

BUCKEYE SPORTS BULLETIN

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Vol. 40, No. 14

"For The Buckeye Fan Who Needs To Know More"

Jan. 30, 2021



COURTESY OF THE OHIO STATE DEPT. OF ATHLETICS

B1G BUCKETS – Junior guard Duane Washington, who leads Ohio State with 15.9 points per game in Big Ten play, scored nine points and dished a team-high four assists in the Buckeyes' 74-62 win at Wisconsin on Jan. 23.

Basketball Buckeyes On The Rise

By **JOE DEMPSEY**
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

When the Ohio State men's basketball team dropped a 77-60 loss at Minnesota on Jan. 3, many doubters became vocal about the team's inefficiencies despite early-season wins over Notre Dame, UCLA and Rutgers.

Chris Holtmann's squad responded with three straight impressive Big Ten wins, an 11-point win at Rutgers, a 10-point victory over Northwestern and a six-point win at Illinois – all without starting point guard C.J. Walker.

After beating the Wildcats by double digits Jan. 13 to avenge a crushing 71-70 Dec. 26 loss, Holtmann was asked if he had expected so much early success for his group.

"I try to stay away from big-picture view in the middle of the season," Holtmann said. "The biggest reason is I don't ever want to fall prey to being a prisoner of the moment. And I think after games, we can be emotional one way or another and make statements that are too emotional.

"The reality is we've improved, we've grown, we've gotten better," Holtmann continued. "As I've said from the very beginning, I really enjoy coaching this group. But we've got a lot of progress that we need to make to play in the best league in the country. That's all our focus is on is how can we – as simple as it sounds – how can we take from this, work on film tomorrow."

A key for Ohio State has been not getting too high

after wins or too low after losses. Holtmann's squad collapsed down the stretch at Northwestern Dec. 26, but while the players learned from the loss, the coach did not allow them to dwell on it.

"Coach Holt's the type of guy where we'll come in the day after a win or a loss, and we'll watch the film, break it down, and then after that game, we move on to our next opponent," junior wing Justin Ahrens said after avenging the loss Jan. 13. "We don't think much about that game. We put it in the past – take what we can learn and move on. Obviously, as players in practice, we know that we had a number out for them because we lost a tough one up there at Northwestern. What we learned from that loss up there was that we've just got to play smarter and harder in the last four minutes of the game, and we went out there and did that tonight and ended with a good result."

Following the win over the Wildcats, Holtmann was asked about how his team flipped the script on an opponent who had outplayed it down the stretch in December.

Holtmann said. "That was the players – their fiber, their poise, their commitment to playing the right way and toughness down the stretch." Holtmann said. "We're learning as a coaching staff about this group, and they deserve all the credit for that."

After the Buckeyes beat one of the nation's most talented teams in Illinois, they faced adversity again in their next game against Purdue on Jan. 19. They were

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COVID-19 Dominates 2020 Storylines

By **WYATT CROSER**
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

When the Buckeye Sports Bulletin staff decided on the top Ohio State storylines of 2020, there was a theme within the majority of the picks that took away from the actual sports moments from the year, and that was the COVID-19 pandemic.

Just as it continued to impact and creep into every single sporting event that took place over the past nine months, COVID impacted and crept into more than a handful of the staff's picks for the top stories list. Instead of keeping it within the list, BSB decided to make the coronavirus its own story – The Story of the Year, if you will. It is the story of how the Ohio State sports world and the sports world in general has been affected by a virus that has infected 25 million people and killed over 410,000 in the United States alone.

Even though the first confirmed case of COVID-19 in the United States occurred a little less than two months prior on Jan. 20, the first domino in the sports world fell on March 10, when the Ivy League announced it would be canceling the conference's men's and women's basketball tournaments, the first conference to pull the trigger on a cancellation due to the coronavirus.

