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Vol. 45, No. 24 "For The Buckeye Fan Who Needs To Know More" August 2026

# New Year, Same Standard

## *Ohio State Hoping New Faces Meet High Expectations*

**By GREG WILSON**
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Editor




SONNY BROCKWAY

**THE HUNTED — Despite having four players selected among the first 11 in the 2026 NFL draft and having to replace eight starters on defense, Ohio State is ranked No. 1 in the two major polls. Coach Ryan Day understands the expectations and pressures that come with it but also knows it's not where you start, it's where you finish.**

For most of college football history, if a team lost four first-round caliber players to the NFL, some sort of rebuilding period would have been natural.

Ohio State had to bid farewell to Carnell Tate, Arvell Reese, Sonny Styles and Caleb Downs, who were major parts of at least the last two Buckeye teams, and Kayden McDonald didn't go far behind those four first-round picks, barely falling into the second round.

Head coach Ryan Day and his staff were faced with replacing that high level of talent, and as is always the case for Ohio State, they were expected to be just as good, if not get better, for the 2026 season.

So that's exactly what they set out to do.

Media and coaches around the country believe they may have been successful in doing so, with both the AP poll and the coaches' poll ranking Ohio State No. 1 in the country in the lead-up to the season.

But Day himself would be the first to say that those polls mean nothing, and it's what the Buckeyes do on the field that matters most. They finally got to take a look at what the team might look like when fall camp started on Aug. 6.

"Anytime you put the helmets on, anytime you start going against each other, it's completely different," Day said. "We got a chance to get together (as a team), talk about our goals, where we want to go and focus on football. Physically, we look as good as we have. We have the talent. Now we have to go play."

The talent the Buckeyes bring back is fairly well established on the offensive side of the ball. Most importantly, Heisman Trophy finalist Julian Sayin and perhaps the best player in college football – wide receiver Jeremiah Smith – are back for the unit.

Four starting offensive linemen from the 2025 team return as well, and they bring back 1,000-yard rusher Bo Jackson for his sophomore season. The pieces are there, as Day said, but they have a new leader who is trying to put the pieces of that puzzle together.

Day hired former NFL head coach Arthur Smith to be Ohio State's offensive coordinator in January, which helps Day take more of a back seat in terms of offensive game planning, the same way he was able to during the 2024 national championship season with Chip Kelly as the offensive coordinator.

That was supposed to be the case again last season, but when push came to shove and offensive coordinator Brian Hartline was hired to be the head coach at South Florida before the Big Ten Championship Game in December, Day took over play calling again for the Cotton Bowl.

Now, he fully feels like he can rely on the people he has leading each unit.

"I feel really strongly that we have a very good staff," Day said. "I feel like it's important for the coordinators to lead their units, and that's the same thing with Rob Discher on special teams. It's my responsibility to make sure I'm doing the things a head coach is supposed to do, and having great people on staff allows me to do that."

Day said the decision to bring Arthur Smith on was an easy one when he looked at the history the coach has put together in

Continued On Page 10

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# FAN FORUM

## From The Message Board

***On page 28 of this issue, we asked four Buckeye reporters four questions about the upcoming season. One of those questions was about Ohio State's biggest strengths and weaknesses going into the 2026 season. We posed the same question to our subscribers on the BuckeyeSports.com Fan Forum. Here are the answers.***

"Since the question was phrased in the plural, strengths and weaknesses, I don't know how to respond. I'll say strength is WRs and weakness is the difficult schedule. I'm also concerned about depth of the OL. I think several positions such as LB, RB, DB will surprise to the upside."

**— Terrier Buck**

"Looking at this question from a very high-level point of view, I'm thinking the strengths are in the offense with eight returning players, which includes four starting linemen, returning starting running back, team overall wide receiver depth, and of course the Sayin to Smith connection.

"Weakness, at least until proven otherwise, is on the defense where we lost eight starters, in particular three players taken in the first round of the NFL draft. Also, until I see an improvement in our punt return game and kicking game, special teams are a weakness."

**— BuckeyeScott**

"It's been a few years since the Buckeyes had dominant special teams. Remember the punter for the Crimson Tide when we beat them on the way to the 2014 championship? I thought that guy 'single-footedly' kept Alabama in that game. We had a kid from down under, but that 'Bama punter might have been the best I've ever seen in a single game.

"Since Day seems to be worried about the offensive line, I'm going to worry, too. It was a disaster last season against Indiana and Miami, and it always seems a weakness on Day's teams. The defensive secondary worries me, because no one is replacing Caleb Downs at the same level."

**— Michael Bauer**

"Ohio State's biggest strength is the reliability of people in the most important positions in the program. The Buckeyes' head coach, offensive coordinator, defensive coordinator and quarterback are at least on paper, among the best at what they do in the sport.

"The weakness, in my opinion, is the fact that they don't have a star pass rusher. With Matt Patricia as the coordinator and the secondary being one of the best parts of the team, I expect the Buckeyes to be good on defense, but I think pass rush may be a slight issue in big games."

**— Bobby Gorbett, BSB**

"I believe Ohio State's biggest strength is its secondary. Once again, the Buckeyes reloaded at both corner and safety after bringing in multiple key transfers from Power Four programs, including Earl Little Jr. (Florida State), Terry Moore (Duke) and Dominick Kelly (Georgia). Returning cornerbacks Jermaine Mathews Jr. and Devin Sanchez, as well as safety Jaylen McClain, are also poised for strong years.

"Ohio State's weakness lies in its pass catchers. Outside of Jeremiah Smith, the Buckeyes don't have a proven second (or third) elite weapon at receiver or tight end."

**— Sam Cipriani, BSB**

"The biggest strength in my eyes is the easy-to-see one – the connection between Julian Sayin and Jeremiah Smith. I am among the many who believe that those two will do something special together this season with how many points I see this offense putting on the board.

"It's tough to say what the biggest weakness is, which may always be the case for the preseason No. 1-ranked team. However, I need to see real improvement in the run game this year. We're hearing that Bo Jackson got faster over the offseason and that he has the potential for some breakaway runs, which we didn't see from him last year. I'm skeptical about that until I see it with my own eyes. If he didn't add that skill, maybe Legend Bey will just be the one who breaks off long TD runs if he can get on the field."

**— Greg Wilson, BSB**






# LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

**July Interview Issue Kudos**

Treasured and most respected BSB staff ... O-H! I just wanted to send a quick note about how much I ultimately enjoyed the recent "interview edition"! Kudozzz! As a longtime subscriber, as well as a journalism major in college, I was extremely pleased with the edition I treasure the most every year!

Let me explain. When I initially looked at the lineup of interviewees, I kind of yawned a bit. Sure, I recognized certain names, but essentially yawned a bit! Well, I read my BSBs from cover to cover as I have a passion for each and every Ohio State sport, so I was so glad as I slowly digested this fine-crafted, well-reported edition.

Well, I've got to salute you, Frank, and all your fine writing and support staff. You truly lived up to what your mantra states: "For the Buckeye fan who needs to know more." Very grateful for all the neat new facts I have learned! Keep up the great work! Glad I don't live in Dayton, because I always get my BSB in reasonable time without a stitch on it. Yeah, I am winking at you, Frank! Let's Go Bucks! Wish I could buy all y'all a Bahama Mama and cream puff from Schmidt's right now!!!

**Mark W. Biesecker**
**aka "1bowhunterbuckfan"**
**Greer, S.C.**

**Ring Of Honor Issue**

Jim Tressel? In the Ring of Honor? The Ring of HONOR? I'm going to have to get a new dictionary. They must have a new, updated definition of "honor."

**Terry Walrath**
**Hinckley, Ohio**

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

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|---|---|---|---|
| No. 1 | Sept. 6 | No. 13 | Dec. 20 |
| No. 2 | Sept. 13 | No. 14 | Jan. 17 |
| No. 3 | Sept. 27 | No. 15 | Jan. 31 |
| No. 4 | Oct. 4 | No. 16 | Feb. 14 |
| No. 5 | Oct. 11 | No. 17 | March 7 |
| No. 6 | Oct. 18 | No. 18 | March 21 |
| No. 7 | Nov. 1 | No. 19 | April 4 |
| No. 8 | Nov. 8 | No. 20 | April 18 |
| No. 9 | Nov. 15 | No. 21 | May |
| No. 10 | Nov. 22 | No. 22 | June |
| No. 11 | Nov. 29 | No. 23 | July |
| No. 12 | Dec. 6 | No. 24 | August |

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# Buckeyes Seek To Extend Historic Run

Ohio State embarks upon the 2026 season with hopes of extending one of college football's most historic streaks – and it's one most fans and pundits don't seem to know anything about.

Beginning with the undefeated season in 2012, the Buckeyes have two or fewer losses in 14 consecutive seasons, a streak of success unparalleled in program history. Among his school-record 205 victories, 13 Big Ten championships and three (or five depending on who you're talking to) national titles, Woody Hayes never managed to string together more than four consecutive seasons with losses and ties totaling two or fewer.

John W. Wilce also posted four straight such seasons beginning in 1914 and probably could have stretched that streak to as many as eight had All-America halfback Chic Harley not been drafted for World War I military duty and missed the entire 1918 season.

But a streak of 14 such seasons in a row? No other Ohio State teams have ever come close, and as it turns out very few teams across the college football landscape have, either.

During what is considered by most experts the modern era of college football (beginning immediately after World War II), only two other programs have enjoyed 10 or more consecutive seasons with two or fewer losses.

Beginning in 1948, Oklahoma had 11 such seasons while setting the still-standing NCAA record of 47 consecutive victories between 1953 and 1957. During that 11-year stretch, the Sooners won the Big Seven/Eight championship every year as well as three national titles under the guidance of College Football Hall of Fame coach Bud Wilkinson.

More recently, Alabama put together 13 consecutive seasons under Nick Saban, a streak beginning in 2011 during which the Crimson Tide lost no more than two games in any one season. Saban's teams were 163-18 over that period (a .901 winning percentage) and captured five national championships.

The only other program that recently came close to double digits in terms of consecutive seasons with two losses or fewer was Miami (Fla.) with eight in a row from 1985 to 1992. That streak, which included a pair of national titles, was started by Jimmy Johnson, one of only four men elected to both the College and Pro Football halls of fame as a coach. The other three? Stay tuned.

USC had a recent streak of seven seasons during which the Trojans suffered two or fewer losses. It began in 2002 although several victories were later vacated by the NCAA due to recruiting violations and other improprieties. Meanwhile, Clemson had a six-year streak of two or fewer losses beginning in 2015 that included a pair of national championships. The Tigers went 79-7 during that stretch, a .919 winning percentage.

What about other storied programs such as Notre Dame and Michigan?

The Wolverines' best streak of seasons with two losses or fewer came during a seven-year period beginning way back in 1901. The Fighting Irish enjoyed six straight such seasons beginning in 1919 under the guidance of the legendary Knute Rockne and culminating with the program's first national championship in 1924.

If you want to go back to dawn of college football, Yale holds the unofficial all-time record for most consecutive seasons with two losses or fewer. Beginning in 1872 when they played only one game, the Bulldogs rattled off 27 consecutive seasons with losses or ties totaling two or fewer.

The team posted a 217-11-12 record (an .892 win percentage) over that stretch and claimed 19 national championships under four different head coaches – Walter Camp, William Rhodes, John A. Hartwell and Frank Butterworth. Perhaps even more remarkably, 12 of those national titles were claimed during seasons in which Yale had no formal head coach.

## EDITOR'S NOTEBOOK
Mark Rea

### No More Cupcakes

If Ohio State can continue its streak of 14 seasons with two or fewer losses – and both major polls have the Buckeyes as their preseason No. 1 team – it will have to run a sizeable gantlet of ranked teams. Three top-10 programs according to The Associated Press preseason poll – No. 2 Oregon, No. 5 Texas and No. 6 Indiana, each of which garnered first-place votes – populate this year's schedule along with No. 14 USC, No 16 Michigan and No. 22 Iowa also on the slate.

OSU last played three top-10 opponents in the regular season during its national championship run in 2024 but hasn't faced as many as six ranked opponents in any regular season since 2005.

The matchup at Texas will be the marquee game of the early season with "ESPN College Gameday" already announcing it will be in Austin for pregame festivities prior to a primetime game on ABC. Then beginning in October, the Buckeyes have a five-week run that includes road tests at Iowa, Indiana and USC, and finishes Nov. 7 when Oregon comes to Columbus.

Ohio State doesn't have many pleasant memories regarding any of those four teams. For example, the last time the Buckeyes visited the Hawkeyes was in 2017 when they came home with a still-inexplicable 55-24 defeat at the hands of an Iowa team that lost five games that season.

On the way to last year's national title, Indiana snapped its 30-game losing streak to Ohio State in the Big Ten Championship Game, and the last time the Buckeyes visited historic Los Angeles Coliseum during the regular season resulted in a 35-3 spanking courtesy of USC in 2008. OSU hasn't beaten the Trojans in the Coliseum during the regular season since a 21-0 win in 1946.

Like Indiana, Oregon hasn't had much success against Ohio State in the overall series, winning just twice in 12 meetings. But the last time the Ducks came to Columbus, it resulted in a particularly ugly 35-28 loss in 2021 that featured open rebellion by a couple of OSU players as well as fans wondering whether head coach Ryan Day was really the right man to lead the program.

If it makes you feel any better, the Buckeyes aren't alone among Big Ten teams with tough schedules to navigate.

Longtime college football analyst Phil Steele ranks Michigan's slate as the second-toughest in the country. The Wolverines host No. 10 Oklahoma on Sept. 12 and then have back-to-back home dates in mid-October with No. 18 Penn State and defending national champion Indiana. That's the end of the home cooking, though. Michigan has travel dates at Oregon on Nov. 14 and at Ohio State two weeks later.

Steele ranks USC's schedule third-toughest right behind Michigan. The Trojans are the only Big Ten team with two off weeks this year, and their first four opponents combined to go 23-27 last season. Things get a little tougher in late September, however, when they welcome Oregon to the Coliseum, and then a four-week stretch beginning in mid-October takes USC to Penn State, Wisconsin and Indiana with the aforementioned home game against the Buckeyes on Oct. 31.

Some believe Iowa can make some noise this season as Kirk Ferentz begins his 28th season as head coach. We should know right out of the box whether the Hawkeyes are contenders or pretenders. Their first three conference games feature games at Michigan, home against Ohio State and back on the road at Washington. That's the bad news. The good news for Iowa is that it doesn't play Indiana, USC, Oregon or Penn State this year.

Speaking of Penn State, the schedule tees up nicely for first-year head coach Matt Campbell. None of the Nittany Lions' first four opponents had winning records last season while the fifth – Northwestern – barely did at 7-6 while finishing tied for 10th in the Big Ten standings. The middle of October features a home game against USC and a trip to Michigan after which the final five teams on the docket combined for a 28-34 record in 2025.

Meanwhile, Indiana should pile up the wins before back-to-back games against Ohio State and Michigan in mid-October. Despite the Hoosiers' success the past two years under Curt Cignetti, the fact remains they haven't enjoyed two wins in a row against the Buckeyes in nearly 40 years and haven't celebrated two straight victories against the Wolverines since the late '50s.

### Coaching Trivia Answer

Joining Jimmy Johnson as the only men elected to both the College and Pro Football halls of fame as coaches are Don Coryell, Sid Gillman and A.E. "Greasy" Neale.

Coryell began his coaching career by winning three straight conference titles at tiny Whittier College in Southern California before spending 12 seasons at San Diego State, where he won three small-college national championships. Future Pro Football Hall of Fame coaches John Madden and Joe Gibbs were part of Coryell's staffs with the Aztecs.

Coryell later transitioned to the NFL, where he won a pair of division titles with the St. Louis Cardinals and three more with the San Diego Chargers.

Gillman, of course, was an All-America end for Ohio State in 1932 before becoming an assistant coach at his alma mater. He was later a head coach at Miami (Ohio) and Cincinnati, compiling a combined record of 81-19-2, before spending 18 seasons in the pro ranks, first with the Los Angeles Rams of the NFL and later with the San Diego Chargers of the old American Football League.

In 1963, Gillman led the Chargers to a 51-10 win against the Boston Patriots in the AFL Championship Game. It remains the only major sports title for the city of San Diego.

Neale began his coaching career while he was still a professional athlete, playing football with Jim Thorpe for the Canton Bulldogs as well as Major League Baseball for the Cincinnati Reds with whom he won a World Series championship in 1919. Neale began coaching football at the college level with Muskingum (Ohio) College in 1915 and later made stops at West Virginia Wesleyan, Marietta, Washington & Jefferson (whom he led to the 1922 Rose Bowl), Virginia and West Virginia.

After totaling 82 wins at the college level, Neale took over the reins of the NFL's Philadelphia Eagles in 1941 and guided them to back-to-back league championships in 1948 and 1949.

OHIO STATE®

# INSIDER

## OSU Tops AP Poll

The Ohio State football team will start the 2026 season at the top of the rankings. Ohio State was ranked No. 1 in the Associated Press' preseason rankings released on Aug. 17.

The Buckeyes, who received the No. 1 ranking despite replacing 12 starters from last year's team, got 40 first-place votes.

Despite the roster turnover, it doesn't come as a huge surprise that Ohio State is ranked atop the poll. The Buckeyes won all 12 of their regular-season games last year for the first time since 2019 and return star players wide receiver Jeremiah Smith and quarterback Julian Sayin.

No. 2 Oregon received 14 first-place votes, No. 4 Notre Dame received six first-place votes, No. 6 Indiana received eight first-place votes, and No. 7 Miami (Fla.) received one first-place vote.

Rounding out the rest of the top 10 were No. 3 Georgia, No. 5 Texas, No. 8 Texas A&M, No. 9 Ole Miss and No. 10 Oklahoma.

The SEC had nine teams included in the top 25, which was the most of any conference, but the Big Ten was right behind with eight teams.

Joining Ohio State, Oregon and Indiana in the rankings were fellow Big Ten teams No. 14 USC, No. 16 Michigan, No. 17 Washington, No. 18 Penn State and No. 22 Iowa.

## OSU Adds Chase Jersey Patch

In a historic move, Ohio State has partnered with JPMorganChase to place jersey patches on the uniforms of all 36 varsity teams, marking the first time corporate sponsors will appear on the school's iconic gear.

The deal is expected to be worth nearly $17 million per year for Ohio State.

Ohio State athletic director Ross Bjork said the partnership reflects the university's commitment to innovation while creating new opportunities for student-athletes.

"JPMorganChase is a global brand with deep roots in Ohio, making them a natural partner that shares our commitment to innovation, excellence and long-term community impact," Bjork said. "Together, we have built a comprehensive and historic partnership that reflects the strong commercial strength of the Ohio State athletics identity and the broader college athletics landscape. This relationship creates meaningful opportunities for our student-athletes that support the sustained excellence and competitiveness of our athletic programs, while honoring the tradition and values of Ohio State."

Beyond the jersey patch sponsorship, JPMorganChase will also provide NIL opportunities and financial literacy programming for Ohio State athletes, according to an Ohio State press release.

The partnership makes JPMorgan the presenting sponsor of the new 1922 Club at Ohio Stadium, with Ohio Stadium and the Schottenstein Center receiving "expanded

## 2026 Ohio State Football Schedule

| Date | Opponent | Result/Time (ET) | TV | 2025 Record, Bowl Result |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Sept. 5 | BALL STATE | 12:30 p.m. | BTN | 4-8, not bowl eligible |
| Sept. 12 | at Texas | 7:30 p.m. | ABC | 10-3, 41-27 win over Michigan |
| Sept. 19 | KENT STATE | Noon | FOX | 5-7, not bowl eligible |
| Sept. 26 | ILLINOIS | TBA | TBA | 9-4, 30-28 win over Tennessee |
| Oct. 3 | at Iowa | TBA | TBA | 9-4, 34-27 win over Vanderbilt |
| Oct. 10 | MARYLAND | TBA | TBA | 4-8, not bowl eligible |
| Oct. 17 | at Indiana | TBA | TBA | 16-0, 27-21 win over Miami (Fla.) |
| Oct. 31 | at USC | TBA | TBA | 9-4, 30-27 loss to TCU |
| Nov. 7 | OREGON | TBA | TBA | 13-2, 56-22 loss to Indiana |
| Nov. 14 | NORTHWESTERN | TBA | TBA | 7-6, 34-7 win over Central Michigan |
| Nov. 21 | at Nebraska | TBA | TBA | 7-6, 44-22 loss to Utah |
| Nov. 28 | MICHIGAN | Noon | FOX | 9-4, 41-27 loss to Texas |
| Dec. 5 | Big Ten Championship | TBA | TBA | |

# Brutus Level VIPs To Be Recognized In Texas Issue

If you have wanted to show your support for Buckeye Sports Bulletin through the VIP program but are unable to participate at the Scarlet, Elite or Elite-Plus levels, now is the time to sign up at the Brutus level for just $50. Brutus level VIPs are recognized in BSB twice a year, and we will be running the complete list of Brutus VIPs in the upcoming Texas issue. VIP donors help Buckeye Sports Bulletin stay alive and vibrant.

"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 45 years and what we plan to do in the future."

A VIP upgrade can easily pay for itself each year with special VIP discounts and perks.

VIP subscribers enjoy a 5 percent discount on any Ohio State football trip booked through Reynolds Travel. And VIP subscribers receive a certificate good for $10 off at Roosters restaurants, the "Fun, Casual Joint," 15 percent off their purchases at College Traditions, as well as a card from either Rusty Bucket or Cameron Mitchell restaurants good for $10 off your next food purchase.

As mentioned, with the $50 Brutus VIP upgrade, Buckeye Sports Bulletin subscribers will have their names and cities listed in two different issues annually as supporters of BSB.

Those who add $100 to their subscriptions will have their names and cities listed in all 24 issues each year as BSB Scarlet patrons. Those who donate $125 will be designated as Elite patrons in each issue.

And those who donate $150 or more will have their names listed as Elite-Plus VIPs. The four largest Elite-Plus donors to the Buckeye Sports Bulletin VIP program will have their names listed in each issue as Wachsman Level Elite-Plus donors in honor of the late BSB assistant publisher Karen Wachsman, and our largest donor will be designated as the Woody Level Wachsman Elite-Plus Donor.

To upgrade your existing subscription to VIP status, with all the benefits that come with that designation, go to BuckeyeSports.com/vip-memberships to pay by credit card, or call us at (614) 486-2202 during regular business hours. If readers have questions about this program, they can call the same number.

The following are our Elite Wachsman, Elite-Plus, Elite and Scarlet VIP subscribers..

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# BuckeyeSports.com Ramps Up For Football Season

Ohio State football season is finally here, and BuckeyeSports.com – Buckeye Sports Bulletin's 24/7 website, free to all subscribers – will be with you every day, from the opening game against Ball State on Sept. 5 to the CFP national championship game from Las Vegas Jan. 25, 2027. The next issue of BSB will be mailed on Sept. 8. There is no reason to wait for your next Buckeye Sports Bulletin to get the latest OSU sports news, including any recruiting activity.

The BSB staff will be reporting from every press conference or other availability throughout football season. All the news is available in real time at the BuckeyeSports.com website. BuckeyeSports.com also offers plenty of additional content not found in your paper. The Buckeye Sports Bulletin staff mans BuckeyeSports.com, reporting on the breaking stories, plus posting additional features.

Along with daily posts, we offer reprints from the Buckeye Sports Bulletin archives as part of our popular Reprint Thursdays. Also, staff members man the Fan Forum, where the discussion between staff and readers is always lively and will be even more so during football season. And the popular staff predictions return for the Ball State game the afternoon of Friday, Sept. 4 and will run on Friday afternoons throughout the season.

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 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.

BSB is also offering a last chance to upgrade your subscription to first-class mail in an envelope for the football regular season for the old rate of $35 or $45 through the playoffs and football recruiting in February. Just give us a call at (614) 486-2202 or (800) 760-2862 to order by credit card. Or you can send your check, money order or credit card information (don't forget your three- or four-digit security code) to P.O. Box 12453, Columbus, Ohio, 43212. Be sure to mention either the "Football Upgrade" or the "Recruiting Upgrade."

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branding" to "enhance fan experience."

According to the press release, Chase cardholders will receive exclusive benefits such as "special ticket offers, gameday savings, premium experiences and other opportunities designed to deepen fans' connection to the Buckeyes."

### West, Tight Ends Impressed With Smith

First-year offensive coordinator Arthur Smith hasn't called a single play for Ohio State yet, but his impact is already drawing early praise in the Buckeye locker room.

During Ohio State's Aug. 19 media availability, multiple Buckeyes took to the podium to point out the wrinkles Smith has added to the Buckeye offensive attack. Sophomore running back Isaiah West said Smith's offensive philosophy focuses on the mastery of a small set of plays over play diversity.

"Arthur Smith has a structured plan for the offense," West said. "We don't have 1,000 different plays. We have a few that we're really good at. Arthur Smith is really big on being brilliant in the basics, and that's what he's really good at."

Ohio State's running backs room isn't the only position group taking advantage of the introduction of Smith.

Fifth-year tight end Bennett Christian echoed West's sentiment, noting that Smith's offensive scheme gives Ohio State multiple options from the same formation. He added that in a conversation with linebacker Payton Pierce, the junior said opposing defenses will have a hard time deciphering the Buckeyes' offense.

"There's just plays off plays off plays," Christian said. "We'll set you up one way and then come back. It looks the same, but it's a different play. I was talking to Payton about it. I was like, 'Hey man, like, what do you see in the middle?' He's like, 'Man, I don't know how defenses are going to stop it.' So it's really exciting to know that one of our middle linebackers sees it and says that."

Smith, who spent 2014-15 as the assistant tight ends coach of the Tennessee Titans before taking over as the head tight ends coach from 2016-18, brings an extensive background in utilizing his tight ends at the NFL level.

That experience hasn't gone unnoticed by senior Mason Williams, who transferred to Ohio State in January after three seasons at Ohio. The 6-4, 246-pound tight end praised Smith's offensive mind and the extensive knowledge he's brought with him.

"Coach Smith is a great guy," Williams said. "Honestly, if anybody else in the world would have gotten hired, I would not be as happy as I am with him being here. The guy is one of the smartest football coaches I've ever been around. Obviously, he was a tight end coach, and you've seen the way that he uses tight ends and his other offenses."

### Smith Says Alabama Was Dream School

Before he became the face of Ohio State, the Buckeyes' top receiver envisioned a different path.

Jeremiah Smith revealed on July 29 at Big Ten media days in Chicago that growing up, his dream school wasn't Ohio State – it was Alabama.

Despite admiring the Crimson Tide under legendary coach Nick Saban, Smith said the program didn't recruit him as heavily as the Buckeyes.

"Growing up, my dream school was Alabama when Nick Saban was there," Smith said. "They weren't recruiting me though, so it is what it is. I always wanted to go to 'Bama."

Smith, a Miami Gardens, Fla., native, said Alabama's pipeline of South Florida stars made the Crimson Tide his dream school growing up. But after committing to Ohio State on Dec. 14, 2022, he said Alabama and other programs backed off from his recruitment.

"A lot of guys at that time from South Florida were going to 'Bama and having success like Amari Cooper, Jerry Jeudy, Calvin Ridley, guys like that," Smith said. "I got the offer. I think I committed to Ohio State too early. That's why they stopped. They thought there was no chance."

Choosing Ohio State instead has proved to be the right decision for Smith. Since arriving in Columbus as the No. 1 overall recruit in the 2024 class, he has developed into one of the nation's top receivers, helping lead the Buckeyes to the national championship as a freshman.

Smith claimed Big Ten Freshman of the Year and All-America honors as a freshman in 2024 before he earned unanimous All-America recognition in 2025. He also was named Big Ten Receiver of the Year and first-team All-Big Ten in each of his first two seasons.

In 29 career games, Smith has totaled 163 receptions for 2,558 yards and 27 touchdowns, while taking nine carries for 68 yards and two scores.

Even after former Buckeye offensive coordinator Brian Hartline, his primary recruiter, left for the head coaching job at South Florida, Smith never seriously considered leaving Ohio State. He said that remained true even after confirming he received a $10 million offer to enter the transfer portal this offseason.

"I always wanted to be at Ohio State," Smith said. "It would be dumb for me to leave Ohio State and go to another team when I have the best offensive line in the country, the best quarterback in the country, the best coaches in the country."

### Day Says Cap Should Be Higher

The regulations proposed in Congress for college football have been a topic of conversation since it was brought to the floor by a bipartisan group of Senators.

There have been many different proposals for caps on how much schools are able to pay their players, with the original revenue-share cap set at $18 million, with $2.5 million set aside for scholarships.

That ruling has not kept players from making much more money, whether that be through third-party collectives or many other loopholes that programs found after the orig-

**Continued On Page 6**

# Note On NCAA Eligibility

The NCAA voted to change its eligibility rules on June 23 as previously reported in BSB, which allows student-athletes five years of eligibility. Those five years begin either the semester they enroll in classes for the first time or when they turn 19 years old, whichever comes first.

With that rule, there will no longer be redshirt years, which has affected current student-athletes as well. BSB will refer to players according to the new rule from here on out. (Example: Julian Sayin, who was a redshirt freshman for the 2025 season, is now a junior going into the 2026 season).

A further explanation of the rule and how it affects eligibility will be provided in the Sept. 12 issue of BSB..

# I Believe In BSB

The following Buckeye Sports Bulletin subscribers showed that they "Believe in BSB" by renewing their subscriptions for two years at full price. Additionally, there were dozens of readers who renewed for one year at full price. BSB publisher Frank Moskowitz thanks all participants in this initiative. Any new two-year renewal participants will be listed in the next issue of BSB. For information on how to participate, give us a call during regular business hours at (614) 486-2202 or (800) 760-2862.

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Steve Speelman, Galloway, Ohio
James Stoll, Lima, Ohio
Michael Thomas, Marion, Ohio
Don Toth, Delaware, Ohio
Todd Truax, Kansas City, Mo.
Richard Waldren, Springfield, Ohio"
"Jeff Wells, New York, N.Y."

OHIO STATE INSIDER

Continued From Page 5

inal House v. NCAA lawsuit was finished.

Now there is talk about having a hard salary cap on how much players can be paid to play at a school, and Ohio State head coach Ryan Day said that while he supports some sort of structure in college football, he would like to see a higher cap than some of the proposals that have been bandied about over the offseason.

"We would all like to see more structure when it comes to the salary cap and then how things are handled above the salary cap. You'd call it a soft cap if you're talking about that," Day said on July 29. "Do I think the cap should be higher? Absolutely."

After Ohio State's national championship season in 2024, Bjork came out to say that the players on that team received "about $20 million," which made them one of the top programs in college football in terms of how much the players made.

However, that number has continued to go up since then, with rosters rumored to be valued at more than twice that much just two seasons later.

Day expects that to continue if regulations aren't put in place.

"Anytime you have an open market every year, you're going to see that go higher and higher," he said. "When you put a small cap on that, it makes it more and more challenging to compete and do things the right way."

Of course, there will always be teams and programs that are able to spend more than others, and Ohio State will be one of those programs. But Day hasn't considered what a higher salary cap would do to parity in college football.

"What does that mean in terms of parity and all of that? I don't know," Day said. "But I can tell you right now that we want to pay our players, and we certainly would like to see that cap come up higher."

### Bjork Says Teams Won't Play OSU After 2030

Bjork signaled that college football's increasingly high-stakes landscape is creating scheduling challenges for the Buckeyes.

During an appearance on 97.1 The Fan's "T-Bone & Tyvis" show hosted by Jonathan "T-Bone" Smith and former Ohio State defensive back Tyvis Powell, Bjork said major programs are reluctant to lock in future regular-season series against the Buckeyes once their current schedule agreements conclude.

"There's not a lot of willingness, honestly, to play Ohio State past 2030, when we have Georgia (scheduled)," Bjork said on Aug. 7.

Ohio State has two major Power Four nonconference matchups scheduled before 2031, beginning with a home-and-home series against Alabama in 2027-28.

The Buckeyes currently have no Power Four nonconference opponent scheduled for 2029, with Navy, Charlotte and Bowling Green on the slate, before they have a home-and-home series with Georgia in 2030-31.

Bjork also pointed to the SEC's newly implemented nine-game conference schedule, which begins this season, as another factor that could make it more difficult for Ohio State to find major nonconference opponents.

"The SEC actually came out of their spring meetings, and they were all grousing about what they thought was a strength-of-schedule metric that wasn't giving them enough credit," he explained. "Now we'll see what happens when they play nine games this year, and what that looks like."

In 2025, Texas was one of the first programs left out of the 12-team College Football Playoff, finishing No. 13 in the final regular-season rankings.

In Week 1 of the regular season, the Longhorns fell 14-7 to the Buckeyes, and though Ohio State was ranked No. 2 ahead of the playoffs, the loss may have been part of what kept the Longhorns out of the postseason.

With SEC teams already facing an expanded conference slate, Bjork suggested that the combination of conference and nonconference scheduling demands, coupled with the way the current college football landscape can penalize teams for taking on tougher schedules, could make major programs even less willing to add Ohio State to their future nonconference schedules.

"People say, 'Well, just schedule these games.' The other team actually has to sign the contract too," Bjork said. "And it's not as easy as what people think it might be."

### Patricia Helps Smith Adjust To CFB

The transition from the NFL to the college level is often jarring for former pro coaches. The presence of former NFL head coach and Ohio State defensive coordinator Matt Patricia has made the transition a bit easier for the Buckeyes' new offensive coordinator, who, much like Patricia, is more used to the NFL than the college game.

"It's so much fun to have him here. It's great," Patricia said of Arthur Smith. "Obviously, just practice, all the stuff that we're doing, trying to work against each other, different looks, different ideas. I'm certainly looking at his eyes, saying, 'Hey, scout the defense for me here. Let me know what you see.' Some disguised looks, different packages, which is great because he's seen a bunch of that before and can speak on that."

Before joining Ohio State, Patricia spent two decades in the NFL, including a 14-year stint with the New England Patriots from 2004-17.

Patricia later spent three seasons as the head coach of the Detroit Lions.

Smith has 17 years of NFL experience, including three seasons as head coach of the Atlanta Falcons from 2021-23.

With both coaches having spent the majority of their careers in the NFL before moving to college football, Patricia understood many of the challenges Smith would face in making the transition to Ohio State.

"I talked to him a lot before and during the process just because he's such a great coach," Patricia said. "I have so much respect for him. I think we've gone through similar things in our careers in the NFL.

"Maybe my perspective of getting back around a bunch of great young men and coaching – how wonderful that is and maybe just telling him, reminding him of that a little bit, was cool. From that aspect of it, there's always the normal questions like, 'What's the difference between the NFL and college? What's the schedule? What does this look like?' Being able to give him some insight there was good."

Having gone through the same transi-

## 2026 Preseason Polls

### The Associated Press Top 25

| Rank | School | 2025 | Pts. | '25 Rank |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **1** | **Ohio State (40)** | **12-2** | **1,672** | **5** |
| 2 | Oregon (14) | 13-2 | 1,597 | 4 |
| 3 | Georgia | 12-2 | 1,513 | 6 |
| 4 | Notre Dame (6) | 10-2 | 1,510 | 10 |
| 5 | Texas | 10-3 | 1,483 | 12 |
| 6 | Indiana (8) | 16-0 | 1,440 | 1 |
| 7 | Miami (1) | 13-3 | 1,379 | 2 |
| 8 | Texas A&M | 11-2 | 1,131 | 8 |
| 9 | Ole Miss | 13-2 | 1,102 | 3 |
| 10 | Oklahoma | 10-3 | 1,047 | 13 |
| 11 | LSU | 7-6 | 988 | NR |
| 12 | Texas Tech | 12-2 | 983 | 7 |
| 13 | Alabama | 11-4 | 904 | 9 |
| T-14 | Southern Cal | 9-4 | 839 | 20 |
| T-14 | BYU | 12-2 | 839 | 11 |
| 16 | Michigan | 9-4 | 718 | 21 |
| 17 | Washington | 9-4 | 501 | NR |
| 18 | Penn State | 7-6 | 482 | NR |
| 19 | SMU | 9-4 | 434 | NR |
| 20 | Tennessee | 8-5 | 394 | NR |
| 21 | Utah | 11-2 | 304 | 14 |
| 22 | Iowa | 9-4 | 260 | 17 |
| 23 | Houston | 10-3 | 252 | 22 |
| 24 | Louisville | 9-4 | 194 | NR |
| 25 | Missouri | 8-5 | 117 | NR |

(First-place votes in parentheses)

**Others receiving votes:** Clemson 112, Florida 51, Boise State 43, Arizona 32, TCU 11, South Carolina 10, Navy 10, Illinois 9, Vanderbilt 8, Oklahoma State 8, Pittsburgh 7, Virginia Tech 6, Minnesota 5, UNLV 4, Louisiana 4, New Mexico 4, Georgia Tech 4, James Madison 3, Auburn 3, Memphis 2, California 2, Western Michigan 1, Tulane 1, Liberty 1, Virginia 1

### Coaches' Top 25

| Rank | School | 2025 | Pts. | '25 Rank |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **1** | **Ohio State (38)** | **12-2** | **1,741** | **6** |
| 2 | Oregon (6) | 13-2 | 1,637 | 4 |
| 3 | Georgia (7) | 12-2 | 1,591 | 5 |
| 4 | Texas (2) | 10-3 | 1,544 | 13 |
| 5 | Notre Dame (5) | 10-2 | 1,524 | 11 |
| 6 | Indiana (14) | 16-0 | 1,522 | 1 |
| 7 | Miami | 13-3 | 1,409 | 2 |
| 8 | Texas A&M | 11-2 | 1,174 | 8 |
| 9 | Oklahoma | 10-3 | 1,104 | 10 |
| 10 | Ole Miss | 13-2 | 1,096 | 3 |
| 11 | Alabama | 11-4 | 1,050 | 9 |
| 12 | Texas Tech | 12-2 | 1,034 | 7 |
| 13 | LSU | 7-6 | 951 | NR |
| 14 | Southern Cal | 9-4 | 838 | 21 |
| 15 | BYU | 12-2 | 781 | 12 |
| 16 | Michigan | 9-4 | 719 | 22 |
| 17 | Penn State | 7-6 | 463 | NR |
| 18 | Tennessee | 8-5 | 428 | NR |
| 19 | Washington | 9-4 | 406 | NR |
| 20 | SMU | 9-4 | 378 | NR |
| 21 | Utah | 11-2 | 313 | 14 |
| 22 | Iowa | 9-4 | 291 | 17 |
| 23 | Clemson | 7-6 | 235 | NR |
| 24 | Houston | 10-3 | 194 | 19 |
| 25 | Missouri | 8-5 | 158 | NR |

(First-place votes in parentheses)

**Others receiving votes:** Louisville 153, Florida 147, TCU 63, Illinois 62, South Carolina 50, Arizona 50, Virginia 40, Vanderbilt 37, Auburn 29, Georgia Tech 26, Boise State 24, Oklahoma State 22, UNLV 17, North Carolina State 13, Florida State 13, Virginia Tech 12, Nebraska 12, Memphis 9, Arizona State 8, James Madison 6, Duke 6, Pittsburgh 4, New Mexico 4, Western Michigan 3, Navy 3, San Diego State 2, Kansas State 1, Jacksonville State 1, Hawaii 1, California 1

## 29 Bucks Earn Degrees at Summer Commencement

Twenty-nine current and former Buckeye athletes earned degrees at Ohio State's summer commencement, which was held on Aug. 9 at the Schottenstein Center.

Among the 29 graduates were several notable Buckeyes, including 2023 Biletnikoff Award winner and Heisman Trophy finalist Marvin Harrison Jr. (sport industry), women's basketball players Chance Gray (master's in law) and Tyana Todd (political science), women's hockey's Sara Swiderski (psychology), and two-time national champion Jesse Mendez (economics) and Nic Bouzakis (sport industry) of the wrestling program.

Justin Haire's baseball team led all Ohio State programs with four summer graduates: Ryan Butler (graduate certificate of healthcare, leadership and innovation), Noah Furcht (master's in sports coaching), Henry Kaczmar (communication) and Grant Mangrum (master's in sports coaching). The Buckeye football program and men's lacrosse each had three graduates.

The complete list of graduates follows:

**Baseball –** Ryan Butler, graduate certificate of healthcare, leadership and innovation; Noah Furcht, master's in sports coaching; Henry Kaczmar, communication; Grant Mangrum, master's in sports coaching.

**Women's basketball –** Chance Gray, master's in law; Tyana Todd*, political science.

**Cheerleading –** Sean Henderson, specialized master's in business.

**Men's diving –** Kylie Flory, computer science and engineering.

**Men's fencing –** Anil Singh, doctorate in welding engineering.

**Women's fencing –** Chandini Antal, hospitality management; Julieta Toledo Ames, master's in sports coaching.

**Football –** Marvin Harrison Jr. *, sport industry; Joseph McGuire, sport industry; Bradley Robinson, doctorate in kinesiology.

**Women's gymnastics –** Kaitlyn Grimes, master's in kinesiology; Tory Vetter, graduate certificate in health psychology/behavioral medicine.

**Men's hockey –** Logan Terness*, sport industry.

**Women's hockey –** Sara Swiderski*, psychology.

**Men's lacrosse –** Jacob Cohen, specialized master's in business; Daniel Kelley, biology; Bobby Van Buren, master's in sports coaching

**Women's lacrosse –** Antoinette Hargraves, specialized master's in business.

**Rowing –** Madalena Hughes, electrical and computer engineering; Maria Kyridou, criminology.

**Men's track & field –** Damon Frabotta, economics.

**Men's volleyball –** Thomas Leahey, master's in mechanical engineering.

**Women's volleyball –** Kaitlyn Hoffman, biology.

**Wrestling –** Nic Bouzakis, sport industry; Jesse Mendez, economics.

*Degree completion graduate

tion just a year earlier, Patricia said helping Smith navigate his own transition has made his Ohio State experience even more fulfilling, and he added that the pair have particularly bonded over a shared love of football history.

"What's really cool is we're just so blessed and lucky to be here at Ohio State with Coach Day, who brought us both in from the NFL and let us get that joy of coaching. Watching (Smith) go through what I experienced last year was cool."

### OSU RB Suspended

Ohio State freshman running back Legend Bey was suspended for the opening days of preseason camp after a violation of team rules, Day announced on Aug. 6.

"He won't practice the first couple of days," Day said. "(It was) a little violation of team rules. He's learning, but he'll be back on the field soon."

Bey already faces an uphill battle for playing time in a crowded backfield. He enters the program behind returning sophomores Bo Jackson and West, as well as journeyman transfer Ja'Kobi Jackson.

A product of North Forney, Texas, Bey was a former four-star recruit and the No. 127 overall prospect in the class of 2026, according to the 247Sports composite rankings.

Despite eight other Buckeyes in the 2026 class receiving higher recruiting rankings, the 5-10, 195-pound speedster has emerged as one of the program's most talked-about newcomers.

Bey's elite athleticism is marked by his 10.23-second 100-meter dash in high school and a verified 4.33-second 40-yard dash, leading Day to compare his explosiveness to NFL wide receiver Tyreek Hill and former Buckeye Curtis Samuel.

Bey ultimately returned to practice two days later on Aug. 8.

