily for the Buckeyes, their pair of wins over then top-10 Maryland and fringe-top-25 team Nebraska since the release of the last poll could have them poised for a move back up into the top 10.

With a couple of road games against two top-five teams – No. 1 UCLA and No. 4 USC – upcoming in early February, Ohio State has an opportunity to potentially rise all the way up to the top five itself.

However, the new Big Ten giants are ranked in the top five for a reason. Both teams have been difficult to defeat in or out of the conference, with the Bruins boasting the only unblemished record in the country at 20-0 (8-0 Big Ten) and perhaps the best win of the season on their résumé, a 77-62 triumph over now-No. 2 South Carolina back in November, and the Trojans owning a 14-game win streak and 18-1 record (8-0 Big Ten) as BSB went to press.

OSU Suffers First Loss Of Season At PSU

By **BOBBY GORBETT**

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

The Ohio State women's basketball team suffered its first loss of the season in the three Big Ten games it played since BSB last went to press.

Prior to the game on Jan. 19, few would have guessed that Penn State – a team that had yet to win a Big Ten game in seven tries up to that point – would break the Buckeyes' unbeaten streak, but that's exactly what happened at the Bryce Jordan Center in State College, Pa., when head coach Kevin McGuff's team was bitten by cold shooting and a poor performance in the paint in the stunning three-point loss.

Ohio State didn't let the loss beat it twice, however. Instead, the Buckeyes responded well with back-to-back wins over such Big Ten contenders as No. 8 Maryland on Jan. 23 at Value City Arena and Nebraska on Jan. 26 at Pinnacle Bank Arena to improve to an impressive 19-1 on the season and 8-1 in the Big Ten.

OSU Goes Cold In Loss To Penn State

Ohio State's 17-game winning streak came to a stunning end in a 62-59 loss to Penn State (10-9, 1-7) on Jan. 19. Without star freshman point guard Jalonni Cambridge, who missed the game due to an illness, Ohio State (17-1, 6-1) struggled to find any sort of offensive rhythm.

The Buckeyes left Bryce Jordan Center with their first loss of the season but also a season-low 59 points, thanks in part to a 22-of-54 shooting performance (40.7 percent) in a game played before 2,817 onlookers.

"We made some shots early on from the three-point line, and then we kind of fell in love with it," McGuff said after the game. "We kept shooting threes for a while there, and then we went a little cold and didn't get around the basket or to the free-throw line enough."

The first five minutes of the game seemed to indicate that the Buckeyes would beat the Nittany Lions soundly.

Chance Gray and Cotie McMahon combined to hit four three-point jumpers in the first 4:19 of the game to help lead a game-opening 14-2 scoring run.

The Buckeyes didn't seem to have much reason to be alarmed until they had a 4:20 scoring drought to start the second quarter, helping Penn State score seven straight points to trail 18-17 with 6:01 left after a layup from freshman guard Talayah Walker.

The Nittany Lions proved their 7-0 spurt wasn't a fluke. After OSU scored five straight points to go up 23-17, PSU wrapped the first half on a 13-4 scoring run to take a 30-27 lead at halftime.

Ohio State bounced back after halftime with a three-point barrage. McMahon, Madison Greene and Taylor Thierry each made a triple in the first 4:01 of the period to lead 42-35. But the Nittany Lions responded

Penn State 62, Ohio State 59										
Jan. 19 2025 Bryce Jordan Center • State College, Pa.										
	1	2	3	4	F					
Ohio State (17-1, 6-1)	18	9	24	8	59					
Penn State (10-9, 1-7)	10	20	21	11	62					
Ohio State	Total	FT	Reb.							
	Min	M-A	M-A	O-D	A	PF	Pts.			
McMahon	31	7-14	2-4	1-4	6	4	19			
Gray	37	6-18	2-2	0-2	1	0	18			
Thierry	37	3-5	0-0	0-2	4	1	7			
Petty	27	3-7	1-2	1-6	1	2	7			
Greene	39	1-2	0-0	0-3	2	4	3			
Watson	14	1-4	0-0	0-0	1	0	3			
Cambridge	7	1-2	0-0	0-1	0	1	2			
Lemmlä	5	0-1	0-0	0-1	2	1	0			
Walker	3	0-1	0-0	0-0	0	1	0			
Totals	200	22-54	5-8	2-19	17	14	59			
Percentages: FG: 40.7%. FT: 62.5%. Three-point field goals: 10-23. (Gray 4-12, McMahon 3-4, Watson 1-3, Thierry 1-2, Greene 1-2). Team rebounds: None. Blocked shots: 3 (McMahon, Lemmlä, Walker). Turnovers: 13 (McMahon 3, Greene 3, Thierry 2, Petty 2, Lemmlä 2, Walker). Steals: 12 (McMahon 3, Petty 3, Thierry 2, Gray, Greene, Watson, Walker).										
Penn State	Total	FT	Reb.							
	Min	M-A	M-A	O-D	A	PF	Pts.			
Elliott	32	6-11	1-2	1-2	4	3	14			
Murray	31	4-9	0-0	0-3	0	1	12			
Merkle	26	6-7	0-0	2-8	1	3	12			
Campbell	39	1-5	1-2	0-7	3	1	3			
Hall	19	1-2	0-0	1-1	2	3	2			
Oden	34	4-13	3-4	0-5	5	2	13			
Walker	20	3-5	0-0	1-4	2	2	6			
Johnson	2	0-0	0-0	0-0	0	0	0			
Totals	200	25-52	5-8	8-31	17	15	62			
Percentages: FG: 48.1%. FT: 62.5%. Three-point field goals: 7-15 (Murray 4-8, Oden 2-4, Elliott 1-2, Campbell 0-1). Team rebounds: 4. Blocked shots: 2 (Hall, Walker). Turnovers: 21 (Oden 6, Merkle 4, Gabby 3, Campbell 3, Murray 2, Hall, Walker, Team). Steals: 4 (Oden 2, Elliott, Walker). Officials: Angie Enlund, Michael McConell, Cara Seggie. Attendance: 2,817										