The next day, the NCAA said there would be no fans in the stands at the upcoming basketball tournaments and Ohio State announced the cancellation of the spring football game. A day later, the Big Ten canceled the remainder of the men's basketball tournament, and later in the day, the NCAA officially pulled the plug on its basketball tournaments and Olympic sport national championships altogether.

Ohio State historian Jack Park told BSB that he was a speaker at a luncheon club for the Pro Football Hall of Fame in Canton, Ohio, on March 9, the day before the entire sports world came crumbling down.

"I can remember finishing up that speech and talking about how excited I was that spring football was just around the corner, and I was already looking ahead to the spring game, and we were going to have a great season and I'm looking forward to going to Oregon," Park said. "Of course, that all got canceled."

What followed in the next few months, at least for Ohio State, was a lot of the same: The Big Ten suspending all organized team activities until April 6, then until May 4, then until June 1 before there was finally a breakthrough on June 8, when Ohio State players returned to campus for voluntary workouts.

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From The Message Board

Of the several players opting to return to Ohio State for one more season, including juniors such as wide receiver Chris Olave and tight end Jeremy Ruckert or seniors such as offensive tackle Thayer Munford and defensive tackle Haskell Garrett, we asked the readers on BuckeyeSports.com, as well as staff members, who they think will have the greatest impact in 2021. Here are some of the responses:

"One hundred percent Olave. Might be one of the best wide receivers ever to don the Scarlet and Gray and I 100 percent thought he was gone, so it was a huge surprise."

– Tiffin Buckeye

"Has to be Olave. An offense is only as good as its quarterback and having an experienced cool customer like Olave is bound to make the life of whoever Ohio State's inexperienced quarterback is easier."

– Poster That Harley Built

"I expect the answers to unanimously mention Olave, so I'll mention a dark-horse candidate, Haskell Garrett. He has a unique story and unique motivation. If he plays 10 percent better than he did in 2020, he may be one of the most important players on the team."

– Terrier Buck

"I have to vote Olave, but your call of Garrett is a unique and appropriate one, Terrier."

– Frank Moskowitz, BSB

"Haskell Garrett. You can't stop that guy. This will be his year."

– PeyoteBuck

"I'll go with Thayer Munford. Having someone with three-plus years of starting experience protecting a new quarterback's back side will be a tremendous help."

– Andrew Lind, BSB

"While I don't know if I'd say he will have the largest impact of any returning player, I think that if Jeremy Ruckert had decided to depart, he would have left the biggest gap between his talent and the next player at his position."

– Wyatt Crosher, BSB

From The Pages Of BSB

35 Years Ago – 1986

Tom Lichtenberg was named to replace Jim Tressel, who had taken the head-coaching position at Youngstown State, on the Ohio State football coaching staff. Lichtenberg was set to work with Ohio State's quarterbacks and receivers. A former head coach at Mason, Ohio, and Cincinnati Purcell high schools, Lichtenberg joined the staff after serving three years as assistant athletic director at Iowa State.

Buckeye boss Earle Bruce had Lichtenberg on his staff for five years when the former was head coach at Iowa State. Just prior to being hired by OSU, Lichtenberg had decided to return to the sidelines as an assistant at Iowa State.

"I had no idea Earle was ever going to call," said Lichtenberg. "But the big reason I got back into coaching was because I really missed working with the kids. That's what coaching is all about."

30 Years Ago – 1991

Ohio State, winner of 17 consecutive games in the 1990-91 season without a loss, was a firm disciple of turning the complex game of basketball into a simple one.

After 17 games in 1989-90, the Buckeyes were plodding along with an 8-9 record and sporting a 3-5 record in Big Ten play.

At the time, the Buckeyes were not a very good shooting team. The squad had launched 1,040 shots in those 17 games and had made only 467 of them, a shooting percentage of just 44.9.

A year later, Ohio State had recovered its shooting eye with almost unbelievable accuracy. Through 17 games, the Buckeyes had attempted 1,077 shots and canned 590 of them, good for a glittering 54.8 percent.