### Downs Explains Patricia's First Day

Former Ohio State safety Caleb Downs offered a revealing glimpse into Patricia's coaching style with an inside look into the defensive coordinator's first day in Columbus.

Speaking on the July 22 episode of the "Downs 2 Business" podcast alongside his brother, Indianapolis Colts receiver Josh Downs and former NFL MVP Cam Newton, Caleb Downs recalled a surprising first impression that set the tone for Patricia's arrival.

Downs said that when he heard about Patricia's hiring, he was aware of the coordinator's mixed reputation – particularly concerns about his return to the college game after more than two decades away – but still expected him to be effective given his success in the NFL.

"Matt Patricia – he has a weird reputation," Downs said. "When he first got hired, there were some people (that said) it was a terrible hire and a terrible pickup. I was like, 'This dude coached on all these Super Bowl teams. He's got to be a good coach. He's got to know what he's talking about.' But there were a lot of people that were saying all this stuff about him."

While Downs felt the new coordinator came across as personable, his first team meeting at Ohio State showed players exactly why he had developed a reputation as a demanding coach.

"I met him and was like, 'I don't know why everybody is saying he is so hard-nosed and everything like that,' " Downs said. "On his first day (Patricia) got in the meeting: 'Hey, guys, we're going to hand out this sheet. I want you to write the best five players on this defense and the worst five players on this defense. (Patricia) is like, 'If you say yourself, and the coach doesn't say you, you are lying.' "

The exercise immediately put Buckeye defenders on the spot, forcing them to honestly evaluate both themselves and their teammates in front of the entire defense.

"There were a couple of dudes sitting there like 'Oh,' with their hands over their mouth because they wrote their names and everybody (was shocked they did)," Downs said.

Following the 2025 season, Downs was selected No. 11 overall in the first round of the 2026 NFL draft by the Dallas Cowboys.

**Continued On Page 8**

## Buckeyes Abound On Preseason Watch Lists

| AWARD | CRITERIA | PLAYER(S) |
|---|---|---|
| **AFCA GOOD WORKS TEAM** | Honors 22 players and one head coach for extraodinary commitment to community service. | DB Jaylen McClain, head coach Ryan Day |
| **BEDNARIK AWARD** | Most outstanding defensive player. | DE Kenyatta Jackson Jr., S Earl Little Jr. |
| **BILETNIKOFF AWARD** | Most outstanding pass catcher. | WR Jeremiah Smith |
| **BRONKO NAGURSKI AWARD** | Most oustanding defensive player. | DL Kenyatta Jackson Jr., S Jaylen McClain |
| **DAVEY O'BRIEN AWARD** | Most outstanding starting quarterback. | QB Julian Sayin |
| **DOAK WALKER AWARD** | Most outstanding running back. | RB Bo Jackson |
| **LOMBARDI AWARD** | Most outstanding down lineman on offense or defense or linebacker. | OL Carson Hinzman, OL Luke Montgomery, OL Austin Siereveld |
| **LOTT IMPACT TROPHY** | Most outstanding defensive IMPACT player — Integrity, Maturity, Performance, Academics, Community and Tenacity. | DL Kenyatta Jackson Jr., CB Jermaine Matthews Jr. |
| **LOU GROZA AWARD** | Most outstanding placekicker. | K Connor Hawkins |
| **MACKEY AWARD** | Most outstanding tight end. | TE Hunter Welcing |
| **MANNELLY AWARD** | Most outstanding long snapper. | LS Dalton Riggs |
| **MAXWELL AWARD** | Most outstanding player in college football. | RB Bo Jackson, QB Julian Sayin, WR Jeremiah Smith |
| **OUTLAND TROPHY** | Most outstanding interior lineman. | OL Carson Hinzman, OL Luke Montgomery, OL Austin Siereveld |
| **PAUL HORNUNG AWARD** | Most versatile player. | WR Brandon Inniss |
| **POLYNESIAN COLLEGE FOOTBALL POY** | Most outstanding player of Polynesian descent. | WR Chris Henry Jr. |
| **THORPE AWARD** | Most outstanding defensive back. | S Earl Little Jr. |
| **RIMINGTON AWARD** | Most outstanding center. | OL Carson Hinzman |
| **UNITAS GOLDEN ARM AWARD** | Most outstanding upperclassman quarterback who demonstrates character, citizenship, intergrity and respect for the game. | QB Julian Sayin |
| **WALTER CAMP AWARD** | Most outstanding player in college football. | QB Julian Sayin, WR Jeremiah Smith |
| **WUERFFEL TROPHY** | Player who best combines exemplary community service with leadership achievements on and off the field. | S Jaylen McClain |

# OHIO STATE INSIDER

Continued From Page 7

## Seven Buckeyes Shed Black Stripes

Since the start of fall camp, seven Ohio State players have officially become Buckeyes by shedding their black stripes.

A pair of running backs, Ja'Kobi Jackson, a seventh-year Florida transfer, and walk-on junior Stanley Jackson Jr., were the first to earn the honor this August, having their black stripes removed on Aug. 11.

Four freshmen followed the duo. Cornerback Jay Timmons shed his on Aug. 12, while quarterback Luke Fahey and defensive end Khary Wilder did so on Aug. 15. Safety Simeon Caldwell became the fourth freshman to lose his stripe on Aug. 19.

Most recently, Alabama transfer Cam Calhoun shed his black stripe on Aug. 20.

## USA Today Ranks OSU No. 1 CFB Program

In USA Today's July 20 ranking of the nation's top college football programs, Ohio State claimed the No. 1 spot.

Fueled by their recent success under Day and a level of sustained excellence few programs can match, particularly since the start of the century, the Buckeyes earned the distinction as the premier program in college football.

"We are witnessing one of the greatest runs in college football in Columbus," the article wrote. "The Buckeyes are 165-21 since 2012. In 2024, Day became the program's third full-time coach in a row to win a national championship. What else is there to say? Ohio State has won at least 10 games of every full season but one since 2005. It is simply the Bowl Subdivision gold standard and the envy of every program in the country in and out of the Big Ten."

Alabama claimed the No. 2 spot, followed by Georgia at No. 3, Notre Dame at No. 4 and Texas at No. 5. Rounding out the top 10 were LSU at No. 6, Michigan at No. 7, Oklahoma at No. 8, Miami (Fla.) at No. 9 and USC at No. 10.

The ranking also showcased the depth of the newly expanded Big Ten, with nine programs within the conference securing spots on the list, led by the Buckeyes, Wolverines and Trojans in the top 10.

Other conference members that earned recognition included Oregon at No. 11, Penn State at No. 12, Indiana at No. 17, Nebraska at No. 20, Washington at No. 22 and Iowa at No. 23.

## Barrett, Swisher Make OSU HOF

Ohio State's announced its 2026 class for its athletics Hall of Fame on Aug. 7, and the class is headlined by former Buckeye quarterback J.T. Barrett.

Barrett spent four seasons with Ohio State, getting thrown into the fire as a freshman in 2014 when starter Braxton Miller was injured in the preseason. Barrett led the Buckeyes to an 11-1 regular season, and Ohio State won the national championship that year after Barrett was injured in the win over Michigan.

In his career with the Buckeyes, Barrett started 44 games and set a school record

## Ohio State Tops Preseason Consensus Poll

Ohio State is ranked No. 1 in the country by six out of the eight top-25 rankings, finishing atop Buckeye Sports Bulletin's annual consensus poll.

The poll includes rankings from The Associated Press, Athlon Sports, CBS Sports, College Football News, ESPN FPI, Phil Steele, Sporting News and the USA Today coaches' poll. Points are awarded on a 25-24-23 scale, with the No. 1 team earning 25 points, the No. 2 team earning 24 points, and so on. The maximum number of points a team can receive is 200, and the total number of first-place votes is in parentheses.

The Buckeyes (196 points) ranked as low as No. 4 in the country according to Phil Steele and were No. 2 in the nation, according to the Sporting News.

Following Ohio State in a tie for second place were Big Ten foe Oregon and Notre Dame (181 points each). The Buckeyes face off against the Ducks at Ohio Stadium on Nov. 7. The Fighting Irish received one first-place vote from Sporting News, while reigning champion Indiana received the No. 1 spot from Phil Steele.

The Hoosiers (168 points) finished in sixth place behind No. 4 Georgia (179 points) and Ohio State's Week 2 opponent, No. 5 Texas (175 points). There was a sizable gap between the Hoosiers and Miami (Fla.) at No. 7 (147 points), marking a possible gap between the top teams and the next tier heading into the season.

Rounding out the top 10 in the consensus poll are No. 8 Oklahoma (137 points), No. 9 Texas A&M (129 points) and a tie for 10th place between Lane Kiffin's LSU and the head coach's former Ole Miss squad at 112 points.

Other schools in the Big Ten that finished inside the top 25 are No. 14 USC, No. 15 Michigan, No. 17 Penn State, No. 19 Washington and No. 20 Iowa. The Hawkeyes were the lowest rated team in the poll to have been ranked inside the top 25 by each of the eight polls.

A total of 34 teams received votes in the polls, with Florida, Auburn, Clemson, Missouri, Illinois, Kansas State, Boise State, Florida State and Virginia Tech missing the cut for the top 25.

| Rk. | Team | Points |
|---|---|---|
| **1.** | **Ohio State (6)** | **196** |
| T2. | Oregon | 181 |
| T2. | Notre Dame (1) | 181 |
| 4. | Georgia | 179 |
| 5. | Texas | 175 |
| 6. | Indiana (1) | 168 |
| 7. | Miami (Fla.) | 147 |
| 8. | Oklahoma | 137 |
| 9. | Texas A&M | 129 |
| T10. | Ole Miss | 112 |
| T10. | LSU | 112 |
| 12. | Alabama | 111 |
| 13. | Texas Tech | 109 |
| 14. | USC | 108 |
| 15. | Michigan | 93 |
| 16. | BYU | 78 |
| 17. | Penn State | 62 |
| 18. | Tennessee | 56 |
| 19. | Washington | 52 |
| 20. | Iowa | 34 |
| 21. | SMU | 32 |
| 22. | Utah | 29 |
| 23. | Louisville | 22 |
| 24. | South Carolina | 18 |
| 25. | Houston | 17 |

**— Compiled by Greg Wilson**

## 2026 Big Ten Schedule

| | AUG. 29 | SEPT. 5 | SEPT. 12 | SEPT. 19 | SEPT. 26 | OCT. 3 | OCT. 10 | OCT. 17 | OCT. 24 | OCT. 31 | NOV. 7 | NOV. 14 | NOV. 21 | NOV. 28 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **ILLINOIS** | | UAB (Sept. 3) | DUKE | SOUTHERN ILLINOIS | **at Ohio State** | PURDUE | at Michigan State | | OREGON | at Maryland | NEBRASKA (Nov. 6) | at UCLA (Nov. 13) | IOWA | at Northwestern |
| **INDIANA** | | NORTH TEXAS | HOWARD | WESTERN KENTUCKY | N'WESTERN (Sept. 25) | at Rutgers | at Nebraska | **OHIO STATE** | at Michigan | MINNESOTA | | USC | at Washington | PURDUE |
| **IOWA** | | NORTHERN ILLINOIS | IOWA STATE | UNI | at Michigan | **OHIO STATE** | at Washington (Oct. 9) | | at Minnesota | WISCONSIN | at Northwestern | PURDUE | at Illinois | NEBRASKA (Nov. 27) |
| **MARYLAND** | | HAMPTON | at UConn | VIRGINIA TECH | UCLA | at Nebraska | **at Ohio State** | RUTGERS | | ILLINOIS | at Purdue | WISCONSIN | at USC | PENN STATE |
| **MICHIGAN** | | WESTERN MICHIGAN | OKLAHOMA | UTEP | IOWA | at Minnesota | | PENN STATE | INDIANA | at Rutgers | MICHIGAN STATE | at Oregon | UCLA | **at Ohio State** |
| **MICH. STATE** | | TOLEDO (Sept. 4) | EASTERN MICHIGAN | at Notre Dame | NEBRASKA | at Wisconsin | ILLINOIS | N'WESTERN | at UCLA | | at Michigan | WASHINGTON | OREGON (Nov. 20) | at Rutgers |
| **MINNESOTA** | | EASTERN ILLINOIS (Sept. 3) | MISSISSIPPI STATE | AKRON | at Washington | MICHIGAN | at Purdue | | IOWA | at Indiana | UCLA | at Penn State | N'WESTERN | at Wisconsin (Nov. 27) |
| **NEBRASKA** | | OHIO | BOWLING GREEN | NORTH DAKOTA | at Michigan State | MARYLAND | INDIANA | at Oregon | | WASHINGTON | at Illinois (Nov. 6) | at Rutgers | **OHIO STATE** | at Iowa (Nov. 27) |
| **N'WESTERN** | | SOUTH DAKOTA STATE | | COLORADO | at Indiana (Sept. 25) | PENN STATE (Oct. 2) | BALL STATE | at Michigan State | RUTGERS | at Oregon | IOWA | **at Ohio State** | at Minnesota | ILLINOIS |
| **OHIO STATE** | | BALL STATE | at Texas | KENT STATE | ILLINOIS | at Iowa | MARYLAND | at Indiana | | at USC | OREGON | N'WESTERN | at Nebraska | MICHIGAN |
| **OREGON** | | BOISE STATE | at Oklahoma State | PORTLAND STATE (Sept. 18) | at USC | | UCLA | NEBRASKA | at Illinois | N'WESTERN | **at Ohio State** | MICHIGAN | at Michigan State (Nov. 20) | WASHINGTON |
| **PENN STATE** | | MARSHALL | at Temple | BUFFALO | WISCONSIN | at Northwestern (Oct. 2) | USC | at Michigan | | at Purdue | at Washington | MINNESOTA | RUTGERS | at Maryland |
| **PURDUE** | | INDIANA STATE (Sept. 4) | WAKE FOREST | at UCLA | NOTRE DAME | at Illinois | MINNESOTA | WASHINGTON (Oct. 16) | | at Penn State | MARYLAND | at Iowa | WISCONSIN | at Indiana |
| **RUTGERS** | | UMASS (Sept. 3) | at Boston College (Sept. 11) | USC | HOWARD (Sept. 25) | INDIANA | | at Maryland | at Northwestern | MICHIGAN | at Wisconsin | NEBRASKA | at Penn State | MICHIGAN STATE |
| **UCLA** | | at California | SAN DIEGO STATE | PURDUE | at Maryland | | at Oregon | WISCONSIN | MICHIGAN STATE | NEVADA | at Minnesota | ILLINOIS (Nov. 13) | at Michigan | USC |
| **USC** | SAN JOSE STATE | FRESNO STATE (Sept. 4) | LOUISIANA | at Rutgers | OREGON | WASHINGTON | at Penn State | | at Wisconsin | **OHIO STATE** | | at Indiana | MARYLAND | at UCLA |
| **WASHINGTON** | | WASHINGTON STATE (Sept. 6) | UTAH STATE | EASTERN WASHINGTON | MINNESOTA | at USC | IOWA (Oct. 9) | at Purdue (Oct. 16) | | at Nebraska | PENN STATE | at Michigan State | INDIANA | at Oregon |
| **WISCONSIN** | | vs. Notre Dame at Green Bay (Sept. 6) | WESTERN ILLINOIS | EASTERN MICHIGAN | at Penn State | MICHIGAN STATE | | at UCLA | USC | at Iowa | RUTGERS | at Maryland | at Purdue | MINNESOTA (Nov. 27) |

**Big Ten Championship Game ▪ Lucas Oil Stadium, Indianapolis ▪ Dec. 5 ▪ 8 p.m. ET**

## 2026 Ohio State Football Roster

| No. | Name | Pos. | Ht. | Wt. | Yr. | Hometown/Previous School |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 0 | Brandon Inniss*** | WR | 6-0 | 197 | Sr. | Hollywood, Fla./American Heritage |
| 1 | Earl Little Jr. | SAF | 6-0 | 203 | 5th | Fort Lauderdale, Fla./Florida State |
| 2 | Legend Bey | RB | 5-10 | 195 | Fr. | Forney, Texas/North Forney |
| 2 | Kenyatta Jackson Jr.*** | DE | 6-6 | 263 | 5th | Miami Gardens, Fla./Chaminade-Madonna Prep |
| 3 | Devin McCuin | WR | 6-0 | 195 | Sr. | Jacksonville, Texas/UT San Antonio |
| 3 | James Smith | DT | 6-3 | 306 | Sr. | Montgomery, Ala./Alabama |
| 4 | Jeremiah Smith** | WR | 6-4 | 222 | Jr. | Miami Gardens, Fla./Chaminade-Madonna Prep |
| 4 | Qua Russaw | DE | 6-2 | 244 | Sr. | Montgomery, Ala./ Alabama |
| 5 | Kyle Parker | WR | 5-10 | 198 | Sr. | Allen, Texas/LSU |
| 5 | Riley Pettijohn* | LB | 6-2 | 235 | So. | McKinney, Texas/McKinney |
| 6 | Jerquaden Guilford | WR | 6-3 | 195 | Fr. | Fort Wayne, Ind./Northrop |
| 6 | Devin Sanchez* | CB | 6-2 | 199 | So. | Houston/North Shore |
| 7 | Phillip Bell | WR | 6-1 | 195 | So.. | Mission Viejo, Calif./Mission Viejo |
| 7 | Jermaine Mathews Jr.*** | CB | 5-11 | 195 | Sr. | Cincinnati/Winton Woods |
| 8 | De'Zie Jones | WR | 5-10 | 191 | So. | Wayne, N.J./DePaul Catholic |
| 8 | Jaylen McClain** | SAF | 6-0 | 203 | Jr. | Rahway, N.J./Seton Hall Prep |
| 9 | Zion Grady* | DE | 6-4 | 262 | So. | Enterprise, Ala./Enterprise |
| 9 | Tavien St. Clair | QB | 6-4 | 235 | So.. | Bellefontaine, Ohio/Bellefontaine |
| 10 | Julian Sayin* | QB | 6-1 | 214 | Jr. | Carlsbad, Calif./Alabama |
| 10 | Leroy Roker III* | SAF | 6-0 | 202 | Jr. | Fort Myers, Fla./Bishop Verot |
| 11 | Brock Boyd | WR | 6-1 | 196 | Fr. | Southlake, Texas/Southlake Carroll |
| 11 | Terry Moore | SAF | 6-0 | 200 | 5th | Washington, N.C./Duke |
| 12 | Beau Atkinson* | DE | 6-6 | 260 | 5th | Raleigh, N.C./North Carolina |
| 13 | Luke Fahey | QB | 5-11 | 206 | Fr. | Mission Viejo, Calif./Mission Viejo |
| 13 | Miles Lockhart | CB | 5-9 | 196 | Jr. | Chandler, Ariz./Basha |
| 14 | Christian Alliegro | LB | 6-4 | 245 | Sr. | Darien, Conn./ Wisconsin |
| 15 | Chris Henry Jr. | WR | 6-5 | 211 | Fr. | Santa Ana, Calif./Mater Dei |
| 15 | Jordan Thomas | CB | 6-1 | 198 | Fr. | Oradell, N.J./Bergen Catholic |
| 16 | Blaine Bradford | SAF | 6-1 | 212 | Fr. | Baton Rouge, La./Baton Rouge Catholic |
| 16 | Justyn Martin | QB | 6-4 | 228 | Sr. | Inglewood, Calif./Maryland |
| 17 | TJ Alford* | LB | 6-1 | 237 | So. | Port Saint Lucie, Fla./Vero Beach |
| 18 | Cam Calhoun | CB | 6-0 | 187 | Sr. | Cincinnati/Alabama |
| 18 | Kolton Stover | QB | 6-4 | 213 | So. | Centerburg, Ohio/Highland |
| 19 | Brady Geibel | QB | 6-5 | 222 | So. | Sugarcreek, Ohio/Furman |
| 19 | Jordyn Woods | CB | 6-4 | 200 | So. | Cartersville, Ga./Cartersville |
| 20 | Cincere Johnson | LB | 6-3 | 237 | Fr. | Cleveland/Glenville |
| 21 | Brenten 'Inky' Jones* | SAF | 6-2 | 216 | 5th | Steubenville, Ohio/Steubenville |
| 21 | Anthony 'Turbo' Rogers | RB | 5-8 | 203 | So. | Montgomery, Ala./Carver |
| 23 | Nolan Baudo | WR | 5-10 | 185 | Sr. | Chicago/Marist |
| 23 | Garrett Stover* | LB | 6-1 | 228 | Jr. | Sunbury, Ohio/Big Walnut |
| 24 | Ja'Kobi Jackson | RB | 6-0 | 219 | 5th | Pensacola, Fla./Florida |
| 24 | Dominick Kelly | CB | 6-2 | 193 | So. | St. Petersburg, Fla./Georgia |
| 25 | Bo Jackson* | RB | 6-0 | 218 | So. | Cleveland/Villa Angela-St. Joseph |
| 25 | Jay Timmons | CB | 5-11 | 191 | Fr. | Gibsonia, Pa./Pine-Richland |
| 26 | Payton Pierce** | LB | 6-1 | 232 | Jr. | Lucas, Texas/Lovejoy |
| 28 | Simeon Caldwell | SAF | 6-2 | 210 | Fr. | Jacksonville, Fla./The Bolles School |
| 28 | Stanley Jackson Jr. | RB | 5-11 | 210 | Jr. | Westerville, Ohio/Marshall |
| 29 | Favour Akih | RB | 5-11 | 197 | Fr. | Delaware, Ohio/Rutherford B. Hayes |
| 29 | Deshawn Stewart | SAF | 6-0 | 199 | So. | Wayne, N.J./DePaul Catholic |
| 30 | Khmari Bing | SAF | 6-0 | 201 | Fr. | Baltimore/St. Francis Academy |
| 30 | Amari Valerio-Hudson | WR | 5-9 | 175 | Fr. | Dublin, Ohio/Coffman |
| 32 | Kaden Gebhardt | SAF | 6-1 | 210 | Fr. | Lewis Center, Ohio/Olentangy |
| 32 | Isaiah West* | RB | 5-10 | 222 | So. | Philadelphia/St. Joseph's Prep |
| 33 | Eli Lee | LB | 6-3 | 237 | So. | Akron/Archbishop Hoban |
| 33 | Ryan Seimetz | WR | 5-11 | 196 | Fr. | Jackson, Ohio/Jackson |
| 34 | Brennen Schramm | WR | 6-0 | 194 | Sr. | Medina, Ohio/Medina |
| 34 | Khary Wilder | DE | 6-4 | 257 | Fr. | Gardena, Calif./Junipero Serra |
| 36 | CJ Sanna | LB | 6-2 | 235 | Fr. | Lewis Center, Ohio/Olentangy |
| 37 | Zach Hayes | LB | 6-2 | 226 | Jr. | LaGrange Park, Ill./Nazareth Academy |
| 38 | Eli Riggs | LB | 6-3 | 230 | Jr. | Cincinnati/Indian Hill |
| 38 | Frankie McAllister | TE | 6-5 | 235 | Fr. | Columbus/St. Francis DeSales |
| 39 | Glorien Gough | CB | 5-10 | 196 | Jr. | Palos Verdes Estates, Calif./Mater Dei |
| 41 | Braxton Rembert | LB | 6-5 | 215 | Fr. | Hoschton, Ga./Mill Creek |
| 42 | Joe McGuire** | P | 6-2 | 209 | Sr. | Melbourne, Australia/Prokick Australia |
| 43 | Amar'e Miller | CB | 6-0 | 200 | Fr. | Pickerington, Ohio/Pickerington North |
| 43 | Brody Jenkins | LS | 5-11 | 197 | Fr. | Madison, Ga./Morgan County |
| 44 | Epi Sitanilei | DE | 6-4 | 258 | So. | Ontario, Calif./St. John Bosco |
| 46 | Ryan Rudzinski | SAF | 6-4 | 218 | Sr. | Columbus/Bishop Watterson |
| 48 | Jackson Gula | DB | 6-1 | 193 | So. | Streetsboro, Ohio/Streetsboro |
| 48 | Dalton Riggs | LS | 6-2 | 231 | 5th | Eagle, Idaho/UCF |
| 49 | Marcello Diomede | K | 6-1 | 197 | Sr.. | Glen Ellyn, Ill./ Notre Dame |
| 49 | Gavin Thobe | SAF | 6-2 | 196 | So. | Bellbrook, Ohio/Bellbrook |
| 50 | Alec DelSignore | LB | 6-1 | 225 | Sr. | Youngstown, Ohio/Cardinal Mooney |
| 51 | Luke Montgomery*** | OL | 6-5 | 313 | Sr. | Findlay, Ohio/Findlay |
| 52 | Ty Howard | LB | 5-11 | 203 | 5th | Cleveland/Duquesne |
| 53 | Will Smith Jr.* | DT | 6-3 | 303 | Sr. | Dublin, Ohio/Coffman |
| 54 | Na'il Diggs Jr. | LB | 6-1 | 209 | Fr. | Charlotte, N.C./Charlotte Latin |
| 55 | John Walker | DT | 6-3 | 302 | Sr. | Kissimmee, Fla./UCF |
| 56 | Nate Riegle | DE | 6-2 | 227 | Jr. | Findlay, Ohio/Ohio U. |
| 57 | Ian Gecse | OL | 6-4 | 296 | Sr. | Grandview Heights, Ohio/Grandview Heights |
| 58 | Gabe Van Sickle* | OL | 6-5 | 320 | Jr. | Coopersville, Mich./Coopersville |
| 59 | Ashton Yeager | DT | 6-2 | 287 | So. | Findlay, Ohio/Bowling Green |
| 60 | Jaxon Powell | OL | 6-4 | 307 | Fr. | Portsmouth, Ohio/Northwest |
| 61 | Landon Beal | LS | 6-0 | 210 | Jr. | Grove City, Ohio/Maine |
| 62 | Joshua Padilla | OL | 6-3 | 301 | Sr. | Huber Heights, Ohio/Wayne |
| 63 | Julian Goines-Jackson | OL | 6-1 | 303 | 5th | Zanesville, Ohio/Youngstown State |
| 64 | Simon Lorentz | OL | 6-1 | 290 | Jr. | Dover, Ohio/Dover |
| 65 | Tucker Smith | OL | 6-5 | 299 | Fr. | Phoenix/Sandra Day O'Connor |
| 66 | Landry Brede | OT | 6-6 | 320 | Fr. | Mentor, Ohio/Mentor |
| 67 | Austin Siereveld** | OL | 6-5 | 327 | Sr. | Liberty Township, Ohio/Lakota East |
| 68 | Mason Wilhelm | OL | 6-3 | 309 | Fr. | Lakewood, Ohio/St. Edward |
| 69 | Ian Moore* | OL | 6-6 | 315 | Jr. | New Palestine, Ind./New Palestine |
| 70 | Phillip Daniels* | OL | 6-5 | 312 | Sr. | Cincinnati/Minnesota |
| 72 | Deontae Armstrong | OL | 6-7 | 310 | Jr. | Lakewood, Ohio/St. Edward |
| 73 | Vasean Washington | OL | 6-5 | 310 | 5th | Springfield, Ohio/Dartmouth |
| 74 | Carter Lowe | OL | 6-5 | 318 | So. | Toledo/Whitmer |
| 75 | Carson Hinzman*** | OL | 6-5 | 301 | 5th | Spring Valley, Wis./St. Croix Central |
| 76 | Jake Cook | OL | 6-4 | 310 | So. | Westerville, Ohio/Westerville North |
| 77 | Sam Greer | OT | 6-7 | 320 | Fr. | Akron/Archbishop Hoban |
| 78 | Maxwell Riley | OL | 6-4 | 302 | Fr. | Avon Lake, Ohio/Avon Lake |
| 80 | Jaeden Ricketts | WR | 5-11 | 202 | Fr. | Pataskala, Ohio/Watkins Memorial |
| 82 | David Adolph*** | WR | 6-5 | 210 | 5th | Dublin, Ohio/Jerome |
| 83 | Nate Roberts* | TE | 6-5 | 240 | So. | Washington, Okla./Washington |
| 84 | Hunter Welcing | TE | 6-3 | 248 | 5th | Deer Park, Ill./Northwestern |
| 85 | Bennett Christian** | TE | 6-6 | 255 | 5th | Acworth, Ga./Allatoona |
| 86 | Mason Williams | TE | 6-4 | 246 | Sr. | Mogadore, Ohio/Ohio U. |
| 87 | Brody Lennon | TE | 6-4 | 243 | So. | Novelty, Ohio/Gilmour Academy |
| 88 | Max LeBlanc | TE | 6-4 | 246 | Jr. | Saint Bruno, Quebec/Baylor (Tenn.) School |
| 89 | Nick Lautar | TE | 6-6 | 242 | Fr. | Lebanon, Ohio/Lebanon |
| 90 | Damari Simeon | DL | 6-2 | 292 | Fr. | Richland, N.J./St. Augustine Prep |
| 91 | Darryus McKinley | DL | 6-3 | 272 | Fr. | Lafayette, La./Acadiana |
| 92 | Cooper Peterson | K | 6-0 | 214 | Fr. | Charlotte, N.C./ Corvian Community |
| 93 | Brady Young | P | 6-3 | 220 | 5th | Perrysburg, Ohio/Houston Christian |
| 94 | Jason Moore | DT | 6-6 | 316 | Sr. | Ft. Washington, Md./DeMatha Catholic |
| 95 | Emanuel Ruffin | DL | 6-3 | 297 | Fr. | Bessemer, Ala./Bessemer City |
| 96 | Connor Hawkins | K | 6-1 | 200 | Jr. | Liberty Hill, Texas/Baylor |
| 96 | Eddrick Houston** | DE | 6-3 | 304 | Jr. | Atlanta, Ga./Buford |
| 97 | Dre Quinn | DE | 6-4 | 245 | Fr. | Buford, Ga./Buford |
| 98 | Jamir Perez | DL | 6-3 | 349 | Fr. | Cleveland/Glenville |

* Varsity letters

**Coaching staff –** Ryan Day, head coach; Matt Patricia, defensive coordinator; Arthur Smith, offensive coordinator; Larry Johnson, associate head coach/defensive line coach; Tim Walton, assistant head coach/co-defensive coordinator/secondary/cornerbacks coach; Matt Guerrieri, safeties coach/pass game coordinator; James Laurinaitis, linebackers coach; Keenan Bailey, co-offensive coordinator/tight ends coach; Tyler Bowen, offensive line coach/run game coordinator; Billy Fessler, pass game coordinator/quarterbacks coach; Cortez Hankton, wide receivers coach; Carlos Locklyn, running backs coach; Robby Discher, special teams coordinator; Mickey Marotti, associate AD, director of football sport performance; Mark Pantoni, general manager – player personnel.

with 38 wins as a quarterback, which included four wins over the Wolverines.

In his four seasons, he set Big Ten records for total offensive yards (12,697), touchdown passes (104) and touchdowns responsible for (147). He also set career records at Ohio State for passing yards (9,434) and rushing yards by a quarterback (3,263).

In the Hall of Fame class of 2026, Barrett is also joined by former women's cross country and track and field star Katie Borchers (2012-15), Diane Dixon of the women's track and field team (1983), Jincy Dunne of the women's hockey team (2017-20), Danielle Meyer of the women's volleyball team (2004-07), Oyesade Olatoye of the women's track and field squad (2015-21), Chris Sanders of the men's track and field and football teams (1992-94), Nick Swisher of the baseball team (2000-02) and Stan White from the football team (1969-71).

Swisher is another big name to be inducted into the hall. After his playing career at Ohio State, he went on to play for 12 years in MLB with five different teams. He spent time with the New York Yankees, the Athletics, Cleveland, the Chicago White Sox and the Atlanta Braves. He won a World Series in 2009 with the Yankees.

At Ohio State, Swisher received first-team All-Big Ten honors twice, and he is still top 10 in program home runs (35), RBI (156) and walks (131).

The university said that details for the official ceremony to honor the inductees will be announced at a later date.

### Fielding Sues NCAA For 5th Year

Former Ohio State kicker Jayden Fielding is suing the NCAA in hopes of gaining a fifth year of eligibility after exhausting his during his time with the Buckeyes.

Chris Hummer of CBS Sports reported that Fielding's attorney said that Fielding hopes to enter the transfer portal so that he can play a fifth year elsewhere.

There have been many lawsuits against the NCAA in recent memory, several of which have been successful, and Fielding's attorney, Darren Heitner, has represented many of those college athletes.

On Aug. 19, 16 former college football players were granted another year of eligibility with a temporary restraining order against the NCAA granted in Louisiana that allowed them to enter the transfer portal despite the fact that many of them signed NFL contracts over the offseason.

Heitner has already helped multiple athletes from the 2022 class gain another year of eligibility in college, which includes those 16 players.

Fielding had already signed a professional contract with the Ottawa Redblacks of the Canadian Football League, but he may be back in college football soon if his lawsuit turns out the same way many others have.

With a previous ruling from a Colorado judge, Fielding could already return to Ohio State for a fifth year if he wanted to, but since the Buckeyes added Connor Hawkins from the transfer portal, they likely aren't looking at bringing Fielding back for another season.

Fielding's lawsuit would force the transfer portal back open for the kicker so he could find another home for a fifth year.

Fielding spent three seasons as the main placekicker for the Buckeyes and made 45 of 57 tries, but he missed some of the biggest kicks he was sent out for, with his 27-yard miss against Indiana in last season's Big Ten Championship Game is still on the minds of Buckeye fans after the 13-10 loss. Fielding also missed two field goals in the 13-10 loss to Michigan in 2024. He did come back from that to make a game-sealing kick against Notre Dame in the national championship.

### JSN, Smith Join 99 Clubs

Ohio State's star wideout made history on July 10, when Smith became the first player ever to earn a 99 overall rating in the EA Sports College Football series with the launch of the College Football 27 video game.

Ohio State was tied with Indiana for the second-highest overall team in the game, standing at a 90 overall. Oregon ranked first with a 91 overall.

The Buckeyes finished with the highest-ranked offense (92 overall) and the seventh-ranked defense (88).

Additionally, former Ohio State wide receiver Jaxon Smith-Njigba earned a 99 overall at the launch of EA Sports' Madden NFL 27.

Smith-Njigba was one of six NFL stars named to the 99 Club, joining Cincinnati Bengals wide receiver Ja'Marr Chase, Los Angeles Rams quarterback Matthew Stafford and defensive end Myles Garrett, Buffalo Bills quarterback Josh Allen and Arizona Cardinals tight end Trey McBride.

**Continued On Page 41**

# New Coordinator Smith Brings NFL Pedigree

Continued From Page 1

the NFL as a play caller. He also said that the players seem to respect the experience Smith has coaching at the highest level of the game.

"Arthur Smith's résumé speaks for itself. When you walk in with that type of résumé, like (defensive coordinator Matt Patricia) did the year before, you have a certain level of credibility with the players, then with the coaches, and he knows what he wants," Day said. "He has a certain level of confidence when he walks in the room, and I think the guys have enjoyed that."

Even though Sayin has said himself that nothing is going to help him more this year than the experience he gained as a starter in 2025, Smith has still been able to teach the second-year starter a few things.

Sayin recognizes the fact that his new offensive coordinator was very recently coaching some of the top quarterbacks in the world in the NFL, so there is a lot of valuable information that Sayin can absorb from listening to what Smith can teach him.

"The fact that Arthur is going from Aaron Rodgers to Julian, I think Julian sees – what a great way to learn the game," Day said. "One of the best all-time quarterbacks was working with Arthur last year."

However, it's not necessarily Sayin's play that Day is concerned about when it comes to whether the offense is going to be able to improve this season.

There are two main areas where the unit struggled last year, and Day wants to see how well those positions are able to play around Sayin this season.

"It's more about how that offensive line and running backs are going to play for him," Day said. "At the end of the day, he's the leader, and he's going to be the one that's going to have to make the play in these big matchup games in the fourth quarter."

The final two games of the 2025 season featured Sayin being sacked five times in each contest.

Then, the run game finished 72nd in the country in rushing yards per game (154.4), when a good run game could have been a difference-maker in the postseason.



SONNY BROCKWAY

**COACH SPEAK — New offensive coordinator Arthur Smith (left) provides years of NFL experience in running an offense, most recently with the Pittsburgh Steelers, and delivers his knowledge to Ohio State players such as quarterback Julian Sayin (10).**

Good news for the Buckeyes on both counts: Arthur Smith is known for his expertise in the run game as a play caller, and he's a former offensive lineman who knows the position well.

The hope is obviously that Smith will be able to effectively use and perhaps enhance the returning strengths of the OSU offense – the pass game – and add to that threat by making the run game much better than it was last year. If he's able to do that, there's a real chance the Buckeyes could finish the season with the No. 1 offense in the country.

So far, so good, according to Arthur Smith.

"We don't have many mental errors, and that's usually a sign as you go through camp about how much you put in," Smith said. "You're just watching every day and assessing, 'Do we need to pull back?' That has not been the case with these guys."

On the other side of the ball, the Buckeyes are dealing with a completely different challenge.

For the second straight season, Ohio State lost eight starters from what was the No. 1 scoring defense in the country.

This time around, the coordinator is a constant, with Patricia entering his second season with the Buckeyes after an impressive first year in Columbus.

But last year, most of the new starters came from inside the program after having been reserves for the Scarlet and Gray for years. The Buckeyes had to largely rely on replacing the outgoing talent with players from other programs. Those players had to learn Patricia's entire defense when they arrived on campus, whereas a player such as Payton Pierce had the head start of playing under the coordinator last year.

But as Day knows, fans don't care how the talent got to Columbus. All they want is to see another No. 1 defense.

"There's no rebuilding of anything around here," Day said. "The standard is the standard, and I think all the guys on the defensive staff and the players would tell you the same thing. They're expected to be the best defense in the country, and it's the same thing on offense.

"That being said, it's a different group of guys. The potential is there, and the experience is there, it's just not all together here at Ohio State. There are guys who have played football. But it's a race against time to get better."

## Trial By Fire

The Buckeyes finished the regular season undefeated last year, which helped them make their first trip to Indianapolis for the Big Ten Championship Game since the 2020 season.

Of course, that came with a big season-opening victory over Texas and their first win over Michigan since the 2019 season, but outside of those games, the rest of the path that Ohio State took to 12-0 was free of any major obstacle.

Then, when they got into the postseason, perhaps they weren't tested enough for the competition they went up against. At least that's what Jeremiah Smith seemed to think.

"Last year we weren't battle-tested," Smith said. "We played one team, and that was in late August when we played a tough team. We're definitely going to be battle-tested this year, and it's going to show a lot at the end of the season."






SONNY BROCKWAY

**DEFENDING THE HONOR — Matt Patricia returns for his second season as the defensive coordinator after a noteworthy 2025 in which Ohio State led the nation in total and scoring defense. There was speculation his success would lead to a return to the NFL where he spent most of his coaching career, but the Buckeyes are glad he's back.**

Going 12-0 looks a whole lot less likely looking at Ohio State's 2026 regular-season schedule.

The Buckeyes have to play against six teams that are ranked in the top 25 in the AP preseason poll, with a road game against Texas to finish the home-and-home series first of those six on Sept. 12.

Then OSU gets nearly a month before the next one – although Illinois, which received votes in the AP poll, comes to Ohio Stadium on Sept. 26 – before heading to Iowa on Oct. 3.

Then, after what should be a short break from tough competition against Maryland on Oct. 10, the Buckeyes have one of the toughest three-game regular-season stretches they have ever been through that begins with a game in Bloomington, Ind., against the reigning national champion Hoosiers on Oct. 17.

After an off week to break the stretch up, OSU heads to Los Angeles to face off against USC on Oct. 31 before heading back home to play Oregon on Nov. 7.

The last of those six ranked games is the rivalry game on Nov. 28 against Michigan, which is back in Columbus this year.

Day spoke about the tough schedule and how it could be helpful when it comes to postseason play, but only if the Buckeyes get the most important piece of that puzzle accomplished first.

"It's helpful if we win the dang games," Day said when asked if the Buckeyes' difficult 2026 schedule will serve them well. "But we have to win the games, and every game it's going to be on the line, and that's how it goes. It's going to be a challenge.

"It's going to force us to get games into the fourth quarter, get comfortable winning games in the fourth quarter during the regular season, and then we'll go from there. We have to be able to predict where the issues are going to be and, personnel-wise, to put guys in a situation to be successful."

## Maize And Blue On The Mind

It may be August, and there may not have been a single snap taken for the 2026 season yet, but in Columbus, it's never too early to be thinking about the rivalry game.

The latest thing the Buckeyes did to keep focus on The Game in November when that week rolls around was to move their Senior Day to Sept. 5 for the season opener against Ball State rather than holding it on Nov. 28 when Michigan comes to town.

This wasn't a decision the program took lightly, Day said, but he wanted to make sure all of the focus during rivalry week was on nothing other than beating the Wolverines.

"The traditions at Ohio State are significant and very, very strong, and that's something we all respect," Day said. "But when we look at all the things that go on that weekend, the way that things have changed, the first thing we wanted was to keep as much focus on that game. There are already enough distractions that week, and this was one more thing we felt like we could move."

Day and the staff also didn't make this decision on their own. He took the opinions of the seniors themselves into account when making the decision and gave them the chance to veto the idea if they wanted to.

"We went to the seniors because we didn't want to do it without their support, and I wasn't sure what to expect," Day said. "They were nodding quickly and said, 'Yeah, I think that's a great idea.' It's going to allow us an opportunity to recognize them early in the season then focus on the games."

Despite a 2-4 record in The Game, Day continues to place a massive emphasis on it, as the coaches before him did as well.

Ohio State's plan to move Senior Day up so that they can focus as much as possible that week on beating Michigan came shortly after a couple members of the Wolverines squad faced some criticism for possibly downplaying the rivalry.

First, it was first-year head coach Kyle Whittingham who saw some backlash at Big Ten media days in Chicago when he said that he wanted to keep hatred out of the rivalry.

"I just think that a rivalry can be intense and emotional without the hatred factor," Whittingham said. "I don't think there's any place for that personally. I think Ryan Day's a good person. To sit here and say, 'I hate Ryan Day,' I'd be making crap up."

After learning very early on in his Wolverine tenure that the rivalry is constantly under the microscope, even four months before the game takes place, Whittingham clarified what he meant by his comments in Chicago.

"Would we have a better chance to win if I hated them? I mean, I don't understand," Whittingham said. "I want to beat them worse than anybody around."

Sophomore quarterback Bryce Underwood came under fire next after downplaying the rivalry in an interview with NBC Sports.

"It's just another game with guys in a different color," he said. "That's how I see it."

Perhaps the timing of putting more emphasis on The Game for Ohio State wasn't an accident. But last season it was the idea of being in the routine of a normal week that Day took into Michigan week, and whatever the Buckeyes did ended up working for the first time in six years.

So like it or hate it, it's tough to argue with the reasoning Day gave for moving Senior Day to the beginning of the year.

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# Sayin Aims To Improve On Stellar Season

**By BOBBY GORBETT**
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

At this time a year ago, Ohio State's quarterback competition had finally reached its conclusion. After a long bout with Lincoln Kienholz, Julian Sayin was finally named the Buckeyes' starting quarterback on Aug. 18.