Ohio State 74, Maryland 66										
Jan. 23, 2025 Value City Arena • Columbus										
	1	2	3	4	F					
Maryland (16-3, 6-2)	22	12	20	12	66					
Ohio State (18-1, 7-1)	12	15	30	17	74					
Maryland	Total	FT	Reb.							
	Min	M-A	M-A	O-D	A	PF	Pts.			
Smikle	28	5-13	6-11	2-3	4	4	17			
Poffenbarger	38	3-8	6-6	0-4	4	1	13			
Kubek	34	5-9	1-4	4-5	0	3	12			
Te-Biasu	40	3-12	3-3	0-3	0	4	11			
Dalce	35	4-11	2-4	8-10	2	3	10			
McLean	13	0-1	2-2	0-5	1	1	2			
Fisher	5	0-1	1-4	0-0	0	0	1			
DeBerry	5	0-1	0-0	0-0	0	1	0			
McKennie	2	0-0	0-0	0-0	0	0	0			
Totals	200	20-56	21-34	16-32	11	17	66			
Percentages: FG: 35.7%. FT: 61.8%. Three-point field goals: 5-19 (Te-Biasu 2-9, Poffenbarger 1-4, Smikle 1-3, Kubek 1-3). Team rebounds: 4. Blocked shots: 2 (Kubek, Dalce). Turnovers: 17 (Poffenbarger 6, Te-Biasu 4, Smikle 3, DeBerry 2, Dalce, McLean). Steals: 2 (Smikle, Fisher).										
Ohio State	Total	FT	Reb.							
	Min	M-A	M-A	O-D	A	PF	Pts.			
J. Cambridge	31	8-17	4-4	0-8	2	4	20			
McMahon	35	5-16	4-6	1-4	1	4	14			
Thierry	35	4-7	4-4	0-5	2	3	13			
Petty	8	3-3	1-1	1-0	0	2	7			
Gray	22	0-7	0-0	0-0	1	2	0			
K. Cambridge	24	4-8	2-2	2-3	3	4	12			
Lemmlä	23	2-3	1-2	2-3	0	3	5			
Greene	10	1-3	1-2	0-1	1	0	3			
Walker	7	0-1	0-0	2-0	1	0	0			
Watson	5	0-2	0-0	0-1	1	1	0			
Totals	200	26-62	12-16	13-27	12	23	74			
Percentages: FG: 40.3%. FT: 81.0%. Three-point field goals: 3-19 (K. Cambridge 2-5, Gray 0-4, McMahon 0-3, J. Cambridge 0-2, Greene 0-2, Lemmlä 0-1, Watson 0-1, Thierry 1-1). Team rebounds: 1. Blocked shots: 5 (Lemmlä 4, Thierry). Turnovers: 6 (J. Cambridge 2, McMahon, Petty, Gray, Greene). Steals: 10 (K. Cambridge 4, J. Cambridge 2, Thierry 2, McMahon, Lemmlä). Officials: Gina Cross, Bryan Enterline, Maggie Tieman. Attendance: 7,082										

with a 10-2 run to retake a 45-44 lead with 3:59 left in the third quarter.

The Buckeyes battled back to tie the game at 51 heading into the fourth quarter, and the game was tied at 56 with 6:45 remaining after a Gray three. Both teams plunged into a scoring drought until the Nittany Lions broke through with a Gabby Elliott layup at 2:31 to take a 58-56 lead.

After Ajae Petty split a pair of free throws, Penn State capitalized off an extra possession when Elliott grabbed a three-point miss from redshirt sophomore guard Moriah Murray and laid in a layup to put the home team up 60-57 with 1:45 left.

McMahon cut the deficit with a pair of free throws at the 40-second mark, but on the other end, the Buckeyes fouled, failed to get a defensive rebound after a missed free throw, and fouled again, allowing Penn State to extend its lead to three, 62-59 with 16 seconds left.

The Buckeyes looked to Gray, who had already scored 18 points and made four triples, to hit a potential game-tying shot, but she missed two three-pointers in the last 13 seconds, allowing Penn State to hold onto the narrow win.

Ohio State, which was held without a field goal for the final 6:45, was led by McMahon with a game-high 19 points and six assists on 7-of-14 shooting. Petty led the team with seven rebounds to go with seven points.

Penn State, which outrebounded OSU 39-21, leading to a 34-22 scoring advan-

tage inside, was led by Elliott with 14 points on 6-of-11 shooting along with four assists and three rebounds. Gracie Merkle had 12 points and a game-high 10 rebounds.

Bucks Earn First Top-10 Win Of Season Vs. Terps

Ohio State (18-1, 7-1) wasted no time bouncing back from its loss to Penn State, coming back from a 15-point first-half deficit to defeat No. 8 Maryland (16-3, 6-2) 74-66 on Jan. 23.

The Buckeyes' poor first half at Value City Arena started from the get-go when McGuff's team – facing off against its first AP top-10 opponent of the year – missed seven of its first 10 shots to trail Maryland 18-8 with 3:41 left in the first quarter.

The Buckeyes' deficit remained at 10, 22-12, to start the second quarter, where the Terrapins were equally impressive, getting a pair of three-point jumpers from guards Kaylene Smikle and Sarah Te-Biasu to help Maryland start the quarter on a 7-2 spurt and take a 29-14 lead with 8:15 left in the half.

Ohio State's defense tightened up to only allow one field goal the rest of the half, allowing it to finish the period on a 13-5 scoring run to make the score 34-27. Nine of those points during that sequence came from Kennedy Cambridge and McMahon.

The Buckeyes started the second half much stronger than they began the first on

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OHIO STATE WOMEN'S BASKETBALL

Ohio State 72, Nebraska 66

Jan. 26 2025
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	1	2	3	4	F
Ohio State (19-1, 8-1)	17	19	25	11	72
Nebraska (15-5, 6-3)	21	17	17	11	66

Ohio State	Total				A	PF	Pts.
	Min	M-A	M-A	O-D			
Thierry	38	8-10	2-3	1-6	0	2	23
McMahon	38	6-17	2-2	1-9	3	3	15
Gray	19	3-8	1-3	0-3	0	0	7
Petty	16	2-3	0-0	0-3	2	2	4
J. Cambridge	17	0-1	0-0	0-2	3	4	0
Greene	23	3-6	4-4	0-0	1	2	11
K. Cambridge	22	4-7	0-0	0-2	1	0	8
Lemmilä	22	0-1	2-4	2-7	1	3	2
Walker	5	1-1	0-0	0-0	0	0	2
Totals	200	27-54	11-16	5-33	11	16	72

Percentages: FG: 50.0%. FT: 68.8%. **Three-point field goals:** 7-20. (Thierry 5-7, McMahon 1-5, Gray 0-3, Greene 1-3, K. Cambridge 0-2). **Team rebounds:** 2. **Blocked shots:** 5 (K. Cambridge 2, Lemmilä 2, Thierry). **Turnovers:** 13 (J. Cambridge 5, McMahon 3, Greene 2, Thierry, Gray, Petty, K. Cambridge, Lemmilä). **Steals:** 10 (Thierry 3, McMahon 3, K. Cambridge 3, J. Cambridge).

