

Cotton Bowl Analysis: What Worked Well, What Didn't Work



What Worked Well

Missouri quarterback Brady Cook was named the most valuable player on the offense for the Tigers in their 14-3 win over Ohio State in the Cotton Bowl, but his specific outing rarely looked like a dominant one due to the pressure the Buckeyes were throwing at him.

Ohio State was in Cook's face throughout the contest, finishing with six sacks of Missouri's signal caller and three courtesy of junior defensive end Jack Sawyer. It was arguably Sawyer's most dominant outing in three seasons with the Buckeyes, as his three takedowns of Brady tied an Ohio State bowl record, and it shattered his personal record as he had notched a high of only 1½ sacks in two previous games.

In addition to Sawyer, two other defensive linemen - juniors Ty Hamilton and J.T. Tuimoloau - finished with a sack, and the group in total registered the best outing of the season for defensive line coach Larry Johnson's unit with junior Tyleik Williams also totaling four tackles. Cook finished 11 of 18 passing for 128 yards and a touchdown and rushed 19 times for 66 yards, but none of those plays came easy as Sawyer and his fellow juniors made life difficult for Cook and his offensive linemen.

What Didn't Work

Nearly all of Ohio State's troubles in the Cotton Bowl - at least outside of special teams - were due to struggles on the offensive line that had a less-than-ideal cap to an already challenging season. Head coach Ryan Day and offensive line coach Justin Frye opted for a change in the final game of the season, shifting right guard Matthew Jones to center in his final career game and having fifth-year guard Enokk Vimahi step in for just his second career start at right guard. This sent regular center Carson Hinzman to the bench, a move that Day said was because of practice leading up to the Cotton Bowl.

Given that it was the first time this season that starting five had taken the field, it was of little surprise

that the unit struggled throughout the contest. Missouri notched four sacks in the win and 10 tackles for loss, making a living in Ohio State's backfield. It led to an early set of hits on quarterback Devin Brown that eliminated him from the game, and the quality of play did not improve once true freshman signal caller Lincoln Kienholz was thrown into the mix. Most of the issues came from blitzes and pass rushers sneaking around the edge, but there was plenty of open territory in the interior as left guard Donovan Jackson, Jones and Vimahi ceded their share of big defensive plays.

The offensive line also failed to find a rhythm in the rushing game. The Buckeyes averaged only 2.9 yards per attempt, and leading rusher TreVeyon Henderson had just 72 yards on 19 attempts (3.8 yards per rush) after totaling 39 yards in the first quarter. Penalties also remained an issue, with both tackles - Josh Simmons on the left and Josh Fryar on the right - hit with false-start flags, a troubling trend throughout the season that continued in the Cotton Bowl.

Play Of The Game

Either of Missouri's 7-yard touchdowns in the fourth quarter - running back Cody Schrader's rush with 14:55 left or Luther Burden III's reception from Cook with 5:12 left - would qualify as a big play, but perhaps the biggest shift in the game came on a big play by Missouri late in the third quarter.

Facing first-and-10 from their own 35-yard line, the Tigers provided the longest play of the game for either team when Cook hit wide receiver Marquis Johnson for a 50-yard gain, the longest play allowed this season by Ohio State. Cornerback Denzel Burke got lost in coverage as Johnson sneaked down the sideline, with fellow cornerback Jordan Hancock also trailing behind the play, and Johnson got Missouri down to Ohio State's 15-yard line. Then, after a penalty on each team over the next two plays and an 8-yard rush by Cook to end the third quarter, Schrader scored the Tigers' first touchdown of the game, one that turned out to be enough for victory over the Buckeyes. It was arguably the most exciting play of the contest outside of the scoring plays, and it doubled as the first major strike from either team, one for which Ohio State did not have a response.