Thanks to Sayin's highly impressive first season as the starter, there will be no quarterback competition ahead of Ohio State's 2026 campaign.

Making starts in all 14 of Ohio State's games, Sayin threw for 3,610 yards, 32 touchdowns and only eight interceptions while completing 77.0 percent of his passes, the highest mark of any FBS quarterback.

For his efforts, Sayin was a finalist for the Heisman Trophy, became the Big Ten Freshman of the Year, and now will be only the third Ohio State quarterback to start for a second straight season under head coach Ryan Day. In their second years as starters, C.J. Stroud and Justin Fields were both named Big Ten Offensive Player of the Year, and more importantly to Day, they led their respective teams to successful seasons.

Now that Sayin has a year of starting experience under his belt, Day expects to have a quarterback completely consumed with winning games.

"When you're first starting, you're doing everything for the first time, and then after a while, you can find yourself in a Heisman race. You can find yourself doing different things, and you can quickly get distracted from what really matters," Day said at Big Ten media days. "When you come back for that second year, all you want to do is win. You know that if you win, you're going to have an opportunity to get awards and have an opportunity to get drafted and all those things, and you kind of push all that stuff to the side.

"I can see that look in Julian's eye. Not that he was worried about that last year, but just when you're into that second year, and you're more experienced, all you're worried about is winning, and that's what he's going to be focused on."

## Projected Starter

***Quarterback***
**10 ▪ Julian Sayin**

**6-1 ▪ 214 ▪ Jr.**
**Carlsbad, Calif./Alabama**

Complete 77.0 percent of his passes, which led the FBS, in first year as a starter.

After an extremely productive regular season, which placed him in serious contention for the Heisman Trophy, Sayin struggled slightly in the postseason. In a 13-10 loss to Indiana in the Big Ten championship, Sayin was sacked five times, threw a costly first-half interception, and fell short on a quarterback sneak on a crucial fourth-down play in the second half.

The Carlsbad, Calif., native had a similar experience in the Buckeyes' 24-14 loss to Miami (Fla.) in the quarterfinals of the College Football Playoff. Sayin was once again sacked five times, plus he threw two interceptions – one of them a pick-six – and seemed reluctant to pick up key yardage with his legs.

Equipped with what Day might describe as the eye of the tiger, Sayin has been eager to improve in the offseason. Sayin's pursuit of growth was evident in the spring game when he flashed his mobility, picking up 10 rushing yards and a touchdown on two carries.

With the help of strength and conditioning coach Mickey Marotti, Sayin went from 210 pounds to 215 pounds.

"(I'm) a little bit heavier than last year," Sayin said. "It was very helpful in the offseason. (Marotti) pushed me pretty hard. And I think the extra weight has helped me in throwing the ball and running the ball."



SONNY BROCKWAY

**SECOND TO NONE — Junior quarterback Julian Sayin returns for a second season as a starter wanting to end it with a national championship and possibly the Heisman Trophy. He's excited to continue his development under the guidance of new offensive coordinator Arthur Smith.**

Sayin was asked about the different look in his eye that Day had described at Big Ten media days, and he attributed it to the seriousness and the intensity of the upcoming season.

Like Day, Sayin also understands the significance of his starting experience.

"It's super important to have that experience," Sayin said. "It's something that you can't really teach, is to have the experience of playing in the game."

Day said the fact that Sayin has 14 starts under his belt should only add to his poise ahead of a 2026 season that will see the Buckeyes match up with six teams ranked in the preseason top-25.

"The other thing is you've been on the field, you've experienced ups and downs," Day said. "You're not going to ride the emotional roller coaster that maybe you would as a young player. You understand when to throw the ball away. You understand time, score, situation, and how to prepare. And you have a reference point on some of these teams that you played last year as well. All those things add up."

Sayin isn't the only Buckeye star with starting experience. Junior receiver Jeremiah Smith is returning for his third year and proved last year he has a strong connection with Sayin when he went for 1,243 receiving yards and 12 touchdowns on 87 catches.

Sayin hopes he and Smith can bolster their connection even further heading into this season.

"How can we improve our timing and get on the same page on everything?" Sayin said when asked about the conversations he's had with Smith. "A lot of that work was done in the offseason, and communication is the best thing for our offense.

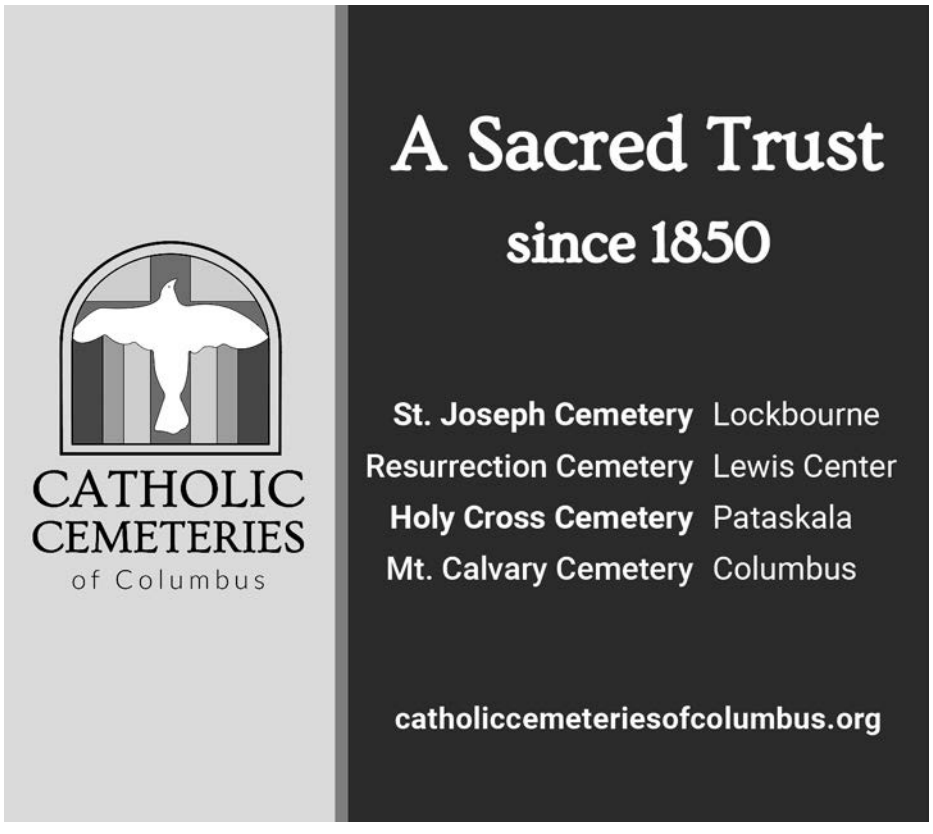
"How can we get to the point where we know what each other is thinking? And being able to take the points from Coach Day, who's obviously an elite developer of quarterbacks and somebody who knows the pass game really well. So Jeremiah and I always come together and talk through whether it's a certain route or a certain coverage. 'What can we do to beat this?' "

It isn't all familiar for Sayin. The Buckeyes have a new offensive coordinator after Brian Hartline left for the head coaching job at USF. However, Day replaced Hartline with Arthur Smith, a former NFL head coach who has certainly gained the respect of Sayin during his first few months on the job.

"It's been a lot of fun working with him," Sayin said. "Obviously, he's someone who has an extremely bright offensive mind. When you have someone who has an NFL background like that and has coached at the highest level – he's been an NFL head coach – it's really awesome for our development as players. We want to play at the next level, so it's really cool to have him in our corner."

Sayin has had no issues keeping up with the new system, according to Arthur Smith. The Buckeyes' offensive coordinator said if there is a problem, it's that Sayin is too far ahead of some of his teammates.

"He continues to impress," Smith said. "He doesn't feel like a young player to me because he sees the game so well. He understands football. He's so smart. Sometimes I





SONNY BROCKWAY

**NEXT IN LINE? — A backup must be ready at a moment's notice, and it's particularly important for a quarterback. Sophomore Tavien St. Clair (above) from Bellefontaine, Ohio, could be that player for the Buckeyes but is being challenged by freshman Luke Fahey.**

have to pull him back and be like, "Hey, you have to let everybody else catch up to you.' But that's a great problem to have. I'm super impressed with him. He understands how to play quarterback and understands the game."

## St. Clair Leads Backups

When he first spoke to reporters in early August, Day indicated the battle for Ohio State's backup quarterback spot was still ongoing.

"The backup quarterback position is critical," Day said. "Certainly we're all going to talk about Julian, but we need to have depth in that room as well. Those guys have to step up."

If Day were considering only talent, there wouldn't have been a battle in the first place. In fact, former five-star quarterback Tavien St. Clair's physical traits even surpass those possessed by Sayin.

Out of high school, the 6-5, 230-pound passer was ranked the No. 7 overall player in the country, the No. 3 quarterback and the No. 1 player from Ohio.

In addition to looking the part, St. Clair flashed his arm strength and athleticism in the spring game. The Bellefontaine, Ohio, native threw for 166 yards and a touchdown while also adding 14 yards on the ground.

But as talented as St. Clair may be, he also showed he has room to grow during the spring game. He completed only 9 of 21 passes, and a couple of his incompletions just as easily could have been interceptions.

St. Clair's inconsistency in the spring game could also be chalked up to a lack of in-game experience. In his only collegiate appearance last year, St. Clair threw two incompletions in Ohio State's 70-0 win over Grambling State.

With Kienholz transferring to Louisville after the conclusion of last season, St. Clair's playing time should ramp up.

In the spring, it seemed more likely that former Maryland quarterback and transfer Justyn Martin would push St. Clair for the backup spot, but in fall camp, three-star true freshman Luke Fahey has turned heads.

Fahey had his black stripe removed on Aug. 15, making him the third-quickest true freshman quarterback to earn the honor under Day. Only Sayin and Kyle McCord had their black stripes removed earlier than Fahey.

"He's been doing a great job," Day said of Fahey on Aug. 15. "He's putting a lot of pressure on Tavien. He really is. He's been competing. He's been making plays. We'll see how he grades out. (Quarterbacks Coach Billy) Fessler grades everything. That's been exciting to see him come in with a certain work ethic and run the offense at a pretty high level. We'll see how the rest of the camp plays out, but it is good to see him step in and push Tavien."

As a true freshman, Fahey obviously has no in-game experience at the collegiate level, but he did earn playing time in the spring game and flashed his abilities at the end of the scrimmage. He completed 3 of 8 passes for 26 yards and scrambled for a late 681-yard touchdown.



# Jackson, West To Lead OSU Backs In 2026

**By SAM CIPRIANI**
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

There were many questions surrounding Ohio State's backfield heading into the 2025 season, with a true No. 1 back left undecided before the Buckeyes' fall camp, but that campaign helped establish the hierarchy in the Buckeyes' running back room, and Ohio State enters the 2026 season with a much clearer picture of its backfield.

Three games into his true freshman campaign, Bo Jackson earned the starting job over CJ Donaldson and James Peoples and never relinquished it.

Fellow sophomore Isaiah West had only 12 carries through the first six games of the season. However, he was a key part of Ohio State's offense following a breakout performance (55 yards, 6.1 yards per carry) during the Buckeyes' victory over Wisconsin on Oct. 18.

However, both Jackson and West were sidelined throughout this spring as they recovered from shoulder surgeries, although they have since returned to the field for fall camp.

Despite an ongoing competition for playing time, Jackson said the two have worked together throughout the rehab process this offseason.

"It's been great," Jackson said on Aug. 7. "We worked together pretty much the whole winter and spring, getting our shoulders back right, getting bigger, faster and stronger."

Jackson was one of the nation's most productive running backs in 2025, ranking 26th nationally with 1,090 rushing yards. Only two other freshmen, North Texas' Caleb Hawkins (1,434 yards) and Duke's Nate Sheppard (1,132), crossed the 1,000-yard threshold last year.

He accomplished all of that with just the 46th-most carries nationally (179), rushing for six touchdowns along the way. Jackson also contributed 19 receptions for 200 yards and a touchdown through the air.

Still, during the opening week of Ohio State's fall camp, there was discussion about West's vast offseason strides, with the Philadelphia native taking the first snaps with the Buckeye first-team offense on the opening day of fall practice.

Although West earned praise from Ryan Day, the Ohio State head coach said Jackson separated himself from the group through the first two weeks of fall camp.

Day said Jackson will remain as the featured back in running backs coach Carlos Locklyn's unit but added that Locklyn hopes to utilize a three-running-back rotation throughout the season.

"(Ja'Kobi Jackson) is right there, and so is Isaiah, and then we're building depth behind that," Day said. "Coach Locklyn's plan is to make sure that we have three guys available. But so far, Bo has certainly stood out, and Ja'Kobi and Isaiah are right there."

Day mentioned Bo Jackson's improved field vision and explosiveness, particularly in the way he reads blocks and attacks the hole before making plays at the second level.

"The first thing is his reads and the way he's hitting the hole, that has really shown up," Day said. "He's doing a much better job at the second level. We've talked about it before. You're running over someone, you're running around them, or you're making them miss. You're seeing it show up on film. It did not show up on film last year."

West said Bo Jackson's running style is defined by his speed and explosiveness, noting that while he shares some of those traits, his own strength lies in his agility and making defenders miss.

"To me, Bo is a slasher. Bo is extremely fast. Bo is explosive," West said. "I'm not as fast as Bo Jackson. But I have my own explosiveness. I make people miss. I'm really excited."

West added that Jackson is only getting started, hinting at even greater potential ahead.

"I don't think you all even know how much better Bo actually got," West said.

As Day alluded to, West remains close behind Jackson after a strong true freshman campaign.

West took 59 carries for 310 yards and two rushing touchdowns, and he hauled in two passes for 12 yards in 2025 as he split time with Donaldson and Peoples behind Jackson.

With Donaldson now off to the NFL as an undrafted free agent with the New Orleans Saints and Peoples transferring to Penn State, the path is clear for West to step into the No. 2 role for the Buckeyes.

Ja'Kobi Jackson lauded West's ability as a runner, pointing to both the physical gains he has made this offseason and the short-area speed and acceleration he brings to the Buckeye backfield.

"Just from this offseason, he's a freak in the weight room," Jackson said. "Then on the field, he has great vision, great burst and great short-area burst. So he's a great back."

Behind West and Bo Jackson in the room is Ja'Kobi Jackson, a journeyman transfer. The seventh-year running back began his career at the JUCO level, playing three seasons at Coahoma Community College in Clarksdale, Miss., from 2020-22. He then transferred to Florida as the No. 156 overall junior college recruit, according to the 247Sports composite, where he'd spend the next three seasons of his collegiate career from 2023-25.

Despite making the jump from JUCO to the SEC after just three seasons, Jackson was hindered by injuries throughout much of his college career. He redshirted three times – two standard (2020, 2023) and one medical following an upper-body injury just four games into the 2025 season – and failed to play a full season all but once (2024) in his six seasons before Ohio State.

However, he's been effective when available. In his final season at Coahoma in 2022, he appeared in nine games, taking 128 carries for 661 rushing yards and seven touchdowns while racking up 5.2 yards per carry. In his lone complete season at Florida in 2024, he rushed for 509 yards and seven rushing touchdowns, adding seven catches for 76 yards.

"He has a really good base," Bo Jackson said of Ja'Kobi . "He's got good hands, very good vision. He's a really good back too."

While the Jacksons and West are firmly secured as Ohio State's top three backs, the depth chart behind them remains murky.

Freshman phenom Legend Bey seems the most likely to take the jump behind the top trio. His speed and athleticism could give the Buckeyes an explosive playmaker out of the backfield.

As a four-star recruit, Bey was pegged as one of the best raw athletes in the country coming out of North Forney, Texas. Though the 5-10, 195-pound Bey primarily played quarterback at North Forney, he is now making the transition to running back at Ohio State.

While Day said that Bey is still learning the ins and outs of the running back position, his natural athleticism and ability to generate big plays have already started to show why the Buckeyes are excited about his potential.

"Legend is learning how to play the position," Day said on Aug. 15. "But you certainly can see the talent. He had some big plays and explosive plays today. If he continues to grow and get better and all those things, take care of the football, you can see what a weapon he'll become for us. We are excited about the room."

Ja'Kobi Jackson expressed a similar sentiment, believing Bey has all the tools and potential to be a future playmaker for Ohio State.

"I see explosiveness. I see somebody who has very great potential to be the player that Ohio State wants him to be," he said. "He continues to grow and learn everything. He's going to be that guy."

While it was Bey who earned much of the preseason hype, Ohio State also added a second freshman in its 2026 recruiting class in four-star Favour Akih. Akih ranked just outside the top 300 as the No. 304 overall prospect and the No. 22 running back in the class.

The product of Delaware (Ohio) Hayes, Akih earned first-team All-Ohio honors in just nine games as a junior after carrying the ball 236 times for 1,653 yards and 15 touchdowns.

However, Akih is unlikely to see meaningful playing time this season. At just 17 years old, though, he remains a long-term piece of Ohio State's running back room.

Bo Jackson praised Akih's improvement from the spring camp to the fall.

"He's been getting a lot better," Bo Jackson said. "In the spring he was really new, really inexperienced, but now in any drills he's looking way sharper."

Also in the running back room are sophomore Anthony "Turbo" Rogers and junior walk-on Stanley Jackson Jr., who had his black stripe removed in fall camp, though neither is expected to see significant action outside of blowouts, barring injuries.

## Projected Starter

***Running Back***
**25 ▪ Bo Jackson**

**6-0 ▪ 218 ▪ So.**
**Cleveland Villa Angela-St. Joseph**

Jackson was 37th nationally with an average of 83.8 yards per game rushing in 2025.



SONNY BROCKWAY

**ACTION FOR JACKSON — After securing the starting job three games into the 2025 season, sophomore Bo Jackson (25) will begin this year as RB1 with expectations to carry the bulk of the load in the planned three-back rotation. Sophomore Isaiah West and transfer Ja'Kobi Jackson (no relation), in his seventh season, will also play prominent roles in the backfield.**

# Mix Of Old And New Provides Depth At TE

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

Tight end will never be a glamour position at Ohio State – not in a program known as "Wide Receiver U." which before that embraced Woody Hayes' "3 yards and a cloud of dust" running attack.

But the position is essential to the Buckeye offense, and the 2026 NFL draft proved that the number of catches is only a small part of what makes a successful tight end.

In fact, if you can't block, you won't get the rock.

"There's no better feeling than getting a pancake," said senior Mason Williams. "Really, there isn't. When you can get a D-end flat on their back, there really is no better feeling."

He transferred from Ohio, following in the footsteps of Will Kacmarek, who is sort of the patron saint of tight ends for several of the current Buckeyes.

Kacmarek had just 15 catches for 168 yards and two touchdowns for the Buckeyes last season yet was drafted in the third round (No. 87) by the Miami Dolphins.

"I want to be the next Will," said fifth-year tight end Bennett Christian. "I think I've really stepped up in that area on the field, and I think that's my goal. I want to be Will Kacmarek. I've always been a pretty good blocker, but Will was really good with his feet and his technique. We talk a lot about stuff that he's thinking about when he's coming off his technique.

"To be a good run blocker, you have to have a good mindset. You can have all the technique you want, but if you're not going to fire off the ball, you have no chance. I think of what he did for our offense last year, doing the dirty work that doesn't get a lot of praise.

"He was a third-round draft pick doing what he did. There's a lot of potential there, so I'm just trying to be that for this offense."

Don't be mistaken: The tight ends can make plays too. Max Klare joined the Buckeyes from Purdue last season and made 43 catches for 448 yards and a pair of TDs. He parlayed that into being selected ahead of Kacmarek at No. 61 in the second round by the Los Angeles Rams.

## Next In Line

With Kacmarek and Klare being drafted and Jelani Thurman (seven catches, 84 yards, one TD) transferring to North Carolina, the Buckeyes lost a combined 65 catches for 700 yards from the group.

The room is not barren, though. There are experienced players and some prospects who will provide tough choices for tight ends coach Keenan Bailey.

Sophomore Nate Roberts (6-5, 240) could be the starter when the top-ranked Buckeyes line up against Ball State in the season opener on Sept. 5 in Ohio Stadium.

Last season, he had four catches for 30 yards, had two carries for 1 yard and made one tackle. The Washington, Okla., native played 265 snaps at tight end and special teams, with a high of 44 snaps against Grambling.

Roberts is looking forward to the challenge under new offensive coordinator Arthur Smith.

"It's kind of a different mindset going from the position that I was playing to the role I'm taking this year," Roberts said. "I was more of a fullback last year, but this year I'm taking that traditional tight end role. I'm looking forward to it. It's good to learn new things, especially with Arthur's new offense.

"I just have to be ready to play whatever position they need me to. So I've got to practice at the slot, out wide and in the inline. Playing fullback definitely helped me out. I was in the slot, I was in the backfield, so I'm comfortable moving around. It's not new to me. I'm definitely more comfortable in that position now."

He'll be surrounded by the veterans Williams, Christian and Northwestern transfer Hunter Welcing, who is in his seventh season. Roberts said he and junior Max LeBlanc (6-4, 246) are like sponges around those guys.

"We had (Kacmarek) and Klare last year, so we had a good year under our belt," Roberts said. "Having those older guys coming in, hearing what they had to say, because obviously they've been in the game longer than we have, I'm just trying to take a little bit from Hunter and Mason and Bennett. But having that year under our belt last year, we're very comfortable at our age."

The Buckeyes also brought in Lebanon, Ohio, three-star tight end Nick Lautar, who was the composite No. 28 player in the state for the 2026 recruiting class.

Rounding out the unit are sophomore Brody Lennon (6-4, 243) from Cleveland Gilmour Academy and walk-on freshman Frankie McAllister (6-5, 235) from Columbus St. Francis DeSales.

## Sticking Around

Christian (6-6, 255), center Carson Hinzman and defensive end Kenyatta Jackson Jr. are the only players remaining from the 2022 class.

"A lot of guys either left or we had a few in the NFL," Christian said. "Those guys showed a lot of commitment in this age of college football and we bond over that. I mean, I'm a Buckeye until I die. The other two, we all share that."

It's been a long journey for Christian, who has played 26 career games and made seven catches for 77 yards and two touchdowns. Last season he appeared in 12 games and totaled 16 yards and a score off five receptions.

He played 15 games in 2024 when the Buckeyes won the national championship and also played twice as a freshman in 2022 before being suspended for the 2023 season for failing a drug test when he said he took a supplement bought at a nutrition store that was not NCAA-approved.

With NIL money being thrown around and the ease of hopping from school to school, Christian said he never seriously considered transferring despite being down on the depth chart.

"I freaking love Ohio State, and whatever they ask me to do, I'm going to do it to the best I possibly can no matter what circumstances look like," he said, "Obviously I had a suspension and stuff was really rough at one point and I could have looked another way but like I said, I love Ohio State and will always be a Buckeye.

"I'm a big believer in sticking to your word, so when I signed as a high schooler I wasn't planning on going anywhere. I've signed, and I'm going to do whatever I can even if it looks bad at times, which it has been."

### Projected Starter

***Tight End***
**83 ▪ Nate Roberts**

**6-5 ▪ 240 ▪ So.**
**Washington, Okla.**

Had four catches for 30 yards and two rushes for 1 yard in 2025.

## Fresh Start

Welcing, from Deer Park, Ill., has been through adversity as well with injuries limiting him early in his career. Despite not posting gaudy career numbers, he was named to this season's watch list for the Mackey Award, which goes to the nation's top tight end.

He did not play the COVID 2020 season, and then he appeared in five games in 2021 and one the next season before sustaining the second ACL tear in his right knee (the first was in high school). As a redshirt freshman in 2023, he played eight games, followed by 12 and 13 before successfully appealing to the NCAA for a seventh season.

Welcing, 24, entered last season with one career catch for 20 yards but had 28 for 296 yards and two TDs and was named Big Ten honorable mention.

He told Eleven Warriors he never imagined a few years back that he would still be playing in college, let alone at Ohio State.

"I remember I was like a fourth-year, I think, and I was, 'Dude, there's no way I'm doing another year or two of this.' And then here I am," he said. "But everything happens for a reason, so I'm excited to use this opportunity and make the best of it."

The change from Northwestern was readily apparent the first time he worked out with the Buckeyes in the offseason.

"It's been different, for sure. It's definitely a little bit more intense than what I was expecting," he said. "I feel like I really gave it my all and it pushed me towards uncomfortability and then making myself a better player in the process.

"Being around this coaching staff, players as well, you're going to get pushed to your max no matter what. I think the pressure of both the coaching staff and playing against the best players around in practice is pushing me towards that goal.

Bailey likes Welcing's leadership and the fact he had a big game vs. Michigan last season for the Wildcats (four catches for 81 yards).

"Hunter, he's been in college like since I was in college, and he's played in this conference. You put on his game, especially the one against those guys up north, and he's experienced," Bailey said.

Welcing (6-3, 248) will see his former teammates on Nov. 14 when Northwestern comes to Columbus, but he knows he's in the perfect spot to pursue his dream of playing in the NFL.

"There are opportunities galore here, and this represents my best opportunity to put myself in position to have success on the next level," he told the Chicago Tribune. "I didn't always think my body could hold up, but having a positive attitude has allowed me to become the player I am today."

## Knowing The Way

Williams, a Mogadore, Ohio, product, also believes he's finally reached the place where he belongs.

"I was a huge Ohio State fan growing up," he said. "Everybody where I'm from is an Ohio State fan. So when they did call, it was a great feeling. I was just looking for the best opportunity, whether that was here or whether that was somewhere else. Obviously, I believe that it's here, and it's continued to grow and show that it has been, so I think I made the right decision."

He said pursuing the same path as Kacmarek has made the move smoother.

"Seeing him make that transition put that into me, that's a possibility," Williams said. "Being able to continue that legacy and, I mean, obviously you guys saw what he did last year and the year before and what he's doing now in preseason (NFL) and everything. I'm hoping that I can continue to shine like he has."

Williams (6-4, 246) was lightly recruited and played five games (three catches for 78 yards and one TD) for Ohio as a freshman in 2023, but he found more opportunities the next season when Kacmarek departed for Ohio State and grabbed 19 catches for 211 yards and two touchdowns in 14 games. Last season, in 13 games, his 26 receptions went for 276 yards and three scores.

He already has experience playing in Ohio Stadium after making a catch for 3 yards in the 37-9 loss to Ohio State last season and looks forward to suiting up as a Buckeye.

"If you want to continue to the next level, there's nowhere better to be," Williams said. "The type of opportunities and the type of looks that you get just from stepping into this room and being around here is an opportunity that you can't really pass up."



# Ohio State Receiver Room Runs Deep

**By GREG WILSON**
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Editor

Yet again, Ohio State had a wide receiver selected in the first round of the NFL draft, with Carnell Tate going fourth overall.

There's almost no suspense when it comes to whether the Buckeyes' streak of five straight years with a pass catcher selected in the first round will continue this year. After the first two seasons Jeremiah Smith has had at OSU, it would be staggering to see him fall out of the first round in the 2027 draft.

But that's not what Smith is eyeing right now.

"I don't really focus on what's in the future. I focus on what's right now. And that's Ohio State football," Smith said at Big Ten media days in late July. "I'm not really focusing on the NFL but trying to make everybody around me better. And that's what all the greats did. Tom Brady, Kobe Bryant, that's what LeBron James is doing. That's what I'm trying to do. Trying to leave the jersey better than I found it."

Smith is focused on trying to win a second national championship during his time in scarlet and gray, and he also is hoping to be one of the increasingly rare non-quarterbacks to take home the Heisman Trophy after finishing sixth in voting last season. He's also gunning for the Biletnikoff Award.

"Biletnikoff and Heisman," Smith said about some of his goals this year. "I know for the Heisman, I have to do something pretty crazy to win that. But the Biletnikoff is the biggest thing I really want.

"With the Heisman – I have to have an outstanding season where they can't deny me."

Through two seasons, Smith has accumulated 163 catches for 2,558 yards and 27 receiving touchdowns. He's also added a rushing score in each of his freshman and sophomore seasons.

His receiving numbers have him on pace to set multiple records at Ohio State. Smith begins the season 43 receptions short of breaking former teammate Emeka Egbuka's all-time mark of 205. Smith is just 341 yards away from topping Michael Jenkins' career mark of 2,898 yards. He also enters the season tied for fifth all-time in touchdowns and needs to catch nine more to break the record Chris Olave set during his career as a Buckeye (35).

There is no doubt that Smith will be great for the Buckeyes. There seems to be some good depth at the wide receiver position going into the year, but there is also some uncertainty.

This offseason was the first time Ohio State went into the transfer portal for wide receivers. Former position coach Brian Hartline didn't believe it was necessary to do so, and it's hard to argue with the results after how well he recruited and developed players at the position.

But now with Cortez Hankton taking over as wide receivers coach, the Buckeyes brought in former UTSA pass catcher Devin McCuin and former LSU receiver Kyle Parker, who will both likely factor into the offense this season.

Early in fall camp, it was McCuin who seemed to be making more of an impact. He was running with the ones for the first three days of practice that were open to the media, and he made some impressive catches.



SONNY BROCKWAY

**GREAT CATCH — Jeremiah Smith (4) enters his junior season with numerous Ohio State receiving records within reach, but his goals include a second national championship and winning the Heisman Trophy and the Biletnikoff Award (best receiver).**



SONNY BROCKWAY

**TAKING ANOTHER STEP — Brandon Inniss said the receiving corps has set a goal of getting more yards after the catch as he eyes a big senior season following setting career highs in catches, yards and touchdowns in 2025. He wore No. 1 in 2025 but will wear No. 0 as the Block "O" honoree this season.**

"He's a really, really talented receiver," said starting quarterback Julian Sayin. "He has a lot of speed. He's a very smart player, knows where he's going. He's in the right spots. He's a guy who's willing to block for us and make plays. He's doing some good things."

McCuin was playing outside opposite Smith during those three practices but could also slide into the slot with his size and speed. Where he plays could depend on which receiver steps up for playing time the most, whether that be senior Brandon Inniss in the slot or freshman Chris Henry Jr. on the outside.

Inniss has a clear advantage when it comes to experience. He's entering his fourth season with the Buckeyes after being a former five-star recruit, but he hasn't yet met the potential that was once predicted of the receiver.

He was the starting slot receiver for the Buckeyes during the 2025 season but was the fourth target in the offense behind Smith, Tate and tight end Max Klare. He finished the year with 36 catches for 271 yards and three touchdowns, going for just 7.5 yards per reception on the season.

Inniss is one of many voices at Ohio State who are preaching getting more yards after the catch this year than they did during the 2025 season.

"It's what we're doing individually when we get the ball in our hands, getting north and south as fast as we can," he said. "One cut and go, making guys miss, running

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## Projected Starters

| *Wide Receiver* | *Wide Receiver* | *Slot Receiver* |
|---|---|---|
| **4 ▪ Jeremiah Smith** | **3 ▪ Devin McCuin** | **0 ▪ Brandon Inniss** |
| **6-4 ▪ 222 ▪ Jr.** | **6-0 ▪ 195 ▪ Sr.** | **6-0 ▪ 197 ▪ Sr.** |
| **Miami Gardens (Fla.) Chaminade-Madonna** | **Jacksonville (Texas)/UTSA** | **Hollywood (Fla.) American Heritage** |
| On pace to set multiple receiving records at Ohio State. Was Big Ten Receiver of the Year as a freshman and sophomore. | Made third-team all-conference last season with UTSA with 65 catches for 726 yards and eight touchdowns. | Finished 2025 season with career highs in catches (36), yards (271) and touchdowns (3). |

through contact, stuff like that."

Inniss said that a lot of the work to get better at gaining yards after the catch has come in the weight room with strength coach Mickey Marotti. Inniss also said that Hankton has been very happy with the progress that has been made in that area with the receivers since he first got on campus as a new coach in the spring.

"Coach Hank tells us every day. He told us, 'The transition after the catch from the spring to now has been off the charts, and that's everybody,' " Inniss said on Aug. 12. "It's good seeing the hard work put on the field."

But when it comes to what Inniss will be as a player this year, Smith is confident that he will have a better year than he did last season.

"You're going to see a different Brandon this year," Smith said at Big Ten media days in Chicago. "I feel like this year he's going to be pretty good."

But Henry, a five-star talent in the 2026 recruiting class, is also pushing hard for playing time early on, as many expected him to do. Head coach Ryan Day said as much during a press conference on Aug. 15.

"He came in and took significant strides in the summer and came in with a different approach in the spring," Day said. "It's like he's not a freshman anymore, and he doesn't look that way. He's made a lot of plays, he's learned the offense well, he's buying into special teams and he's playing physical."

Whether he ends up starting as a freshman or not, Henry seems very likely to make some sort of impact for the Buckeyes this year. But Henry isn't the only freshman who is pushing to do so this season.

Brock Boyd, who came into Ohio State as the No. 731 prospect in the country and the No. 100-ranked wide receiver in his class, has been quickly making a name for himself inside the Woody Hayes Athletic Center early on in his college career.

It's not as much of a surprise as his recruiting rankings might suggest that Boyd is making an early impact. Many considered the Texas high school standout to be the most underrated player in the 2026 class for the Buckeyes. Now he's proving that may very well have been the case.

He was the first freshman to shed his black stripe during spring practices, and now he's already working in with the second team during fall camp.

"Brock's cold," Inniss said. "Day in and day out, you see something new from Brock. He's great. He's very smart. He's probably the smartest freshman I've seen (at Ohio State) for a long time."

Smith spoke very highly of Boyd at Big Ten media days.

"Brock surprised me a lot, especially over the spring," Smith said. "He was out there making plays, diving for the ball with two defenders on him, doing crazy stuff. He reminds me of myself when I first got here in the spring, out there making plays and having fun. He's going to play a lot this year."

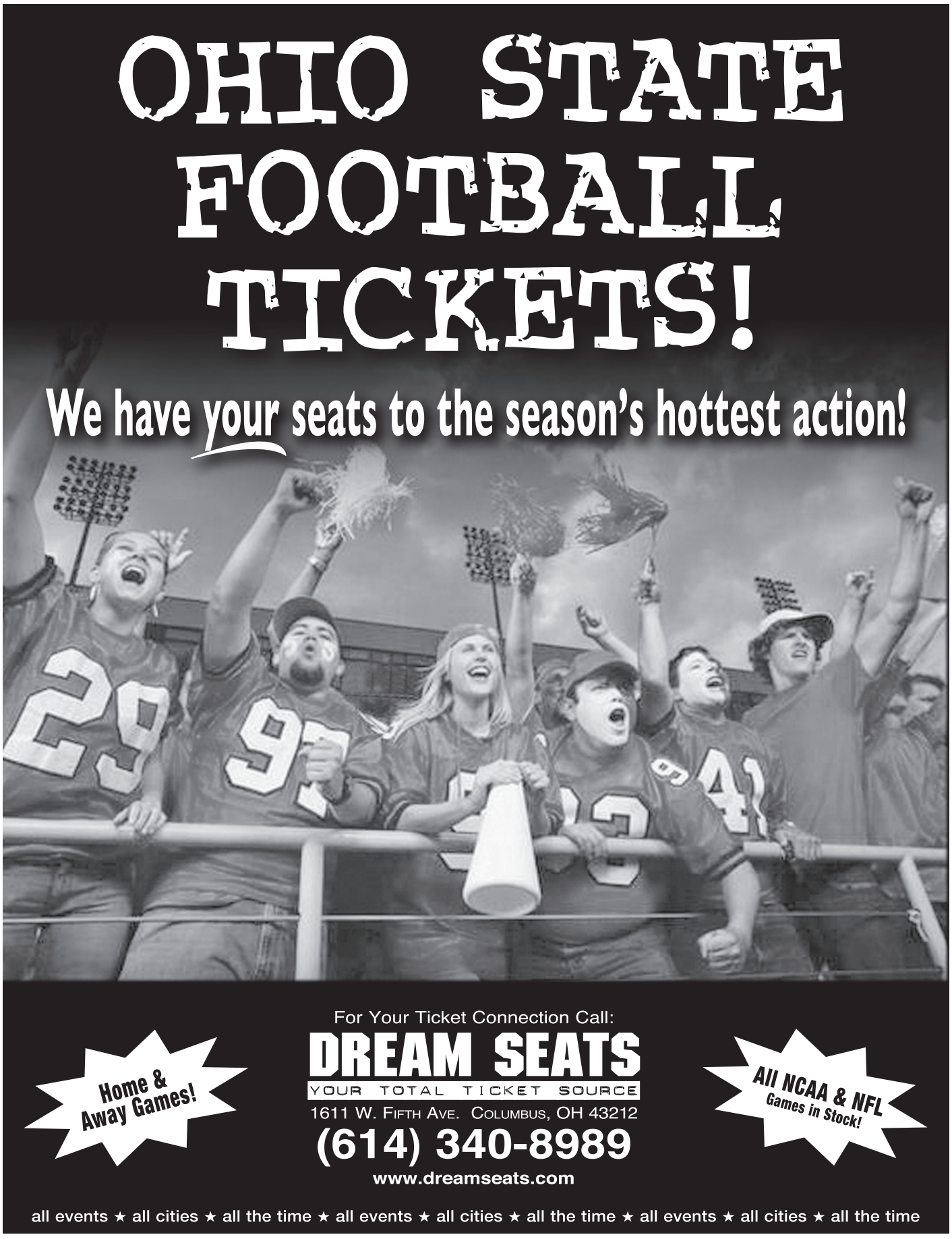
Parker has been working in the slot with the second team so far in fall camp, but there hasn't been much talk about the LSU transfer to this point from his coaches and teammates, which may not be a bad thing.

Last year with the Tigers, Parker finished with 31 receptions for 330 yards and four touchdowns, and if he doesn't end up being a starter for the Buckeyes, he will still add to the depth at the position. However, with so many players pushing for time around him, the impact of his transfer may not be fully felt until the 2027 season.

But Hankton, who also coached Parker at LSU, said in the spring that he likes what Parker brings to the room.

"He brings a mindset of physicality," Hankton said. "He's really tough with the football, has a high football IQ and is very versatile."

That depth goes further than two deep, with sophomore Phillip Bell, freshmen Jerquaden Guilford and Jaeden Ricketts and senior David Adolph in the room.



# Bucks Bank On Returning OL To Grow In 2026

**By BOBBY GORBETT**
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

## Projected Starters

***Center***
**75 ▪ Carson Hinzman**
**6-5 ▪ 301 ▪ 5th**
**Spring Valley (Wis.) Saint Croix Central**
Two-year starter, who earned first-team All-American honors for first time in his career last year.

***Left Tackle***
**69 ▪ Ian Moore**
**6-6 ▪ 315 ▪ Jr.**
**New Palestine, Ind.**
Appeared in all 14 games during sophomore season. Totaled 230 snaps on offense and special teams for the year.

***Right Tackle***
**70 ▪ Phillip Daniels**
**6-5 ▪ 312 ▪ Sr.**
**Cincinnati Princeton/Minnesota**
Appeared and started in 13 games during his first year at Ohio State. Was named to third-team All-Big Ten for his efforts.

***Left Guard***
**51 ▪ Luke Montgomery**
**6-5 ▪ 313 ▪ Sr.**
**Findlay, Ohio**
Was named a second-team All-American after starting all 14 games. Totaled 870 snaps last year.

***Right Guard***
**67 ▪ Austin Siereveld**
**6-5 ▪ 327 ▪ Sr.**
**West Chester (Ohio) Lakota West**
Started at left tackle for the first time last year. One of seven team captains, and only one of two players to be named a captain for the second-consecutive year.

Over his seven-year tenure as Ohio State's head coach, Ryan Day has a remarkable 86.8 winning percentage. Elite receivers, high-level quarterback play and superstar defenders have all been hallmarks of Day's Ohio State teams.

Elite offensive line play, however, is something that has often eluded Day's teams.

That only continued in 2025, when the undefeated and loaded Buckeyes led by arguably the best defense in the country failed to win a postseason game, in large part because of the offensive line's struggles.

In back-to-back postseason losses to Indiana and Miami (Fla.), the Buckeyes gave up 10 combined sacks and failed to reach 100 yards rushing in either game.

The offensive line wasn't all bad in 2025. In fact, in the regular season, the Buckeyes gave up only six total sacks. Even including their postseason struggles, the Buckeyes' 1.14 sacks allowed per game was tied for the 12th-best mark in the country.

That's likely why Day decided not to use the transfer portal to revamp the offensive line and instead will rely on a group that includes four returning starters in senior left tackle Austin Siereveld, senior left guard Luke Montgomery, fifth-year center Carson Hinzman and senior right tackle Phillip Daniels.

With just under two weeks to go before the start of the season, the only unknown is who will be the fifth starter and what position he will play.

In the first practice made available to the media, Siereveld moved over to guard, which was his first position at Ohio State, and junior tackle Ian Moore filled in to protect quarterback Julian Sayin's blind side.

"We're going to try a couple different combinations," Day said after the practice on Aug. 6. "We did two spots, so sort of just scarlet and gray, not really ones and twos. We are going to look at (Siereveld) playing tackle, as you saw last year. We're also looking at him playing guard, and finding the best five is what we're going to do."

Whatever the configuration, second-year offensive line coach Tyler Bowen will need the unit to improve as run blockers. Last year, the Buckeyes finished No. 72 nationally, averaging just 154.4 rushing yards per game, which included a modest mark of 4.6 yards per rush.

To improve Ohio State's run game, Bowen will likely use some of the guidance of first-year Ohio State offensive coordinator and former NFL head coach Arthur Smith, who made a name for himself in the NFL by creating dominant rushing attacks at different stops as an NFL coach.


Carson Hinzman

So far in camp, Smith has already impressed Montgomery.

"He's an O-line guy. I like that a lot," Montgomery said. "He's great. Just his scheme and what he brings from the NFL, but overall, he's just a tremendous guy. I really love what he's doing with technique and all the stories that he's bringing with him because he's had so much experience at the NFL level."

### Hinzman Is Veteran Among Veterans

Hinzman has had a somewhat unconventional path to stardom at Ohio State. After taking many and perhaps even himself by surprise by winning the starting center job in his redshirt-freshman season in the program, Hinzman had some growing pains. The Spring Valley, Wis., native started in all 12 regular-season games during the 2023 season but was subsequently benched for the team's 14-3 loss to Missouri in the Cotton Bowl after struggling in the weeks leading up to the game.

Hinzman stayed patient after Ohio State made an upgrade out of the transfer portal, signing former Alabama center Seth McLaughlin, and after there were injuries to multiple starters along the offensive line, he was one of the first players to earn playing time off the bench.

Hinzman made nine starts during the 2024 season, splitting those between left guard and center, and played well enough to help the Buckeyes claim their first national championship since 2014. That stretch of play made him a solid choice to start at center last season, and Hinzman didn't waste his opportunity to be a full-time starter once again.

Even against tough competition the likes of Indiana and Miami (Fla.), Hinzman rarely made mistakes in pass protection, which is why it wasn't much of a surprise he was named to the third-team All-Big Ten.

Of everyone in Columbus grateful to have Hinzman returning for his fifth season, perhaps no one is happier than starting quarterback Julian Sayin, who knows full well the significance of a veteran center.

"It's been a lot of fun to work with a guy like Carson because when you have a veteran at center, it makes your job at quarterback easier," Sayin said at Big Ten media days. "He's somebody who is the leader of that offensive line room."