Nebraska	Total				A	PF	Pts.
	Min	M-A	M-A	O-D			
Markowski	29	8-15	2-5	1-5	0	1	18
Hake	31	4-9	1-2	0-4	1	2	12
Prince	33	4-13	0-0	3-5	3	3	8
Petrie	21	2-4	1-2	2-4	3	3	6
Nissley	22	1-7	0-0	0-2	5	1	3
Rimdal	18	3-7	0-0	0-0	3	0	8
Bozan	11	1-2	3-4	3-1	0	1	5
Hargrove	19	1-4	0-0	0-3	1	2	3
Moriarty	16	1-5	0-0	0-0	2	1	3
Coley	1	0-0	0-0	0-0	0	1	0
Totals	200	25-66	7-13	12-25	18	15	66

Percentages: FG: 37.9%. FT: 53.8%. **Three-point field goals:** 9-35 (Hake 3-7, Britt 0-6, Nissley 1-5, Rimdal 2-5). **Team rebounds:** 4. **Blocked shots:** None. **Turnovers:** 13 (Prince 4, Nissley 3, Petrie 2, Hake, Rimdal, Bozan, Team). **Steals:** 7 (Hake 3, Prince 3, Moriarty). **Officials:** Kyle Bacon, Mark Berger, Julie Krommenhoek. **Attendance:** 9,772

guard Shyanne Sellers due to respective knee injuries – McDaniel's injury being a season-ending torn ACL – bounced back by scoring four of the final six points of the period to trail 57-54.

But that was the closest the shorthanded Terrapins would get the rest of the game, after OSU scored seven straight points to start the fourth quarter to lead 64-54 with 7:49 left after a Thierry layup.

After the Buckeyes extended their lead to 11 on two separate occasions, Maryland tried one last comeback by holding Ohio State scoreless over a 2:19 period to cut the deficit to six, 68-62, with 3:08 to go, but McMahon and Jaloni Cambridge both made clutch baskets on consecutive possessions to preserve the eight-point win.

The younger Cambridge was Ohio State's leading scorer and rebounder with 20 points on 8-of-17 shooting along with eight boards. After the game, McGuff was clearly happy to have his star point guard back in the lineup.

"We're a different team with Jaloni," McGuff said, "and she played really well tonight, especially in that second half."

Kennedy Cambridge provided a spark off the bench with 12 points on 4-of-8 shooting along with a team-high three assists and four steals, to go along with five rebounds in 24 minutes of action.

Although her team shot only 20-of-56 (35.7 percent) from the field, Smikle had a solid day for the Terrapins, scoring a team-high 17 points on 5-of-13 shooting, while senior forward Christina Dalce had an impressive 10 points and 18 rebounds.

Thierry's Season-High Lifts Bucks Over Huskers

In a back-and-forth road battle against a quality opponent, Ohio State (19-1, 8-1) received just enough offensive fireworks from Thierry, who scored a season-high 23 points on 8-of-10 shooting, to outlast Nebraska (15-5, 6-3) 72-66 on Jan. 26 in front of 9,772 fans inside Pinnacle Bank Arena.

Ohio State struggled early on both ends in the first quarter, allowing Nebraska to take an early 15-9 lead with 4:33 left in the period after a turnaround jumper from Cornhuskers All-Big Ten center Alexis Markowski. The Buckeyes responded and used scoring from bench contributors Greene, freshman center Elsa Lemmilä and Eboni Walker to trail 21-17 heading into the second frame.

Ohio State began the quarter with five straight points to take the lead, but Nebraska followed with an 8-0 spurt to go back up 29-22 with 5:33 left in the half. The Buckeyes got back in the game with an encouraging offensive spurt to trail 31-30 with 3:54

remaining after a Greene three, but a 2:16 scoring drought halted that momentum and allowed Nebraska to hold a 38-36 lead at the half.

Ohio State tied the game four times in the third quarter before ultimately taking a 52-50 lead off a layup by McMahon with 4:45 left in the period. After Nebraska took back a 53-52 lead off a three-pointer by senior guard Alberte Rimdal with 3:58 left in the period, the Buckeyes finally flexed their muscles with a 9-0 run capped by another McMahon layup to lead 61-53 with 30 seconds left before conceding two points at the end of the period.

After scoring 25 points in the third quarter, Ohio State netted only four points on 2-of-8 shooting in the first 8:02 of the final frame, allowing Nebraska to slowly climb back and trail 65-64 with 2:28 left after a made free throw by junior guard Callin Hake that came off a Greene turnover.

Hake had another chance at the line to tie the game at 65 but was unsuccessful, and the Buckeyes took full advantage of the miss on the ensuing possession when Thierry hit a clutch three-point shot to expand the lead to 68-64 with just 1:58 left. Nebraska answered with a layup from Markowski on the next play, and after Kennedy Cambridge missed a three-point shot to give the Huskers the ball back down just two, Ohio State got a crucial stop – forcing a missed three-point attempt by freshman guard Britt Prince – to get the ball back and allow Greene to extend the lead to two possessions with a pair of free throws.

After Nebraska missed three field goals and a pair of free throws on the next possession, Greene wrapped a bow on the six-point win with another two makes from the line just as the clock struck zeros.

In addition to her 23 points, Thierry added seven rebounds and three steals, helping the Buckeyes score 12 fastbreak points to Nebraska's one.

"She was really spectacular today," McGuff said of Thierry after the game. "I thought Taylor Thierry was as good as she's been all year, and she's had some great moments, but I thought on both ends of the floor she just had such a presence and made some huge baskets for us."

McMahon followed Thierry with 15 points on 6-of-17 shooting and a game-high 10 rebounds, while Greene added 11 points on 3-of-6 shooting, helping the Buckeyes shoot 50.0 percent (27 of 54) on the night.

Nebraska, which shot 25 of 66 from the field (37.9 percent), was led by Markowski, who scored 18 points on 8-of-15 shooting and grabbed six rebounds.

Ohio State faces quite the gantlet in the three games it plays before BSB next goes to press. The Buckeyes will start with a home game against Washington on Feb. 2 (5 p.m., BTN) before traveling west to Los Angeles for a midweek contest with No. 1 UCLA on Feb. 5 (9:30 p.m., Peacock) and a weekend matchup against superstar guard JuJu Watkins and No. 4 USC on Feb. 8 (9 p.m., FOX).

offense, making five of their first eight shots, but that didn't do much to put a dent on the scoreboard. Maryland scored 16 points in the first 4:08 of the half – four more than they tallied in the second quarter alone – to take a 50-40 lead with 5:52 left after a Te-Biasu three.