"I really don't know how to explain that except that we've worked extremely hard as a team to create good shots," said head coach Randy Ayers. "We spent a tremendous amount of practice time recognizing different situations and trying to create a good shot out of those situations."

25 Years Ago – 1996

Several local broadcast reports on Jan. 17 had OSU head football coach John Cooper's name listed in connection with the coaching vacancy of the NFL's Arizona Cardinals. But Cooper, on a recruiting trip in California that day, issued a statement through the OSU athletic communications office to the contrary.

"I have not talked to anyone from the Cardinals," Cooper said. "I am very happy at Ohio State."

Cooper, who had just finished his eighth season with the Buckeyes, came to Ohio State after resurrecting the program at Arizona State. He received a five-year contract extension from OSU after the '94 season and then received an automatic one-year extension after guiding the Buckeyes to a top-10 finish in '95. That was set to carry him through the year 2000.

20 Years Ago – 2001

After an exhaustive two-week search, Ohio State's new football coach was only 2½ hours away at Youngstown State the whole time.

OSU athletic director Andy Geiger introduced Tressel as Ohio State's 22nd head football coach during a Jan. 18 press conference. The media event, staged in the new recruiting lounge at Ohio Stadium, was attended by a throng of 20 media members and was beamed live statewide.

"I'm really humbled to stand before you today," Tressel said. "I just spent the last 40 minutes standing before the Ohio State Buckeyes in their team meeting room, and I mentioned the same thing to them."

Tressel's hiring ended a 15-day search to find the successor to Cooper, who was fired Jan. 2 after a 13-year reign with the Buckeyes.

Word had actually leaked a day prior to the media that Tressel had outlasted Minnesota's Glen Mason in the final interview phase. Oregon's head coach, Mike Bellotti, who had toured the campus and interviewed Jan. 15, had already taken his name out of the running.

15 Years Ago – 2006

Basketball fans who had fretted for nearly a year about the NCAA investigation into the Ohio State men's basketball program could begin to feel a sense of relief. According to a report in The Columbus Dispatch, the Buckeyes didn't need to worry about being able to accept an invitation to the 2006 NCAA Tournament if it came.

The Dispatch reported that the timetable for the delayed hearing before the NCAA infractions committee indicated that any appeal by the university in the wake of sanctions would not be heard until after the 65-team field for the NCAA Tournament was announced March 12.

That would eliminate the possibility of the Buckeyes being banned from the tournament for a second consecutive year.

Neither side would comment on the NCAA's case against OSU. The university's hearing before the infractions committee was scheduled to resume Feb. 3-4 in Chicago.

10 Years Ago – 2011

Ohio State hired former Buckeye football player Anthony Schlegel to its coaching staff. He began work as assistant strength coach at his alma mater Jan. 24, the first day of winter workouts for the team.

Schlegel had started 17 games at middle linebacker for the Buckeyes in 2004 and '05. In his new job with OSU, Schlegel gained the early approval of at least one Buckeye.

The morning of the team's first day of winter workouts, senior-to-be Andrew Sweat wrote on his Twitter page, "Great workout with new strength coach, Coach Schlegel. This is the start (of a) national championship run."

Schlegel replaced Doug Davis, who had spent four seasons at Ohio State before taking a job at Kent State with new head coach Darrell Hazell, a former OSU assistant.

Five Years Ago – 2016

Thad Matta's 12th season in Columbus had been full of firsts. Ohio State's four-game nonconference losing streak, one that featured home losses to the likes of UT-Arlington and Louisiana Tech, was the longest of Matta's tenure and the program's worst since the 1957-58 season.

Although the Buckeyes rebounded with a win over then-No. 4 Kentucky, they went on to lose 100-65 to Maryland on the road Jan. 16, the first time an Ohio State team had been beaten that badly in the Matta era.