The Buckeyes certainly don't want to sustain any injuries, but Hinzman would be an especially difficult loss if he's ever injured. Not only is Hinzman one of the more experienced players on the roster, but the Buckeyes don't necessarily have much depth at the center position.

Senior offensive lineman Josh Padilla seems to be the most likely contingency plan. Padilla appeared in 13 games last season for the Buckeyes, and while he wasn't perfect, he seemed to rise to the occasion against the Hurricanes' elite defensive line when called upon in the middle of the game.

The Buckeyes wouldn't want him to have to play much at center, but if inserted into the lineup, Padilla should help keep the Buckeye offense on track.

### Moore Emerges At Left Tackle

Ohio State has a returning starter at left tackle, and he certainly played well enough to be a returning starter at that spot, but Siereveld's presence may be required at an-



other position.

After losing 2025 starting right guard Tegra Tshabola to the transfer portal, Ohio State is in need of a guard to replace him. That means the Buckeyes may have a vacancy at offensive tackle, and luckily for Bowen, Day and Smith, former four-star recruit Moore has impressed since first earning playing time last year.

The 6-6, 315-pound offensive lineman earned his first start during Ohio State's 34-10 victory over Purdue and not only looked good in that game but performed admirably in playing time off the bench down the stretch of the rest of the season.

Moore is younger than some of the other options Ohio State has on the offensive line, but his frame, wingspan and athleticism also make him one of the more talented options in the room.

"We have a lot of confidence in him," Montgomery said of Moore. "He's got a lot of confidence in us. He's got all the intangibles to be the best he wants to be. He's super exciting to watch. He's definitely one of the most athletic guys we have on the O-line. What I like about Ian too is that he brings a lot of energy. You can always hear him and feel him, which is needed on the offensive line."

Playing right next to him on the offensive line, Montgomery has a front seat to the growth of Moore, but perhaps no players know him better than those who have to go against him in practice, such as fifth-year defensive end Kenyatta Jackson Jr.

According to Jackson, Moore has what it takes to start at Ohio State.

"He can for sure be a starter," Jackson said. "He brings a physicality. His IQ is off the charts. It's just building that confidence, which he is. His confidence has gone through the roof, and if he continues, he'll be a good player, a great player."

The Buckeyes certainly have plenty of options at left tackle, and it's not a certainty that Siereveld will move away from left tackle after excelling there last year. However, true freshman tackle Sam Greer could also help the Buckeyes if he's absolutely needed.

At 6-7, 320 pounds, Greer already has a very formidable frame despite his young age. He was a top-60 recruit out of high school and could be a candidate to earn playing time early in the season in garbage time.

## Montgomery Says Experience Will Pay Off

Ohio State's undefeated 2025 regular season might not have been possible if several first-year starters hadn't excelled. No player better exemplified that than Montgomery. Having previously started just two games at Ohio State, Montgomery was a second-team All-American according to the American Football Coaches Association last year. He started in all 14 games, and along with Siereveld, he helped make the left side of the offensive line a strength for the Buckeye offense.

Montgomery was one of several players to gain experience down the stretch of the 2024 season when Ohio State suffered injuries to multiple starters, even starting in the College Football Playoff semifinal and championship wins.

Headed into his fourth season with the program, the 6-5, 313-pound offensive lineman believes his experience is one of his biggest attributes.

"I've waited my time here," Montgomery said. "Nowadays people can jump ship and stuff like that. I've dealt with adversity. I've been through it, and you get wiser as you get older, and game-wise and experience-wise, you can only get that from real repetition against real guys in real, big stadiums. We've done it at the highest level of collegiate football. I have a lot of experience, and I think it's going to help us overall because we've got a lot of guys with that experience."

The Buckeyes certainly wouldn't want the former top-100 recruit to face any injuries as a senior, but sophomore interior offensive lineman Jake Cook is one of several players who could fill in if his name is called.

Having appeared in only two games last season, Cook doesn't have much experience, but he was a four-star recruit out of high school and, at 6-4, 310-pounds, has the frame to make an impact if needed.

## Back To Guard?

If there's been one consistent question mark on Ohio State's offensive line since fall camp ahead of the 2024 season, it's been the right guard position. Tshabola won the starting spot that year and was never formally removed from that spot for the next two years, but unfortunately for Ohio State, he struggled with consistency and failed to solidify himself as a reliable starter.

It seems most likely that the Buckeyes will convert Siereveld back to guard, a move that on paper should solve the team's issues at the position. After making seven starts during the Buckeyes' 2024 season at guard, Siereveld seemed likely to start there again last year. However, he began to take reps at left tackle in the weeks leading up to the 2025 season and was ultimately named the starter there.



Phillip Daniels

Siereveld was solid in his first full year as a starter to the extent that some thought he could enter the NFL draft after last season. He also earned second-team All-Big Ten honors. It isn't certain yet that he will move to guard, but he has the versatility to play either position, which, according to Montgomery, is in part due to his 6-5, 327-pound frame.

"He's a big guy," Montgomery said. "He's got length. He's tall. He's athletic, and one thing that sticks out about Austin is that he's super smart and is always doing the right thing. He's always accountable, holding guys accountable. When you move Austin around, there's no reason to feel anxious or stressed out because he's going to get the job done."

Siereveld's position may simply depend on how well Moore does at left tackle in fall camp. If Moore fails to prove he's ready to step up at left tackle, Siereveld may not be able to move to guard. In that case, Ohio State would likely look to one of Padilla or Gabe VanSickle at guard.

Each player rotated in at right guard last year while Tshabola had his struggles, and both appeared in 13 games. Like many offensive linemen in 2025, VanSickle struggled against the Hurricanes, but overall he had some solid moments for a redshirt freshman. The four-star recruit seems somewhat unlikely to start many games this year but proved last year he can be a valuable depth piece for the offensive line.

## Daniels Likely To Start Again

It was a solid first season at Ohio State for Daniels. The 6-5, 312-pound tackle cut his teeth at Minnesota, where he totaled 362 snaps in his redshirt-freshman season. It didn't seem certain that Daniels would earn a starting role for Ohio State, transferring in with former Rice tackle Ethan Onianwa, but Daniels performed well enough in the spring and in fall camp to win the battle for the right tackle spot ahead of last season.

Daniels had a good regular season and earned third-team All-Big Ten honors, but he didn't finish last season as well as he started it. He had trouble in pass protection against Miami's elite defensive linemen and also failed to hold up at times against the Hoosiers. For the season, Daniels was the second-lowest-graded starting offensive lineman. He gave up two sacks and 19 pressures for the entire year, according to Pro Football Focus.

After the postseason struggles, some questioned if there was any chance Daniels would lose his grip on the starting right tackle job. Day has been adamant that he is simply trying to find the best five offensive linemen, and he could conceivably trot out a unit that includes Moore and Siereveld at tackle with Padilla or VanSickle at guard. However, in the offseason, Daniels has mainly lined up with the first-team unit.

Other options at offensive tackle include former top-100 recruit sophomore Carter Lowe and junior tackle Deontae Armstrong.





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# Buckeyes' Defensive Line As Deep As Ever

**By SAM CIPRIANI**
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

For most programs, losing at least three starting defensive linemen in back-to-back years would derail a defense. But at Ohio State, reloading and returning even stronger has become an annual routine.

Defensive line coach Larry Johnson's unit lost Caden Curry and All-American Kayden McDonald to the NFL draft, retaining just one starter in fifth-year defensive end Kenyatta Jackson Jr. The Buckeyes also bring back junior defensive tackle Eddrick Houston, who didn't start but earned a good amount of playing time in a rotation with Tywone Malone Jr., who signed as an undrafted free agent with the Carolina Panthers.

Ohio State's defensive front served as the backbone of coordinator Matt Patricia's top-ranked defense last season, ranking seventh nationally in rushing defense (89.4 yards allowed per game) and tying for 31st with 2.50 sacks per game.

To maintain that standard, Ohio State focused much of its offseason on rebuilding depth, integrating nine newcomers, including three transfers and six freshmen, into the rotation.

Ohio State's three new arrivals through the transfer portal, Alabama transfers James Smith (defensive tackle) and Qua Russaw (edge rusher), along with former UCF defensive tackle John Walker, all join the Buckeyes as seniors.

Ohio State head coach Ryan Day emphasized the importance of the experienced trio making an immediate impact as the Buckeyes prepare for the upcoming season. While Day praised their mindset and preparation, he stressed that they must prove they can maintain their high efforts and show endurance throughout long drives.

"We need them to have a major impact," Day said on Aug. 15. "We're counting on that. I'm interested to see what it looked like today when we were in some of these sustained drives. We watched the teamwork where you get four plays, and you're out. Then the twos come in, and they get four plays. There's a lot of good there.

"But the question for defensive linemen is, can you consistently do it over an extended period of time and during a drive? I'd like to see what that looks like today, but they're certainly more than capable, and we're counting on them. I think that they understand that part of it. They have gotten really good with their strike and their hands and have great attitudes."

For Russaw and fellow transfers Walker and Smith, the goal was to acclimate to the program's high standards and absorb every bit of advice from Day and veterans such as Jackson .

"The standard here is pretty high," Russaw said. "Coach Day has us running to the ball. That standard is high, so we're just competing every day, coming out here trying to do our job to the best of our abilities. We're just soaking up all the stuff Coach Day gives us, and even Kenyatta. He's been here for a minute. He gives us tools and different stuff to use."

The Buckeyes' 2026 freshman class, on the other hand, included four four-star recruits and two three-star commits.

Most notably among Ohio State's four-star recruits, the Buckeyes landed the No. 52 overall recruit in the class, defensive end Khary Wilder, who has quickly made an impression during the opening weeks of fall camp.

Ohio State senior defensive end Beau Atkinson emphasized Wilder's tenacity on the field, believing he has the potential to become a future cornerstone of the Buckeye defensive line.

"I think Khary is a stud," Atkinson said. "He plays very violent and aggressive."

While integrating incoming transfers and a talented freshman class provides the necessary depth across the entire front, the success of Johnson's unit will depend on how those new faces complement Ohio State's returning core.




SONNY BROCKWAY

**END GAME — Fifth-year defensive end Kenyatta Jackson Jr. (No. 97 last season but now No. 2) opted not to enter the NFL draft and returned to build on a 2025 season in which he started all 14 games for the top defense in the nation. He was named one of seven captains on Aug. 22.**

To the surprise of some, fifth-year edge rusher Jackson returned for his final year at Ohio State after a strong 2025 campaign. Jackson worked his way into a starting role last season after appearing in 16 games and racking up 16 tackles, three tackles for loss and 1½ sacks as a rotational defensive end the year before.

Then in 2025, opposite the now-Indianapolis Colts defensive end Caden Curry, Jackson started in all 14 games for Ohio State, totaling 28 tackles, 11 TFLs, 6½ sacks and two pass breakups.

While the imposing 6-6, 263-pound defensive end could have been selected due to his physical traits and potential, he opted to return to fine-tune his game.

When asked whether this season felt different from a leadership standpoint now that he was in his fifth year, Jackson said it did not, noting that he would maintain the same mentality and voice on the field.

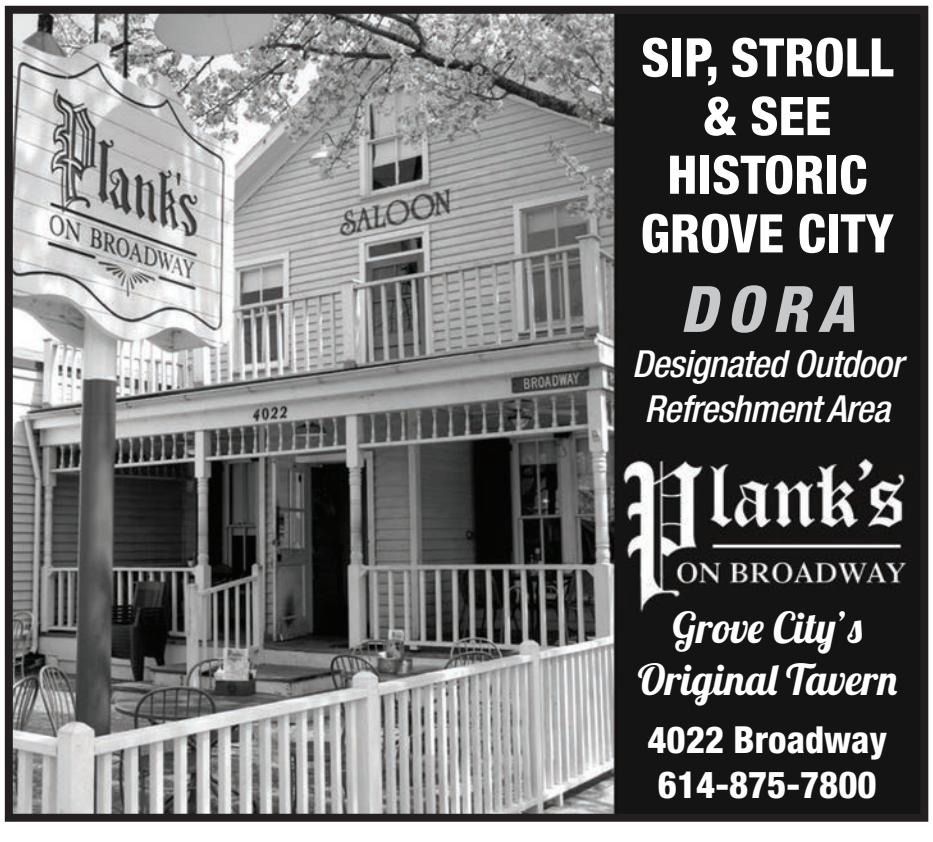
"I don't really think too much about it," he said. "It's pretty much just being myself, leading by example, being a vocal leader on the team and one of the veterans on the defense. I just want to do my job the best I can."

While he continues to be a vocal leader for Ohio State and was named a captain on Aug. 22, Jackson said he expects his role on the Buckeyes' line to look different this fall.

After sacrificing opportunities last season because of a talented defense, he noted that the coaching staff plans to use him in new ways following the departure of several key defenders to the draft.

"Last year I had to sacrifice a little bit," Jackson said. "This year, I'm all over the field. I mean (Patricia) has got me in so many different fronts and positions where I can play on the field."

Across from Jackson is a battle for the No. 2 defensive end role between Russaw and fifth-year Atkinson, who transferred to Ohio State in 2025 from North Carolina, where he spent the first three seasons of his collegiate career. Atkinson stands as



## Projected Starters

### *Defensive End*
**97 ▪ Kenyatta Jackson Jr.**

**6-6 ▪ 263 ▪ 5th**
**Miami Gardens (Fla.) Chaminade-Madonna**

The lone returning starter on the Buckeyes' defensive line. Was an All-Big Ten honorable mention in 2025.

### *Defensive Tackle*
**3 ▪ James Smith**

**6-3 ▪ 306 ▪ Sr.**
**Montgomery (Ala.) Carver/Alabama**

Smith totaled 28 tackles and 2.5 sacks in 2025 before committing to Ohio State.

### *Defensive Tackle*
**96 ▪ Eddrick Houston**

**6-3 ▪ 304 ▪ Jr.**
**Atlanta Buford**

Former five-star defensive end prospect. Finished with three sacks and four TFLs in 2025.

### *Defensive End*
**12 ▪ Beau Atkinson**

**6-6 ▪ 260 ▪ 5th**
**Raleigh (N.C.) Leesville Road/UNC**

Ohio State's No. 3 defensive end in 2025. Atkinson led North Carolina with 12 TFLs and 7.5 sacks in 2024.

the most likely candidate to earn the second starting edge rusher position with Jackson.

The 6-6, 260-pound edge rusher was Johnson's first defensive end substitution throughout the 2025 campaign, earning 11 tackles, 2½ TFLs and a sack across 11 games. Atkinson's 214 snaps on defense trailed only Curry (608) and Jackson (549).

After he was pegged as a possible impact transfer (No. 95 overall in the 2025 class) for the Buckeyes after racking up 35 tackles, 12 TFLs, and 7½ sacks with the Tar Heels in 2024, he didn't quite meet those expectations when he failed to earn a starting role.

Now, Atkinson will have another opportunity to claim a starting job in 2026, with Russaw pushing him for the position.

Jackson said Atkinson took last season's adjustments to heart, focusing his offseason preparation on flexibility and physical refinement.

"He put the work in behind the scenes for sure," Jackson said. "I think Coach Johnson told him that he needed to be a little more flexible. He worked on that in the training room. You put the work in after practice each and every day. You can see it every day. So that hard work is showing up right now."

Russaw brings three seasons of experience at Alabama to Ohio State, including a redshirt year in 2023. He was effective when on the field during his final two seasons with Alabama, finishing with a combined 50 tackles, 3½ TFLs, two sacks, two interceptions and a forced fumble.

But unlike Atkinson's breakout 2024 campaign with North Carolina, the Montgomery, Ala., native never started a full season for the Crimson Tide, appearing with Alabama's first-team defense just three times in 2025.

After entering the transfer portal, Russaw (6-2, 244) ultimately chose Ohio State. He said he was drawn both by the chance to develop under the Buckeyes' coaching staff and the opportunity to earn NFL-level preparation.

"This is a great place to come to get developed," Russaw said. "You have Coach Patricia, Coach Day, (strength and conditioning coach) Mickey Marotti. It's a great place to learn ball and get ready to play at the next level. I'd say we have all the right people around here to help us out."

Jackson took notice of Russaw's improvement during fall camp, adding that while he may not possess the 6-6 frame Jackson does, his speed makes him an effective presence off the edge.

"It's going good for him," Jackson said. "He's fast, physical. He's got everything. He doesn't have the size. He's a little short, but he's got everything, though. He's a physical dude as well. We need that speed off the edge for sure."

Also pushing for time as backups behind the top defensive ends Jackson, Russaw and Atkinson are sophomores Zion Grady and Epi Sitanilei.

Grady saw action in 10 games in 2025, totaling 13 tackles, two TFLs and a sack while finishing fourth on Ohio State snaps among defensive ends (104). Sitanilei appeared in only four games but has made strides from the spring to the fall, according to multiple Buckeye defensive linemen.

Johnson also brought in a pair of four-star defensive ends in the class of 2026 to round out the unit with Dre Quinn, the No. 375 overall player and No. 38 edge rusher, as well as Wilder.

Ohio State fifth-year tight end Bennett Christian pointed to Wilder and Sitanilei as his two most improved players on the Buckeyes' defensive line.

"The two younger guys that have impressed me the most have been Epi and probably Khary Wilder," Christian said. "Epi has put on a lot of weight. He's understanding how to play at this level, and Khary is coming in as a freshman, and he has done a great job."

Atkinson noted Quinn's speed off of his breaks, expressing full confidence in Ohio State's young group.

"Dre Quinn's a freak off the ball. He's very fast," Atkinson said. "All of those young guys, they're all really good."

Ohio State lost both McDonald and Malone on its interior defensive line, but with Houston returning for his junior campaign at 3-tech and Johnson bolstering the inside with multiple transfers and young talents, the Buckeyes have quickly reloaded.

Houston has been a key part of the Buckeyes' defensive front over the last two seasons. As a true freshman in 2024, he racked up seven tackles and two pass breakups in 11 games as he emerged late in Ohio State's run to the national championship. Houston then appeared in 13 games as sophomore last season, starting in four, while totaling 21 tackles, four TFLs and three sacks.

Both Walker and Smith enter Ohio State's defensive tackle competition following solid seasons at their previous schools. Smith made significant strides in each of his three seasons at Alabama, increasing his snap count from 76 to 325 and then 452. In his junior campaign, Smith started in 12 of 15 matchups for the Crimson Tide and racked up 28 tackles, 6½ TFLs, 2½ sacks, and one pass breakup as Alabama advanced to the quarterfinals of the College Football Playoff.

Smith said that the culture of Ohio State's defensive tackle room is built around pushing one another to improve in the midst of healthy competition.

"It's not a hard room because everybody is trying to drink the Kool-Aid. Everybody has their own things they're trying to work on that they got to get better at," Smith said. "We're not looking at each other like, 'Damn, I'm trying to be better than him at this.' We all have something we need to be working on every day."

Walker didn't face quite the same competition at UCF as Smith did in the SEC, but the 6-3, 302-pound defensive tackle was just as effective.

The Kissimmee, Fla., native, who was originally recruited by Johnson as a top-100 prospect out of Osceola High School in the class of 2023, totaled 40 tackles, three TFLs and a sack over 12 games as the Golden Knights' starting nose tackle last season. Walker said he is eager to learn as much as possible from Johnson and that the long-time defensive line coach has already made a strong impression on him.

"I'm trying to be a sponge and just soak everything up that he tells me," Walker said. "I'm trying to be really sound on my technique and listen to everything he's saying because he's a legend."

Day emphasized the versatility of the Buckeyes' defensive tackle additions, mentioning Walker and Smith's contrasting skill sets.

"They're all a little bit different," Day said. "John is big, strong, and powerful. James is a little quicker. They're very disruptive."

Also adding to Ohio State's defensive tackle unit are seniors Will Smith Jr. and Jason Moore, who are projected to follow James Smith, Houston and Walker.

Will Smith Jr., the son of 2002 Ohio State national champion defensive end Will Smith, was the Buckeyes' fourth defensive tackle in snaps last season (223). However, with the additions of Walker and James Smith, it appears Will Smith Jr. could remain stuck behind a crowded group at nose tackle. He racked up 20 tackles in 13 games for the Buckeyes in 2025. Moore, meanwhile, totaled just 46 snaps with six tackles and one TFL.

Walker noted that competition among defensive tackles has been positive, with multiple players pushing each other for snaps.

"It's great competition," Walker said. "We have great defensive tackles, like James. He's a great ballplayer. We have Will, Eddrick, Jason Moore. Those guys are so good, and we all compete."

The Buckeyes also added four defensive tackle recruits in the class. Ohio State brought in two four-star prospects in Emanuel Ruffin and Damari Simeon, to go along with a pair of three-stars in Jamir Perez and Darryus McKinley.

"We have a bunch of guys that are hungry and willing to make plays and do whatever to cause havoc on the inside," Walker said.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ESTD 2025 CITY CREEK EVENTS

# Fresh Look But Same Goals For Secondary

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

## Projected Starters

***Cornerback***
**7 ▪ Jermaine Mathews Jr.**
**5-11 ▪ 195 ▪ Sr.**
**Cincinnati Winton Woods**
Third-team All-Big Ten in 2025. Started all 14 games and totaled 799 snaps on defense and special teams.

***Cornerback***
**6 ▪ Devin Sanchez**
**6-2 ▪ 199 ▪ So.**
**Houston North Shore**
Played 13 games (one start) last season but was depth player on a secondary which had three players drafted to the NFL. Had 15 tackles for the season and a fumble recovery against Ohio.

***Strong Safety***
**8 ▪ Jaylen McClain**
**6-0 ▪ 203 ▪ Jr.**
**Rahway (N.J.) Seton Hall Prep.**
One of two returning starters in the secondary along with Jermaine Mathews Jr. Third-team All-Big Ten in 2025; career-high eight tackles vs. Texas.

***Free Safety***
**11 ▪ Terry Moore**
**6-0 ▪ 200 ▪ 5th**
**Washington, N.C./Duke**
Missed 2025 season due to torn ACL. All-ACC second team for Duke in 2024 with seven tackles for loss and four interceptions.

***Nickel***
**1 ▪ Earl Little Jr.**
**6-0 ▪ 203 ▪ 5th**
**Plantation (Fla.) American Heritage/FSU**
On preseason watch list for Jim Thorpe Award given to best defensive back in college. All-ACC second team in 2025. Spent two seasons at Florida State after two with Alabama.

The Ohio State pass defense, which was the best in the nation in 2025, won't be the same one when it opens the season at home against Ball State on Sept. 5 and will be severely tested the following week in a showdown at Texas.

How could it be when three members were selected in the NFL draft in April? They were part of the exodus of talent from defensive coordinator Matt Patricia's top-ranked defense, which helped the Buckeyes to an undefeated regular season before losses to Indiana in the Big Ten Championship Game and Miami in the College Football Playoff.

The Buckeyes have to replace eight starters overall, with the secondary needing three after safety Caleb Downs went 11th to the Dallas Cowboys, cornerback Davison Igbinosun was the No. 62 pick in the second round by the Buffalo Bills, and the New Orleans Saints tabbed cornerback Lorenzo Styles Jr. in the fifth round at No. 172.

With senior cornerback Jermaine Mathews Jr. and junior safety Jaylen McClain the lone players in the secondary to start every game last season, head coach Ryan Day went into the transfer portal to likely fill two of the three open spots while precocious sophomore Devin Sanchez is ready to play corner opposite Mathews.

"It's different because, since I've been here, it's been a lot of veteran experience in the room, and now I really have the most experience that we have in the room," Mathews said. "It's a new challenge for us, but there's nothing we can't handle, and we've been getting better every day."

Duke fifth-year senior transfer Terry Moore is expected to line up at free safety, and Earl Little Jr., another in his fifth season, comes from Florida State to try to secure the nickel position, although freshman Jay Timmons has drawn praise during the preseason camp.

"It is a competition," Day said on Aug. 13. "We want guys to compete, and a lot of guys have earned the right to do that. Now's the time we're going to be rolling these guys, and then these reps accumulate. We evaluate the reps and see where it goes.

"We need to find what that combination is going to be there. Do we feel like we have two corners that we can just play all of the time? Do we feel like there's three that we can rotate? How does that play into the nickel position? Those are all parts of what we need to solve here in the next couple of weeks."

### Tough Act To Follow

The biggest challenge and one that may be impossible to match is succeeding Downs, an All-American in both seasons with the Buckeyes and the recipient of the 2025 Jim Thorpe Award as the best defensive back in college. He was the unquestioned leader of the secondary and set a high standard.

Enter Moore, who not only has big shoes to fill but is coming off a torn ACL in the final game of the 2024 season, which kept him off the field last season. He was named second-team All-ACC in 2024 as a junior when he had 71 tackles, seven tackles for loss, four interceptions and six pass breakups.




SONNY BROCKWAY

**LOCKDOWN — Ohio State must replace three starters in the secondary who were drafted into the NFL in April, but senior cornerback Jermaine Mathews Jr. (7) provides experience after having started all 14 games in 2025 to earn Big Ten third-team honors.**

Not bad for a guy who started his career at Duke as a running back. Moore (6-0, 200) rushed 29 times for 128 yards with four receptions for 26 yards and three kickoff returns for 57 yards in 2022. He also had a fumble recovery and two tackles on special teams before making the switch to defense for his sophomore season.

When he went portal diving, Ohio State was an easy choice not only because of its reputation for developing NFL-ready players, but he was recruited to Duke out of Washington High School in North Carolina by current OSU safeties coach Matt Guerrieri, who was on Duke's staff from 2018 to 2021.

"Terry, he's a very smart guy. I mean, great ball skills, goes to attack the ball," McClain said.

McClain added that Moore and Little have fit in right away and he's developed a bond with both.

"I feel like it all started when they first got here," McClain said. "We had a connection off the field before the spring. So when we got on the field in the spring, we knew what it was. So if I wanted to get on Earl, it's nothing personal. And if I'm getting on Terry, it's nothing personal."

### Ready To Rock

When it comes to confidence, Sanchez (6-2, 199) may be the team leader. He played 13 games last season, totaling 409 snaps on defense and special teams, with five of his 15 career tackles coming against Illinois while playing behind Mathews and Igbinosun.

Now that it's his turn, Sanchez has set lofty goals of winning the Thorpe and being an All-American this season.

"I feel like I can do that, especially with the spring I had and then this camp I'm going to have, knowing that there's no better corner in the country than me," he said.

McClain doesn't doubt him: "He has the reps. He has a lot of confidence. You can see it displayed on the field."

That bravado comes from going against some of the best receivers in the country during practices the past two years, such as Carnell Tate, the fourth pick in the 2026 NFL draft by the Tennessee Titans, and junior All-American Jeremiah Smith.

"(Smith is) getting me better, and I'm getting him better," Sanchez said. "He may catch a ball, I may knock the ball down. It's going out there each play because he's the best receiver in the country. Iron sharpens iron."

He credits defensive backs coach Tim Walton for pushing him to get out of his comfort zone.

"If I'm comfortable, then this is not the place for me," Sanchez said. "Guarding JJ (Smith) every practice, that's uncomfortable. You've got to be a real stud to go out there and do that. Going against him made me realize I can guard anybody in the country."

Sanchez knows he'll be seeing top playmakers across from him almost every game.

"I feel like these guys are counting on me to go out there and guard the No. 1 receiver," he said. "I'm counting on myself. My family's counting on me, and this whole fan base is counting on me. It's a big task, but I'm not scared of it."

### Steady Presence

Mathews provides stability and consistency for the secondary. The former Cincinnati Winton Woods four-star made an immediate impact last season in the opener against Texas when his interception of Arch Manning with the Buckeyes ahead 7-0 led to a touchdown in the 14-7 victory.

From there, Mathews (5-11, 195) earned third-team All-Big Ten honors. For the season, he added another INT vs. Purdue and made 26 tackles, three pass deflections, 1½ tackles for loss and one sack. He had a career-high six tackles against Miami but enters this season motivated by the defeats in the final two games.

"Last year was tough. We had a lot of good players on the team," he said. "It's just moving on. Really, we can't do anything about last year. We can only do anything about the 2026 season. So I'm just getting ready for the 2026 season."



SONNY BROCKWAY

**LEADER OF THE BACKS – Junior safety Jaylen McClain (No. 18 last season but now No. 8) has embraced being a more vocal leader among the defensive backs after the departure of two-time All-American Caleb Downs, the No. 11 pick by the Dallas Cowboys in the 2026 NFL draft. McClain was named a captain on Aug. 22.**

He has personal goals too.

"I left a lot of plays out there and just want to make sure I make the plays that I'm supposed to make," Mathews said. "It's just not to my standard last year at the end, but I can't do anything about it. Just move on."

### Providing A Voice

McClain was named one of seven captains by Day on Aug. 22, and Mathews was not surprised, noting he has become more of a leader this season.

"He's just being more vocal," Mathews said. "He had Caleb Downs back there, so he didn't really have to do too much talking last year. But now he's gone, so Jaylen's stepping into that role, and he's been doing a great job at it."

McClain agrees.

"I would say there's a lot more responsibility on my plate," he said. "Obviously losing Caleb, that's a big person to lose out there. He was a field general out there, and so I feel like taking the next step into that role. Just being that guy that's able to make everybody feel comfortable on the field, that's a bigger responsibility."

McClain (6-0, 203) is on the preseason watch list for the Bronko Nagurski Trophy, given to the best defensive player in the country. He was third-team All-Big Ten in 2025, recording 53 total tackles while also having three pass breakups.

He looks forward to working with the new players in the secondary, especially Little.

"Me and Earl, great friends, great teammates, and obviously that off-the-field relationship segues perfectly into matching on the field," he said.

### Big Lift

Little (6-0, 203) comes to Ohio State after two seasons at Florida State, where he was second-team All-ACC in 2025. Prior to that, he was at Alabama for two seasons. In 35 career games, he has 93 tackles as well as three tackles for loss, and all four of his interceptions were last season.

"He plays fast and physical," McClain said. "I feel like you see that it jumps off on the tape when you watch him at Florida State. And he flashed that as well when he was here in spring ball. I'm excited to see how he does that in the games for us.

"He's a very fast, physical-type player. Very physical. He doesn't shy away from any type of contact. He sees the ball, and he goes after it."

Little is on the watch list for the Thorpe Award.

Wide receiver Brandon Inniss, a former teammate of Little at Plantation (Fla.) American Heritage High School, paid him the highest compliment.

"He's going to remind you all a lot of Caleb, honestly, the way he plays, flying downhill, making plays all over the field," Inniss said. "Just play after play after play you see on film, it's like, 'Damn, he made that play?' "

### Taking Notice

One of the most impressive freshmen in camp was Timmons (5-11, 191), a five-star from Gibsonia (Pa.) Pine-Richland and a former Florida State commit. He has been pressing Little for the starting spot at nickel and practiced quite a bit with the first team.

"It shows that the coaches trust in him, we trust in him and expect him to make plays for us," McClain said. "It allows us to play multiple defenses. He's been doing a good job at understanding the playbook and being able to execute."

Day likes what he's seen of Timmons: "He's super competitive. He's edgy. He just has a knack for the game, and he's got really good instincts."

Quarterback Julian Sayin believes he will be a major contributor.

"I mean, a really talented player," Sayin said. "Somebody who is anticipating instead of reacting. He kind of has a nose for the ball and is a really good player. He's challenging to go against."

The Buckeyes are building depth and quality among the defensive backs as far as Sayin is concerned.

"As a quarterback, you look for who can we go after," he said. "And our secondary, there's not many guys that you can pick out that you're like, 'Oh, that's the guy I want to go after.' So, it definitely makes it tough on our offense."

Mathews has the final words on what it takes to play in the secondary at Ohio State.

"Probably one of the number one traits that you need at that defensive back, it's your confidence," he said. "Confidence in yourself. If you don't believe in yourself, nobody else will.

"It's you vs. the guy in front of you, and at corner, like I said, the confidence is the most important thing, and at defensive back, especially corner, our plays are more magnified than anybody else's.

"If we give a play up, it's a touchdown, and everybody's going to see who gave up the touchdown. So I think it's just being focused. It's a very hard position, but that's what we signed up for, so that's what we've got to do."


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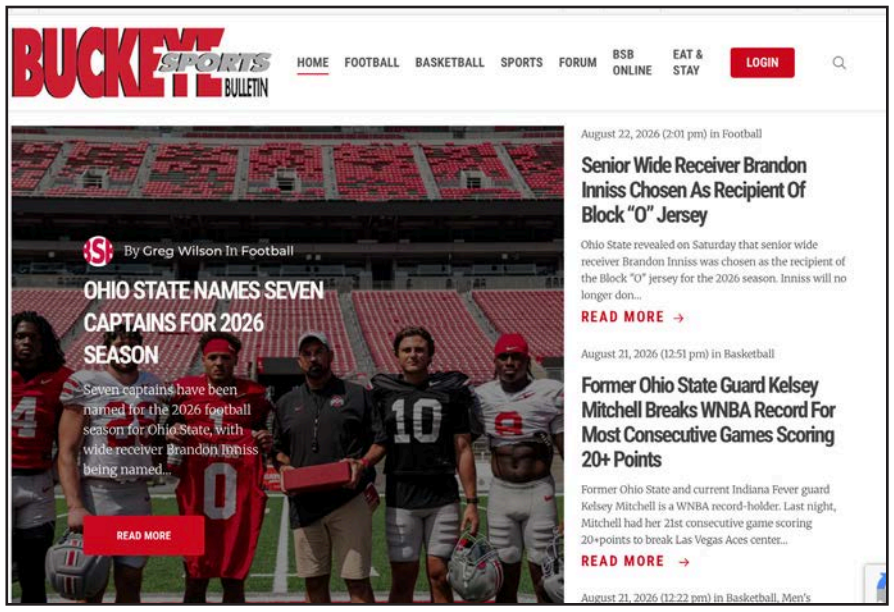


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# Ohio State Reloads In Linebacker Room

**By GREG WILSON**
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Editor

There's no position group on Ohio State that lost more top-end talent between the 2025 and 2026 seasons than the linebacker room.

Arvell Reese was taken with the fifth overall pick in the NFL draft, with Sonny Styles going just two picks later at No. 7 overall.

But even with those two major losses, the Buckeyes are still feeling very good about what they have at linebacker going into this season.

"It's another room that we have depth in, and I think (linebackers coach James Laurinaitis) feels that way," said head coach Ryan Day. "I think you'll see us rotate guys and try to figure out how all those pieces work. (Defensive coordinator Matt Patricia) and James and everybody on the defense does a good job of making sure we have guys in the right position."

Taking over at Mike is last year's third linebacker, Payton Pierce, who was perhaps not a starter only because of the extremely high level of talent in front of him in Reese and Styles. Now he takes over as the quarterback of the defense, and he's somebody whom teammates and coaches alike have a lot of confidence in leading the unit while he's on the field.

"He's really sneaky athletic," said senior linebacker Christian Alliegro. "He's a really vocal leader, and he's super smart, too. He's one of the smartest guys I've been around in terms of being the man in the middle. He commands the defense. He has a lot of respect from his peers, so obviously he's doing something right."

Pierce, a junior, said that when he arrived on campus as a freshman he had a goal to be a leader and a captain for the Buckeyes, a goal he fulfilled when he was named a captain on Aug. 22. He is thought of by his peers as a strong leader already, as every defender who speaks with the media talks about how influential Pierce is in the locker room.

But Pierce's leadership extends to the field as well. He's the one entrusted with the green dot on his helmet and has the coaches in his ear on the defensive side of the ball, so he's communicating the plays to his teammates every time he's on the field.

That's something he takes a lot of pride in.

"I love it. I like being in control," Pierce said. "I've waited my turn for this, and I'm ready for it. I'm super excited. The coaches have done a great job of putting in good play calls and building the defense, and I'm ready to go out there, get everyone lined up and ball out."

The Buckeyes went into the transfer portal over the offseason for more depth at the position and brought in Alliegro out of Wisconsin.

With former highly ranked four-star prospect Riley Pettijohn out for spring ball with a torn labrum, Alliegro assumed the starting role at the second linebacker spot, and he remains there into fall camp after how well he's performed there in practices.

Alliegro has already been a solid presence in the middle of the defense with the Badgers throughout his career, but after getting in a full offseason with the Buckeyes, he says he's feeling more ready than ever to make an impact on the field.

"It all started with (strength coach Mickey Marotti) in the weight room getting me right," Alliegro said. "Then it was acclimating to Coach Patricia and Coach Laurinaitis' defense. It's been a good transition.

"I feel good. My body honestly feels the most powerful and the quickest it's ever been."

Alliegro also brings good versatility to the room, and he's able to line up on the edge as he did for much of spring practices, which could allow Pettijohn to get on the field more often.

Perhaps the Buckeyes could change their base defense from a 4-2-5 to a 4-3 to get Pettijohn on the field more often. But Patricia also said that what the defense does is react to the offense, so it will also be dependent on what they see lined up across from them.

"One of the things that happens for us defensively is you always have to also look and see what offensive personnel is on the field," Patricia said. "So in some of those different groups, it could be personnel based on what we're seeing that just has that different mix of players on the field."

While Patricia said that the offense dictates what they do as a defense, overall offensive strategy may be changing in the college game, and heavy personnel is becoming much more common. That was shown by Ohio State itself last year, which had two or more tight ends on the field for roughly half of its offensive plays during the 2025 season.

That could help Pettijohn earn more playing time if he ends up being the third linebacker.

"It's interesting, the game of football kind of cycles through, and what was old is new and kind of vice versa," Patricia said. "I see a lot more of those bigger groupings coming back. So obviously the bigger the offense gets, then we have to be able to hold up to that. So maybe the third linebacker on the field is important in that situation."

Pettijohn believes it will be the case that more linebackers will be on the field more often for one simple reason.

"There's a lot of talent in the room, so there's no way you can keep us all off the field," he said. "(Patricia's) definitely going to be putting us in the right places."

While Pettijohn was injured, it was sophomore TJ Alford who was in the rotation as the third linebacker during the spring, and he gained a lot of valuable experience and feels that he can now make an impact this season as well.

"The spring was huge (for me)," Alford said. "I feel like I really showed the coaches that they could trust me out there to make plays, make corrections and things like that."

Pettijohn and Alford have been coming in with the second team throughout fall camp, and Day, for one, has been impressed with what they are putting on the field, both when it comes to defense and special teams.

"Both of those guys are putting in a lot of good work," Day said of Alford and Pettijohn. "They're doing a good job on special teams, which is only going to lead to them playing on the field. They're showing up, watching film and seeing how they did in live work. Then Payton and Christian have been solid.

"We want to maximize their skill sets. And those four guys have different skill sets, which is good. There are certain things they do the same, but they're into it. They're making the calls. They recognize plays quickly and diagnose plays quickly."

Laurinaitis has said in the past, as the linebackers coach, that whoever proves they deserve to be on the field will get on the field during the season, whether that's only two linebackers or whether that's six. This year, Patricia feels like the depth of the room looks very good and could be a strength for his defense with so many guys at the position who are proving they could be useful.

"I feel like we have a good depth group that is all learning and kind of really growing at the same time," Patricia said of his linebackers. "What I think is really neat is that Peyton's in, TJ's in, Riley's in, Eli Lee is in, Christian's in, and I feel like, hey, we're good.

"Communication is good. Front is good. We can play the run game. I feel like when you have those waves of players, I do think it kind of gives you a little bit of an advantage as you go through the game. I like where they're at."

But the depth may even go past the first four guys in the room if the Buckeyes need it. Lee, a sophomore is back as well, and Alliegro touched on how he's done well.

"He's just a fantastic football player and super smart as well," Alliegro said. "He has a knack for the football for sure. I think he has the most forced fumbles so far in the summer. He's a hell of a player."

Not only is the depth good in the room, but multiple guys in the room can also do multiple things. Alliegro talked about the versatility some of the linebackers bring when they get on the field, noting that many of them can play on or off the ball if needed.

"Strong, fast and aggressive," Alliegro said when asked how he would describe the linebacker room. "We have multiple different players that can play multiple different positions. You have a guy like Pettijohn who can go on the edge and play off ball. You have me who can play on the edge and play off ball, and TJ Alford as well with his long arms; he can do whatever he wants. Then obviously Payton Pierce is the man in the middle doing his thing, too."

Junior Garrett Stover also returns after being named an Iron Buckeye over the winter. Laurinaitis also had yet another very strong recruiting class in 2026, with five-star Cincere Johnson and four-stars Braxton Rembert and CJ Sanna joining the room as well.

With a long, grueling college football season, the Buckeyes will likely have to rely on the depth in the room at some point, and while it will be hard to replace Reese or Styles as individual players, they may be able to replace them collectively.

## Projected Starter

***Weakside***
**26 ▪ Payton Pierce**

**6-1 ▪ 232 ▪ Jr.**
**Lucas (Texas) Lovejoy**

Finished 2025 season with 43 tackles and his first career interception.

## Projected Starter

***Middle***
**14 ▪ Christian Alliegro**

**6-4 ▪ 245 ▪ Sr.**
**Darien (Conn.) Avon/Wisconsin**

Started 2025 season with 48 tackles and six tackles for loss in seven games before being injured in Wisconsin's loss to OSU.



# OSU Hopes Hawkins Solves Kicking Problem

**By BOBBY GORBETT**
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

The 2025 Big Ten championship gave the winner, Indiana, the No. 1 seed and a spot in the Rose Bowl in the College Football Playoff and gave the loser, Ohio State, a difficult first-round matchup against Miami (Fla.) in the Cotton Bowl.

The difference in that game was just three points, or a field goal, which senior kicker Jayden Fielding missed from only 27 yards in the final three minutes of the game.

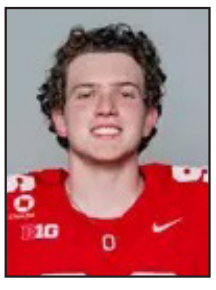
That 13-10 loss to the Hoosiers preceded a 24-14 loss to the Hurricanes, which was by no means the fault of Fielding but again featured a missed field goal, this one from 49 yards, by the Buckeye placekicker.