A timeout from McGuff at the 5:50 mark seemed to give the Buckeyes the spark they desperately needed. They stormed back with three forced turnovers and efficient offense to go on a 15-0 run that allowed them to take a 55-50 lead with 2:01 left in the period after a Jaloni Cambridge fastbreak layup, bringing most of the 7,082 fans inside Value City Arena to their feet.

The run was dominated by the Cambridge sisters, who combined for seven points, two rebounds, two assists and a steal during that span.

Maryland, playing without team leader Bri McDaniel and preseason All-Big Ten

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Deckhut Trying To Make Waves With Play

Sam Deckhut is a variation of the term surf and turf.

For the Ohio State sophomore forward from San Diego, his interests are surf and ice with an emphasis on the latter.

He left home at age 15 to pursue a sport that took him to Arizona, the Northeast and Iowa before committing to the Buckeyes.

IN THE CREASE Craig Merz

Still, the chance to ride the waves has never lost its appeal for him when he returns home, as he did for the holiday break.

"It's great," he said. "When I go back after being here for so long, my first session out there, my shoulders and my back are just so sore because it's all the different muscles. It's definitely a good workout."

He has more time to enjoy surfing when he goes back to San Diego in the summer and can usually be found at nearby Tourmaline Surfing Park.

Deckhut got to experience the highs and lows in temperatures recently when he left the warmth of San Diego after the break to play in the outdoor game at Wrigley Field in

Chicago when the game-time temperature on the late afternoon of Jan. 3 was 24 degrees and dropping.

He didn't let the elements get to him, scoring the Buckeyes' first goal when they rallied from a 2-0 deficit for a 4-3 win.

Through 23 games, he had five goals and four assists for nine points.

"We've played him at wing. We played him at center, back to wing," coach Steve Rohlik said. "I like the versatility. I like that no matter where you put him, you know what you're getting. His consistency is what I talk about. I don't care if he's scoring goals or not. I just need him to be consistent no matter where we need to play him."

"If he's killing penalties or he's winning faceoffs, we need him to bring energy on a line that he's on. That's what I'm looking for."

Deckhut comes from a part of the country that is not known for hockey, but there have been various minor-league teams such as the San Diego Gulls there for decades, and current NHL players defenseman Chad Ruhwedel of the New York Rangers and Vancouver Canucks goaltender Thatcher Demko hail from San Diego.

"It's not as big into hockey as some places, but it's a pretty close community," he said. "I grew up going to the Gulls games, and a couple of hours north, there's two NHL teams (Anaheim Ducks and Los Angeles Kings) so it's a little bit more spread out, but it's still there. And it's growing."

Deckhut began playing hockey at age 4 thanks to his father, who is from Vancouver.

"My older two brothers started playing, and I kind of followed their lead," Deckhut said.

He played for the Gulls' and Kings' Under-13 and -14 teams before joining the Phoenix Jr. Coyotes at age 15.

"It was hard to compete in Triple-A, the highest level in youth hockey in San Diego, once you got to a certain age. Most of the kids on my team left after their U-14 year, so I went to Arizona and played there for two years," he said. "It's hard to leave your family when you're like that, but my whole life was hockey, and I really wanted to compete at the highest level I could and I wanted to keep my dream alive."

"So, at the time, honestly, it wasn't out of the question for me to leave. I was very fortunate to live with a really good family in Arizona that helped make the decision easier."

From there he enrolled in the Salisbury (Conn.) School, an all-boys, private college prep school, in 2019-20. During that time, he also played for a U-18 program and helped the Rochester (N.Y.) Coalition win the 2021 national championship.

After graduating from Salisbury in 2021, he joined Sioux City (Iowa) of the United States Hockey League and played two seasons for the Musketeers. He had a combined 66 points (17 goals, 49 assists) in 119 games.

Then it was off to Columbus.

"I really wanted to go to a big school," Deckhut said. "I came here to visit. (Rohlik) took me around. I loved everything. The campus life and how much they put into the athletics here is just really cool. I always wanted to be a part of such a historic program. I like Columbus and fell in love with the coaches, so it was a pretty easy decision."

Attending a football game was an eye-opener.

"I heard they were crazy and everyone was into it, but the first game was surreal," he said. "There's just so many people and then everyone's bought into the program, so it was pretty special."

Deckhut played 29 games as a freshman last season with three goals and three assists for six points. His best game was scoring twice and having a plus-3 vs. Michigan State on Feb. 23.

With Deckhut having already passed his production from last season, Rohlik feels he is getting more comfortable in his role.

"His natural spot is center, but we've actually played him on wing a little bit more before Christmas and now the second half, but he played there last year, and he's played very well for us there," he said.

Down The Stretch

The Buckeyes' series at Penn State on Jan. 24 and 25 began the final segment of six consecutive weeks of Big Ten games to end the regular season.



Sam Deckhut

"I think we're all ready for it," said graduate forward Joe Dunlap. "It's not like it's something we haven't seen before. We're just playing guys in our conference now, and I feel like that brings out the best in our team so we're excited for what's to come."

The PSU series came after an untimely open weekend Jan. 17-18 as far as Ohio State was concerned. The Buckeyes were off from Dec. 14 to the game at Wrigley, followed by the rematch in Ann Arbor two days later on Jan. 5. Ohio State then split with visiting Minnesota on Jan. 10-11.

Ideally, there would have been more time between coming out of the holiday break and the final open weekend.

"It seems like we just had a break there, at Christmas, and it was kind of an odd time to have another bye, but we took advantage of just trying to push ourselves in practice," Rohlik said before the Penn State series. "Now we've got 12 straight games. There's no breaks in the Big Ten so we've got to be at our best."

Adding to the quirkiness of the schedule, the Buckeyes have a pair of Thursday-Friday home series instead of playing Friday and Saturday.

The first is Jan. 30 (8 p.m.) and 31 (7 p.m.) vs. Michigan State. The season ends Feb. 27 (8 p.m.) and 28 (6 p.m.) against Michigan.

Remembering His Roots

Former Buckeye goalie Jakub Dobeš was thrilled by Ohio State's national championship win in football over Notre Dame on Jan. 20 because it allowed him to win a bet with Montreal Canadiens teammate Jake Evans, who played for the Fighting Irish from 2015-18.

An Instagram post showed him and Dobeš departing a plane with Evans wearing a black Ohio State football jersey with the No. 1.

Lion In Wait

It was a frustrating series at Penn State with the Nittany Lions (11-10-3, 2-9-3) taking four of six points with the extra shootout point after a 6-6 tie through regulation and overtime.

The No. 9 Buckeyes (15-7-2, 8-5-1) had one win in the past five games with a regulation loss, a shootout loss and a pair of overtime defeats.