Despite some flashes Ohio State showed in the punting game and return game, the key field-goal misses still loom large over the state of the Buckeyes' special teams, which may be why head coach Ryan Day made some upgrades in the offseason.

Day started with the signing of former Baylor standout junior kicker Connor Hawkins out of the transfer portal, and in February he hired former Illinois special teams coach Robby Discher to occupy the same role at Ohio State.

Ohio State had quality control coach Rob Keys help with the special teams the last two years, but mainly used several assistant coaches to run the unit. It's unclear how much assistant coaches will assist Discher in leading the special teams, but the former Fighting Illini assistant said he had already identified some changes he wanted to make during the spring.

"The goal is to always try to elevate any place you're at, and that's always a challenge," Discher said. "It's a competitive business, and it's a performance-based business. So it's like that with the players. It's like that with the coaches. There's a lot of things that Ohio State's done extremely well, and no sense in changing some of the stuff. And some things you feel strongly about, maybe you can have your own fingerprint on."


Connor Hawkins

As Discher said, Ohio State had its moments in special teams. The Buckeyes finished 2025 ranked 12th nationally with an average of 25.3 yards per kickoff return and 40th nationally with an average of 10.6 yards per punt return.

Led by then-junior punter Joe McGuire, Ohio State averaged 41.2 net yards per punt, which ranked 36th nationally.

Discher will be tasked with making a good special teams unit elite in 2026, and with plenty of young talent on the roster, he should have plenty of tools at his disposal.

## Bucks Use Portal To Upgrade Kicker

Outside of his memorable postseason misses, Fielding was relatively reliable for the Buckeyes. He made 16 of his 20 field goals and all 56 of his extra points. One thing that Fielding never did during his time at Ohio State was make a field goal of 50 yards or longer. In three years as Ohio State's starting kicker, Fielding's long was 49 yards.

Hawkins should immediately add some range to the room. In his first year as a starter last year, Hawkins went 3 for 4 from 50-plus yards, with his longest kick being a 54-yarder he made in the Bears' season opener.

Overall, Hawkins made 18 of 22 field goals and was a perfect 10 of 10 on field goals inside 40 yards. He also made all 37 of his extra points.

During the spring game, Hawkins went 2 of 3 on field goals, with his makes coming from 46 yards and 42 yards, and his miss coming from 43 yards out.

Playing at Baylor, which went just 5-7 last season, Hawkins didn't take many pressure-packed kicks in huge games, which he'll likely be expected to do at Ohio State. It isn't easy to re-create game pressure weeks before the season starts, but Day said he's tried to do so in practice with Hawkins.

"Connor has done a good job," Day said on Aug. 15. "He made a couple of nice kicks for us today in some pressure spots that we want to challenge him with, and we'll continue to do that throughout camp. The consistency with the snap and the hold and the kick has been good, and now we just have to go put him in these situations in practice where there's a lot of pressure and see how he responds. His past will tell you that he will respond well, and so we've seen that so far in practice."

Joining Hawkins in the room is former Notre Dame kicker Marcello Diomede. Unlike Hawkins, Diomede earned limited playing time at his previous destination. The 6-1 senior kicked in 10 games over three seasons with the Fighting Irish. Diomede attempted just one field goal during his time with the Fighting Irish, which he missed, and converted 4 of 5 extra-point attempts.

Although he's unlikely to take many field goals and extra-point attempts at Ohio State, he should be useful on kickoffs. With Notre Dame last year, Diomede had 16 kickoffs for 1,033 yards (64.6 average) with 11 touchbacks.

According to Day, Diomede's leg strength will come in handy.

"Marcelo has a really strong leg, and so he gives us an opportunity to have somebody to help with the kickoffs and also long field goals at times," Day said. "It's still early in camp, but he brings a really strong leg to the table."

## New Year, Same Punter

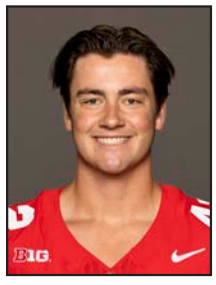
Before the 2024 season, Joe McGuire was viewed as a relatively unheralded long shot to win the battle to be Ohio State's starting punter. He shared a room with the 6-7, 255-pound Nick McLarty, who made a name for himself on social media by punting a ball 90 yards over a stadium.

McGuire may not have kicked a ball over a stadium, but he managed to beat out McLarty for the job. Since then, McGuire has quietly gone about his business and blossomed into a reliable punter for the Buckeyes. Appearing in all 14 games last year, McGuire had 29 punts for 1,229 yards (42.4-yard average). McGuire also forced 15 fair catches and had 12 punts inside the 20-yard line.

After a solid season as the Buckeyes' starting punter last year, McGuire is expected to start for a third consecutive season. One new part of the Buckeye punt operation is the long snapper. John Ferlmann was the Buckeyes' long snapper for three seasons from 2023-25 and earned all-conference honors for his efforts the last two seasons. The Buckeyes replaced him with Dalton Riggs, a fifth-year player who made previous stops at BYU and UCF.

According to Day, Riggs and McGuire have started to make a connection during fall camp.

"Dalton is new, but he's really getting a good feel with Joey in the punting game with their snap-to-kick operation," Day said. "I think Joey's taking the next step, but we have to build depth there as well."


Joe McGuire

Likely backing up McGuire is fifth-year punter Brady Young, who spent his first four years at Cincinnati before transferring to Houston Christian, then to OSU.

Young didn't earn any playing time at Cincinnati but ended last season with 69 punts for 2,882 yards (41.8-yard average). He forced five fair catches and had 17 punts inside the 20-yard line.

## Inniss Returns As Returner

Before the 2024 season, Ryan Day guaranteed Ohio State would end a long drought without a punt-return touchdown. The Buckeyes made good on that guarantee when former safety Caleb Downs returned one for a touchdown during his team's 38-15 win over Indiana that year.

Day made no such guarantee for Ohio State's kickoff-return touchdown drought ahead of last season, but once again, the Buckeyes ended their drought.

Former defensive back Lorenzo Styles Jr. was the player who finally broke through for the Buckeyes' first kickoff-return touchdown since 2010 with a 100-yard return during Ohio State's 48-10 win over UCLA.

Although Styles made the big play, it was then-junior receiver Brandon Inniss who returned most of the punts and kicks for the Buckeyes last year.

Inniss finished last season with 181 punt-return yards on 17 attempts for an average of 10.6 yards. His longest punt return went for 32 yards. Inniss had modest numbers as a kick returner. He went for 66 yards on five kickoff returns for an average of 13.2 yards.

Considering he's played a big role as a returner during each of the last two seasons, Inniss is likely to continue to occupy the role in 2026.

Still, in practices made available to the media, sophomore receivers De'Zie Jones and Phillip Bell, sophomore running back Anthony Rogers, senior receiver Kyle Parker, junior receiver Jeremiah Smith and freshman Brock Boyd joined Inniss in taking return reps.

## Projected Starters

### *Kicker*
**96 ▪ Connor Hawkins**

**6-1, 200, Jr.**
**Liberty Hill, Texas/Baylor**

Made 18 of 22 field goals last year, with three makes coming from over 50 yards. Also made all 37 of his extra points.

### *Punter*
**42 ▪ Joe McGuire**

**6-2, 209, Sr.**
**Melbourne (Australia) Prokick**

Third season as a starter after initially winning the job for the 2024 season. Ended last season with 29 punts for 1,229 yards (42.4 average).

### *Long Snapper*
**48 ▪ Dalton Riggs**

**6-2, 231, 5th**
**Eagle, Idaho/UCF**

Appeared in 12 games last year for UCF and totaled 102 snaps. Appeared in 12 games during the 2024 season for BYU, totaling 85 snaps.

### *Punt/Kick Returner*
**0 ▪ Brandon Inniss**

**6-0, ▪ 197 ▪ Sr.**
**Plantation (Fla.) American Heritage**

Took the majority of punt and kick returns for the Buckeyes last season. Finished the year with five kick returns for 66 yards (13.2) and 17 punt returns for 181 yards (10.6).

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# BSB Staff Sees OSU, Oregon B1G Title Matchup

Ohio State gets back onto the gridiron on Sept. 5 in the season opener against Ball State.

But while the opener is a bit of a cupcake matchup for the Buckeyes, the rest of the schedule is anything but that with many tests along a road that they hope leads to another Big Ten title and a national championship.

Buckeye Sports Bulletin staff members Sam Cipriani, Bobby Gorbett, Craig Merz and Greg Wilson all made their predictions for how Ohio State's 2026 season will go, along with players they believe will earn hardware by season's end and the conference CFP teams.

Here are this year's BSB staff predictions:

## Cipriani: Bucks Overcome Difficult Schedule

While Ohio State boasts one of the most talented rosters in the nation, the Buckeyes will be put through a grueling schedule that's arguably the toughest in all of college football.

To reach the Big Ten Championship Game and/or the College Football Playoff, Ohio State will have to survive a slate that pairs a marquee nonconference showdown with Texas with a brutal Big Ten schedule where the Buckeyes have little margin for error.

Ohio State's conference schedule features matchups with each of the top six finishers in the Big Ten from last year (excluding themselves), all of which finished 9-4 or better.

Ohio State features eight returning starters on offense and three on defense, with many other players from last season's roster expected to take on larger roles alongside key transfers and a top-five freshman class.

Led by returning cornerstones quarterback Julian Sayin, star wide receiver Jeremiah Smith and running backs Bo Jackson and Isaiah West, the offense benefits from continuity, particularly along the offensive line with Carson Hinzman, Luke Montgomery and Austin Siereveld.

Conversely, defensive coordinator Matt Patricia faces a heavier rebuilding project with only three returning starters from 2025's elite unit that finished No. 1 in both total and scoring defense. Still, much like entering the 2025 season, I'm confident Patricia can once again mold a unit replacing more than half of its starters into one of the nation's best.

The defense won't have the luxury of returning stars such as Caleb Downs and Sonny Styles this season, but the Buckeyes were far more aggressive in the transfer portal, adding elite safeties Terry Moore and Earl Little Jr., defensive tackles James Smith and John Walker, linebacker Christian Alliegro and defensive end Qua Russaw.

All in all, I expect Ohio State to finish the 2026 season as one of the nation's top five teams and earn a trip to both the Big Ten Championship Game and the College Football Playoff, even if it picks up a couple of blemishes along the way. That said, I believe another Big Ten program has fully embraced the blueprint that fueled the last three national champions and will emerge as the conference's best.

I'm picking Oregon to win both the Big Ten and the national championship. Led by my Heisman Trophy pick, quarterback Dante Moore, the Ducks have all the pieces to make a title run.

While Moore has a chance to become Oregon's first Heisman winner since Marcus Mariota in 2014, a loaded receiving corps and one of the conference's most talented defenses – featuring cornerback Brandon Finney Jr., defensive ends Teitum Tuioti and Matayo Uiagalelei, and defensive tackle A'Mauri Washington – give the Ducks the balance needed to win it all.

**Big Ten Title:** Oregon over Ohio State
**Offensive POY:** Dante Moore, Oregon
**Defensive POY:** John Henry Daley, Michigan
**Coach of the Year:** Dan Lanning, Oregon
**Freshman of the Year:** Mark Bowman, USC
**Big Ten CFP teams:** Ohio State, Oregon, Indiana

## Gorbett: OSU Exceeds Expectations In 2026

If you look at sportsbooks' projections for the 2026 season, you'll see that the Buckeyes are projected to win nine or 10 regular-season games. That is not because Ohio State isn't talented. The Buckeyes were ranked No. 1 in both the preseason media and coaches polls.

The reason the Buckeyes aren't expected to win 12 regular-season games for the second year in a row is that their schedule features six ranked teams, which includes three teams ranked inside the top 10.

At least in the regular season, I see Ohio State exceeding expectations. As difficult as their schedule may be, the Buckeyes' worst regular-season finish under head coach Ryan Day is 10-2.

And with starting quarterback Julian Sayin and superstar receiver Jeremiah Smith on the roster, I don't think this will be one of Day's weaker Buckeye teams. I expect the Buckeyes to go 11-1 with a win in the Big Ten Championship Game that will almost certainly have them ranked No. 1 in the country headed into the College Football Playoff.

After a comfortable win over Ball State in Week 1, I see Ohio State defeating Texas for the third year in a row. I believe the Longhorns to be improved this year, but the Buckeyes have matched up well with Texas each of the last two seasons, and defensive coordinator Matt Patricia had Texas starting quarterback Arch Manning seeing ghosts last year.

Ohio State could get tripped up by feisty Big Ten foes Illinois or Iowa, but under Day the Buckeyes have seldom lost to less-talented teams.

I think the Buckeyes will get revenge over an Indiana team that has slightly more questions than it had a season ago during the middle of the season, and after an off week they will play well enough on the road to defeat USC.

I see Ohio State's first and only loss of the regular season coming to an uber-talented Oregon team hungry to prove itself.

The Buckeyes will have no problems with Northwestern and Nebraska, and after getting the monkey off their back last year, they will win their second straight game over Michigan to cap the regular season.

An 8-1 record in Big Ten play will be good enough for Ohio State to make the Big Ten championship, and I expect it to draw Oregon in Indianapolis.

Just like in 2024, the Buckeyes will avenge a regular-season loss to Oregon in the postseason and will claim their first Big Ten championship since 2020.

**Big Ten Title:** Ohio State over Oregon
**Offensive POY:** Jeremiah Smith, Ohio State
**Defensive POY:** Teitum Tuioti, Oregon
**Coach of the Year:** Lincoln Riley, USC
**Big Ten Freshman of the Year:** Mark Bowman, USC
**Big Ten CFP teams:** Ohio State, Oregon, Indiana, USC

## Merz: Too Close To Call With Tough Schedule

I could almost pat myself on the back for my prediction in this space a year ago that the Buckeyes would lose twice. Genius, right?

The problem is I forecast both defeats coming in the regular season and didn't even have them playing in the Big Ten Championship Game. Ouch.

Of course, the Buckeyes went undefeated through 12 games before stumbling in the conference title game to eventual national champion Indiana (words that I thought I'd never write unless it pertained to basketball) and then Miami in the College Football Playoff.

As for my picks to make the 12-team postseason? I got OSU and Oregon right but whiffed on Penn State – which I picked over the Ducks in the conference title game – and Illinois (good gosh).

My final confession: I saw the Buckeyes beating Texas in the opener but unwisely had them losing again to the Wolverines in Cheaterville, USA.

That leads me to the 2026 season and the most difficult prediction I've had to make over the years. It shouldn't be that hard considering the Buckeyes are the preseason No. 1 pick in most polls, have ridiculous talent all over the field and reload but never rebuild.

The problem is the schedule is, or could be, as daunting as I can recall, starting with Week 2 at Texas following what will be an emotional (sarcasm) Senior Day stomping of Ball State.

Texas has the home field, as many star players as the Buckeyes and percolating revenge after defeats in the 2024 CFP semifinal and last season in Columbus.

As good as the Buckeyes are, they still have to replace eight starters on defense, and going against Arch Manning early in the season could be trouble.

A loss deep in the heart of Texas won't damage the Buckeyes' playoff chances, and in fact they could make it with three defeats depending on the ranking of the victorious opponents.

I'm at both ends of the spectrum: It would be remarkable if they go 12-0 in the regular season with road games against Texas, Iowa, Indiana, USC and even an improving Nebraska along with home games vs. Oregon and Michigan.

Still, I don't see three defeats in the offing, so I'm settling for a 10-2 mark that should be enough to get them to the Big Ten Championship Game.

If last season's schedule was too soft to prepare the Buckeyes for the postseason, I have no worries about how they will handle it this time around.

So, assuming they lose to Texas, where's the other setback? I'm going off the rails and saying the Trojans will pull the upset at the Los Angeles Coliseum on Oct. 31.

It's not that USC is better, but the Buckeyes will be coming off a huge win at Indiana two weeks earlier. While that's followed



by an open weekend, OSU will have a potential top-five showdown against Oregon after playing the Trojans.

While Buckeye fans will be in full panic mode if there is a loss at USC, I expect the Buckeyes to rebound in a big way against the Ducks and finish the season with wins over Northwestern, Nebraska and the Wolverines.

That may be enough to advance the Buckeyes to the title game, where I could envision a rematch with Oregon.

As for Big Ten individual awards, quarterback Julian Sayin and receiver Jeremiah Smith will be vying for offensive player of the year, but the Buckeyes could split votes, allowing Ducks' QB Dante Moore to slip by.

It may be a reach, but receiver Chris Henry Jr. could be a top freshman candidate if Smith draws all the attention from the defenses.

There are several coaches taking over programs, and Matt Campbell at Penn State or Michigan State's Pat Fitzgerald could make some noise, especially Campbell, who inherited a solid team from James Franklin and has an easier schedule devoid of the Buckeyes and Oregon after opening with powerhouses Marshall, Temple and Buffalo.

**Big Ten Title:** Ohio State over Oregon
**Offensive POY:** Dante Moore, Oregon
**Defensive POY:** Rolijah Hardy, Indiana
**Coach of the Year:** Matt Campbell, Penn State
**Freshman of the Year:** Chris Henry Jr., Ohio State
**Big Ten CFP teams:** Indiana, Ohio State, Oregon, Penn State

## Wilson: Buckeyes Get Through Tough Schedule

Ohio State is facing a much tougher road to the College Football Playoff this season with six teams ranked in the preseason top 25 on the schedule. But the Buckeyes are ranked in the top 25 as the No. 1 team by both the coaches and the media, so there's no playing the underdog card in these games.

They will have to go into Texas in Week 2, which will surely be an extremely hostile environment for the Scarlet and Gray, and try to complete a three-game sweep over the Longhorns that started in the Cotton Bowl during the 2024 national championship run.

I have the Buckeyes pulling that off thanks to a defense full of new faces out of the transfer portal proving it can hang with the best in the country and Ohio State's experienced offense proving to be too much to handle for the SEC powerhouse.

Next of those games is Oct. 3 at Kinnick Stadium against Iowa, and while the Hawkeyes might be able to work some of their Kinnick magic against the Buckeyes, I don't think it will be enough to upset them.

It will be a brutal three-game stretch that Ohio State struggles a bit when it goes on the road to Indiana and USC in back-to-back games before hosting Oregon at the 'Shoe. I see the Buckeyes coming out of that stretch with at best a 2-1 record, if not two losses.

But then OSU has a couple of games that should be late tune-ups against Northwestern and Nebraska before heading back to Ohio Stadium for the rivalry game against Michigan.

Head coach Ryan Day finally topped the Wolverines for the first time since his first season as head coach at OSU last year, and I think he's figured out the recipe. Even though I expect a lot of improvement from Wolverines quarterback Bryce Underwood this season, I still don't think they will be able to handle Ohio State at the 'Shoe.

Then, even with the tough schedule they went through, I think the Buckeyes can win a Big Ten title for the first time since the 2020 season and go into the College Football Playoff as one of the top teams in the country.

**Big Ten Title:** Ohio State over Oregon
**Offensive POY:** Jeremiah Smith, Ohio State
**Defensive POY:** Koi Perich, Oregon
**Coach of the Year:** Ryan Day, Ohio State
**Freshman of the Year:** Savion Hiter, Michigan
**Big Ten CFP teams:** Indiana, Ohio State, Oregon, USC








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# Experts Say OSU Will Be Led By Offense In 2026

**By BOBBY GORBETT**
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

Ohio State may enter the season ranked atop both the coaches and Associated Press preseason polls, but there are still many questions surrounding the team headed into the season.

With the opener with Ball State rapidly approaching, BSB sat down with 247Sports' Steve Helwagen, Eleven Warriors' Dan Hope, Joey Kaufman of The Columbus Dispatch and Doug Lesmerises of the BillandDougShow.com Substack to discuss quarterback Julian Sayin, Ohio State's offensive line, and the Buckeye defense, among other relevant topics.

**Q: What do you need to see from Julian Sayin to believe he can lead Ohio State to a national championship?**

**Helwagen:** "The one thing that people want to see out of him is better pocket poise when things break down, because they're going to play so many matchup games this year. That became an issue against Indiana and Miami (Fla.), the way he handled pressure. We think the offensive line will be better, but if there are breakdowns, he has to handle it better. He can't turn the ball over. He can't get sacked. He has to avoid it if he can.

"To me, that's what he needs to improve upon. I think it would be hard to improve upon his completion percentage, but certainly you want him to maintain that, be efficient, play at a high level, and if it's there for him to be able to pick up yardage with his feet, that would be great too."

**Hope:** "We already saw a lot of it last year. To be the most accurate passer in the country, third-most accurate in FBS history with a 77.0 percent completion percentage, certainly it all starts there. I think for a first-year quarterback, he showed great command of the offense already.

"If you're looking for growth areas from him, No. 1 is just being able to do more outside of the pocket. You look at what he did last year. It was mostly throwing from inside the pocket, not a lot of running. That's probably the No. 1 thing that he needs to improve on in terms of making the offense more multidimensional and being able to handle that pass rush when you get into a game against a team that has a great defensive line.

"Those are two growth areas for Julian. But all in all, coming off of last year and looking at how well he did as a first-year quarterback, I have a lot of confidence in Julian's ability to be a national championship-caliber quarterback."

**Kaufman:** "Being able to manage the chaos in the pocket. When you look back at the regular season last year, when the conditions were right, he wasn't under pressure, and he could sit in the pocket and pick his nose, he could pretty easily pick apart the defense. It was a little different when he was under duress. You just want to see him be able to manage that a little more. He really didn't get that opportunity in the regular season last year, and this year it will be interesting because he will certainly play better competition in the regular season, you figure on paper.

"Maybe you can see him manage all of that a little more this year. You want to see him – not that you want to see quarterbacks really running for their lives back there in the pocket – but if he's able to hang in, deliver a pass while getting hit or getting flushed in the pocket, having to make a throw on the run, those things would be encouraging."

**Lesmerises:** "Playmaking when it gets tough, escaping pressure, not taking sacks, and making plays in those moments is probably the biggest thing. A lot of the rest of it, Arthur Smith will put him in a position to succeed. Having Jeremiah Smith will put him in a position to succeed, but he has to be able to turn negative plays into positive ones. If he had a couple against Indiana or Miami where the pressure is in his face but he spun away and made a throw, or even ran a little bit, that might have changed those games. Everybody references him breaking the sack and running against Penn State last year – just more of those moments in the games that matter."



SONNY BROCKWAY

**COOL UNDER FIRE — Julian Sayin (10) led the nation in completion percentage (77.0), took the Buckeyes through an undefeated regular season and finished fourth in Heisman Trophy voting, but his ability to handle pressure in the pocket must improve if they are to have a chance to win a national championship, experts said.**

**Q: Do you believe Ohio State's offensive line has improved and grown from the struggles of last postseason?**

**Helwagen:** "That's a very difficult question to answer, and it really holds the key to what kind of team this is going to be. If they can improve on the better things that they did last year and eliminate the negative things that they did last year, they've got a chance to be really special. You've got guys with experience now, including guys who played some on the national championship team in 2024, that you expect to play at a high level.

"Once they get the rotation settled on where (Austin) Siereveld is going to play, then things will really sink into place for the offensive line. Once they get that settled, I think you will see improvement. The key will be how they play in those matchup games. Can they set up running lanes for the running backs, and can they protect the quarterback? That's the biggest question."

**Hope:** "It should be. You look at who all they have back: Austin Siereveld's back, Luke Montgomery's back, Carson Hinzman is back, Phillip Daniels is back. I think that if Tegra Tshabola had stayed, they were probably going to look to upgrade over him anyway, so I don't think that's a loss. This offensive line, especially if Ian Moore is able to establish himself at left tackle and then Austin Siereveld comes in and is able to move over to right guard, then that interior offensive line of Luke Montgomery, Carson Hinzman and Austin Siereveld should be in the running for the best interior offensive line in the country.

"The tackles will be the bigger question mark. But based on what we saw from Ian Moore in limited action last year, I have a lot of optimism that he can be a very good left tackle for Ohio State. Or if they end up keeping Siereveld out there, he already did well at that position last year. Moore could potentially be an upgrade at right tackle. Joshua Padilla is a guy who could step in at right guard. I expect the offensive line to be better. They have to prove it. Week 2 against Texas is when we'll really learn if they've gotten better because it is largely the same guys as last year."

**Kaufman:** "It remains to be seen. It's hard for me to say, 'Oh yeah, they've improved,' because, frankly, we haven't seen them play a real football game. You can't truthfully answer that until you see what they trot out. If Ian Moore takes a leap, maybe you feel the offensive line's a little better, but it's kind of the same guys.

"It's the same offensive line coach (Tyler Bowen). The addition of Arthur Smith might help them and put them in some better spots schematically. His experience coming from the NFL and being a former offensive lineman is going to make a difference. I guess now I'm talking myself into them being a little better, but I think they'll be better because they'll be put in better spots with a new offensive coordinator."

**Lesmerises:** "Yes, I think it can be. It's not a 100 percent definitive yes, just because it's like, 'Oh, the offensive line had some troubles last year. What happened?' Well, they brought four of the guys back. I guess that's good, because you're more experienced, but are we sure it's good? You have to work through that, but I believe their individual talent is there.

"They have enough individual talent to be good, potentially great, and so then it's about working together, handling movement up front, passing off assignments, and that's probably more on Tyler Bowen than it is on any individual offensive lineman. So that's my question: Does Tyler Bowen have them ready to handle the looks? Matayo Uiagaleilei, A'Mauri Washington and Teitum Tuioti are a great defensive line for Oregon. Colin Simmons is a problem for Texas. From an individual talent standpoint, they can handle that as well as anybody. But if they're giving them looks, can they handle that?"

**Q: Can the defense be as good as it was last year after losing eight starters for the second straight year?**

**Helwagen:** "I doubt it, but I think they've got some really good players coming on that can maintain a level of play that will be good enough for them to compete for championships. They have a lot of talented young guys coming up through the pipeline, and they augmented in places where they had to have help. They went out and got it in the transfer portal, like Christian Alliegro at linebacker, Terry Moore and Earl Little Jr. at safety.

"I think those guys are going to be key contributors. Qua Russaw at defensive end, the two defensive tackles they picked up (James Smith and John Walker). They have

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a lot of veteran guys, and that will help mitigate some of the guys they lost, but it would be hard to duplicate what happened last year. That was just an amazing defense."

**Hope:** "I don't think I'd expect them to be the No. 1 defense in the country for the third year in a row because you don't have Caleb Downs anymore, you don't have Sonny Styles, you don't have Arvell Reese. They still have a lot of talent. I think they're still going to be a really good, top-10 defense, but who's the star of this defense? Even last year, when they were replacing eight guys that they lost to the NFL draft, you still had Caleb Downs. He was that centerpiece.

"You don't really have that guy right now. I think Jaylen McClain's capable of being somewhat that guy. I think Earl Little Jr. can help with that. Certainly, Kenyatta Jackson Jr. is someone I think has the potential to be an All-Big Ten defensive end up front, but you just don't have those established stars on defense right now. There are a lot of guys on defense who we think are going to be really good, but we don't necessarily know."

**Kaufman:** "That, to me, is hard to imagine. They gave up just a shade under 10 points (per game) last year, and on paper, they were the best defense since 2011 Alabama. I don't think they're going to be quite as good this year, but they could be in the same ballpark, or maybe the drop-off is not as steep.

"They don't really look like they're going to have the front-line game changers that they had last year. They had three guys drafted in the top 11, two top-10 linebackers and an all-everything safety in Caleb Downs. They don't have that, but they might be deeper. You could look at guys nine to 16 on the roster. They're maybe deeper this year, and they might have more options for how they want to package stuff, which could then allow them to be comparable or not too far off from where they were last year. To me, it would be hard to say with much confidence that they would be as good this year at this stage of the game."

**Lesmerises:** "Individually, those three first-rounders are in the top tier of elite Ohio State defenders that I've seen in 20 years doing this, and then you throw in Davison Igbinosun, Caden Curry and Kayden McDonald. No, I don't think it can be. Can it be 85 percent as good? If they rotate, if they use sub-packages, if guys like Eddrick Houston, Devin Sanchez, Kenyatta Jackson, Payton Pierce and Jaylen McClain elevate, there's always somebody next at Ohio State, but last year was a defense-first team.

"I think this has to be an offense-first team, but the defense should be good enough to support an offense-first team. But I don't think it is a championship-style defense where the defense is what would go out and win you a national title."

**Q: What do you think is the biggest strength and weakness of Ohio State?**

**Helwagen:** "The biggest strength is probably the ability on offense to control the tempo of the game and to score points and really put pressure on the opposing team to have to match what Ohio State does offensively. I don't want to say they're just going to go out and outscore people in shootouts, but I think that when you have an offense that's capable of putting up points like they do, it really does take a lot of the onus off your defense.

"It's hard to pinpoint one particular weakness, but if I had to think of one, maybe it's the front seven on defense. They're just guys who really haven't played a ton and guys who haven't played a ton together. Maybe until they get their bearings, they won't be as dominant as perhaps they could be by the end of the season."

**Hope:** "The biggest strength to me is I think you have the best quarterback, wide receiver tandem in the country. You've got the best player in college football, let alone the best wide receiver in Jeremiah Smith, and you've got the most accurate quarterback from last year coming back in Julian Sayin. I think if Arthur Smith can build the offense around them the way that he should be capable of, you should have one of the most explosive offenses in the country.

"I don't know if it's necessarily a specific weakness, but outside of Jeremiah Smith and Julian Sayin, I don't think you have as many established stars on this team as you did a year ago. There's a lot of guys who you think are going to be good players or really good players, but can they be those great players, those championship-level players, the stars that you need to lead you to a title, as we saw from that group of seniors two years ago in 2024?"

**Kaufman:** "I think the biggest strength is you have a returning Heisman Trophy finalist mixed with the best player in college football. That combination is the slam dunk answer, but you have a quarterback who is really smart and a good processor with a really quick release, and then you have a freaky athletic marvel, Jeremiah Smith, who is probably going to go down as the best receiver in Ohio State history and is sort of like the Orlando Pace of this generation.

"It's those two, and specifically Jeremiah and everything he can do. He's talked a bit about being a little more productive after the catch this year and being more dominant week in and week out. That's where it starts.

"Then the question mark to me – it's less of a weakness because the floor is really high for the defense – but do they have anybody who's sort of a havoc creator? Do they have a game-wrecker on defense that is a true playmaker? We talk about the guys they lost in Downs and Styles and Reese, but they also lose Caden Curry, who led them in sacks last year.

"Do they have somebody who can blow up a game? They seem like a very fundamentally sound disruptive defense, but is there somebody who's going to just blow up a play? That's my question. It's the absence of certainty, I guess."

**Lesmerises:** "Coaching is potentially their biggest strength. Arthur Smith has a chance to be the most influential person that's part of Ohio State football this year. There are many other contenders, probably everybody outside of Indiana that has a somewhat major question at one of their coordinator spots. Texas arguably has it at both. I think USC has it on defense. I think Oregon has it on offense. I think Notre Dame still might have it on defense a little bit. I think Georgia probably has it on offense, and when you have two former NFL head coaches, it has a chance to be a real advantage for Ohio State this year.

"As for a potential weakness: Are we sure the run game is going to be at the level that it needs to be? And that's tied to the offensive line, but to me, that's primarily about the ability of the running backs to be dynamic, to get yards on their own, turn 3 yards into 6, 6 yards into 15 and 15 yards into 50. I think there are legitimate questions about that.

"Now, do I think they have to have a great run game to win the national title or compete for the national title? No, I don't. The passing game with Sayin and Smith and the ability of the defense ought to be good enough, I don't think it has to be a spectacular run game, but it is probably the thing I have the most uncertainty about."



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# OSU Names Seven Captains, Inniss Gets Block 'O'

**By GREG WILSON**
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Editor

Seven captains have been named for the 2026 football season for Ohio State, with wide receiver Brandon Inniss being named the recipient of the Block "O" jersey as one of the captains on Aug. 22.

Inniss is joined by offensive lineman Austin Siereveld, quarterback Julian Sayin, wide receiver Jeremiah Smith, linebacker Payton Pierce, safety Jaylen McClain and defensive end Kenyatta Jackson Jr., who were also voted captains for the Buckeyes.


Austin Siereveld

"This group represents our team well, with leaders from different position groups, backgrounds and experiences," said head coach Ryan Day. "All seven are returning players, including two captains from last year, and they understand our standard and what it means to carry our culture forward."

Inniss will no longer don his No. 1 jersey and will become the seventh player in Ohio State history to wear No. 0, joining Sonny Styles (2025), Cody Simon (2024), Xavier Johnson (2023), Kamryn Babb (2022), Thayer Munford (2021) and Jonathon Cooper (2020).

"Brandon is the right choice to wear the Block 'O' this season," Day said. "It is an honor that represents much more than what a player does on the field. It represents toughness, accountability and character, and Brandon has earned the respect of everyone in our building through the way he works, prepares and serves his teammates."

This will be Inniss' second straight year as a captain after he was one of four last year.

Inniss was a five-star recruit who hasn't yet been able to reach his potential on the field, but he is obviously thought of inside the Woody Hayes Athletic Center as one of the top leaders on the team.

It is also Siereveld's second straight year as a captain of the team after he and Inniss were joined by Sonny Styles and Caleb Downs, both of whom are beginning their NFL careers.

This is just the seventh time in program history that at least seven players were named captains and the third time under Day, with the most recent team being the 2020 squad that had seven.

Siereveld returns on the offensive line for his second season as a starter. After contributing to the 2024 College Football Playoff run to the national championship, Siereveld emerged as the Buckeyes' starting left tackle for the 2025 season, where he proved to be an important piece for the offense.

Now, he could go into the 2026 season as the left tackle again, or he could move to right guard, depending on which linemen step up and show they are ready to play.


SONNY BROCKWAY

**REWARDED — Not only was receiver Brandon Inniss named a captain for the second straight season on Aug. 22, but he was also awarded the prestigious Block "O" jersey and will wear the No. 0 during his senior year. It honors Bill Willis (1942-44), an All-American and national champion lineman who later was considered the first Black starter in the NFL for the Cleveland Browns.**

Sayin is also in his second year as a starter, finishing his first as the most accurate quarterback in the country with a 77.0 completion percentage. He also had 3,610 yards and 32 touchdowns to just eight interceptions.

Sayin's teammates have talked this preseason about how the junior has stepped up as a leader in the locker room and has been much more vocal than his first year in his starting role. They backed that up by voting him to be a captain.

Smith is entering the 2026 season, his third as a starter, chasing Ohio State and Big Ten records. He comes into the year with 163 catches for 2,558 yards and 27 touchdowns, each of which has him on pace to break Buckeye records.


Payton Pierce

Smith's teammates have always considered him to be a leader by example with how hard he works at his craft, but they have also spoken about how he has also become more vocal as a leader over the offseason.

Pierce said this fall camp that one of his goals as a freshman at Ohio State was to one day be a captain for the Buckeyes, and he gets to check that box off now that his teammates have recognized him.

This will be Pierce's first year as a starter after he rotated in as the third linebacker behind Styles and Arvell Reese during the 2025 season. He finished the year with 43 tackles, playing in all 14 games.

McClain is one of just three returning starters on the defensive side of the ball. He emerged in fall camp last year as the likely safety to start alongside Downs, and he lived up to expectations with 53 tackles and three passes broken up.

He came to Ohio State as the No. 36 safety prospect in the country in the 2024 class, but he quickly made a name for himself and has proved to be one of the top safeties in the country over the last year.

Jackson enters his fifth season with the Buckeyes and joins McClain as one of the three returning starters on the defensive side of the ball (cornerback Jermaine Mathews Jr. is the third). Jackson was thought of as a possible Block "O" recipient but will still be a captain for OSU this season.

Jackson had the option to enter the NFL draft after a solid 2025 season, but he opted to return to try to improve himself further and raise his stock for the 2027 NFL draft. Last season, Jackson finished with 28 total tackles, 11 of which were for a loss, 6½ sacks and two passes broken up.

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# The Numbers Game

## Final 2025 Football Statistics

**2025 Game-By-Game**

| Date | Opponent | Result/Time | Crowd |
|---|---|---|---|
| Aug. 30 | (3) TEXAS (1) | W, 14-7 | 107,524 |
| Sept. 6 | (1) GRAMBLING STATE | W, 70-0 | 100,624 |
| Sept. 13 | (1) OHIO | W, 37-9 | 105,765 |
| Sept. 27 | (1) at Washington | W, 24-6 | 72,458 |
| Oct. 4 | (1) MINNESOTA | W, 42-3 | 105,114 |
| Oct. 11 | (1) at Illinois (17) | W, 34-16 | 60,670 |
| Oct. 18 | (1) at Wisconsin | W, 37-0 | 72,795 |
| Nov. 1 | (1) PENN STATE | W, 38-14 | 105,517 |
| Nov. 8 | (1) at Purdue | W, 34-10 | 57,701 |
| Nov. 15 | (1) UCLA | W, 48-10 | 104,168 |
| Nov. 22 | (1) RUTGERS | W, 42-9 | 100,023 |
| Nov. 29 | (1) at Michigan (15) | W, 27-9 | 111,373 |
| Dec. 6 | (1) Indiana (2) | L, 13-10 | 68,214 |
| Dec. 31 | (2) Miami (Fla.) (10) | L, 24-14 | 71,323 |

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

**Team Statistics**

| | OSU | Opp |
|---|---|---|
| **First Downs** | **317** | **184** |
| **Rushing** | **121** | **76** |
| **Passing** | **180** | **88** |
| **Penalty** | **16** | **20** |
| **Average Per Game/Rush** | **154.4** | **89.4** |
| **Average Per Game/Pass** | **268.2** | **129.7** |
| **Total Offense** | **5916** | **3067** |
| **Total Plays** | **883** | **767** |
| **Average Per Game** | **422.6** | **219.1** |
| **Average Per Play** | **6.7** | **4.0** |
| **Penalties-Yards** | **58-544** | **50-395** |
| **Fumbles-Lost** | **7-3** | **11-7** |
| **Third Down Efficiency** | **81-152** | **54-176** |
| **Percentage** | **53%** | **31%** |
| **Fourth Down Efficiency** | **12-17** | **11-28** |
| **Percentage** | **71%** | **39%** |
| **Sacks-Yards** | **35-229** | **16-110** |
| **Time Of Possession Avg.** | **33:07** | **26:51** |

| Score By Quarters | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | OT | Tot. | Avg. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Ohio State** | **92** | **137** | **118** | **121** | **0** | **468** | **33.4** |
| **Opponents** | **15** | **46** | **33** | **36** | **0** | **130** | **9.3** |