In the opener, Penn State pulled its goalie for the extra attacker and scored with 12 seconds to tie it 6-6. Deckhut and Thomas Weis each had a goal and an assist, and Max Montes got two assists.

After a scoreless OT, the Nittany Lions won the shootout 1-0 in three rounds to earn the extra conference point.

OSU turned the tables the next game, twice rallying in the third with the tying score coming with 21 seconds left by Patrick Guzzo with goalie Logan Terness off for the 6-on-5 advantage. Reese Laubach scored at 3:26 of overtime to end the game.

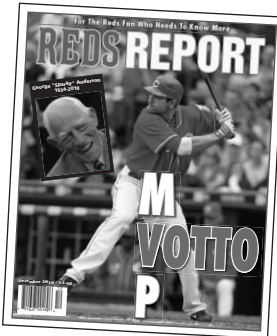
For complete recaps of the Penn State series, go to the BuckeyeSports.com website, free to all Buckeye Sports Bulletin subscribers.

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Wrestlebucks Split B1G Duals Vs. Purdue, Iowa

Since the last dual that was covered in Buckeye Sports Bulletin, No. 4 Ohio State has had two more wrestling duals against Purdue on Jan. 19 and No. 2 Iowa on Jan. 25, beating the Boilermakers but losing a close match to the Hawkeyes.

ON THE MAT Greg Wilson

Ohio State took care of the Boilermakers 34-10 at the Covelli Center to earn its third conference win of the season. After the match, head coach Tom Ryan talked about what it takes to be able to beat a Big Ten team the way they did Purdue.

"This team had a great summer. Every day at this level you wake up, focus on that day and getting better," Ryan said. "We had a really good summer, so you see performances like this one. I wasn't around quite a bit this summer, but the coaches did a great job with these guys and they're wrestling well."

The win over Purdue began with redshirt sophomore Brendan McCrone matching up with the No. 1 wrestler in the country at 125 pounds, redshirt senior Matt Ramos. He fell in the opening bout to Ramos, who had enough to win the match, 3-0, with a second-period takedown.

"McCrone was against the No. 1 kid in the country, and he was in a position to win it," Ryan said. "But you have to win it, right? He has to figure out a way to turn – the world knows about his cradle now – so you have to develop something in addition to the cradle. But I'm proud of the way he wrestled and proud of the way he fought."

Redshirt sophomore Nic Bouzakis quickly turned the night around for Ohio State at 133 pounds, beating Dustin Norris 15-3. The win earned Ohio State a bonus point to put it up 4-3, a lead they wouldn't give up the rest of the night.

"Nic looked good, had a lot of energy," Ryan said. "Right now we're just looking for energy. Nic looked good at (133 pounds). He's starting to get his weight under control and feel good out there."

Reigning national champion and No. 1 wrestler in the country Jesse Mendez had a major decision of his own at 141 pounds, beating Grayson Clark, who impressed Ryan with how he matched up with Mendez in the 13-2 loss.

"Jesse is Jesse, and he does Jesse things," Ryan said. "(Clark) was flexible, a very flexible wrestler. He had good hips, trick knees. He was kind of prolonging takedowns."

The Buckeyes' lead was extended even further when No. 9 Dylan D'Emilio got the first pin of the night for the Buckeyes at 149 pounds, taking Isaac Ruble to the mat in 4:51 after leading 10-1 heading into the second period.

"I thought Dylan was brilliant," Ryan said. "He felt the kid's pattern early, within the first minute and a half. He kind of felt the patterns of the match and did a nice

job with his double and did a really good job capitalizing on the transition from the takedown to the backs."

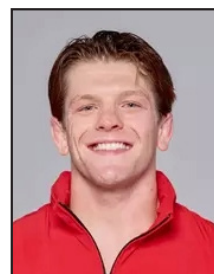
No. 17 Sammy Sasso was defeated by the No. 7 grappler at 157 pounds, Joey Blaze, by a score of 5-1. Sasso put up a fight after going down 3-0 early due to suffering a takedown in the first period.

"Sammy just started a little slow," Ryan said. "You shake hands and then he's on your ankle. (Sasso) has to be a little bit more ready, but you always get the same thing with Sammy. You get an incredible will. There's no quit in Sammy Sasso. I think he feels better at (157 pounds), and Blaze is a tough opponent. They have similar styles, very similar."

One move Ryan made recently was to get redshirt junior Paddy Gallagher up from 157 pounds, where he wrestled his first three seasons at Ohio State, to 165 pounds. The jump is something that Ryan thought might bring Gallagher's energy up from where it was since he wouldn't have to be cutting as much weight.

The head coach was very pleased with how the first match at that weight went, with the ninth-ranked Gallagher needing only one period to end the match, finishing off a pin of Stoney Buell at 2:58.

"I think one of the biggest things of the meet was Paddy," Ryan said. "Paddy was



Paddy Gallagher

exciting. He graduated high school as a 160-pounder, and he felt strongly about going down to 57 and I've been kind of battling with him since he's been here. Sometimes you have to go down because that's the weight you can make. But to be out there, not have energy and your mind is racing on how you feel rather than on 'What's the next best thing I can do?' – it doesn't make for great wrestling.

"Tonight he had energy. He got a takedown, then got taken down but moved right away out of the position and ends up pinning the guy. He did a good job with the transition. ... Typically through high school he was a really aggressive wrestler, and I think he finally felt like himself out there a little bit, so I'm super happy for him and the way he wrestled."

Gallagher confirmed that he feels better at 165 pounds than he did at the weight below, responding to being taken down with the fall.

"Now that I'm up a weight and I feel a lot better, I just have a lot of trust in my cardio," Gallagher said after the match. "If I give up a takedown it doesn't really matter. I'm just coming at you for seven minutes."

Graduate Carson Kharchla, who is up to No. 6 in the country at 174 pounds, had another fall for the Buckeyes exactly six minutes into his bout with No. 25 Brody Baumann. Had he not pinned Baumann, he still would have had a big win, leading 13-1 when the match ended.

No. 19 Ryder Rogotzke extended the lead for the Buckeyes again with a 7-1 victory over Orlando Cruz before redshirt

senior Gavin Bell fell 17-5 in a major decision at 197 pounds to Ben Vanadia, although he weighed in at 184 pounds.

"Bell weighed in at 184 but we moved him up to 197 because (Seth) Shumate tweaked himself in practice, so we felt the best thing was to sit him and rest him," Ryan said. "We've got a big couple of weeks ahead. Purdue is a tough team, but we're going to see the upper echelon of competition in college wrestling coming up in the next few weeks."