**Individual Statistics**

| Rushing | Att. | Net | Avg. | TD | Long |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Bo Jackson | 179 | 1090 | 6.1 | 6 | 64 |
| CJ Donaldson Jr. | 96 | 361 | 3.8 | 10 | 27 |
| James Peoples | 61 | 344 | 5.6 | 3 | 49 |
| Isaiah West | 59 | 310 | 5.3 | 2 | 38 |
| Lincoln Kienholz | 11 | 66 | 6.0 | 2 | 22 |
| Jeremiah Smith | 3 | 21 | 7.0 | 1 | 17 |
| Brandon Inniss | 3 | 16 | 5.3 | 0 | 8 |
| Carnell Tate | 2 | 16 | 8.0 | 0 | 8 |
| Sam Dixon | 3 | 9 | 3.0 | 1 | 6 |
| Nate Roberts | 2 | 1 | 0.5 | 0 | 1 |
| Julian Sayin | 42 | -44 | -1.0 | 0 | 12 |
| Team | 14 | -29 | -2.1 | 0 | 0 |
| **OSU Totals** | **475** | **2161** | **4.5** | **25** | **64** |
| **OPP Totals** | **425** | **1251** | **2.9** | **5** | **37** |

| Passing | Comp. | Att. | Pct. | Yds. | TD-INT | Effic. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Julian Sayin | 301 | 391 | 77.0 | 3610 | 32-8 | 177.5 |
| L. Kienholz | 11 | 14 | 78.6 | 139 | 1-0 | 185.5 |
| Tavien St. Clair | 0 | 2 | 0.0 | 0 | 0-0 | 0.0 |
| Brandon Inniss | 1 | 1 | 100.0 | 6 | 0-0 | 150.4 |
| **OSU Totals** | **313** | **408** | **76.7** | **3755** | **33-8** | **176.8** |
| **OPP Totals** | **208** | **342** | **60.8** | **1816** | **7-8** | **107.5** |

| Receiving | Rec. | Net | Avg. | TD | Long |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Jeremiah Smith | 87 | 1243 | 14.3 | 12 | 87 |
| Carnell Tate | 51 | 875 | 17.2 | 9 | 57 |
| Max Klare | 43 | 448 | 10.4 | 2 | 39 |
| Brandon Inniss | 36 | 271 | 7.5 | 3 | 29 |
| Bo Jackson | 19 | 200 | 10.5 | 1 | 23 |
| Will Kacmarek | 15 | 168 | 11.2 | 2 | 47 |
| CJ Donaldson Jr. | 15 | 96 | 6.4 | 1 | 14 |
| James Peoples | 10 | 50 | 5.0 | 0 | 12 |
| Jelani Thurman | 7 | 84 | 12.0 | 1 | 26 |
| Bryson Rodgers | 6 | 79 | 13.2 | 1 | 21 |
| Mylan Graham | 6 | 93 | 15.5 | 0 | 23 |
| Bennett Christian | 5 | 16 | 3.2 | 1 | 6 |
| Quincy Porter | 4 | 59 | 14.8 | 0 | 22 |
| Nate Roberts | 4 | 30 | 7.5 | 0 | 15 |
| David Adolph | 3 | 31 | 10.3 | 0 | 14 |
| Isaiah West | 2 | 12 | 6.0 | 0 | 12 |
| **OSU Totals** | **313** | **3755** | **12.0** | **33** | **87** |
| **OPP Totals** | **208** | **1816** | **8.7** | **7** | **67** |

| Scoring | TD | EPK | EPR | EPRC | FG | PTS |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Jayden Fielding | – | 56-56 | – | – | 16-20 | 104 |
| Jeremiah Smith | 13 | – | – | – | – | 78 |
| CJ Donaldson Jr. | 11 | – | – | – | – | 66 |
| Carnell Tate | 9 | – | – | – | – | 54 |
| Bo Jackson | 7 | – | – | – | – | 42 |
| James Peoples | 3 | – | – | – | – | 18 |
| Brandon Inniss | 3 | – | – | – | – | 18 |
| Will Kacmarek | 2 | – | – | – | – | 12 |
| Lincoln Kienholz | 2 | – | – | – | – | 12 |
| Max Klare | 2 | – | – | – | – | 12 |
| Isaiah West | 2 | – | – | – | – | 12 |
| Lorenzo Styles Jr. | 1 | – | – | – | – | 6 |
| Bennett Christian | 1 | – | – | – | – | 6 |
| Jelani Thurman | 1 | – | – | – | – | 6 |
| Bryson Rodgers | 1 | – | – | – | – | 6 |
| Sam Dixon | 1 | – | – | – | – | 6 |
| Riley Pettijohn | 1 | – | – | – | – | 6 |
| Jackson Courville | – | 4-4 | – | – | – | 4 |
| **OSU Totals** | **60** | **60-60** | **–** | **–** | **16-20** | **468** |
| **OPP Totals** | **13** | **10-11** | **–** | **–** | **14-17** | **130** |

| FG Distance | 0-29 | 30-39 | 40-49 | 50+ | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Jayden Fielding | 6-7 | 7-8 | 3-4 | 0-1 | 16-20 |
| **OSU Totals** | **6-7** | **7-8** | **3-4** | **0-1** | **16-20** |
| **OPP Totals** | **6-6** | **2-4** | **6-7** | **0-0** | **14-17** |

| Punting | No. | Yds. | Avg. | Bk | Long |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Joe McGuire | 29 | 1229 | 42.4 | 0 | 55 |
| Nick McLarty | 1 | 45 | 45.0 | 0 | 45 |
| **OSU Totals** | **30** | **1274** | **42.5** | **0** | **55** |
| **OPP Totals** | **70** | **3134** | **44.8** | **1** | **65** |

| Interceptions | No. | Yds. | Avg. | TD | Long |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| J. Mathews Jr. | 2 | 28 | 14.0 | 0 | 23 |
| Davison Igbinosun | 2 | 2 | 1.0 | 0 | 2 |
| Caleb Downs | 2 | 0 | 0.0 | 0 | 0 |
| Payton Pierce | 1 | 15 | 15.0 | 0 | 15 |
| Sonny Styles | 1 | 5 | 5.0 | 0 | 5 |
| **OSU Totals** | **8** | **50** | **6.3** | **0** | **23** |
| **OPP Totals** | **8** | **91** | **11.4** | **1** | **72** |

| Punt Returns | No. | Yds. | Avg. | TD | Long |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Brandon Inniss | 17 | 181 | 10.6 | 0 | 32 |
| Lorenzo Styles Jr. | 1 | 36 | 36.0 | 0 | 36 |
| Caden Curry | 1 | 0 | 0.0 | 0 | 0 |
| Jeremiah Smith | 1 | -6 | -6.0 | 0 | 0 |
| **OSU Totals** | **20** | **211** | **10.6** | **0** | **36** |
| **OPP Totals** | **3** | **9** | **3.0** | **0** | **4** |

| Kickoff Returns | No. | Yds. | Avg. | TD | Long |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Brandon Inniss | 5 | 66 | 13.2 | 0 | 37 |
| Lorenzo Styles Jr. | 2 | 116 | 58.0 | 1 | 100 |
| James Peoples | 1 | 20 | 20.0 | 0 | 20 |
| **OSU Totals** | **8** | **202** | **25.3** | **1** | **100** |
| **OPP Totals** | **16** | **266** | **16.6** | **0** | **41** |

| Def. Leaders | Solo | Ast. | Tot. | TFL-Yds. | Sacks |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Sonny Styles | 46 | 36 | 82 | 6.5-17 | 1.0-4 |
| Arvell Reese | 34 | 35 | 69 | 10.0-45 | 6.5-41 |
| Caleb Downs | 45 | 23 | 68 | 5.0-13 | 1.0-8 |
| Caden Curry | 40 | 26 | 66 | 16.5-79 | 11.0-72 |
| Kayden McDonald | 31 | 34 | 65 | 9.0-29 | 3.0-20 |
| Jaylen McClain | 42 | 11 | 53 | 0-0 | 0-0 |
| Davison Igbinosun | 29 | 24 | 53 | 0.5-0 | 0-0 |
| Payton Pierce | 23 | 20 | 43 | 1.5-2 | 0-0 |
| Lorenzo Styles Jr. | 18 | 12 | 30 | 1.5-1 | 0-0 |
| K. Jackson Jr. | 16 | 12 | 28 | 11.0-57 | 6.5-45 |
| J. Mathews Jr. | 20 | 6 | 26 | 1.5-7 | 1.0-6 |
| Tywone Malone | 12 | 14 | 26 | 0-0 | 0-0 |
| Eddrick Houston | 6 | 15 | 21 | 4.0-16 | 3.0-14 |
| Will Smith Jr. | 9 | 11 | 20 | 0-0 | 0-0 |
| Devin Sanchez | 12 | 3 | 15 | 0-0 | 0-0 |
| Zion Grady | 7 | 6 | 13 | 2.0-12 | 1.0-10 |
| Faheem Delane | 6 | 6 | 12 | 1.0-1 | 0-0 |
| Beau Atkinson | 3 | 8 | 11 | 2.5-12 | 1.0-9 |
| Bryce West | 7 | 3 | 10 | 0-0 | 0-0 |
| Aaron Scott Jr. | 7 | 2 | 9 | 1.0-5 | 0-0 |
| Leroy Roker | 5 | 4 | 9 | 0-0 | 0-0 |
| Riley Pettijohn | 3 | 6 | 9 | 1.0-1 | 0-0 |
| C.J. Hicks | 2 | 4 | 6 | 1.0-1 | 0-0 |
| Jason Moore | 1 | 5 | 6 | 1.0-1 | 0-0 |
| TJ Alford | 3 | 3 | 6 | 1.0-2 | 0-0 |
| Garrett Stover | 4 | 1 | 5 | 0-0 | 0-0 |
| Joshua Mickens | 1 | 2 | 3 | 0-0 | 0-0 |
| Carnell Tate | 3 | - | 3 | 0-0 | 0-0 |
| Logan George | 2 | - | 2 | 0-0 | 0-0 |
| Eli Lee | - | 2 | 2 | 0-0 | 0-0 |
| Eric Mensah | - | 2 | 2 | 0-0 | 0-0 |
| Malik Hartford | 1 | 1 | 2 | 0-0 | 0-0 |
| Epi Sitanilei | - | 1 | 1 | 0.5-0 | 0-0 |
| Jarquez Carter | 1 | - | 1 | 0-0 | 0-0 |
| Nate Roberts | 1 | - | 1 | 0-0 | 0-0 |
| Dominic Kirks | - | 1 | 1 | 0-0 | 0-0 |
| Joey Velazquez | - | 1 | 1 | 0-0 | 0-0 |
| James Peoples | 1 | - | 1 | 0-0 | 0-0 |
| Jeremiah Smith | 1 | - | 1 | 0-0 | 0-0 |
| Jayden Fielding | 1 | - | 1 | 0-0 | 0-0 |
| Ryan Rudzinski | 1 | - | 1 | 0-0 | 0-0 |
| **OSU Totals** | **444** | **340** | **784** | **78-301** | **35-229** |
| **OPP Totals** | **513** | **382** | **895** | **56-176** | **16-110** |

**Fumbles Forced:** McDonald (2), Curry, Downs (2), Houston, Mathews Jr., Pettijohn, Pierce, Styles, West.
**Fumbles Recovered:** Curry (2), McDonald, Pettijohn, Pierce, Sanchez, Sitanilei.

## 2025 Big Ten Year In Review

### Final Standings

| | All W | All L | All Pct. | Conf. W | Conf. L | Conf. Pct. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Indiana | 9 | 0 | 1.000 | 13 | 0 | 1.000 |
| **Ohio State** | **9** | **0** | **1.000** | **12** | **1** | **0.923** |
| Oregon | 8 | 1 | 0.889 | 11 | 1 | 0.917 |
| Michigan | 7 | 2 | 0.778 | 9 | 3 | 0.750 |
| USC | 7 | 2 | 0.778 | 9 | 3 | 0.750 |
| Iowa | 6 | 3 | 0.667 | 8 | 4 | 0.667 |
| Washington | 5 | 4 | 0.556 | 8 | 4 | 0.667 |
| Illinois | 5 | 4 | 0.556 | 8 | 4 | 0.667 |
| Minnesota | 5 | 4 | 0.556 | 7 | 5 | 0.583 |
| Nebraska | 4 | 5 | 0.444 | 7 | 5 | 0.583 |
| Northwestern | 4 | 5 | 0.444 | 6 | 6 | 0.500 |
| UCLA | 3 | 6 | 0.333 | 3 | 9 | 0.250 |
| Penn State | 3 | 6 | 0.333 | 6 | 6 | 0.500 |
| Rutgers | 2 | 7 | 0.222 | 5 | 7 | 0.417 |
| Wisconsin | 2 | 7 | 0.222 | 4 | 8 | 0.333 |
| Maryland | 1 | 8 | 0.111 | 4 | 8 | 0.333 |
| Michigan State | 1 | 8 | 0.111 | 4 | 8 | 0.333 |
| Purdue | 0 | 9 | 0.000 | 2 | 10 | 0.167 |

### 2025 Coaches All-Big Ten Teams

Here is a look at the All-Big Ten football teams as selected by the coaches.

**FIRST-TEAM OFFENSE:** Quarterback – Fernando Mendoza, Indiana; Running Back – Emmett Johnson, Nebraska; Running Back – Kaytron Allen, Penn State; Receiver – **Jeremiah Smith, Ohio State**; Receiver – **Carnell Tate, Ohio State**; Receiver – Makai Lemon, USC; Center – Logan Jones, Iowa; Guard – Beau Stephens, Iowa; Guard – Emmanuel Pregnon, Oregon; Tackle – J.C. Davis, Illinois; Tackle – Carter Smith, Indiana; Tight End – Kenyon Sadiq, Oregon; Tight End – **Max Klare, Ohio State.**

**FIRST-TEAM SPECIAL TEAMS:** Kicker – Sean O'Haire, Maryland; Punter – Ryan Eckley, Michigan State; Return Specialist – Kaden Wetjen, Iowa; Long Snapper – Mark Langston, Indiana.

**FIRST-TEAM DEFENSE:** Edge – Derrick Moore, Michigan; Edge – Anthony Smith, Minnesota; Interior – Tyrique Tucker, Indiana; Interior – **Kayden McDonald, Ohio State**; Linebacker – Aiden Fisher, Indiana; Linebacker – **Arvell Reese, Ohio State**; Linebacker – **Sonny Styles, Ohio State**; Defensive Back – Louis Moore, Indiana; Defensive Back – D'Angelo Ponds, Indiana; Defensive Back – **Caleb Downs, Ohio State**; Defensive Back – Dillon Thieneman, Oregon; Defensive Back – Bishop Fitzgerald, USC.

**SECOND-TEAM OFFENSE:** Quarterback – **Julian Sayin, Ohio State**; Running Back – **Bo Jackson, Ohio State**; Running Back – Antwan Raymond, Rutgers; Receiver – Omar Cooper Jr., Indiana; Receiver – Elijah Sarratt, Indiana; Receiver – KJ Duff, Rutgers; Center – Iapani Laloulu, Oregon; Guard – **Luke Montgomery, Ohio State**; Guard – Olaivavega Ioane, Penn State; Tackle – Caleb Tiernan, Northwestern; Tackle – **Austin Siereveld, Ohio State;** Tight End – Lake McRee, USC; Tight End – Lance Mason, Wisconsin.

**SECOND-TEAM SPECIAL TEAMS:** Kicker – Nico Radicic, Indiana; Punter* – Bryce McFerson, Maryland; Jack McCallister, Purdue; Return Specialist – Jonathan Brady, Indiana; Long Snapper – Luke Basso, Oregon.

**SECOND-TEAM DEFENSE:** Edge – Gabe Jacas, Illinois; Edge – **Caden Curry, Ohio State**; Interior – Aaron Graves, Iowa; Interior – Bear Alexander, Oregon; Linebacker – Rolijah Hardy, Indiana; Linebacker – Jimmy Rolder, Michigan; Linebacker – Bryce Boettcher, Oregon; Defensive Back – Zach Lutmer, Iowa; Defensive Back – Jalen Huskey, Maryland; Defensive Back – Robert Fitzgerald, Northwestern; Defensive Back – **Davison Igbinosun, Ohio State**; Defensive Back – Brandon Finney Jr., Oregon.

**THIRD-TEAM OFFENSE:** Quarterback – Jayden Maiava, USC; Running Back – Justice Haynes, Michigan; Running Back – Jordan Marshall, Michigan; Receiver – Hank Beatty, Illinois; Receiver – Griffin Wilde, Northwestern; Receiver – Denzel Boston, Washington; Center – Pat Coogan, Indiana; Guard – Gio El-Hadi, Michigan; Guard – Dave Iuli, Oregon; Tackle – Gennings Dunker, Iowa; Tackle – Trevor Lauck, Iowa; Tight End – Riley Nowakoswki, Indiana; Tight End – Max Bredeson, Michigan.

**THIRD-TEAM SPECIAL TEAMS:** Kicker – Ryon Sayeri, USC; Punter – Gabriel Nwosu, Penn State; Return Specialist – Kenneth Williams, Nebraska; Long Snapper – **John Ferlmann, Ohio State**.

**THIRD -TEAM DEFENSE:** Edge – Teitum Tuioti, Oregon; Edge – Dani Dennis-Sutton, Penn State; Interior – Rayshaun Benny, Michigan; Interior – A'Mauri Washington, Oregon; Linebacker – Mac Uihlein, Northwestern; Linebacker – Mani Powell, Purdue; Linebacker – Mason Posa, Wisconsin; Defensive Back – TJ Hall, Iowa; Defensive Back – Zeke Berry, Michigan; Defensive Back – Koi Perich, Minnesota; Defensive Back – **Jermaine Mathews, Ohio State**.

### 2025 Media All-Big Ten Teams

Here is a look at the All-Big Ten football teams as selected by the Media.

**FIRST-TEAM OFFENSE:** Quarterback – Fernando Mendoza, Indiana; Running Back – Emmett Johnson, Nebraska; Running Back – Kaytron Allen, Penn State; Receiver – **Jeremiah Smith, Ohio State**; Receiver – **Carnell Tate, Ohio State**; Receiver – Makai Lemon, USC; Center – Logan Jones, Iowa; Guard – Emmanuel Pregnon, Oregon; Guard – Olaivavega Ioane, Penn State; Tackle – Carter Smith, Indiana; Tackle – Gennings Dunker, Iowa; Tight End – **Max Klare, Ohio State**; Tight End – Kenyon Sadiq, Oregon.

**FIRST-TEAM SPECIAL TEAMS:** Kicker – Nico Radicic, Indiana; Punter – Ryan Eckley, Michigan State; Return Specialist – Kaden Wetjen, Iowa; Long Snapper – Mark Langston, Indiana.

**FIRST-TEAM DEFENSE:** Edge – Gabe Jacas, Illinois; Edge – **Caden Curry, Ohio State**; Interior – Tyrique Tucker, Indiana; Interior – **Kayden McDonald, Ohio State**; Linebacker – Aiden Fisher, Indiana; Linebacker – **Arvell Reese, Ohio State**; Linebacker – **Sonny Styles, Ohio State**; Defensive Back – D'Angelo Ponds, Indiana; Defensive Back – **Caleb Downs, Ohio State**; Defensive Back – **Davison Igbinosun, Ohio State**; Defensive Back – Dillon Thieneman, Oregon; Defensive Back – Bishop Fitzgerald, USC.

**SECOND-TEAM OFFENSE:** Quarterback – **Julian Sayin, Ohio State**; Running Back – Jordan Marshall, Michigan; Running Back – Antwan Raymond, Rutgers; Receiver – Omar Cooper Jr., Indiana; Receiver – Elijah Sarratt, Indiana; Receiver – KJ Duff, Rutgers; Center – Pat Coogan, Indiana; Guard – Beau Stephens, Iowa; Guard – **Luke Montgomery, Ohio State**; Tackle – J.C. Davis, Illinois; Tackle – Isaiah World, Oregon; Tight End – Riley Nowakoswki, Indiana; Tight End – Lake McRee, USC.

**SECOND-TEAM SPECIAL TEAMS:** Kicker – Sean O'Haire, Maryland; Punter – Bryce McFerson, Maryland; Return Specialist – Kenneth Williams, Nebraska; Long Snapper – **John Ferlmann, Ohio State.**

**SECOND-TEAM DEFENSE:** Edge – Derrick Moore, Michigan; Edge – Anthony Smith, Minnesota; Interior – Aaron Graves, Iowa; Interior – Bear Alexander, Oregon; Linebacker – Rolijah Hardy, Indiana; Linebacker – Jimmy Rolder, Michigan; Linebacker – Bryce Boettcher, Oregon; Defensive Back – Amare Ferrell, Indiana; Defensive Back – Louis Moore, Indiana; Defensive Back – Jalen Huskey, Maryland; Defensive Back – Zeke Berry, Michigan; Defensive Back – Koi Perich, Minnesota.

**THIRD-TEAM OFFENSE:** Quarterback – Dante Moore, Oregon; Running Back – Roman Hemby, Indiana; Running Back – **Bo Jackson, Ohio State**; Receiver – Hank Beatty, Illinois; Receiver – Ja'Kobi Lane, USC; Receiver – Denzel Boston, Washington; Center – **Carson Hinzman, Ohio State**; Guard – Kade Pieper, Iowa; Guard – **Tegra Tshabola, Ohio State**; Tackle – **Phillip Daniels, Ohio State**; Tackle – **Austin Siereveld, Ohio State**; Tight End – Jack Velling, Michigan State; Tight End – Lance Mason, Wisconsin.

**THIRD-TEAM SPECIAL TEAMS:** Kicker – Drew Stevens, Iowa; Punter* – Tom Weston, Minnesota; Jack McCallister, Purdue; Return Specialist* – Jacory Barney Jr., Nebraska; Jonathan Brady, Indiana; Long Snapper – Greg Tarr, Michigan.

**THIRD -TEAM DEFENSE:** Edge – Teitum Tuioti, Oregon; Edge – Dani Dennis-Sutton, Penn State; Interior – Rayshaun Benny, Michigan; Interior – A'Mauri Washington, Oregon; Linebacker – Isaiah Jones, Indiana; Linebacker – Ernest Hausmann, Michigan; Linebacker* – Mac Uihlein, Northwestern; Amare Campbell, Penn State; Defensive Back – TJ Hall, Iowa; Defensive Back – Zach Lutmer, Iowa; Defensive Back – Robert Fitzgerald, Northwestern; Defensive Back – **Jaylen McClain, Ohio State**; Defensive Back – Brandon Finney Jr., Oregon.

***Additional honorees due to ties**

### Returning Big Ten Individual Player Award Winners

**Thompson-Randle El Freshman of the Year: Julian Sayin, Ohio State**
**Hayes-Schembechler Coach of the Year (coaches vote):** Curt Cignetti, Indiana
**Dave McClain Coach of the Year (media vote):** Curt Cignetti, Indiana
**Richter-Howard Receiver of the Year: Jeremiah Smith, Ohio State**
**Rimington-Pace Offensive Lineman of the Year:** Carter Smith, Indiana
**Bakken-Andersen Kicker of the Year:** Nico Radicic, Indiana

# Ball State A Tune-Up Game For Ohio State

**By SAM CIPRIANI**
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

Nearly eight months after a disappointing finish to the 2025 season, Ohio State returns to the field looking to put last season's missteps behind it and turn offseason expectations into answers.

Ohio State will open its 2026 campaign at 12:30 p.m. on Sept. 5 at Ohio Stadium against Ball State. The Cardinals have an opportunity to make an early statement against one of the nation's top programs.

For Ball State, the matchup comes at the beginning of a season in which the Cardinals will look to take a step forward after a difficult 2025 campaign. The Cardinals are coming off a 4-8 record last season under first-year head coach Mike Uremovich, who previously coached Butler from 2022-24.

While the Cardinals split with their common opponents with Ohio State – beating Ohio, 20-14, and losing to Purdue, 31-0 – performance issues on offense and defense limited Ball State to just a 3-5 record in Mid-American Conference play.

Offensively, the Cardinals were one of the worst in the country last season, ranking 132nd in the FBS with just 271.7 yards of total offense per game. The offense scored fewer than 10 points in six games, with Ball State losing each of those contests.

To make matters worse – or perhaps better given the 2025 performance of the offense – Uremovich will have to replace his 2025 starting quarterback, Kiael Kelly, who had a relatively pedestrian season. He threw for 1,583 yards and 11 touchdowns while completing 56.4 percent of his passes and throwing eight interceptions.

Ball State's passing offense was already near the worst in the country, finishing 128th nationally with just 139.9 passing yards per game.

However, Uremovich and the Cardinals delved into the transfer portal to add two new quarterbacks, Tyler Mizzell out of Division II Concord and former Texas State quarterback Keldric Luster.

Mizzell earned All-Mountain East Conference second-team honors after throwing for 2,889 yards and 26 touchdowns while adding 377 rushing yards and four touchdowns on the ground. Luster saw action in just two games for the Bobcats in 2025, completing 1 of 3 passes for 14 yards and adding three carries for 14 yards. Also in the mix for the starting quarterback job is freshman Mason Atkins, a three-star prospect in the class of 2026.

Ball State quarterbacks coach Craig Harmon described both Mizzell and Luster as dual-threat quarterbacks, while Uremovich expressed confidence in all three signal-callers in competition, noting that the quarterback battle was expected to continue deep into fall camp.

"Those three have been great," Uremovich said during a June interview with Ball State All-Access. "I have confidence in all three of those guys to go play in a game right now. From a knowledge standpoint, Luster and Mizzell are older. So they have a little bit more experience, but all three of those guys can play, and the other guys in the room have gotten better, too.

"I thought that was where we made a lot of improvement this spring – it was just the quarterback play, and obviously you've got two guys that have played ball. One of them (Luster) played at SMU and one of them (Mizzell), started off at Wake Forest, so they've been around big-time football before. That will be a great battle to watch all summer and into the fall."

Luster was named the starter for the Cardinals on Aug. 23.

Behind the signal-callers, the rest of Ball State's offensive corps features a mixture of returning depth and portal additions aimed at sparking an offense that managed just 15.8 points per game in 2025.

The Cardinals' pass attack was among the worst in the FBS last season, and their run game wasn't much better. Ball State finished No. 98 nationally, averaging 131.8 yards per game on the ground behind Kelly's 600 rushing yards and five touchdowns, as well as 2025 starting running back Qua Ashley's 547 yards and four scores.

In 2026, Ball State is set to rely on a committee approach in its running back room, led by junior TJ Horton, who recorded 60 carries for 180 yards last season as Ashley's backup. Freshman Jalen Bonds will also factor into the rotation after seeing limited time as a freshman, rushing 27 times for 77 yards and a touchdown. Kansas transfer Johnny Thompson Jr., who took 19 totes for 75 yards with the Jayhawks last season, may also play a role.

The Ball State wide receivers room also underwent a major overhaul following a season in which no Cardinals wideout recorded more than 29 receptions or 320 receiving yards.

Sophomore Donovan Hamilton returns after a 20-catch campaign in 2025 and is joined by sophomore Elisha Durham (four catches, 34 yards) and junior Isaiah Thacker (three catches for 29 yards).

The Cardinals then bolstered the unit by adding Florida Atlantic transfer Jabari Smith Jr., who hauled in 15 catches for 166 yards and three touchdowns last season, to work out of the slot alongside their returning outside receivers. Transfers Corey Thompson Jr. of Utah State and CJ Nelson of Eastern Illinois, as well as freshmen Ace Cooper and Tayshon Bardo, who were two of the Cardinals' top four 2026 recruits, according to the 247Sports composite, are also expected to compete for time.

At tight end, Ball State brought back junior Tate Hoover while adding fifth-year Dartmouth transfer Sean Ward. However, neither brings much experience, as Hoover and Ward each recorded just one catch for 9 yards in 2025.

While the tight ends are rather inexperienced in game action, the Cardinals' offensive line returns three of five starters from last year's group, including sophomore right tackle Tristan Cook, junior right guard Cole Mosier and fifth-year left tackle Chris Hood. However, Ball State's offensive line will look for major improvements in 2026 after allowing 4.08 sacks per game last season, the second-worst average nationally.

Despite the Cardinals' struggles up front offensively last season, Uremovich singled out Hood as a player who has made significant strides in the offseason.

"I can tell you in the last year and a half how much he's improved physically and mentally. Going through the install the sec-

## Get To Know ... Ball State

- **2025 Record:** 4-8, 3-5 MAC.
- **Team Information:** Offensive Formation – Multiple; Defensive Formation – Multiple 4-2-5; Starters Returning – Offense 4, Defense 1, Specialists 1.
- **Head Coach:** Mark Uremovich, 2nd year at Ball State, 4-8.
- **Series History:** 1st meeting.
- **School Facts:** Location – Muncie, Ind.; Enrollment – 21,597; Nickname – Cardinals; Colors – Cardinal, White; Conference – MAC; Stadium – Scheumann Stadium (Surface – FieldTurf; Capacity – 22,500).

### Top Offensive Players (2025 Stats)

| Rushing | Att. | Net | Avg. | TD |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| TJ Horton | 60 | 180 | 3.0 | 0 |
| Jalen Bonds | 27 | 77 | 2.9 | 1 |

| Passing | Comp-Att. | Pct. | Yds. | TD-INT |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Keldric Luster | 1-3 | 33.3 | 14 | 0-0 |

| Receiving | Rec. | Net | Avg. | TD |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| D. Hamilton | 20 | 244 | 12.2 | 0 |
| Jabari Smith Jr. | 15 | 166 | 11.1 | 3 |
| Elisha Durham | 4 | 34 | 8.5 | 0 |
| Tate Hoover | 1 | 9 | 9.0 | 0 |

### Team Offensive Stats (2025)

**Points Per Game —** 15.8
**Rushing Yards Per Game—-** 131.8
**Passing Yards Per Game —** 139.9
**Total Offense Avg. Per Game —** 271.7

### 2026 Schedule

| Date | Opponent | Time/Result (ET) |
|---|---|---|
| **Sept. 5** | **at Ohio State** | **12:30 p.m.** |
| Sept. 12 | STONY BROOK | 2 p.m. |
| Sept. 19 | at Liberty | 4 p.m. |
| Sept. 26 | at Kent State | TBA |
| Oct. 3 | TOLEDO | TBA |
| Oct. 10 | at Northwestern | TBA |
| Oct. 17 | at Bowling Green | TBA |
| Oct. 24 | SACRAMENTO STATE | TBA |
| Nov. 4 | at UMass | TBA |
| Nov. 11 | BUFFALO | TBA |
| Nov. 17 | at Ohio | 7 p.m. |
| Nov. 28 | CENTRAL MICHIGAN | Noon |
| Dec. 5 | MAC Championship | Noon |

### Top Defensive Players (2025 Stats)

| Def. Leaders | Solo | Asst. | Tot. | TFL-Yards | Sacks |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Austin Stief | 15 | 20 | 35 | 8.5-45 | 2.5-14 |
| Derek Fields | 24 | 10 | 34 | 1.0-1 | 0-0 |
| Willizhuan Yates | 26 | 8 | 34 | 0-0 | 0-0 |
| Gavin Forsha | - | - | - | - | - |
| Cincear Lewis | 4 | 6 | 10 | 0-0 | 0-0 |

| Interceptions | No. | Yds | Avg | TD |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Willizhuan Yates | 1 | 18 | 18.0 | 0 |

### Team Defensive Stats (2025)

**Points Per Game Allowed —** 29.8
**Rushing Yards Per Game Allowed —** 178.8
**Passing Yards Per Game Allowed —** 226.8
**Total Offense Avg. Per Game Allowed —** 405.7



ond time is a big deal, but he had a really good spring," Uremovich said. "I'm excited for people to see all the work that he's put in off the field."

The Ball State defense wasn't much better in 2025. The Cardinals ranked No. 102 nationally in both scoring defense and total defense, allowing 29.8 points and 405.7 yards per game.

Defensive coordinator Jeff Knowles, now in his third season with the Cardinals, faces the task of piecing together a defense that underwent a significant overhaul.

Ball State returns just two players who started over half the season: junior cornerback Will Yates (seven starts) and junior safety Derek "DJ" Fields (eight). The Cardinals will also have to replace their top seven tacklers from a year ago, headlined by defensive end Nathan Voorhis, who recorded a team-high 17 tackles for loss and 12 sacks in 2025.

On the defensive line, sophomore defensive tackle Ameir Glenn is back after appearing in all 12 games in 2025. Glenn recorded 13 total tackles, 2½ tackles for loss and a sack, serving as Ball State's No. 3 defensive tackle last season. The Cardinals also return fifth-year Khristian Zachary, who appeared in three games with no recorded stats, and the rest of the group was built out of the transfer portal.

Headlining the edge additions is a trio of transfers: fifth-year Jared Badie (San Diego State), senior Austin Stief (Davenport) and junior Maverick Gracio (Pittsburgh). Badie saw action in 12 games for the Aztecs without a start, recording eight tackles and 1½ TFLs. Stief started 10 games last season and totaled 35 tackles, 8½ TFLs and 2½ sacks en route to first-team All-GLIAC honors, while Gracio recorded four tackles in 2025.

Ball State added junior defensive tackle transfers Kendrick Gilbert from Louisville and Ka'Shawn Thomas from Wake Forest. Neither brings much experience, however. Thomas played just 18 snaps last season, and Gilbert failed to see the field.

The Cardinals' linebacker corps was hit hard by offseason turnover, losing the two leading tacklers at the position in 2025, Alfred Chea and Joey Stemler, but Ball State added Cincinnati's Cincear Lewis, Tennessee State's Gavin Forsha and Coffeyville Community College's Kaleb Stewart out of the transfer portal. Ball State also returns hybrid linebacker/ edge rusher Layton Starks, who racked up 10 tackles last season, and freshman Lucas Szymborski, who didn't appear in a game in 2025.

The secondary stands out as the most experienced level of Ball State's defense, with Yates and Fields set to return to lead a unit that allowed 226.8 passing yards per game last season (83rd nationally).

At safety, the Cardinals added Purdue's Sterling "Stu" Smith in the transfer portal, who is expected to start opposite Fields at free safety. Smith recorded three tackles in 12 games for the Boilermakers. Returning sophomore safeties Tobi Adewoyin and Deondre Shepherd will provide depth in auxiliary roles.

Alongside Yates at cornerback is former Ohio State walk-on defensive back Dianté Griffin, the grandson of two-time Heisman Trophy winner Archie Griffin.

Fifth-year transfer Chris Jackson joins the program after appearing in all 12 games for Colorado State in 2025, recording seven tackles. The team also brought in sophomore transfer Cedric Franklin II, who played in three games for Arkansas State last season. They join a returning group that includes sophomore Jordan Suggs and junior Avery Stuart, both of whom made just one appearance for the Cardinals last year.

Monmouth transfer Hudson Fiene is expected to compete with kicker/ punter Brody Boehm for the Cardinals' kicking duties. Fiene finished 60 of 62 on extra point attempts and made both of his field goal tries for the Hawks in 2025, while Boehm did not see time with Ball State last year due to injury. Meanwhile, sophomore Cole Stumbaugh is expected to step in as the Cardinals' primary punter.

With so much turnover across the roster, Uremovich emphasized the importance of eliminating the mistakes within Ball State's control, an area the Cardinals struggled with last season.

"I just want to see us continue to develop, do some of the things and take some of the things off the film that we put on film last year: some of the penalties, some of the mental errors that we can control," Uremovich told Ball State All-Access. "Football is challenging, and once the ball snaps, you don't know what's going to happen. But we have to limit the mistakes that we can control. We did a really good job of that in the spring. We need to continue to get better at it."

Opening against Ohio State in the 'Shoe is a steep task for Ball State, which is retooling at nearly every position group. However, for Uremovich and the Cardinals, the game serves as an early gauge of progress, testing their slew of transfer additions and ongoing quarterback competition against elite talent before MAC play arrives.

# BUCKEYE SCOREBOARD

**FOOTBALL**

**Sept. 5** BALL STATE; **12** at Texas; **19** KENT STATE; **26** ILLINOIS.

**Oct. 3** at Iowa; **10** MARYLAND; **17** at Indiana; **31** at USC.

**Nov. 7** OREGON; **14** NORTHWESTERN; **21** at Nebraska; **28** MICHIGAN.

**FIELD HOCKEY**

**Aug. 14** at Ohio (Exh.); **20** at Miami (Ohio) (Exh.); **22** MICHIGAN (Exh.); **28** OLD DOMINION; **30** BELLARMINE.

**Sept. 4** Big Ten/ACC Challenge at Piscataway, N.J., vs. Syracuse; **6** Big Ten/ACC Challenge at Piscataway, N.J., vs. Virginia; **11** DELAWARE; **13** CORNELL; **20** BOSTON COLLEGE; **25** at Iowa; **27** at Iowa.

**Oct. 2** NORTHWESTERN; **4** INDIANA; **9** RUTGERS; **16** at Penn State; **18** at Maryland; **23** MICHIGAN STATE; **25** at Kent State; **30** at Michigan.

**Nov. 5-8** BIG TEN TOURNAMENT; **13-22** NCAA Tournament at TBA.

**MEN'S SOCCER (1-0)**

**Aug. 7** WRIGHT STATE (Exh.); **11** IU INDY (Exh.); **15** INDIANAPOLIS (Exh.); **20** VIRGINIA TECH, W 1-0; **24** DEPAUL; **28** MEMPHIS.

**Sept. 3** NORTHERN KENTUCKY; **8** at Kentucky; **11** at Wisconsin; **18** RUTGERS; **21** WASHINGTON; **25** at George Mason.

**Oct. 2** at Penn State; **10** at UCLA; **16** MICHIGAN STATE; **20** INDIANA; **24** at Maryland; **30** NORTHWESTERN.

**Nov. 4** at Michigan.

**WOMEN'S SOCCER (1-0-1)**

**Aug. 5** WEST VIRGINIA (Exh.); **8** at Louisville (Exh.); **16** at Clemson, T 0-0; **20** KANSAS, W 1-0; **27** KENTUCKY.

**Sept. 3** PRINCETON; **6** MEMPHIS; **10** PENN STATE; **13** at Indiana; **17** at UCLA; **24** USC; **27** IOWA.

**Oct. 3** NORTHWESTERN; **8** at Wisconsin; **11** at Minnesota; **18** at Purdue; **22** RUTGERS; **25** ILLINOIS; **30** at Michigan.

**WOMEN'S VOLLEYBALL**

**Aug. 28** JIM STONE CHALLENGE vs. BOWLING GREEN; **29** JIM STONE CHALLENGE vs. FRESNO STATE; **30** JIM STONE CHALLENGE vs. NORTHERN KENTUCKY.

**Sept. 2** Big Ten/SEC Challenge at Norman, Okla., vs. Ole Miss; **3** Big Ten/SEC Challenge at Norman, Okla., vs. Oklahoma; **11** SPORTS IMPORTS CLASSIC vs. WINTHROP; **12** SPORTS IMPORTS CLASSIC vs. SOUTHERN INDIANA; **13** SPORTS IMPORTS CLASSIC vs. YOUNGSTOWN STATE; **18-19** at Virginia; **25** at Iowa; **26** at Nebraska.

**Oct. 1** RUTGERS; **3** at Northwestern; **9** WASHINGTON; **11** MINNESOTA; **16** at USC; **18** at UCLA; **23** INDIANA; **24** OREGON; **29** at Penn State.

**Nov. 1** at Illinois; **4** PURDUE; **7** at Michigan State; **11** at Michigan; **13** WISCONSIN; **17** MARYLAND.

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# Ohio State vs. Ball State

**Saturday, Sept. 5 ▪ 12:30 p.m. ▪ BTN**
**Ohio Stadium; Columbus**

## Projected Depth Charts

### WHEN OHIO STATE HAS THE BALL...

**0 Derek "DJ" Fields, 6-1, 195, Jr.**
12 Deondre Shepherd, 5-11, 192, So.
SS

**5 Chris Jackson, 5-11, 164, 5th**
8 Avery Stuart, 6-1, 204, Jr.
NICKEL

**1 Sterling Smith, 6-0, 201, Jr.**
2 Tobi Adewoyin, 5-11, 189, So.
FS

**27 Gavin Forsha, 6-2, 224, 5th**
25 Mikeah Webster, 6-1, 243, Fr.
MIKE

**6 Cincear Lewis, 6-2, 227, 5th**
16 Kaleb Stewart, 6-0, 248, So.
WILL

**21 Dianté Griffin, 5-9, 187, 5th**
18 Cedric Franklin II, 6-0, 193, So.
CB

**4 WILLIZHUAN YATES, 6-0, 175, JR.**
23 Jordan Suggs, 6-0, 169, So.
CB

**99 Kendrick Gilbert, 6-4, 271, Jr.**
74 Khristian Zachary, 6-3, 303, 5th
DT

**31 Jared Badie, 6-3, 237, 5th**
42 Layton Starks, 6-4, 237, So.
DE

**10 Austin Stief, 6-4, 246, Sr.**
39 Maverick Gracio, 6-4, 252, Jr.
DE

**56 Ameir Glenn, 6-1, 303, So.**
94 Ka'Shawn Thomas, 6-1, 292, Jr.
DT

WR: **4 JEREMIAH SMITH, 6-4, 222, JR.**, 15 Chris Henry Jr., 6-5, 211, Fr.

LT: **69 Ian Moore, 6-6, 315, Jr.**, 67 AUSTIN SIEREVELD, 6-5, 327, SR.

LG: **51 LUKE MONTGOMERY, 6-5, 313, SR.**, 76 Jake Cook, 6-4, 310, So.

C: **75 CARSON HINZMAN, 6-5, 301, 5TH**, 62 Joshua Padilla, 6-3, 301, Sr.

RG: **67 AUSTIN SIEREVELD, 6-5, 327, SR.**, 62 Joshua Padilla, 6-3, 301, Sr.

RT: **70 PHILLIP DANIELS, 6-5, 312, SR.**, 74 Carter Lowe, 6-5, 318, So.

WR: **3 Devin McCuin, 6-0, 195, Sr.**, 11 Brock Boyd, 6-1, 196, Fr.

P: **42 JOE MCGUIRE, 6-2, 209, SR.**, 93 Brady Young, 6-3, 220, 5th

K: **96 Connor Hawkins, 6-1, 200, Jr.**, 92 Cooper Peterson, 6-0, 214, Fr.

RB: **25 BO JACKSON, 6-0, 218, SO. OR 32 Isaiah West, 5-10, 222, So.**

QB: **0 JULIAN SAYIN, 6-1, 214, JR.**, 9 Tavien St. Clair, 6-4, 235, So.

SLOT: **1 BRANDON INNISS, 6-0, 197, SR.**, 5 Kyle Parker, 5-10, 198, Sr.

TE: **83 Nate Roberts, 6-5, 240, So.**, 84 Hunter Welcing, 6-3, 248, 5th

**— Starters in bold, returning starters in all caps**

### WHEN BALL STATE HAS THE BALL...

**8 JAYLEN MCCLAIN, 6-0, 203, JR.**
16 Blaine Bradford, 6-1, 212, Fr.
SS

**1 Earl Little Jr., 6-0, 203, 5th**
25 Jay Timmons, 5-11, 191, Fr.
NICKEL

11 Terry Moore, 6-0, 200, 5th
10 Leroy Roker III, 6-0, 202, Jr.
FS

**26 Payton Pierce, 6-1, 232, Jr.**
17 TJ Alford, 6-1, 237, So.
MIKE

14 Christian Alliegro, 6-4, 245, Sr.
5 Riley Pettijohn, 6-2, 235, So.
WILL

**7 JERMAINE MATHEWS JR., 5-11, 195, SR.**
24 Dominick Kelly, 6-2, 193, So.
CB

**96 Eddrick Houston; 6-3, 304, Jr.**
3 James Smith, 6-3, 306, Sr.
DT

**6 Devin Sanchez, 6-2, 199, So.**
18 Cam Calhoun, 6-0, 176, Sr.
CB

**2 KENYATTA JACKSON JR., 6-6, 263, 5TH**
9 Zion Grady, 6-4, 262, So.
DE

**3 James Smith, 6-3, 306, Sr.**
55 John Walker, 6-3, 302, Sr.
NT

**12 Beau Atkinson, 6-6, 260, 5th**
4 Qua Russaw, 6-2, 244, Sr.
DE

WR: **14 Elisha Durham, 6-1, 168, So.**, 3 Corey Thompson Jr., 5-10, 167, Jr.

LT: **66 CHRIS HOOD, 6-10, 327, 5TH**, 71 Brady Barrowman, 6-4, 304, Fr.

LG: **75 Zach Bandy, 6-5, 293, So.**, 68 Grant Haworth, 6-2, 299, So.

C: **63 Maxwell Wentz, 6-4, 295, 5th**, 67 Jackson Ruess, 6-4, 302, Jr.

RG: **73 COLE MOSIER, 6-4, 302, JR.**, 68 Grant Haworth, 6-2, 299, So.

RT: **70 TRISTAN COOK, 6-6, 291, SO.**, 61 Luke Dalton, 6-5, 300, 5th

WR: **1 DONOVAN HAMILTON, 6-4, 217, SO.**, 11 Isaiah Thacker, 5-11, 196, Jr.

P: **32 Cole Stumbaugh, 6-2, 223, R-So.**, 38 Brady Boehm, 6-1, 208, R-So.

K: **38 Brady Boehm, 6-1, 208, So.**, 37 Hudson Fiene, 5-10, 177, Jr.

RB: **4 TJ Horton, 5-10, 201, Jr.**, 2 Jalen Bonds, 6-0, 220, Fr.

QB: **6 Keldric Luster, 5-10, 248, Jr.**, 9 Tyler Mizzell, 6-1, 176, Jr.

SLOT: **5 Jabari Smith Jr., 5-9, 163, Jr.**, 7 CJ Nelson, 5-11, 180, 5th

TE: **84 Tate Hoover, 6-2, 254, Jr.**, 89 Sean Ward, 6-5, 255, 5th

**— Depth charts compiled by Greg Wilson**

## How We See It

### OHIO STATE RUSH OFFENSE vs. BALL STATE RUSH DEFENSE

As is the case for every opener, especially in the age of massive turnover each season, the team statistics from 2025 may or may not mean anything. For instance, Arthur Smith replaced Brian Hartline as Ohio State's offensive coordinator and has a history of emphasizing the running game, so the Buckeyes may have a fresh look on offense. That will suit the running backs, but any team that has Heisman Trophy hopefuls in quarterback Justin Sayin and receiver Jeremiah Smith would be crazy not to utilize them to the maximum in what should be their final seasons.