Gavin Bell

Redshirt sophomore Nick Feldman – the seventh-ranked heavyweight in the country – finished the match off with a 19-4 tech fall in the second period to defeat Hayden Filipovich and take the match 34-10 for the Buckeyes.

Bucks Fall To Hawkeyes On Road

Leading up to the match against the Hawkeyes, Ryan and his team were preparing for the challenge it would be going to the No. 2 team's home and trying to beat them.

"(Carver-Hawkeye Arena) is a fun place to wrestle," said Ryan, who wrestled at Iowa in college after transferring from Syracuse, earning All-America honors at 158 pounds in 1991-92 with two Big Ten titles. "It's 50 rows high, it's like a pit, and it's a really fun place to wrestle. Their fans love wrestling out there."

The Hawkeyes are the first of many big tests for the Buckeyes in the latter half of the regular-season schedule, with No. 22 Michigan and No. 1 Penn State coming up in February before the Big Ten championships in March.

But to get through that tough part of the schedule, Ryan knew they had to remain focused on the first of those matches.

"You've got to preload your mind that this is going to be a battle," Ryan said. "Every second will be a war, and getting your mind ready for it – you'll struggle there. But this is a team – I really like where they are mentally and physically, and we're looking forward to the challenge."

The Buckeyes proved to be ready for the challenge when freshman Ben Davino, making his debut in Big Ten competition, followed up McCrone's 6-4 loss to Joey Cruz with a 20-4 tech fall against Keyan Hernandez, giving Ohio State a 5-3 lead.

That was extended to 10-3 when Mendez had a 19-2 tech fall win of his own over Ryder Block, needing almost the entire seven minutes to get there. But that's when things turned for the Buckeyes.

Facing the No. 2, No. 1 and No. 2 wrestlers at their weights, respectively, D'Emilio (8-3), Sasso (10-5) and Gallagher (11-3) all lost their bouts to Kyle Parco, Jacori Teemer and Michael Caliendo, giving the Hawkeyes a 13-10 team lead before Kharchla was able to tie it up at 13-all with a 7-3 victory over No. 5 Patrick Kennedy.

But those were the last points the Buckeyes had that night. It took a sudden-victory period to beat Rogotzke, but No. 5 Gabe Arnold was able to with a takedown, and then Shumate was beaten 18-1 by No. 1 Stephen Buchanan before Feldman lost to No. 11 Ben Kueter 5-4.

Up Next

Before BSB next goes to press, the Buckeyes will face off against Michigan at the Crisler Center in Ann Arbor on Feb. 1 (2 p.m., BTN), host No. 7 Minnesota at home on Feb. 7 (7 p.m., B1G+) and then go on the road to face Indiana on Feb. 9 (2 p.m., B1G+).



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12-Team CFP Field Overcomes Southern Bias

Has the North risen in the college football world, or is it simply that expanding the playoffs has given it a chance to be in play more often?

I'd submit the latter, in large part.

Too often, for too long, the deciders of who gets to play for the championship erred on the side of a South bias, I would argue.

**EXNER
POINT**
Rich Exner

For this, I go back to the 2006 season. Buckeye fans old enough to recall Troy Smith, Ted Ginn and James Laurinaitis will remember that was the season that undefeated and No. 1-ranked OSU played undefeated and No. 2-ranked Michigan in the regular-season finale.

Ohio State won the game, 42-39, and after the game, the next BCS rankings were this: 1. Ohio State (12-0); 2. Michigan (11-1); 3. USC (9-1); 4. Florida (10-1). But by the time the final BCS rankings came out two weeks later, and Michigan doing nothing more to hurt itself, USC had lost and Florida jumped both USC and Michigan into the second slot, with a 12-1 record. I don't think Florida jumps idle Michigan without the Southern bias.

Florida beat OSU for the national championship that season. But to this day I believe that if Michigan were located in the middle of SEC country, that title game would have been a rematch of Ohio State and Michigan.

Leap forward to 2014, the first season of the four-team playoff. Ohio State got in as the fourth seed and won the title. In the old system of just two, Ohio State would have been left out. Instead, Alabama and Oregon would have played for the title.

This season, the first of the 12-team playoff, two more teams from the North – Notre Dame and Ohio State – played for the title. In the old four-team format, they would have been left out. And, get this, in the single-game championship days, Georgia and Oregon would have played for the title this season, two teams that got eliminated in their playoff openers.

I'm not going to say that the Midwest and North were better than the Southeast part of the country during all those years when the Northern teams were left at home. I'm just saying there was a bias to placing more teams from the South high in the rankings, higher than they should have been in many years.

The best thing about the 12-team playoff is that more is decided on the field, not in the rooms of people debating who is deserving.

Much To Like With New Playoff Format

I wouldn't change much about the new

playoff system.

I like the fact that byes are reserved for conference champions. Remember, they had to win one more game (conference title games) to earn that spot while Ohio State and Notre Dame sat at home. And I like the fact that this system keeps some importance on conference titles.

I don't think byes hurt those teams (all four lost), and I think the better team at playoff time won each game. Oregon ran into Ohio State at the wrong time. Georgia played without its quarterback.

I like including 12 teams because I think that should cover most anyone capable of winning it all, though I wouldn't object to 16 teams if conference title games were eliminated.

I like providing spots for the five highest-ranked conference champions. Who are we to say a conference champion isn't deserving based on speculation? Arizona State, though it lost to Texas, sure proved it belonged to the surprise of many.

I really liked playoff games at campus sites. And wasn't it cool that three of the games were at some of the biggest stadiums in the world, all seating over 100,000, at Ohio State, Penn State and Texas? They made Notre Dame look like a cozy bandbox, with a mere 77,622 in attendance.

I liked that rounds two and three had the added pageantry of awarding things like the Rose Bowl and Cotton Bowl trophies. Something a little extra at each step.

I liked the pacing, with a few more days than just a week between games.

What Didn't Work Well With Playoffs

There is one quirk that occurred this season and will repeat itself without an eventual change.

The top seed does not end up with the easiest path, as it should. This is because the No. 1 seed is on the same side of the bracket as the No. 5 seed, typical of most tournament brackets.

But since the top four seeds are reserved for conference champions, the five seed this year – and likely in most future years – was much better than one or more higher-seeded teams. This will be the spot nearly every year for the best non-champion in league play. This year, that fell to No. 3 Texas, making it a fifth seed.

Perhaps reseeding after each round could fix this.

The other problem with this year's bracket is that the playoff committee made a mistake in the final rankings. I said at the time and I'll say again, I see absolutely no reason why Penn State was ranked higher (fourth) than Ohio State (sixth). Both teams had two losses. Ohio State beat Penn State. And while OSU lost to Oregon by one point on the road, Oregon comfortably beat Penn State on a neutral site.