Still, the Buckeyes present a formidable problem for defenses when they keep it on the ground. Bo Jackson had a solid freshman year last season when he ran for a team-best 1,090 yards in 13 games (83.8 yards per game) with six touchdowns. Isaiah West is coming off his first season, during which he ran for 310 yards on 59 attempts in 10 games (31.0) while averaging 5.3 yards a carry along with two scores. Next in line could be Florida transfer Ja'Kobi Jackson, who began his career at Coahoma Community College in Mississippi in 2020. He spent the past three years with the Gators. He played four games as a redshirt senior last season before taking a medical redshirt. One to watch is freshman Legend Bey from North Forney, Texas. Ball State last season ranked 106th in rushing defense (178.8) plus 102nd in total defense (405.7) and scoring defense (29.8) while the Buckeyes were 72nd in rushing (154.4), 26th in total offense (422.6) and 21st in scoring (33.4). **EDGE: OHIO STATE**

### BALL STATE RUSH OFFENSE vs. OHIO STATE RUSH DEFENSE

The Cardinals were 4-8 under first-year coach Mike Uremovich in 2025, and he brought in more than 30 transfers to continue the rebuild. TJ Horton is his top returning back. He was third on the team with 180 yards on 60 attempts in 10 games (18.0) with a modest 3.0 yards per carry and no TDs. Freshman Jalen Bonds may see some action. Purdue transfer Elijah Jackson had 17 yards on eight totes (2.1) last season for the Cardinals but had 83 yards on three runs (27.7) against Indiana State as a redshirt freshman with Purdue in 2024. Johnny Thompson Jr. arrives from Kansas after playing in four games last season, running 19 times for 75 yards (3.9). Ball State was 98th in rushing (131.8). OSU had the No. 7 rushing defense (89.4). **EDGE: OHIO STATE**

### OHIO STATE PASS OFFENSE vs. BALL STATE PASS DEFENSE

Ball State won't be able to stop Ohio State despite the Buckeyes losing wide receiver Carnell Tate to the Tennessee Titans as the No. 4 pick in April. Sayin still has Smith and Brandon Inniss and added freshmen Chris Henry Jr. and Brock Boyd, but the best of them behind Smith could be Devin McCuin, a transfer from UT San Antonio. There will be no shortage of options for Sayin if you include the tight ends. He will be protected by a line that returns four starters and is eager to make amends for allowing 10 sacks in the final two games of the season in losses to Indiana and Miami. Sayin threw for 3,610 yards, 32 touchdowns and eight interceptions with a 77.0 completion percentage. Smith hauled in 87 passes for 1,243 yards (14.3) and 12 touchdowns. Cornerback Dianté Griffin, grandson of Archie Griffin, transferred to Ball State after four years with the Buckeyes. The Buckeyes were 21st in passing yards (268.2). Ball State was 83rd in pass defense (226.8). **EDGE: OHIO STATE**

### BALL STATE PASS OFFENSE vs. OHIO STATE PASS DEFENSE

Keldric Luster (Texas State) entered the program and is taking over an offense that was 128th in passing offense (139.9) with just 12 TDs against eight interceptions. The Cardinals were 132nd in total offense (271.7) and 130th in scoring (15.8). OSU has to replace eight starters, but it was the same situation last season, and the Buckeyes finished first in total defense (219.1) and scoring D (9.3). **EDGE: OHIO STATE**

### SPECIAL TEAMS

The Buckeyes brought in Connor Hawkins from Baylor to add length to their field goals. The preseason selection on the Lou Groza Award watch list was 18 of 22 last season. He made 3 of 4 from 50-plus yards, including a career-long 54-yarder vs. Houston. Joe McGuire punted 29 times for a 42.4-yard average with a best of 55 yards. Horton was Ball State's top kickoff returner last year, averaging 24.5 yards on 12 returns with a score. **EDGE: OHIO STATE**

### INTANGIBLES

This game won't be close, but the debate will be how well it prepares the Buckeyes for the showdown at Texas on Sept. 12. But it's better than the alternative, and it will be interesting to see how Ryan Day manages the second half of the game. Will he stay with the starters to get the reps but risk injury unnecessarily? Or will he evaluate the depth and allow a few freshmen and transfers to get their first experiences in Ohio Stadium? **EDGE: OHIO STATE**

### STAFF PREDICTION

It's Senior Day. The emotions alone of playing their seventh-to-last home game should be worth 10 points. Ball State will spoil the occasion with a late score. **OHIO STATE 63, BALL STATE 7**

# 4-Star QB Edmunds Sticking With Ohio State

When BSB last went to press, Huntington Beach, Calif., four-star quarterback Brady Edmunds was weighing his options between sticking with Ohio State and flipping to UCLA, which is much closer to home.

**RECRUITING OUTLOOK**
**Greg Wilson**

However, after official visits to both programs and much deliberation, Edmunds decided that he is going to remain in Ohio State's 2027 class and shut down his recruitment, announcing his decision on July 23.

"I am shutting down my recruitment. I'm grateful to all the programs that showed interest in me, but Columbus is home," the four-star posted on Twitter. "Looking forward to competing and helping bring another national championship back to the state of Ohio! Go Bucks!!!"

It was the end of a battle for Edmunds that began fairly recently when the Buckeyes seemed to be looking elsewhere to add a second quarterback to the 2027 class alongside Edmunds.

He has been committed to Ohio State since December of 2024 but visited the Bruins on June 5 this summer and the Buckeyes on June 19 before he made his final decision.

When Edmunds first committed to Ohio State, he was considered a five-star player, but he has dropped in the rankings considerably since then and is now the No. 243 player in the country and the No. 20-ranked quarterback.

Ultimately, Edmunds decided he wanted the competition, whether that comes with another QB in his class or from the rest of the quarterback room at Ohio State when he gets to campus.

"At the end of the day, there's always going to be another quarterback," Edmunds said in June. "When I get here, there's going to be four. When I go to the NFL, you might be drafted in the first round and next year, they get a third-rounder. That's just how the game of football is."

## OSU Football 2027 Commitments

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 | ★★★★★ | Sunbury (Ohio) Big Walnut |
| Jaden Carey | CB | 5-11 | 175 | ★★★★ | Fort Lauderdale (Fla.) St. Thomas Aquinas |
| Quinton Cypher | LB | 6-2 | 220 | ★★★★ | Raleigh (N.C.) Millbrook |
| Jordan Donahoo | WR | 6-4 | 185 | ★★★ | Oviedo, Fla. |
| Brady Edmunds | QB | 6-5 | 215 | ★★★★ | Huntington Beach, Calif. |
| Marcus Fakatou | DL | 6-6 | 275 | ★★★★★ | Chatsworth (Calif.) Sierra Canyon |
| Prince Goldsby | LB | 6-3 | 205 | ★★★★ | Blue Spring (Mo.) South |
| DJ Jacobs | DL | 6-5 | 225 | ★★★★★ | Roswell (Ga.) Blessed Trinity |
| Eli Johnson | S | 6-3 | 200 | ★★★★ | Cibolo (Texas) Steele |
| Jimmy Kalis | OT | 6-6 | 280 | ★★★★ | Pittsburgh Central Catholic |
| Deontay Malone | ATH | 6-0 | 182 | ★★★ | Massillon (Ohio) Washington |
| Karlos May | DL | 6-3 ½ | 305 | ★★★★ | Birmingham (Ala.) Ramsay |
| Brody McNeel | OT | 6-5 | 285 | ★★★★ | Richmond (Va.) Godwin |
| Caden Moss | OT | 6-5 | 320 | ★★★★ | Jackson (Miss.) Academy |
| Davis Seaman | IOL | 6-4 | 290 | ★★★★ | Columbus Bishop Watterson |
| Angelo Smith | S | 5-10 | 170 | ★★★ | Hollywood (Fla.) Chaminade-Madonna |
| Wyatt Smith | DL | 6-6 | 235 | ★★★★ | Fort Lauderdale (Fla.) St. Thomas Aquinas |
| Mason Wilt | OT | 6-5 | 265 | ★★★ | St. Clairsville, Ohio |
| Kellen Wymer | OT | 6-5 | 265 | ★★★★ | Liberty Center, Ohio |

## OSU Football 2028 Commitments

Player(s) in the class of 2028 who have issued a verbal commitment to play football at Ohio State.

| Player | Pos. | Ht. | Wt. | Stars | High School |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Jett Harrison | WR | 6-1 | 175 | ★★★★★ | Philadelphia St. Joseph's Prep |
| Elijah Newman-Hall | RB | 5-11 | 195 | ★★★★ | Tampa (Fla.) Blake |
| Christopher Vargas | QB | 6-4 ½ | 195 | ★★★★★ | Danvers (Mass.) St. John's Prep |
| Jameer Whyce | DL | 6-4 | 270 | ★★★★★ | Trotwood (Ohio) Trotwood-Madison |

## OSU Football 2029 Commitments

Player(s) in the class of 2029 who have issued a verbal commitment to play football at Ohio State.

| Player | Pos. | Ht. | Wt. | Stars | High School |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Austin Miller | WR | 6-5 | 200 | N/A | Bellflower, Calif. |

### Top 2028 QB Commits To OSU

The Buckeyes got more good news at the quarterback position since BSB last went to press, with the top quarterback in the 2028 class, Christopher Vargas, pledging to the Buckeyes on Aug. 8.

Vargas, a five-star signal-caller out of Danvers (Mass.) St. John's Prep, camped at Ohio State over the offseason and had only good things to say about the program and the coaches when he was in Columbus.

"It's the culture that they bring, the QB developments they bring from the past since Ryan Day got here," Vargas (6-4½, 195) told BSB about what it is about Ohio State that interests him.

He said that he has enjoyed being coached by Day and quarterbacks coach Billy Fessler, who have proved to be able to develop players at the position.

"They've coached the best of the best," Vargas said. "It feels good to be coached by them."

When it comes to whom Vargas likes to watch and whom he tried to model his game after, it was former Ohio State quarterback C.J. Stroud and current Green Bay Packers quarterback Jordan Love whom Vargas brought up.

"The play style they have is very similar to me," he said. "They have a pass-first mindset, but if they have to improvise, they can."

Vargas is ranked by the 247Sports composite as the No. 6 player in the 2028 class and the No. 1 quarterback.

Andrew Ivins, the director of scouting at 247Sports, writes glowingly of Vargas' game in his scouting report of the five-star.

"Tall pocket passer whose game is built around precision and mitigating risk," Ivins wrote. "Exhibits no shortage of command while coordinating a balanced pro-style attack that frequently has him under center and working through a variety of different progressions. Clean from a mechanical standpoint with an easy and repeatable motion. Flashes elite baseline accuracy on quick reads and can feather the football into tight coverage windows when looking down the field."

As a sophomore, Vargas helped St. John's Prep to the Massachusetts Division I Super Bowl with a 9-1 record as a starter after missing three games with an injury. He finished the season 117 of 156 passing (75.0 percent) for 1,857 yards, 24 touchdowns and two interceptions. As a freshman, he threw for 1,311 yards, 17 touchdowns and three interceptions.

Vargas is already the third five-star commitment in the 2028 class for the Buckeyes, joining Trotwood (Ohio) Trotwood-Madison defensive end Jameer Whyce (6-4, 270) and Philadelphia St. Joseph's Prep wide receiver Jett Harrison (6-1, 175), the younger brother of Marvin Harrison Jr.

The Buckeyes also have Bradenton (Fla.) IMG Academy four-star running back Elijah Newman-Hall (6-0, 215) in the class after he was the first commitment of the group on June 13 of 2025. He isn't far from five-star territory at No. 63 nationally, so the Buckeyes are off to an extremely strong start in the 2028 class.

### Four-Star DL May Commits To OSU

Ohio State added another top defensive lineman to its 2027 class on July 18 when Birmingham (Ala.) Ramsay four-star Karlos May (6-4, 305) committed to the Buckeyes.

He is the fourth defensive lineman in the class for OSU, and as the No. 135-ranked player in the country according to 247Sports' composite, he is the lowest-ranked of the four, making it an extremely impressive haul for defensive line coach Larry Johnson.

May joins third-ranked Roswell (Ga.) Blessed Trinity Catholic five-star edge rusher DJ Jacobs (6-5, 240), 26th-ranked Chatsworth (Calif.) Sierra Canyon five-star defensive lineman Marcus Fakatou (6-6, 275) and 76th-ranked Fort Lauderdale (Fla.) St. Thomas Aquinas four-star edge rusher Wyatt Smith (6-6, 235). May was also the 19th overall commitment in the class that is currently ranked seventh in the country by 247Sports.

May joins the OSU class as the first commitment from Alabama in the 2027 cycle for the Buckeyes. He chose Ohio State over Auburn, Georgia and Florida State, to each of which he also had official visits.

As a junior, May racked up 43 tackles, eight tackles for loss, four sacks and two interceptions.

### David Gabriel Georges Commits To Tennessee

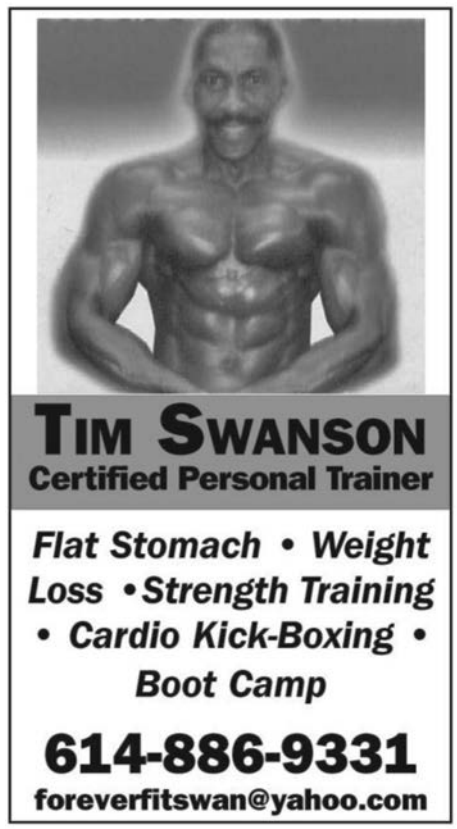
Since BSB last went to press, Ohio State missed on its top remaining 2027 target, Chattanooga (Tenn.) Baylor School five-star running back David Gabriel Georges (6-0, 210).

After a long battle that the Buckeyes and running backs coach Carlos Locklyn had been working hard at for over two years, Gabriel Georges decided to remain in-state with Tennessee, choosing the Volunteers on July 22.

"This was probably the most difficult decision that I've had to make in my life, and this decision was not taken lightly," Gabriel Georges said during his announcement. "With this decision, I am deciding to trust my heart. I am choosing where I feel the most at home and where I will feel the most comfortable while achieving my goals."

It was reported by On3's Chris Low that NIL may have also been part of the decision for Gabriel Georges, since Ten-

Continued On Page 36



# OSU Misses Out On 4-Star Ohio Linebacker

Continued From Page 35

nessee's offer to him was in the range of $2 million annually, while Ohio State's offer was closer to $1 million per year.

But whatever the reasoning behind Gabriel Georges' decision, the Buckeyes are now still without a running back in the 2027 class with just over three months to go until the early signing period in December.

They currently have a young group of running backs in Columbus in Bo Jackson, Isaiah West, Anthony "Turbo" Rogers, Legend Bey and Favour Akih, and they also have Newman-Hall committed in the 2028 class. That may make it easier for Ohio State to skip the 2027 class at the position altogether and possibly add from the portal if needed, but it's a large difference from where OSU hoped to be after spending so much time and energy trying to get Gabriel Georges to come to Columbus.

### Feister Commits To Oregon

Ohio State missed on another 2027 target when Massillon (Ohio) Washington four-star linebacker Brayton Feister (6-2, 238) committed to Oregon on Aug. 14.

Feister chose the Ducks over Cal, Georgia and Ohio State. Feister would have been a good pickup for the Buckeyes, but with Blue Springs (Mo.) South four-star linebacker Prince Goldsby (6-3, 205) and Raleigh (N.C.) Millbrook four-star linebacker Quinton Cypher (6-2, 220) already committed in the 2027 class, they likely feel they are already in a good spot at the position.

"I chose Oregon because it felt like the best place for me to develop, both on and off the field," Feister told 247Sports. "From the first time I stepped on campus, I could feel the culture, the energy, and the standard that they have there. I wanted to be somewhere that expects you to compete every day, and I felt like Oregon gave me the opportunity to do that at the highest level."

Feister is considered the No. 133 player in the 2027 class and the No. 9 athlete, and he is a two-sport star as a state qualifier in wrestling.

As a junior, Feister was a finalist to be Ohio's Mr. Football and was the Division II co-defensive player of the year. He finished the season with 133 tackles, 39 tackles for loss, 13 sacks, four forced fumbles and two interceptions.

He doubled as a running back for Akron Hoban – before transferring this offseason to Massillon – and had 116 carries for 1,098 yards and 17 touchdowns.

Despite missing on Feister, the Buckeyes are still involved in the recruitment of his little brother, three-star athlete Brydon Feister (6-3, 210), who is in the 2028 class at the same school as Brayton.

Brydon Feister is the No. 647 prospect in the country and the No. 54 athlete and has 20 offers, eight of which are from Big Ten schools.

### Bucks Make Cut For Top DL

Ohio State was unsurprisingly included in top lists for multiple prospects who cut their scholarship offers down since BSB last went to press.

The top of those players who had Ohio State on their lists was Indian Head (Md.) Henry E. Lackey five-star defensive lineman Tyzon Swann (6-4, 245) in the 2028 class, who had the Buckeyes in his top nine schools.

They were included for Swann along with Alabama, Auburn, Florida, LSU, Maryland, Oklahoma, UCLA and USC.

Swann told On3 that he was impressed with Ohio State landing Vargas, as many 2028 recruits were.

"I've always looked at Ohio State in a good way, but that is an awesome pickup," Swann said. "Vargas is definitely a dog."

Swann camped at Ohio State over the summer and said that Johnson is a big reason that he's considering the Buckeyes, especially since Johnson was a longtime high school coach near Swann's hometown.

"He won state championships in my area at McDonough High School," Swann said. "Being able to come here and learn from him, knowing he's from my area and is a legend around there, it feels great. I get to take home stuff from the best defensive line coach in the country."

When he was at that camp, Swann said that Ohio State, Florida, Alabama and Auburn were standing out above other

## A Look Back At Recruiting From The Pages Of BSB

### 40 Years Ago — 1986

The North squad wore red uniforms. The South wore white. But there was a definite scarlet and gray hue at the 41st annual Ohio High School Football Coaches Association's North-South All-Star football game.

A total of 66 of Ohio's top graduated seniors put their many talents on display for a crowd of over 10,000 in Massillon's Paul Brown Tiger Stadium on July 19.

The fact that the North won 12-6 in overtime was somewhat irrelevant to Ohio State fans. What would have been of concern was how the 10 incoming Buckeye freshmen who participated in the game performed.

Quite well, readers would be pleased to hear.

Rich Huffman, a tight end out of Salem High School, caught the game-winning pass in the overtime session.

"That felt great," said Huffman of the 15-yard reception. "I thought I did pretty good on my pass catching, but I need to work on my blocking."

### 35 Years Ago — 1991

For the second straight year, the Ohio North-South All-Star game was a showcase for an Ohio State bound quarterback.

St. Henry quarterback Bob Hoying was named most valuable offensive player of the South squad after leading his team to a 21-12 win over the North July 13 at Paul Brown Tiger Stadium.

Hoying sealed the victory by scampering 17 yards around left end for a touchdown with just under two minutes left and the South clinging to a precarious 14-12 lead.

It was the final act of Hoying's one-man show, which included completing 5 of 7 passes for 73 yards and carrying the ball eight times for 53 yards. He also saw some action at safety on defense.

### 30 Years Ago — 1996

Although Rodney Bailey was overlooked by a number of recruiting experts early on, the Ohio State coaching staff certainly took note of him when he attended their summer football camp in June.

The OSU staff offered the Lakewood (Ohio) St. Edward defensive end a scholarship on the spot, and less than four weeks later, he accepted it and became the fourth member of OSU's 1997 recruiting class.

Bailey and the other OSU commitments were expected to sign letters of intent for Ohio State on national signing day in February.

Bailey picked Ohio State, his longtime favorite school, over the likes of Michigan, Michigan State and Northwestern. He made unofficial visits to all of his schools, including last-minute trips to Michigan and Northwestern just to be sure, before announcing his OSU commitment on July 16.

### 25 Years Ago — 2001

With just 20 available scholarships at his disposal for the class of 2002, first-year OSU coach Jim Tressel wasted no time pinpointing the high school talent he wanted and locking those players up through verbal commitments.

As of Aug. 7, Ohio State stood with 14 verbal commitments in its 2002 recruiting class.

New to the class were Canton (Ohio) McKinley defensive back Tyler Everett, Medina (Ohio) Highland defensive end/linebacker Mike Kudla, Kettering (Ohio) Alter offensive lineman Nick Mangold and Toronto Central Tech defensive back Michael Roberts.

The class was drawing attention nationwide. At the same time, Tressel was gaining a strong reputation as a recruiter.

"This has probably been the greatest month in the history of Ohio State recruiting," SuperPrep's Allen Wallace said on the CNN/SI website. "With this class they're putting together now, they are the team to beat in the Big Ten (recruiting race), and they'd have to make some serious mistakes down the stretch to fall out of the top five nationwide."

### 20 Years Ago — 2006

The summer months continued to be productive for Ohio State football on the recruiting trail. After entering the month of July with just three commitments for the class of 2007, the Buckeyes landed four more to bring the total number of commitments to seven as high schoolers geared up for the regular season.

Perhaps the biggest steal, however, was the landing of Orchard Lake (Mich.) St. Mary's wide receiver Taurian Washington, who was listed as a four-star prospect by Rivals. Washington's commitment to OSU was rumored for a few weeks prior to Orchard Lake head coach George Porritt confirming it on Aug. 9.

"He's an explosive receiver, and I think he will fit into their scheme of things," Porritt told BSB. "I know they play four wideouts at times, so I think he'll do fine."

Washington was joined by Monaca (Pa.) Center Area offensive lineman Evan Blankenship, Toledo Central Catholic wide receiver Dane Sanzenbacher, and Warren (Ohio) Harding running back Daniel Herron.

### 15 Years Ago — 2011

A trio of in-state prospects – each of them rated three-star performers by Scout.com – had joined Ohio State's 2012 recruiting class, and none would have to drive too far when it came time to move into campus dorms.

Linebacker Luke Roberts, who pulled the trigger first with a commitment July 13, hailed from Lancaster, Ohio.

"I feel awesome," he told Scout upon announcing his decision following a July 11 visit. "I'm so excited that I have the opportunity to be a Buckeye. After coming home and talking it over with my family and praying about it, I realized Ohio State was the right place for me."

The same day that Roberts jumped on board, Pickerington North prospect Patrick Elflein received a scholarship offer from Ohio State, and he accepted it one day later on July 14.

They were joined by Pickerington Central wide receiver Roger Lewis, who committed three weeks later on Aug. 9.

### 10 Years Ago — 2016

At 10:59 on the morning of Aug. 22, Ohio State didn't have a wide receiver committed in the class of 2017. At 11 a.m., the Buckeyes received verbal pledges from two of the top five receivers in the nation.

Las Vegas Bishop Gorman four-star wide receiver Tyjon Lindsey was expected to announce his commitment via a video released by Bleacher Report. The surprise came when the video also featured the commitment of five-star receiver Trevon Grimes of Fort Lauderdale (Fla.) St. Thomas Aquinas, who was expected to announce his college plans Aug. 24.

It had been expected that both players would commit to the Buckeyes whenever they chose to make their announcements, and those expectations came true, giving Ohio State 18 commits for 2017.

### Five Years Ago — 2021

It appeared that Ohio State's quarterback room had a clear-cut idea of what it was looking for in its 2020-22 recruiting classes.

In the 2020 class, which came in the same year that ended up being Justin Fields' last for the Buckeyes, Ohio State had it covered, signing a pair of four-stars in Jack Miller and C.J. Stroud. The future was helped by a five-star commitment in 2021 – Kyle McCord – and was then solidified as maybe the most talented future room in the country with the commitment of Quinn Ewers, the No. 1 overall prospect in 2022.

But then, that plan earned a new wrinkle once Ewers decided it was time for him to reclassify and come to Ohio State as part of the 2021 class.

"Following conversations with my family and those I know (that) have my best interests in mind, I've decided to enroll at Ohio State and begin my career as a Buckeye," Ewers wrote in a tweet. "This is not just a financial decision; this is about what is best for my football career. At 18, and with one final class about to be completed to earn my high school degree, I feel it's time to get the jump on my college career that is available to me."

### One Year Ago — 2025

Ohio State had long wanted to add a quarterback to its 2026 recruiting class and was able to do so on July 3 when Mission Viejo, Calif., three-star signal caller Luke Fahey committed to the Buckeyes. It didn't take long after his official visit to Columbus the weekend of June 20-22 to realize that he wanted to be a Buckeye. He chose OSU over Oklahoma State, Stanford and Indiana.

Fahey didn't get an offer from Ohio State until he was on campus for his official visit, but it was the one he was waiting for after growing up a fan of the program, he told Eleven Warriors.

"My dad's parents were both students at Ohio State, and they met actually in the library at Ohio State," Fahey said. "In their house, all they did was watch Ohio State, every single sport that was on TV. And then my dad grew up an Ohio State fan, and he kind of molded me into being an Ohio State fan. I've watched so many games over the years, and I've tuned into so many Ohio State sports over the years. I even had a little foam football that was Ohio State that I would throw around with my dad."

# ASK AN ANALYST

## With Allen Trieu of On3

**Ohio State earned a commitment from Danvers (Mass.) St. John's Prep five-star quarterback Christopher Vargas (6-5, 195) in the class of 2028. What have you seen from Vargas, and what is Ohio State getting with his commitment?**

"He checks just about every imaginable box, and that's why, when we evaluate the 2028 class at quarterback, it's a pretty deep group nationally. He's a clear top-tier guy, not just at the position, but at any position. He's one of the best in the country. I think he has an argument to be No. 1 overall. That's because you're looking at a guy 6-4 plus and already pretty filled out. You're talking about a guy who has already put up good numbers, played high-level football, shown that he can process the game, takes good care of the football, and throws a very natural, catchable ball. Then on top of that, you have a guy who, at that size – you don't usually see quarterbacks at his size that also have the track background that he does. So you're getting a good athlete on top of it. Nothing's ever a guarantee, but it's really hard to find weaknesses in his game and his profile."

**The Buckeyes missed on Chattanooga (Tenn.) Baylor School five-star running back David Gabriel Georges (6-0, 210), who committed to Tennessee. How big of a deal will that miss be for Ohio State's 2027 class?**

"It's a big deal anytime you have a chance to add a No. 1-type running back, a five-star who's a guy who can make a huge difference to an offense. Ohio State was right on the doorstep of landing him. Then also, it would be one thing if he had made that commitment in March or April, but you spent all that time recruiting him, and then you don't get him. By that point, you don't have camp or the evaluation period anymore to be able to keep evaluating targets, so now you have to use the season. The timing of it is not great, and again, you had a chance to add a difference maker on offense, and you don't do it. There's no sugarcoating it. That is a loss."

**Do you think they will pivot elsewhere for a 2027 running back, or could they skip the class at the position and go into the portal for a running back if needed?**

"I would be surprised if they skip it. I do think they will try to pivot elsewhere, and whether that's flipping a guy or finding a guy who rises late, I think they're going to exhaust those options. Obviously, you have the portal as a backup, but I do think that they will make strong efforts to sign or add another running back to the class. The good thing, too – you see this at every level of football, especially in the NFL draft – teams can find good running backs in the middle to late rounds, and it's the same in recruiting, where you don't necessarily have to find a blue-chip five-star to get a really good back. Bo Jackson is a little bit of an example of that. He was a four-star guy but wasn't in Gabriel George's class, and now he's one of the best in the country. So I think that's a position where you don't have to get an elite guy to find a good player."

**Do you expect Ohio State to take the same approach as it did in the 2026 recruiting cycle and flip a few 2027 prospects well into the football season? Who would be some possible flip candidates if they do?**

"I mean, if it's not broken, don't fix it. So I do think that they will try to flip some guys, and it's also just the name of the game in recruiting. A couple of names right away, when we're talking about Gainesville, Ga., four-star running back Nigel Newkirk (5-11, 200), an Alabama commit, that's been talked about as a guy that Ohio State could potentially pivot to at that position. There's been a lot of talk about Omaha (Neb.) Millard South five-star quarterback Trae Taylor (6-3, 203), who's committed to Nebraska. Actually, I think I originated some of that discussion, and there was some real interest there from Ohio State. He's very committed to Nebraska. He actually moved there for his senior year, but I don't think that one's completely dead. So we'll continue to keep an eye on that one. There's been some buzz about Oklahoma cornerback commit Mustang, Okla., five-star Gabriel Osborne Jr. (6-2, 180) as well. Oklahoma is doing a good job, so that's not going to be an easy flip, but I think he's a guy Ohio State at least will make some attempts on.

"Then I would keep an eye on some in-state guys. Ohio State's really made sure that they've thoroughly evaluated their state the last couple of cycles. So if there's an in-state guy who pops up as a senior, or even some guys that they missed the first time around on the evaluation, some guys who went to some other schools, I could see Ohio State taking an in-state riser as a senior, or maybe a guy that they missed the first time around on like a three-star linebacker Kaylon Bailey (6-1, 225) at Cleveland Glenville who chose Colorado. Those are a couple of the names I would watch for. But I also think there could be some names that aren't on the flip radar yet that they go after. From talking to a lot of different schools, these Big Ten schools are going to thoroughly evaluate other people's commit lists the first two to three weeks of the season and see if anybody pops up. Ohio State's in that boat too."

programs. However, a decision likely isn't coming for a long time for Swann. He said that he probably won't commit until July or August of 2027, which would be after he takes official visits over the summer.

He also said that when schools were first able to reach out to recruits, Ohio State was one that did so right at midnight, and that was the school he was looking out for the most because he favors the Buckeyes.

"Ohio State is just awesome," Swann said. "Coach Day, Coach J, the passion for football and the tradition and legacies. All of the D-lineman draft picks speaks for itself. There's no way you come here and don't get drafted. That's just what they produce."

Also including Ohio State in his top schools was Malvern, Pa., four-star defensive end George Parkinson IV (6-4, 235), also of the 2028 class.

He narrowed his options down to LSU, Ohio State, Oregon, Penn State, Tennessee and Texas A&M.

Parkinson narrowly makes the top 100 in the 247Sports composite as the No. 99 player in the country and the No. 13 defensive end. He is considered the No. 2 player in Pennsylvania.

The four-star has been to both Ohio State and Penn State multiple times, and he said the Buckeyes and Johnson are a major factor in his recruitment.

"It's *the* Ohio State, so it has a major pull factor," he told 247Sports. "Plus, Larry Johnson. He's a legend. He produced so many D-linemen over the years. Honestly, I just feel the love every time I go. Coach Larry Johnson and I share a lot of the same cultural beliefs, religious beliefs, and I feel like Ohio State has always been a great program."

### Buckeyes In Top 12 For WR, SAF

The Buckeyes were also included in the top 12 for Tustin, Calif., four-star wide receiver Hayden Koo (6-1, 170), who is also in the class of 2028.

Koo is considered the No. 216 player in the country and the No. 32 wide receiver, and he received his offer from the Buckeyes on June 9. Now they are already among his top choices.

Along with Ohio State in Koo's top 12 are BYU, Cal, Kansas, Kentucky, Michigan, Northwestern, Oregon, Stanford, UCLA, USC and Washington.

As a sophomore, Koo caught 53 passes for 796 yards and seven touchdowns.

Koo's offer from Ohio State came after he had a strong performance at a recruiting camp, and he spoke with On3 about it.

"This offer is very special," Koo told On3. "A lot of people will consider them WRU. In my opinion, the top three would be Ohio State, LSU and SC. It was huge with what they show in the draft and just the receivers that they have."

The Buckeyes were also in the top 12 for Birmingham (Ala.) Parker four-star safety CJ Craig-James (6-3, 185).

Craig-James is a top-100 player at No. 73 in the country, and he is ranked the No. 7 safety in the 2028 class.

His top 12 schools are Alabama, Auburn, Cal, Clemson, Florida, Georgia, LSU, Miami (Fla.), Notre Dame, Ohio State, Oregon and Vanderbilt.

In his sophomore season, Craig-James had 37 tackles, two passes broken up, four interceptions and a forced fumble.

### Other Notes And Tidbits

- Ohio State is already building a visitor list for its regular-season finale against Michigan on Nov. 28. Cartersville, Ga., five-star wide receiver Madoxx Davis (5-10, 189) of the 2028 class is the latest to say that he will be in Columbus for The Game. Davis is the No. 23 player in the country and the No. 5 wide receiver in his class.
- Drexel Hill (Pa.) Monsignor Bonner four-star offensive tackle Tyrie Davis-Winn (6-8, 270) told 247Sports that he has also scheduled a visit to get to Ohio State for this year's rivalry game against Michigan, which, as always, is proving to be a major attraction for recruits. Davis-Winn is considered the No. 218 prospect in the country, the No. 25 offensive tackle and the No. 8 player in Pennsylvania in the 2028 class. Davis-Winn holds 20 Division I offers.
- After Gabriel Georges chose Tennessee over Ohio State, the Buckeyes are looking for another option at the running back position in the 2027 class. The Villages (Fla.) Charter three-star Tranard Roberts (6-0, 195) is an option for OSU and has set up an unofficial visit to get to Columbus for the season opener against Ball State on Sept. 5. Roberts is the No. 576 player in the country, the No. 38 running back and the No. 48 player in Florida.
- After spending some time at Sunbury (Ohio) Big Walnut, where he transferred for his senior year, five-star Ohio State wide receiver commit Jamier Brown (5-11, 192) is headed back to his old high school, Huber Heights (Ohio) Wayne. Brown won a state championship in track at Big Walnut but didn't play a down of football there  Now he is back at Wayne for his final season of football, and he will be suspended for the first two games after two unrelated OHSAA rule violations which have not been rrevealed.



# Cignetti Fires Back At SEC, ACC Head Coaches

With the ever-changing landscape of college football, NCAA rules and individual conference stipulations are constantly evolving, creating a competitive rivalry among some of the nation's powerhouse leagues.

**BIG TEN NOTES**
**Sam Cipriani**

Primarily, the Big Ten and SEC have clashed over the last two seasons regarding rule changes to the individual schedule, the transfer portal and the College Football Playoff format.

For the first time in the conference's history, the SEC will play nine conference games in 2026, and the conference also requires its schools to play at least one additional nonconference opponent from the Big Ten, Big 12, ACC or Notre Dame.


Curt Cignetti

In the wake of the SEC's newly imposed tougher scheduling requirements, Missouri head coach Eli Drinkwitz took aim at the Big Ten's scheduling philosophy and said that teams can benefit from avoiding a high-quality nonconference opponent.

Despite the Big Ten having its teams play a nine-game conference schedule since 2016, Drinkwitz took a shot at the conference, stating its members have an inherent advantage "When you don't play a (nonconference Power Four) game," criticizing the league for failing to adopt the SEC's tougher scheduling standards.

Pittsburgh head coach Pat Narduzzi also joined in on the Big Ten criticism, stating he would place the ACC above the Big Ten in terms of skill and achievements during his appearance at ACC media days on July 17.

"This conference is as good as any conference in the country," Narduzzi said. "After about two years in the league, this conference is better – it's better than the Big Ten. It's got more skill.

"You look at our record. You look at our record in bowl games against the SEC and the Big Ten. You look at our record in the regular season. We don't have a losing record. We have a winning record against those teams."

However, during Big Ten media days on July 30, Indiana head coach Curt Cignetti pushed back in his opening statement, defending the conference's strength while emphasizing that success in the Big Ten is earned, not given.

"The Big Ten is the best league in football," Cignetti said. "It has a lot of really good football teams. It's hard to win on the road, very physical football teams, very well-coached. It definitely prepares you for the playoffs. There's no doubt about it. The numbers speak for themselves.

"We don't run a hype machine up here in the Midwest. We believe everything is earned, not given. When we fall short, we say, 'We fell short.' We don't cry a river, whine and complain. That's why we're the best."

The Big Ten finished 11-5 in bowl season and had a 5-2 record in the College Football Playoff last year. The ACC was 9-5 in bowl games, while the SEC finished just 4-10. The Big Ten has also claimed each of the last three national championships with Michigan in the 2023 season, Ohio State in 2024 and Indiana in 2025.

## Manuel Steps Down As U-M AD

Following a tenure riddled with conflict and scandal in recent seasons, Warde Manuel will step down after 11 years as Michigan's athletic director, the university announced July 20. Michigan will now buy out the remaining three years of his contract, and Manuel will voluntarily step down on Dec. 31.

According to a document obtained by The Associated Press, Manuel will receive a $7.14 million payout in his separation agreement with the university.

"I am very proud of all the successes and accomplishments of our athletic department over the past 11 years," Manuel wrote in a statement. "We have tremendous coaches and professionals who support our outstanding student-athletes every day.

"I am happy President (Domenico) Grasso asked me to stay on to work with him to implement the recommendations for continuous improvement. I promise everyone I will have more to say about my decision at the appropriate time."

The announcement of Manuel's departure came as Michigan continued its investigation into the athletic department, which examined both "the circumstances surrounding the conduct of former Coach Sherrone Moore," as well as the "culture, conduct and procedures" of the athletic department.

While Michigan's culture review found that Manuel "demonstrated important leadership strengths, particularly his commitment to student-athletes," it also identified "failures to quickly and effectively act on allegations of wrongdoing by athletic department employees."

The review of the university's athletic department found that there were "failures in accountability, structural deficiencies, weaknesses in our reporting and support systems and concerns about retaliation."

While Michigan experienced significant competitive and financial success, with four national championships during Manuel's time, the athletic department also faced a series of recent off-field issues.

Incidents over the last five years included NCAA violations under former football head coach Jim Harbaugh involving staffer Connor Stalions that resulted in multiple suspensions and a $20 million-plus NCAA fine, the 2022 firing of men's hockey coach Mel Pearson, former men's basketball head coach Juwan Howard's 2022 suspension after an altercation with Wisconsin head coach Greg Gard, former offensive coordinator Matt Weiss' 2024 federal indictment, and the 2025 firing of football head coach Moore following an inappropriate relationship with a staff member.

The agreement also included a two-year clause preventing Manuel from becoming an athletic director or senior athletic adviser at another Big Ten program following his resignation. However, he is free to accept any other position with another school without penalty.

Manuel, a former Michigan defensive tackle who played four seasons under Bo Schembechler from 1986-89, has more than 20 years of experience as an athletic director, serving at Buffalo from 2005-12, Connecticut from 2012-16 and Michigan from 2016 to present.

## MSU Hires Bartholomae As AD

Michigan State has hired Western Michigan athletic director Dan Bartholomae as its next athletic director and vice president, the university announced on Aug. 17.

Bartholomae said that the opportunity to join Michigan State was a dream come true, adding that he sees the university's athletic program well-positioned for the new era of college sports.

"It is a dream come true and a tremendous honor for my family and I to join the Spartan community! Michigan State Athletics has everything required to thrive in this new era of college sports: top-level student-athletes, outstanding coaches, a global alumni network and a university leadership team committed to excellence," Bartholomae said. "Throughout my career, I have been drawn to institutions that believe athletics can elevate a university and unite a community. That is certainly true at Michigan State. I am excited to get to work, listen, learn and help elevate Spartan Athletics to new standards together with all of you."

Bartholomae's hiring comes just over two months after former athletic director J Batt departed to take the same role at Kentucky. Batt served at Michigan State for nearly a year before he left on June 15.

Michigan State's athletic director search unfolded amid uncertainty over university leadership. University president Kevin Guskiewicz announced on May 27 that he would leave to take the same role at Clemson, citing concerns about university governance and some trustees. However, on July 6, Guskiewicz withdrew his resignation and chose to remain president. Michigan State avoided a presidential transition while also searching for a new athletic director.

Bartholomae served as Western Michigan's athletic director from 2022-26, overseeing 37 conference championships and the school's first men's hockey national championship in 2025.

Before his time at Western Michigan, he spent five years as Oregon State's deputy and executive deputy athletic director.

He began his career at Pittsburgh in 2002, spending 15 years in various roles before ultimately becoming its deputy athletic director.

## ND-USC To Resume Rivalry In 2030

After what will be a four-season hiatus, Notre Dame and USC will resume their rivalry with a four-game series beginning in 2030, the universities announced on Aug. 3.

The Trojans and Fighting Irish will renew their rivalry in Week 1 of 2030 at the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum before the series shifts to Notre Dame Stadium in South Bend, Ind., in Week 1 of 2031. Notre Dame and USC will also meet in 2032 and 2033, with dates and times yet to be announced. Both games are scheduled to take place between Weeks 1 and 3.

Before the 2026 regular season, Notre Dame and USC had met in 78 consecutive seasons from 1946 to 2025, with the exception of their canceled 2020 matchup due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The programs first met in 1926, and Notre Dame leads the all-time series 53-38-5, which includes USC's 2005 victory, which was later vacated due to the Trojans' repeated NCAA violations under then-head coach Pete Carroll.

USC athletic director Jennifer Cohen emphasized the significance of the program's rivalry with Notre Dame, adding that it was important for the Trojans to play the matchup early in the season as they enter conference play.

"USC's historic rivalry with Notre Dame holds a special place in the history of college football, and we are happy to resume a series that means so much to the entire Trojan Family," Cohen said. "It remains important for us to play this game early in the season, as it allows us to schedule competitively with our Big Ten peers and takes into account the health and best interests of our student-athletes and program. We are excited for our fans, and we look forward to more memorable matchups and unforgettable games between the Trojans and the Irish."

## Northwestern To Receive $35 Million Football Donation

Northwestern's football program has received a major commitment, with the family of Liz and Dick Uihlein pledging $35 million to the university's football program over the next three years.

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According to the Northwestern press release, the commitment will be used to "support student-athlete development, operational priorities, recruiting, and strategic investments designed to position Northwestern football for sustained success in the Big Ten and on the national stage."

The move also comes as Northwestern prepares to open the newly built Ryan Field, a privately funded stadium by university alumni and donors Pat and Shirley Ryan, which is set to become the first "NFL-type stadium in college football."

In a statement, the Uihleins said they were inspired by the Ryans' contributions to Northwestern and Chicago and wanted to continue that legacy themselves.

"We are so grateful for Pat and Shirley Ryan's contributions to Northwestern and Chicago and want to follow their lead," the Uihleins said. "As multigenerational Chicagoans, we love this city and want to see it thrive. To us, Northwestern University is Chicago. Chicago loves sports, and we need Wildcat football to be competitive. We are pleased to support the university as it enters an exciting new era."

Northwestern president Mung Chiang added that the donation will provide a critical lift for the football program.

"The outstanding generosity from the Uihlein family is another major boost to Wildcat athletics," Chiang said. "Northwestern is proud to be the only top-10 university in the country playing in a Power 2 conference, and we strongly support our athletic program and student-athletes."

Northwestern now enters its fourth season with head coach David Braun at the helm. He has totaled an even 19-19 record over the past three campaigns with the Wildcats, including bowl appearances in 2023 and 2025.

## Lendeborg Named NBA Summer League MVP

Golden State Warriors forward Yaxel Lendeborg was named the NBA's Summer League MVP on July 19 following a stellar six-game run that helped the Warriors finish 5-1 overall and claim the Summer League championship.

The former Michigan forward, whom Golden State selected No. 11 overall in the 2026 NBA draft, averaged 14.8 points, 6.8 rebounds, 4.0 assists and 1.5 steals in 28.3 minutes of action in the Warriors' six contests.

Lendeborg capped off his impressive tournament with 21 points and 10 rebounds in the championship game against the Memphis Grizzlies, outdueling No. 3 overall draft pick Cameron Boozer of Duke in the final.

Lendeborg wasn't the only former Big Ten star to show out in the Summer League. Houston Rockets guard Bruce Thornton (Ohio State) averaged 18.6 points, 4.6 rebounds, 4.4 assists and 2.6 steals per game, while Los Angeles Clippers guard/forward Nick Martinelli (Northwestern) averaged 14.8 points and 6.4 rebounds. His teammate and No. 5 overall draft pick Keaton Wagler (Illinois) averaged 18.0 points per game.