And I also believe Ohio State, given wins over Penn State and Indiana, should have been ranked above one-loss and fifth-ranked Notre Dame. Yes, OSU lost its finale to Michigan, by three points, but Notre Dame lost to Northern Illinois and had no wins as good as Ohio State's best wins.

Under my scenario, Ohio State would

have been on the other side of the bracket playing SMU in the quarterfinal instead of Oregon, and perhaps Oregon would have lasted more than one round, especially if it had a rematch with Penn State.

Title Game And The Aftermath

Notre Dame's fake punt: Too big of a gamble. That's how I sized up Notre Dame's failed fake punt early in the second half from its own 30-yard-line. Yes, Marcus Freeman was up against the wall, down 28-7, but it was early enough not to be forced into such a huge gamble that didn't pay off.

Notre Dame's field goal: Put me in the minority, but I liked Freeman's decision to try a field goal instead of going for it on a fourth-and-goal from the 9-yard-line early in the fourth quarter and down 16 points. Those opposed to the play say a TD and two-point conversion would have pulled ND within one score. That's true. But they're ignoring the fact that making three straight two-point conversions to tie the game is a long shot, even if ND did score again. If Notre Dame made the short field goal (it did not) it would have been a 13-point game, with no need for two-point conversion after two-point conversion. Plus fourth-and-goal is no easy conversion (ask Texas).

Did the Michigan loss change the season?: I don't fully go along with this narrative. It implies that OSU was so-so and emerged a different team after losing to Michigan. But remember, Ohio State had just blown out undefeated Indiana the week before. No doubt, focus was drawn from the U-M loss. But Ohio State was a good team before playing Michigan and laying a giant egg in that game (only to lose by three points, despite all of the mistakes). Yes, the team needed to regroup, but it didn't need to become something it wasn't just weeks earlier.

Unstoppable offense until fumble: Against Notre Dame, Ohio State's offense was basically unstoppable until the fumble at the beginning of the fourth quarter. Until then, OSU drives ended with a touchdown, touchdown, touchdown, touchdown and field goal. Then something changed. Ohio State's wide-open attack went into run mode, almost like the Michigan game, and things began to stall. The Buckeyes punted on the next drive after covering 19 yards on five plays – four runs and a short incomplete pass. Then the final drive started with four straight runs, leaving OSU in a third-and-long before the big 56-yard game-clinching pass to Jeremiah Smith. Yes, the conservative play-calling could be attributed at least in part to trying to milk the clock or avoid a turnover. But the way OSU was stalling before the big play to Smith served as a reminder of play-call choices in the Michigan game.

All in the family: One of the most enjoyable things about the championship run, especially as the title game wound down and the celebration began, was seeing how much Ryan Day and several of the players showed affection for one another. It wasn't fake. You could see in their faces how much the players liked playing for Day, and how much Day enjoyed celebrating with the players. It was genuine.



Tougher Path Of Past Two Champions Up For Debate

Not only are Buckeye fans celebrating the current CFP national championship, but they are also marking the 10th anniversary of Ohio State's last national champion, the 2014 winners of the inaugural CFP playoff – then just a four-team affair.

To mark the anniversary, Buckeye Sports Bulletin chronicled Ohio State's much briefer run to the title as part of our Reprint Thursdays on Jan. 23 at the electronic BuckeyeSports.com. Included are many reprints from the Jan. 24, 2015, issue of BSB, along with stats, features and much more from the wins over mighty Alabama and Oregon in the championship game. Also included is commentary, and I was struck by something that managing editor emeritus Mark Rea said in his Editor's Notebook.

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

It occurred to me that Mark could have said exactly the same thing about this year's team, substituting "seventh consensus national championship in program history."

But I checked Mark's column from the last issue, and he went in a different direction.

"Make no mistake. The way Ohio State stampeded their way to the 2014 national championship was a far cry from how the Buckeyes navigated their way from a soul-crushing loss to archrival Michigan to a run through four top-10 opponents."

In the 36 years Mark and I have worked together, we have disagreed many times, and I am going to invoke that privilege right here.

I think both championship teams showed a similar ability to overcome adversity and then "stampede" their way to the national championship with impressive runs to the finish line. I should say before I get too far into recalling the plight and flight of the 2014 team that I have the advantage of having recently read Mark's comments on the 2014 team, as noted above. If he recalls what he said in his space in 2014, he has a far better memory than I, which is setting the bar pretty low.

The pratfalls and exploits of the 2024 Buckeyes are fresh in all of our minds, even me. So, let's take a look at the journey of the Buckeyes from 10 years ago.

On Aug. 17 of that year, Ohio State, led by Braxton Miller, was voted No. 5 in the AP pre-season poll. A day later, Miller, who had been the Big Ten's most valuable player the previous two years, reinjured his surgically repaired shoulder and was ruled out for the season, leaving Cardale Jones as the only remaining Buckeye quarterback who had taken a snap in live action.

Mark wasn't writing the season off, but even he seemed to think the notion of a national championship was far-fetched.

"No matter what the Negative Nellies and Debbie Downers might say, it's going to take a lot more than losing Braxton Miller to completely derail the 2014 season for the Ohio State football team," he wrote shortly after Miller's injury. "A shot at playing for the national championship in the inaugural College Football Playoff? That might seem a bit ambitious for a team with an untested quarterback at the controls. But contending for the Big Ten title? I see no reason why they can't."

Throughout fall camp, it was presumed Jones would win the battle to back up Miller. So

THE VIEW FROM 15TH & HIGH Frank Moskowitz, Publisher

it would have appeared that he would move up into the starter's role when Miller went down. But as camp progressed, it was redshirt freshman J.T. Barrett who took control of the competition.

"The offense moves better when he's in there," offensive coordinator Tom Herman said of Barrett. "He's probably completing more balls and making more of the right reads in the run game. But at the end of the day, the offense moves when he's in and sometimes it doesn't as much, not that Cardale is doing a bad job. But the offense moves more frequently when J.T. is the quarterback, and that's the sign of a good one."

But even Barrett came into question when, after Ohio State's opening victory over Navy, unranked Virginia Tech invaded Ohio Stadium and upset the Buckeyes, 35-21. Barrett had a really poor outing, completing just 9 of 29 passes, though they went for 219 yards and a TD, but he also was picked off three times and sacked seven. It was hardly a confidence booster in Barrett or the Buckeyes for Buckeye Nation.

This time it's me talking:

"Though there are as many as 12 games left to be played including games with Penn State, Michigan State and archrival Michigan, a chance to win the Big Ten championship and even a remote shot at the playoff still remaining for the Buckeyes, many fans seem to have already conceded the season based on this one outcome," I wrote after the loss to the Hokies.

But the Buckeyes and Barrett bounced back after the loss and went on quite the tear, winning nine straight heading into the Michigan game and averaging 48.0 points a game in the process, still holding out hope for a spot in the four-team playoff field.

Ohio State was doing nothing to hurt those chances when it jumped out to a 28-21 lead over the Wolverines when disaster struck again. Barrett was knocked out for the rest of the season with a broken right ankle at the start of the fourth quarter, putting the Buckeyes' playoff hopes in jeopardy again. But the forgotten Jones showed signs of things to come, leading his team to a touchdown, and Darron Lee returned a fumble for a score to give OSU the 42-28 victory after Michigan tacked on a late score, still leaving the Buckeyes hope for the playoffs, with the Big Ten championship yet to come.

Barrett was 13 of 21 for 176 yards and a score without a pick and ran 15 times for 89 yards and two more scores to give him 203 completions on 314 attempts for 2,834 yards and 34 touchdowns to 10 interceptions, with another 938 yards on the ground for another 11 touchdowns and a 5.5 yard per carry average.

Jones was 2 of 3 against the Wolverines for 7 yards and carried a pair of times for 18 yards, and he was facing the task of leading the Buckeyes against a strong Wisconsin team in the Big Ten Championship Game, with Alabama, Florida State, Oregon, TCU and Baylor all ahead of them in the AP rankings.

That's when the Buckeyes started their version of the 2024 Buckeyes' march through the postseason.

Ohio State, led by its third-string quarterback in Jones, bullied their way into the playoff bracket with an improbable 59-0 victory over a solid Wisconsin team.

Jones threw only 17 passes, but he totaled 257 yards on his 12 completions, three of which

went for touchdowns. Ezekiel Elliott ran for 220 yards on 20 carries and two scores of his own.

Meanwhile the Buckeye defense was holding Badger star running back Melvin Gordon to just 76 yards on 26 carries, a paltry 2.9-yard average. The Wisconsin passing attack didn't fare much better. Quarterback Joel Stave had a rough outing, completing just 17 of 43 passes (39.5 percent) for 187 yards, and he was sacked three times and threw three interceptions.

The Buckeyes' dominant performance left the committee with little choice but to include the Buckeyes in the inaugural CFP event. But sneaking in as the No. 4 seed had its drawbacks. The Buckeyes would have to face Alabama, the dominant program of the day, having won three of the last five BCS championships under Nick Saban.

But like the 2024 Buckeyes, this club seemed like a team of destiny, and they upset the mighty Crimson Tide, 42-35, with Alabama's last touchdown a meaningless one with 1:59 left.

This was Elliott's game. He rushed 20 times for 230 yards, an 11.5-yard average and two scores, sealing the win with an 85-yard touchdown jaunt with 3:24 left in the game. Elliott outdueled Alabama' star running back, Derrick Henry, who had 95 yards on 13 carries and a score.

The win over the game's premier power made the title game against Oregon almost anticlimactic. Ohio State was guilty of four turnovers against the Ducks but still prevailed, 42-20. With the game still on the line, the Buckeyes outscored the No. 2 seed 14-0 in the fourth quarter, both TDs on runs by Elliott, who continued his amazing postseason run with 36 carries for 246 yards and another four scores.

Jones may have had his best game of the postseason, completing 16 of 23 passes (69.6 percent) for 242 yards and a score and getting 38 net yards rushing to help Ohio State ring up 296 yards on the ground.

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

But this was a team of destiny.

I believe, when you factor Alabama in, the 2014 Buckeyes might have had an even tougher path than the current squad, though it was only three games counting the Big Ten Championship Game.

I still maintain, after writing all this, the two Buckeye champions are similar, with their ability to overcome adversity in the regular season and then play *dominant* football in the postseason. The 2014 team outscored its opponents 143-55 in the postseason or 47.7-18.3, while the 2024 team outscored its opponents 145-75, or 36.3-18.8, all against quality competition.

One way the two teams varied, however, is the 2014 group played a mediocre Michigan team (5-6, 3-4) and won, while the 2024 team played a mediocre Michigan team (6-5, 4-4) and – well we know the rest. You know, the adversity the Buckeyes overcame.

The 4s Are Back

Speaking of Mark Rea, his series on Ohio State seasons ending in the numeral four returns after a brief hiatus when we had to pause to get in all the breaking news of the last six weeks or so. This installment was an interesting one, covering 2004, the year that Troy

Smith emerged as the OSU starting quarterback and established himself as one of the great Michigan killers of all time. But before he could do any of that, he had to beat the highly touted Justin Zwick.

I did not recall that Smith was so testy during the competition.

Smith had taken a distant back seat to Zwick in the early going, and as the future Heisman Trophy winner watched from the bench while Zwick continued to struggle, on the eve of the conference season, he had finally had enough.

"As a human being, I'm not happy," he told reporters after the team's practice just four days before the conference opener. "I'm not going to sit here and say everything is peaches and cream, that I have no feelings, because this is my life."

"Ninety percent of the guys on the team, this is what they want to do after college. They want to go to the NFL and make some money and take care of their immediate families back home – their mothers, their sisters and nieces and nephews. I'm not going to say they're playing with my life, but it's sort of like they have puppet strings."

It wasn't really common for a player to speak out like that during the Tressel era.

Ultimately, the problem took care of itself when Zwick was injured and Smith was forced into the lineup. The rest, as they say, is history.

You can read Mark's story on the 2004 team on pages 22-23.

How Many Championships Is It?

Do you ever wonder why Buckeye Sports Bulletin says Ohio State has won seven national championships and everyone else says nine?

Buckeye Sports Bulletin recognizes only championships as determined by a major wire service or won on the field in the BCS or the CFP. That would mean 1942, 1954, 1957, 1968, 2002, 2014 and now, 2024.

In our early years, Ohio State recognized only the same championships. About 30 years ago, they changed that policy – I think it was when they started putting out mammoth media guides to use as recruiting tools – and credited the Buckeyes with championships in 1961 and 1970.

Ohio State was named the national champion by the Football Writers Association of America in 1961 and the National Football Foundation in 1970. Those are reputable organizations, but not the AP or UPI.

You should go to the always reliable Wikipedia and check out the list of groups who have crowned national champions through the years on the NCAA Football Champions page. It's an ample list.

Now that the national champion is determined on the field, the discrepancy between BSB and Ohio State should presumably remain at two.

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