Mavericks forward/center Morez Johnson (Michigan) averaged 18.5 points and 6.5 rebounds. Hornets forward/center Hannes Steinbach (Washington) averaged 15.8 points and 9.2 rebounds, and Thunder guard Bennett Stirtz (Iowa) averaged 17.7 points and 3.3 assists per game.

Other notable former Big Ten hoopers in the Summer League were Christoph Tilly (Ohio State) and Aday Mara (Michigan) on the Thunder, Braden Smith (Purdue) on the Chicago Bulls, Trey Kaufman-Renn (Purdue) on the Minnesota Timberwolves and Tyler Bilodeau (UCLA) on the Brooklyn Nets.

## Michigan-Duke December Men's Basketball Off

The Michigan men's basketball team has canceled its scheduled nonconference matchup with Duke on Dec. 21 due to issues with broadcasting rights, according to multiple reports.

The Wolverines and Blue Devils clash was originally scheduled to be played in Madison Square Garden, but amid a rights dispute between Duke and the Big Ten, the game was later moved to LoanDepot Park in Miami. However, the location change ultimately failed to save it, as the matchup was canceled altogether on July 24.

Instead, Duke is now set to play Texas Tech on Dec. 21 at Madison Square Garden, according to ESPN.

Both Michigan (37-3) and Duke (35-3) spent the majority of the 2025-26 season ranked in the top five, and each was as a No. 1 seed in the NCAA Tournament.

While Duke fell to UConn in the Elite Eight, the Wolverines beat the Huskies in the title game to claim their first national championship in 37 years under head coach Dusty May, who has since departed to take the helm of the NBA's Dallas Mavericks.

# From The Pages Of BSB

### 40 Years Ago — 1986

Earle Bruce, in most instances, would answer questions posed to him by the media. But Bruce wanted to turn the tables when discussing the 1986 Ohio State football team. He was asking the questions.

"First of all," said Bruce in beginning to detail the outlook for his bunch of Buckeyes, "we'll start off with a question mark because obviously the great question mark is our offensive line. That's been the thing that's created a winning record at Ohio State – a great offensive line.

"Right now, with (starting center) Bob Maggs being a question mark because of his back and the surgery he had and he didn't have spring ball, we've got that question to answer.

"With a lack of (starting right tackle) Larry Kotterman in spring practice, most of our offensive line wiped out in the spring and not available, with some 16 or 17 players who did not play in the spring, we have some big question marks we've got to get answered."

### 35 Years Ago — 1991

The experts were pointing to the Buckeyes' home schedule – a slate that featured seven games in Ohio Stadium and another in Cleveland – and figured the team could aspire to a Rose Bowl appearance.

But as far as John Cooper was concerned, the favorable home schedule meant nothing if the Buckeyes couldn't turn Ohio Stadium into a death trap for opposing teams.

"Everyone seemed to like us last year because of our home schedule," the fourth-year OSU head coach said. "Everyone who had beaten us the year before, we were playing at Columbus last year.

"But we did not get the job done at home. We didn't lose a game on the road except for the bowl game, but we just flat didn't get the job done in Columbus. We lost to Southern Cal, Illinois and Michigan at home.

"That's one of the things that we want to establish this year. We want to establish our pride at home. Once again this year, we have a good home schedule. But we have to win those games. We have to make it tough for everyone who comes to the 'Shoe. We didn't do that last year."

### 30 Years Ago — 1996

It is the very nature of college football that every new season presents new challenges and new expectations.

For instance, an Ohio State team built around an explosive, multifaceted offense the year before would now turn to its veteran defense to pave the way toward a successful 1996 season and a Big Ten championship.

That suited Cooper, who was set to begin his ninth year with the Scarlet and Gray, just fine.

"I'd rather have a better defense," Cooper said at the Big Ten Kickoff Luncheon in Chicago. "I think you win championships by having a great defense and a great kicking game. It's a lot more comfortable feeling for me. I don't know any coach who wants to get into a scoring contest.

"I think that allows you to take a few more chances on offense. Obviously, you'd like to have both sides, but if you're asking me if I had to pick which one I prefer, I'd want a strong defense," he said.

### 25 Years Ago — 2001

OSU co-captain and defensive tackle Mike Collins told reporters during the Big Ten Kickoff Luncheon festivities that Jim Tressel was putting a premium on the Michigan rivalry.

"Coach Tressel talks about it every practice," Collins said. "Every Saturday during spring ball, we watched a quarter of the Michigan game.

"He said, 'I'm tired of seeing you guys lose. You've been successful, but you have not been accomplishing your goals.'

"When he talks about Michigan, he really understands the rivalry. He knows what it means to the players, and he knows what it means to the people of Ohio. They hate the Blue."

### 20 Years Ago — 2006

Ohio State fans who were prepared for a rebuilding year on the defensive side of the ball received some good news on Aug. 18.

Faced with stopping the Buckeyes' vaunted offense on the final play of the semiannual jersey scrimmage, the defense held on for a 66-65 victory in a rain-soaked event held at Ohio Stadium.

The game was decided on a final play at the 3-yard line when senior safety Brandon Mitchell knocked away a Troy Smith pass intended for Ted Ginn Jr. in the end zone.

"We've got a lot of guys who are talented who now have the chance to prove themselves," said OSU middle linebacker James Laurinaitis. "I think you're going to see guys competing hard all over the field for playing time."

Like the spring before, when the defensive unit captured the coveted scarlet jerseys, the game hinged on six turnovers, including four interceptions.

### 15 Years Ago — 2011

Of course, there was no manual for first-year head coach Luke Fickell to follow as he prepared to lead Ohio State into the 2011 season, which was set to begin on Sept. 3 in Ohio Stadium vs. Akron. He took over after the Buckeyes' greatest sustained run of success in three decades – and yet inherited a program that needed to be patched back together in many ways.

After 10 excellent seasons that included one national championship and seven Big Ten rings, Tressel was shown the door May 30.

Soon after Tressel's departure, quarterback Terrelle Pryor left amid further NCAA investigations and a media frenzy that threatened to swallow the entire program.

The task of taking over might have seemed overwhelming at first, but Fickell said that had actually helped him get to work.

"Everything happened pretty fast," he said. "The greatest thing I guess I could say is I had no time to sit and think. I had no time to feel sorry of any sort, to have a whole lot of emotion. The situation arose and obviously I had to stand up."

### 10 Years Ago — 2016

When Urban Meyer spoke to the media about his fifth fall camp in Columbus, he offered a telling comment.

Replacing 16 starters on offense and defense from the 2015 season and a group of seniors who boasted a 50-4 record as Buckeyes, Meyer knew his team was light on experience. He knew that the expectations at Ohio State, ones he helped elevate, don't change. He knew that if he reached those expectations, it would be one of his greatest coaching accomplishments.

As the Ohio State head coach settled behind the lectern in the team meeting room at the Woody Hayes Athletic Center on Aug. 22, though, he admitted what he didn't know.

"I don't know how good we are," Meyer said.

### Five Years Ago — 2021

Ohio State athletic director Gene Smith told Dom Tiberi of 10TV in Columbus that, as expected, Ohio State would be joining many other college football teams in going forward with a plan for full capacity crowds that fall, including pregame tailgating, following restrictions the year before due to the pandemic.

"We're going all the way live," Smith said in an interview with the television station. "We're tailgating. We don't see any change in what we had prior to COVID. Now, we're hopeful that we don't end up in a situation where we have a huge spike as a result of the Delta variant. But right now, we're all the way live. We're a full stadium, full tailgating, full nine yards.

"Obviously, we're in a good spot right now relative to the positivity rate. I'm concerned that our vaccinations are low compared to where we would like them to be. I'm hopeful that we could stay on an upward trajectory toward vaccinations. And hopefully, the COVID-19 variant that has hit our country and is hitting our state doesn't impact us. I don't see any reason why we wouldn't be at full capacity if we stay on this upward trajectory."

### One Year Ago — 2025

Eight months had passed since Ryan Day hoisted his first national championship trophy, and it was time for the Buckeyes to move on to a new season.

For Day, the euphoria of winning the national championship didn't last very long, and the reality of today's college football world hit him fast. His offseason started almost immediately after he landed back in Columbus, and with that also began his preparation for the 2025 season.

"When you spend your career on a vision of what you want and a goal, once you accomplish it, there is certainly a feeling of accomplishment," Day said on July 31, the first day of fall camp. "But soon after that, it's just on to the next thing, and that's what the case was. It was great to see our players and our coaches turn the page and move forward."

As Day said, it was the same attitude for the players. Both during spring practices and in fall camp, he talked about how the players on that year's team wanted to take down some of the national championship reminders from the Woody Hayes Athletic Center. The message from the leaders on the team was that they want to make their own mark that year.

"This team has its own identity," Day said. "They want to have their own identity, but they also want to be the first team ever to go back-to-back national championships at Ohio State."

# Bucks Dominate In Puerto Rico Scrimmages

After getting together for summer workouts, Ohio State was able to head down to Puerto Rico to get a glimpse into what its basketball team will look like playing together this upcoming season.

**COURT REPORT**
**Greg Wilson**

The Buckeyes played in two scrimmages in Puerto Rico on Aug. 2 and 3, earning big victories over Los Boris 1 by a score of 117-75 and Los Boris 2 by a score of 111-73 the next day.

Head coach Jake Diebler was happy with what he saw in Puerto Rico in his team's first live intersquad action.

"We're still learning and understanding, with so many new pieces, who we have, evaluating how we're taking what we worked on all summer into a game and how it's working. Those were good." Diebler said after the Aug. 3 scrimmage. "Then we were looking for an opportunity to see how we responded to some in-game adversity, and we got that today. We were able to spread out minutes really well, which was important, and all in all, it's been a great trip."

In the first game, it was Duquesne transfer Jimmie Williams who led in scoring with 20 points on 6-of-7 shooting from three-point range despite him playing in less than 17 minutes of the game.

Incoming five-star freshman forward Anthony Thompson trailed him with 14 points, with junior guard John Mobley Jr. (13 points), Cal transfer guard Justin Pippen (12) and Memphis transfer guard Curtis Givens III (11) all in double figures for the contest.

Junior center Ivan Njegovan had a game-high 10 rebounds and eight points while sophomore forward Amare Bynum led with seven assists and added three steals.

In the second scrimmage. Mobley led the way with 17 points, with Bynum (16), Pippen (14), Thompson (13), Williams (10) and reclassified five-star freshman guard LJ Smith (10) also reaching double figures.

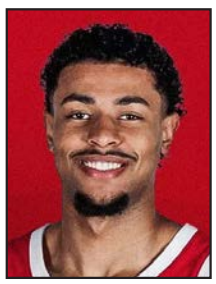
Njegovan again led the way on the boards, this time bringing down 13 rebounds, while Bynum and Pippen tied for the team lead with five assists each.

Josh Ojianwuna was able to see his first game action in Puerto Rico since he tore his ACL during the 2024-25 season with Baylor. He didn't get a shot off in under six minutes of action in the first scrimmage, but in the second contest, he scored four points on 2-of-2 shooting with two rebounds.

## OSU Adds 15th Player To Roster

The Ohio State men's basketball team has made a late addition to its 2026-27 roster to fill its 15th spot, with Argentinian forward Lee Aaliya joining the Buckeyes on Aug. 21.

"Lee is an energetic big who I am excited to have join our Buckeye family," said Diebler. "His experience, athleticism and physicality make him a valuable addition to our program."



Lee Aaliya

Aaliya (6-9) spent the 2024-25 basketball season with Atenas de Cordoba, a club team in Argentina. Over the season, he averaged 7.4 points and 3.5 rebounds per game in 17.5 minutes of action, leading the team to a final four appearance in the South American Basketball Champions League.

Over the last three years, Aaliya has spent time with the Argentinian national team and competed in the most recent AmeriCup and World Cup qualifiers with the team.

At the club level, he has also played with UCAM Murcia in Spain in the Liga ACB, and this past year, he averaged 18.4 points and 9.6 rebounds per game while shooting nearly 60 percent from the floor.

In 2023, he participated in the U19 World Cup and averaged 17.1 points and 9.0 rebounds during the tournament while shooting over 56 percent from the floor in seven games.

The Buckeyes' roster is now complete for this season, as the 21-year-old Aaliya joins the program. He is added to a group of big men that also includes Njegovan, Ojianwuna, Andrija Jelavic and Vuk Lazarevic.

Diebler said previously that after a Colorado judge ruled that players from the 2022 class had another year of eligibility, the Buckeyes were looking at all of their options when it came to a 15th roster spot, which included possibly bringing back former Buckeye Christoph Tilly.

But Diebler said that any addition they would make would need to be beneficial to Ohio State.

"We're certainly going to look at all options, but we're not in a position right now where I'm saying, 'Hey, let's just add whatever,' " Diebler said. "I really like this group. I like this group a lot. We're surveying the landscape, adjusting as times change and new information comes out, and it doesn't mean you have to do something.

"We're going to do what's best for Ohio State, and if that's nothing, then we're going to do nothing. I'm very, very excited about this group we have. If we add somebody, it's going to be someone who raises our level. We're not adding bodies to add bodies."

The ruling could have also given former Buckeye Bruce Thornton another year at Ohio State. Diebler said that he anticipated this ruling and had a preemptive conversation with Thornton about a possible return, which didn't last very long.

"Our conversation lasted about 11 seconds," Diebler said. "I looked at him, he looked at me and I said, 'Fifth year?' and we both knew, 'No, it's time to go on to the next chapter.' And I'm so excited for him."

Although it won't affect Aaliya's status at Ohio State, the fight for eligibility for members of the 2022 recruiting class is still ongoing after another ruling on Aug. 21 made them ineligible again.



SONNY BROCKWAY

**NOT A VACATION — If there was any sightseeing on the Ohio State's men's basketball team's recent trip to Puerto Rico, it was on the basketball court where coach Jake Diebler was able to view his 2026-27 squad in game conditions for the first time in a pair of scrimmages that they won.**

## Smith Reclassified To Develop His Game

Smith was a late reclassification to join the 2026 recruiting class after having been committed to the Buckeyes in the 2027 class.

He joined the team for summer workouts, and when he spoke with the media, he said his decision came down to simply wanting to develop his game at the college level.

"I was ready to get better at the college level and develop my game," Smith said. "During the winter, I was worried about school ball at the time at Oak Hill and staying in (the 2027 class). Spring came around, playing AAU ball, and I felt like I was done with high school and ready to go to college."

Diebler spoke about Smith previously and said that it was the five-star's family who initially inquired about reclassifying, and after months of talking about it, they and Diebler all decided it was the right move for both Smith and Ohio State.

But with what looks to be some good depth on the team this year, Smith will have to work hard for his playing time despite being such a highly rated prospect.

However, Diebler is still expecting him to make some sort of impact as a freshman.

"He's got a high basketball IQ, he's talented and he's got a skill set that will translate right away," Diebler said. "In my mind, there's a baseline level of impact I'm expecting and then leaving room for this ceiling that he's ultimately going to push up."

Smith said that it was tough to adjust to the college game for a few days, but it didn't take him long to understand where he had to improve.

"The first couple of days it was a little rough getting adapted to the physicality and the speed, but now it's starting to slow down and it's getting a little easier for me," Smith said in July.

Diebler agreed with Smith but said the freshman was quick to adjust.

"The first couple of weeks for him were moving a little fast," Diebler said. "That's one of the common things he and I talked about, just that the game was fast. We're starting to see it slow down for him a little bit. I've been impressed with the consistency he works at. He shows up every day

and brings it."

### Alex Smith Trying To Improve Defensively

When freshman forward Alex Smith spoke with the media, he talked about how it was a dream for him to play at Ohio State as a kid from Columbus, but now that he's in scarlet and gray on the court, he knows that he has to improve to actually get on the floor this season as a true freshman.

"Defensively a little bit, and working on adapting to the physicality, playing stronger in the paint," Smith said about where he and the OSU coaches believe he needs to improve his game. "I'm focused on defense right now. That's my main piece."

Smith was enrolled at Upper Arlington through his junior year but transferred to Prolific Prep in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., for his senior year, where he averaged 8.8 points and 4.2 rebounds per game. He said that experience was helpful in getting him prepared to play at the college level.

"It prepared me a lot," he said. "Going from a public school to prep really challenges you mentally. You are away from home, and you are playing against top players every day in practice."

Now Smith is getting that same challenge at Ohio State, an opportunity that he is thankful for.

"Being from Columbus, it's a lot of kids' dreams to be able to play at Ohio State," he said. "For me to be able to do that is really crazy."

### OSU To Play In Outdoor Exhibition

Since BSB last went to press, the Buckeyes were revealed to be part of a four-team doubleheader exhibition that will take place outdoors.

The exhibition on Oct. 7 will consist of a game between Ohio State and Cincinnati and another between Xavier and Dayton and will be played at the Lindner Family Tennis Center as part of the CareSource Invitational, an event that raises awareness and funds for mental health and suicide prevention.

"I think this is great for the basketball community in Ohio," Diebler said. "It's been a long time coming. I've been vocal about this since I first got the job and wanted something like this to happen. There are so many parts to making something like this happen. It takes a lot of people, and I'm just excited. Everyone got together to make this happen."

There is a contingency plan in case of inclement weather on Oct. 7, which would move the event to UD Arena in Dayton, but Diebler is hoping they are able to get the exhibition in outside.

"Getting all four teams together and doing it in a venue like that is exciting," Diebler said. "I'm excited that it's outdoors. I've never been part of a live game outside like that.

"We used to play outside all the time growing up. I know it won't be the same surface, but I'm excited about it. You'll have different things, wind, all that stuff. But who cares? It's going to be fun to play outside."

But ultimately, Diebler is excited to be able to help out a great cause.

"This is for something that's bigger than basketball." he said. "It's great for the basketball community in Ohio, but it's also great for what CareSource is doing."

Ohio State's exhibition against the Bearcats tips off at 3 p.m. with the game between the Musketeers and Flyers following at 5:30 p.m.

### Nonconference Schedule Revealed

Basketball season is slowly starting to creep up with just over two months to go before Ohio State gets back on the hardwood in hopes of making another trip to the NCAA Tournament.

Part of the path that the Buckeyes will have to take to get there has been revealed, with the nonconference slate being made official by Ohio State on Aug. 19.

After exhibition games against Cincinnati on Oct. 7 and Butler on Oct. 25, Ohio State will head to Salt Lake City to match up against BYU in a game that will be considered to be a neutral-site contest.

The Buckeyes then face off against in-state opponent Youngstown State on Nov. 6 at home before hosting Marshall on Nov. 9.

Another tough game will be up next for Ohio State when it goes on the road to play against UConn for the first half of a home-and-home series that will be finished next season when OSU hosts the Huskies.

After that, the Buckeyes are back at the Schottenstein Center for four straight games, hosting Prairie View A&M on Nov. 16, UMBC on Nov. 19, Vanderbilt on Nov. 24 and Lipscomb on Nov. 29.

Ohio State goes on the road on Dec. 12 to finish the back half of a home-and-home series against Notre Dame, the first half of which Ohio State won last season.

Then, the Buckeyes return home again to take on Stony Brook on Dec. 15 before heading to Madison Square Garden in New York for the CBS Sports Classic on Dec. 19, where they take on Kansas.

The nonconference slate ends on Dec. 22 when Mississippi Valley State heads to Columbus.

Ohio State's Big Ten opponents have already been revealed, but the dates of conference games have not yet been settled.

### Other Notes And Tidbits

- Thornton got off to a strong start in the NBA Summer League. In his first game with the Houston Rockets, he scored a team-high 27 points on 7-of-18 shooting. He followed that up with 17 points on 6-of-17 shooting in a loss to the Toronto Raptors. Thornton played in five games in the summer league and finished with 18.6 points per game, 4.6 rebounds and 4.4 assists.
- There will be a new video board at the Schottenstein Center for Ohio State's upcoming season of basketball after several upgrades were made to the arena. The board is more than 7,200 square feet and is accompanied by a new audio system and new underbelly displays on the scoreboard. There will be more video display boards throughout the arena as well. The audio system upgrades were already completed as BSB went to press, with the rest of the upgrades set be done in time for the upcoming basketball season.



OHIO STATE® INSIDER

Continued From Page 9

In 2025-26, Smith-Njigba registered 119 receptions to go along with an NFL-leading 1,793 receiving yards, which also led the league. His 10 receiving touchdowns were tied with Los Angeles Rams wide receiver Puka Nacua for the sixth-most in the NFL.

### Smith, Jones Make Freaks List

The Athletic's Bruce Feldman released his annual "Freaks List" for 2026, which ranks the freak athletes in college football.

Ohio State had two players make the list this year, with Smith ranked No. 2 in the country and walk-on cornerback Brenten "Inky" Jones at No. 30.

Smith trailed only South Carolina wide receiver Nyck Harbor.

Feldman referred to Smith as "the best player on this list and in the country," and talked about his eye-popping statistics, but it was some of Smith's measurables that really made Feldman turn his head.

"The 6-3½-inch Smith is bigger than he was last year, weighing 224 pounds," Feldman wrote. "His explosiveness for that size is reminiscent of another Freak WR from South Florida, Pro Football Hall of Famer Andre Johnson. In a program stocked with high-level athletes, Smith – a super-sized wideout – ran a 1.44-second 10-yard sprint, fastest in the Buckeyes program.

"Smith's 11-foot broad jump, 38½-inch vertical jump and 23.5 mph on the GPS are rare for a wideout this big. Even more eye-catching is the 6.84-second L-drill time he ran this offseason. Only one player at last year's NFL combine, Alabama WR Germie Bernard (who is almost 20 pounds lighter), ran a quicker time."

Smith's 6.84-second three-cone drill would have been the second-fastest time at this year's NFL scouting combine, with only Bernard topping that time at 6.71 seconds.

Jones was a bit more of a surprise to see on Feldman's list, but Feldman said that he couldn't ignore some of the numbers Jones has put up.

"With the numbers this guy keeps putting up, he definitely belongs on here. At 6-2, 216 pounds, Jones is a giant corner and gunner on special teams. He is a product of the Buckeyes program," Feldman wrote. "His top-end speed is 23.52 mph. Jones, a standout basketball player in high school who set his school's record in the 400, broad jumped 11 feet this offseason and clocked a 1.47 10-yard split. He bench-pressed 385 pounds and squatted 555."

Jones may be a walk-on, but his athleticism is undeniable. In four seasons at Ohio State, he has gotten into 23 games, playing in 12 contests during the 2024 national championship season. All of that time has come with the special teams unit.

### Mitchell Breaks 20-Point Record

Former Ohio State and current Indiana Fever guard Kelsey Mitchell is a WNBA record-holder. On Aug. 20, Mitchell had her 21st consecutive game scoring 20-plus points to break Las Vegas Aces center A'ja Wilson's record.

Mitchell made WNBA history in the Fever's 91-85 loss to the Dallas Wings with one of her highest-scoring performances of the season. The Cincinnati native scored 37 points, while shooting 9 of 18 from the field, including 4 of 7 from three-point range. Mitchell also connected on all 15 of her free throws in the loss.

She continued her streak on Aug. 22 with 25 points in a loss to the New York Liberty.

Her performance against the Wings was only one game of what was an incredible stretch for Mitchell. From June 22 to Aug. 22, Mitchell scored at least 20 points in every single game and eclipsed the 30-point mark in five games.

Averaging 24.7 points on 50.9 percent shooting, including 44.8 percent from three-point range, 2.7 assists and 1.7 rebounds per game, Mitchell is having a career-best season in the WNBA and has already broken her own franchise record for most points scored in a single season.

Mitchell has helped lead the Fever to a 24-14 record, the best mark in the Eastern Conference and the fourth-best record in the WNBA as of Aug. 22.

### OSU Gains Commitment From Four-Star

The Ohio State women's basketball team gained a commitment from four-star small forward Mya Wilson on Aug. 3. Wilson, a native of Maplewood, Minn., is the No. 44 player in the country, No. 11 small forward and No. 1 player from Minnesota. She is the Buckeyes' first pledge from the 2027 recruiting class.

The 5-11 small forward chose the Buckeyes over Iowa, Minnesota and TCU.

At Hill-Murray School last year, Wilson averaged 25.1 points per game, 10.1 rebounds, 4.7 assists and 3.0 steals per game ahead of the state tournament. She is her school's all-time leader in points and rebounds.

### Fleming Receives Sentence For ATV Crash

Former Ohio State wide receiver Julian Fleming received a sentence on July 22 of nine to 23 months in prison for a fatal ATV crash in May of 2025 that killed his girlfriend, Alyssa Boyd. Fleming will also have six months of probation upon release.

Fleming pleaded guilty in April to driving an ATV under the influence and involuntary manslaughter, both of which are misdemeanors. That was part of a plea agreement that dismissed 11 other charges.

Police said that Fleming was driving the ATV while under the influence and hit a deer that jumped into the road. The Bradford County Criminal Court in Pennsylvania said that he reported to the county correctional facility on July 20 to begin serving his sentence.

Fleming spent four seasons at Ohio State before transferring to Penn State for the 2024 season.

# Buckeyes Face Tough Road To Playoffs

In college basketball or the NFL, this wouldn't matter. But does the difficulty of Ohio State's schedule threaten to cost the Buckeyes a chance to make the playoffs?

There really is little doubt, as we sit here in August, that Ohio State is and will remain one of the 12 best teams in the country this year.

**EXNER POINT**
**Rich Exner**

But what if OSU loses three games and a team like Notre Dame with its powder-puff schedule goes 11-1? What if Indiana, again absent any meaningful nonconference test, loses to Ohio State but finishes 12-1 or 11-2? What if Penn State, another school with a pretty weak schedule, goes 12-1 or 11-2?

Would the college football committee set aside the number of losses and look at the body of work? Just the thought of that not happening should make Buckeye fans cringe.

The possibility is a solid argument to back the Big Ten's plan to expand the playoffs to 24 teams. That would encourage scheduling good games, minimizing the impact of a loss to a big-time opponent. But that's not going to happen this year.

So with this schedule, the Buckeyes will have to play better than a lot of teams with far weaker schedules to be certain of a playoff spot.

Sure, one might say, "Just win all your games." But the short history of the playoffs tells us that the teams with the best records often aren't the best teams at the end. Remember those Ohio State national championships in 2014 and 2024?

The Buckeyes' schedule this year includes six opponents in the top 25 of the preseason coaches poll, a number surpassed only by the seven for Texas. Yes, the same Texas team that missed out on the playoffs last year in part because it scheduled, and lost to, Ohio State. (Losing to 4-8 Florida didn't help Texas either.)

The Buckeyes will play Oregon (second in the preseason poll), Texas (fourth), Indiana (sixth), USC (14th), Michigan (16th) and Iowa (22nd).

Going 3-3 in those games and winning the rest, for a 9-3 season, certainly would merit being a playoff selection. But here's guessing there's a good chance OSU would be left out in that scenario.

I did a little exercise to try to get a handle on just how daunting the Ohio State schedule is this year. I think it illustrates the huge disparity.

What I did was take the preseason coaches poll and assign points for each opponent for each team, based on the opponents' ranking – 25 for playing the top-ranked team (Ohio State), 24 for playing No. 2 Oregon, 23 for playing No. 3 Georgia, and so on.

No points were assigned for unranked opponents. Those should be considered easy games.

Among what would be considered at this point serious contenders for the national championship, no one has a tougher road – based on this comparison – than Ohio State and Texas.

Here's how it turned out. The numbers to the left are each team's ranking in the preseason poll, followed by its schedule ranking in parentheses (there were some ties).

1. (4) – Ohio State has the fourth-toughest schedule, with three opponents ranked in the top six in the country, and six ranked opponents overall. Schedule strength points 92.

2. (13) – Oregon, with four ranked opponents, 54 points.

3. (15) – Georgia, four ranked opponents, 49 points.

4. (2) – Texas, seven ranked opponents, 98 points.

5. (17) – Notre Dame, three ranked opponents, 36 points.

6. (13) – Indiana, four ranked opponents, 54 points.

7. (21) – Miami, two ranked opponents, 24 points.

8. (8) – Texas A&M, six ranked opponents, 76 points.

9. (5) – Oklahoma, six ranked opponents, 90 points.

10. (8) – Ole Miss, five ranked opponents, 76 points.

11. (12) – Alabama, four ranked opponents, 62 points.

12. (25) – Texas Tech, one ranked opponent, 2 points.

13. (7) – LSU, six ranked opponents, 82 points.

14. (6) – USC, five ranked opponents, 85 points.

15. (20) – BYU, two ranked opponents, 26 points.

16. (1) – Michigan, six ranked opponents, 99 points.

17. (19) – Penn State, three ranked opponents, 29 points.

18. (11) – Tennessee, four ranked opponents, 68 points.

19. (10) – Washington, five ranked opponents, 69 points.

20. (22) – SMU, one ranked opponent, 21 points.

21. (24) – Utah, two ranked opponents, 13 points.

22. (16) – Iowa, three ranked opponents, 42 points.

23. (18) – Clemson, two ranked opponents, 32 points.

24. (23) – Houston, two ranked opponents, 19 points.

25. (3) – Missouri, five ranked opponents, 96 points.

Here's a closer look at some of the teams that may find themselves in the playoff discussions with easy schedules.

Notre Dame's only ranked opponents are No. 7 Miami, No. 15 BYU and No. 20 SMU. Anything more than one loss should disqualify Notre Dame from playoff consideration.

Miami, likewise, has a cream-puff schedule. The Hurricanes' only ranked opponents are No. 5 Notre Dame and No. 23 Clemson.

And Texas Tech does that one better. Its only ranked opponent is No. 24 Houston. The Red Raiders should be required to go undefeated.

When it comes to working their way into the Big Ten Championship Game, it appears no one has an easier path than the Penn State Nittany Lions.

Penn State does not play Ohio State, does not play Oregon and does not play Indiana. The only three ranked opponents on PSU's schedule are No. 14 USC, No. 16 Michigan and No. 19 Washington.

Compare that with USC, which, like Penn State, could be considered to be in the next grouping in the Big Ten after Ohio State, Oregon and Indiana.

USC has a much tougher road than PSU, facing No. 1 Ohio State, No. 2 Oregon, No. 6 Indiana, No. 17 Penn State and No. 19 Washington.

## Around the NFL

A few Buckeye sightings were interesting as the NFL launched its exhibition season, none more surprising to me than an old name resurfacing as a running back in the New York Jets' camp.

This is early stuff from meaningless games, but nevertheless worth a check-in.

Chip Trayanum ran three times for 4 yards in the Jets' opener. I had almost forgotten about Trayanum, the guy whose last-second 1-yard plunge secured the win at Notre Dame in 2023. Well, he's now a 24-year-old undrafted rookie after two years at Arizona State, two at Ohio State, one at Kentucky and one at Toledo.

Will Howard, a sixth-round draft pick of the Pittsburgh Steelers a year ago, finally got on the field. He missed all of last year with a hand injury. Howard completed 7 of 9 passes for 86 yards against the Packers. Howard is competing with Drew Allar, a third-round pick this year from Penn State, for the backup spot. Allar completed 10 of 13 passes for 153 yards and two touchdowns.

Kyle McCord, the 2023 Buckeye starter who played in 2024 at Syracuse, was also in that same game. Starting for the Green Bay Packers, McCord completed 12 of 16 passes for 102 yards. Both Packers starter Jordan Love and Steelers starter Aaron Rodgers sat out the game.

Justin Fields is another ex-Buckeye quarterback hoping to make the grade as an NFL backup this season. He completed 4 of 4 passes for 41 yards in the Chiefs' preseason opener. Most of the QB time went to third-round draft pick Garrett Nussmeier from LSU. Nussmeier was 13 of 19 for 98 yards.

Carnell Tate had three passes thrown his way, but the first-round draft pick didn't end up with any catches in the Tennessee Titans' preseason opener.

C.J. Donaldson is trying to make it as an undrafted rookie for the New Orleans Saints. He carried the ball four times for zero yards.

Quinshon Judkins looked like his old powerful running back self in returning from a dislocated ankle and broken leg for the Cleveland Browns, even if his numbers were meager – four carries for 9 yards.

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**BUCKEYE GAMEDAY** Memories: A new book of short stories about humorous gameday experiences in the 1960s through the 2010s by Tim Sullivan. Available on Amazon.com.

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

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**BUCKEYE CLIFFHANGERS,** a new book from Tim Sullivan covering football seasons from 1916 through the 2024 national championship (Harley to Howard). During that period, the Buckeyes participated in 116 games that were decided in the last minute of play or the last play of the game. This book details the key plays and play makers in each of them. Available on Amazon.com.

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# He'd Be 'Line' If He's Not Worried About Offense

## THE VIEW FROM 15TH & HIGH
## Frank Moskowitz, Publisher

Well, the good news is that Ohio State is returning four of its five starters on the offensive line. The bad news is that Ohio State is returning four of its five starters on the offensive line.

Now before you go off thinking I am being "too dang negative," as former coach John Cooper used to accuse Buckeye Sports Bulletin of being, the big guys up front still have time to redeem themselves. It's just that I have been haunted all offseason by the way the season played out in 2025.

The Buckeye line and offense rolled throughout what proved to be a relatively soft regular-season schedule, especially with the unexpected meltdown of Penn State. But when the competition stepped up a notch, when the chips were on the table, the OSU offense faltered. Everyone quickly points to the fact that Heisman finalist Julian Sayin, who had been sacked only six times total in the regular season, was sacked 10 times, five in each game, in the postseason against Indiana and Miami (Fla.). Now that's definitely on the offense line, with a bit of responsibility to Sayin for his lack of mobility in the backfield.

People tend to forget that Ohio State also struggled with the run game in the postseason, failing to gain 100 yards on the ground in either game. Now some of that has to do with the negative yards from the sacks, but even if you take those sack yards out of the equation, the Buckeyes still failed to gain 100 yards in either game. They had 91 positive yards against IU and 89 against the 'Canes. The offensive line is certainly a big part of that performance. As an aside, I have always maintained that if you hold the No. 2 team in the country – which eventual national champion Indiana was at the time – to 13 points and have what is supposed to be a high-powered offense featuring Sayin and the best receiver tandem in the country, you should win the ballgame!

I'm curious to know if anyone besides me thought back circa 2023 when BSB guest recruiting analyst Bill Greene was on a rant for a year or more about the recruiting by then-Ohio State offensive line coach Justin Frye. It was Greene's contention for months that Frye was bringing in good offensive linemen, who could control most teams, but not the "elite" (one of Urban Meyer's favorite words) linemen who were equipped to lead the Buckeyes to Big Ten or national championships.

I randomly pulled the Oct. 14, 2023, issue of BSB, but it could have been virtually any issue from that era. The Buckeyes had been struggling to land blue-chip offensive linemen Brandon Baker from California and Jordan Seaton from Florida, and Greene was on his anti-Frye crusade.

"Justin Frye, most of his success recruiting offensive linemen has come from recruiting inside the state of Ohio. And that is just not going to get it done to build the kind of offensive line that wins national championships – or even beats Michigan," Greene said. "They're not going to be able to get it done just recruiting the state of Ohio with the offensive line. They don't do it with any other position group on the team. It won't work with wide receivers. It won't work with running backs. It certainly won't work with offensive linemen. They need to be able to recruit nationally. They need to be able to get Baker and Seaton and dudes like that.

"So we'll see. I mean, they got rid of (former offensive line coach Greg Studrawa) in part because of his recruiting and what happened on the field. And I think Justin Frye is going to get a similar fate if his recruiting doesn't ramp up. Like I said, you're just not going to beat the top teams in America with these Ohio projects on the offensive line. It just won't work. And I think Ryan Day knows that too."

If you read the whole series of Greene's reports in our "Ask An Analyst" feature, it wasn't just that Frye was mostly getting homegrown talent, but that he was repeatedly losing out on elite talent like Baker and Seaton in general.

Frye voluntarily left Ohio State in February of 2025 to become the offensive line coach with the NFL's Arizona Cardinals, where he would not have to recruit.

Frye would have had his hands in recruiting most of Ohio States current offensive linemen. My question is, did Greene's dire prediction about Ohio State's offensive line vs. college football's elite become a reality in the games against Indiana?

Ohio State's rugged 2026 schedule is going to put the big guys up front to the real test.

### I'm Not Sold Here Either

Another thing I am keeping an eye on is the run game, which of course is linked to the play of the offensive line. I am keeping an eye on Bo Jackson in particular. A 1,000-yard season – 1,090 to be exact – is nothing to sneeze at, especially from a freshman. But I never felt that Jackson really took charge of a game like the great running backs do. On the upside, his highest rushing yardage of the season, 122 yards on 17 carries, was posted against rival Michigan. He also had four receptions for 49 yards in that game. Once the big boys came around in the postseason he carried 17 times for 83 yards (4.9 average) against the Hoosiers and 11 times for 55 yards (5.0) against the Hurricanes.

Elsewhere in this issue, longtime OSU beat writer Doug Lesmerises seems to agree with me about the offensive line and the running game.

"Are we sure the run game is going to be at the level that it needs to be? And that's tied to the offensive line, but to me, that's primarily about the ability of the running backs to be dynamic, to get yards on their own, turn 3 yards into 6, 6 yards into 15 and 15 yards into 50. I think there are legitimate questions about that," Lesmerises told our Bobby Gorbett.

"Now, do I think they have to have a great run game to win the national title or compete for the national title? No, I don't. The passing game with Sayin and Smith, and the ability of the defense ought to be good enough. I don't think it has to be a spectacular run game, but it is probably the thing I have the most uncertainty about."

I can't help but think the veteran reporter is talking about Jackson when he mentions turning shorter runs into longer runs.

Another question I have about the run game and situations where the O-line breaks down (even the best offensive lines have an occasional breakdown) is whether Ryan Day is actually going to let Sayin run with the ball, as the coaches have been threatening this spring and fall.

As I have said repeatedly in this space, if you never let the quarterback run, it's like playing 10 against 11 on defense. Sayin doesn't have to run the ball as many times as Braxton Miller or J.T. Barrett. Just show the run enough to keep the defense honest.

If you recall, C.J. Stroud was sometimes accused of not being willing or unable to run the ball. I think Stroud was a good runner, when allowed. He just wasn't generally allowed. With Sayin, I don't know. We've never really seen him try. Last season he was credited with minus-44 yards rushing, but much of that had to do with those sacks. Even so, he had only 74 positive yards with a long of 12.

I am puzzled by a coach who will risk injury by leaving his starting quarterback in until late in a blowout but is uncomfortable exposing his QB to the occasional run. Maybe new offensive coordinator Arthur Smith, known to be a run-oriented coach, will be the one to give the OSU quarterback a chance to tuck and run on a called play or improvising.

### Did Anyone Read This

I always enjoy our "From the Pages of BSB" feature, on page 39 of this issue. I'm always interested in things I've forgotten, and I am also on the lookout for things from the past that are somehow relevant to today.

Forty years ago, coach Earle Bruce was preparing for the 1986 season, and he had this to say: "First of all," Bruce told the gathered media when assessing his Buckeyes, "we'll start off with a question mark because obviously the great question mark is our offensive line. That's been the thing that's created a winning record at Ohio State – a great offensive line."

See? Earle agrees with me.

### Stringer And Pace

Here I go with the offensive line again.

In a recent edition of our "Reprint Thursday" feature on the electronic BuckeyeSports.com, where we reprint stories from the BSB archives, we noted the tragic passing of former Buckeye offensive lineman Korey Stringer upon the 25th anniversary of his death from heatstroke at a Minnesota Vikings practice on Aug. 1, 2001.

Stringer was the first offensive lineman I found myself putting the binoculars on and isolating on for an entire play. I enjoyed watching him dominate his man, play after play. He wasn't as flashy as his teammate Orlando Pace and he wasn't going to run downfield 50 yards to level a hapless opponent, as Pace was known to do. But I believe he was every bit as effective as his more-decorated teammate.

I am always amazed that a team that featured both Pace and Stringer on the same offense line finished just 9-4, as the Buckeyes did in 1994. That would be like having John Hicks and Jim Parker on the same line.

Stringer's plight as far as his legacy at Ohio State because of being overshadowed by Pace (and at 6-7, 325 according to the always reliable Wikipedia, he cast a long shadow), reminds me of the historical plight of Buckeye running back Tim Spencer.

Spencer is one of the all-time great Ohio State running backs, but he doesn't always get the recognition that some of the other great Buckeye backs receive. I have always maintained that he doesn't get his due because he came fairly quickly after Archie Griffin and was immediately followed by Keith Byars. He kind of got lost in the great running backs shuffle.

### Thank You, Thank You, Thank You

Buckeye Sports Bulletin readers have really stepped up over the summer in our efforts to keep BSB "vibrant and viable" in a world that is difficult for most of us, especially those in the publishing world. Readers have been paying full price for their subscriptions when they are entitled to a discount, making donations, and signing up to be a VIP, the most visible and effective way to support BSB. And all the while, this generosity has been underwriting the subscriptions of those who are genuinely unable to pay full price.

We have always been able to help those readers in need, finding a promotion that suits their budget. But some of you who take advantage of cheaper promotions are just haggling for a better price. I know because I speak to you every day on the phone.

In this issue I am targeting those of you who take advantage of special discounts year after year. We are asking you to donate $20 in return for the money you have saved through the years. Not to sound like one of the late night-charities, but that is less than six cents a day. Just give us a call at (614) 486-2202 or (800) 760-2862 to donate by credit card or you can send a check or credit card information to P.O. Box 12453, Columbus, Ohio, 43212. That amount may not seem like a lot, but if 1,000 subscribers who have been regularly taking advantage of discounts send an extra $20, that alone would be enough to print and mail three of the 24 issues of BSB.

Remember, publications at such rival schools as Michigan and Penn State are now monthly, and I don't think that's a schedule our readers want. Our friends at Notre Dame are the last publication besides us still publishing weekly during football season, and even they only come out 18 times a year, compared to BSB's 24.

Thanks again for everyone's help.

The other thing that readers have been doing this summer is upgrading their subscriptions to first-class mail in an envelope for football season only, a cost-effective way to improve your mail service. We have been offering readers a last chance to upgrade at the old rates. The upgrade through the Michigan game is $35, and you can upgrade through the playoffs and the Football Recruiting Wrap-Up in February for $45. Use the numbers or address above. Last call!!

Remember, we have actually lowered the *annual* rate for first-class mail. That's how serious we are about getting you to upgrade.

As I have said before, one initiative I am not going to stop pushing is asking BSB subscribers to buy a subscription for their local barber shop or library for just $32.95. It's a great way to spread the word about Buckeye Sports Bulletin and provide a community service.

### Former Receiver Hall's New Book

Former Ohio State receiver Roy Hall, who is active in the Columbus community through his Driven Foundation, has a new book out titled "Fight Through It: The Battles, Breakthroughs, and Beauty of Becoming Resilient Enough to Never Give Up."

"Fight Through It" is a hand on your shoulder for people who need a lifeline. It's for the leader who is tired, the parent who is overwhelmed, the athlete who is pressing, the employee who feels stuck, the believer who is trying to keep faith up while life keeps hitting low.

The book features a foreword by Ohio State football coach Ryan Day and is available on Amazon and Barnes & Noble and also at fightthroughit.com.


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