Perhaps not coincidentally, the 2015-16 Buckeyes – a roster that featured just one scholarship junior, four sophomores and six freshmen – were the youngest team ever fielded by Matta at OSU.

Entering February, the head coach was looking to avoid a second in his career, not wanting to replicate the 2007-08 season – the only time at Ohio State that he had had an eligible team fail to make the NCAA Tournament.

"I haven't," Matta said Jan. 20 when asked if he had talked to his team about the postseason. "It's been more just in terms of us and what we have to do better to play better. That's really been the entire focus with this team, just trying to find and point out and teach and coach, all those things that allow these guys to understand the process a little bit better and understand what it takes mentally to play at this level."

One Year Ago – 2020

Ohio State head coach Ryan Day filled the second of Ohio State's two coaching vacancies on Jan. 20, just a day after new defensive coordinator Kerry Coombs' Tennessee Titans were eliminated from the NFL playoffs. What's old was new again for the Buckeyes with the hire, as Coombs had plenty of experience with Ohio and served as Ohio State's defensive backs coach for six seasons under Urban Meyer, from 2012 to 2017.

"Kerry Coombs is the coach I was really hoping we could hire and bring back to Ohio State," Day said in Ohio State's announcement of the hire. "He is an excellent coach, and he has had two outstanding seasons in the NFL on Mike Vrabel's staff with the Tennessee Titans."

Ohio State director of strength and conditioning Mickey Marotti expressed a similar sentiment at a Jan. 22 press conference.

"It's awesome," Marotti said of Coombs being back to Ohio State. "He brings an energy level. You guys know what he is." Marotti went on to compare Coombs to the "Energizer Bunny" and said that the co-defensive coordinator had already returned to his routine of arriving at the Woody Hayes Athletic Center at 5:30 a.m. every day.

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Fondly Looking Back At Those Lost In 2020

Years from now, when historians look back at 2020 and wonder how society became so self-absorbed that it turned a vicious pandemic into a political football, the grimmest reminder of COVID-19 will not be social distancing, mask-wearing, truncated sports seasons or even the shuttering of thousands of small businesses.

It will be the massive loss of life that underscores – and continues to underscore – our everyday lives as we try to navigate through the most trying days of our lifetimes. As we of a certain age can attest, any singular year is going to bring loss, and how we deal with the grief that accompanies that loss remains unique to us all.

Looking back at those who have passed can also be cathartic in certain ways as long as we can honor those whom we mourn. With that in mind, here are a few of the Ohio State-related figures that we lost in 2020.

Jim Jones began his career at Ohio State as a physical education instructor and ice skating coach in 1965 before Woody Hayes made him the football program's first-ever academic adviser two years later. Jones eventually rose to become director of athletics, an office he held for seven years before his retirement in 1994. Jones died April 22 after suffering a stroke. He was 83.

Bill Myles, who had been an assistant coach under Hayes as well as his successor Earle Bruce, was encouraged by Jones to join him in sports administration, and Myles became an associate athletic director at Ohio State in 1985. He remained in that capacity for more than 20 years, mentoring student-athletes in a variety of sports. Myles, who recovered from a massive stroke in 2014, died May 12 at the age of 83.

The same year Jones promoted Myles, he hired Tennessee assistant Nancy Darsch to take over the women's basketball program, and Darsch produced a school-record 234 victories, four Big Ten championships and seven NCAA tournament appearances in 12 seasons. She was also a successful head coach in the WNBA and won gold medals as an assistant coach in the 1984 and 1996 Olympics. Darsch was 68 when she died Nov. 2 of Parkinson's disease.

Another member of the Hayes coaching staff was George Hill, who served as defensive coordinator at Ohio State from 1971 through 1978. Hill, who died Nov. 10 at the age of 87, later moved to the NFL where he spent 11 seasons with the Miami Dolphins, first as linebackers coach under the legendary Don Shula and then as defensive coordinator for Jimmy Johnson.

Shula, the winningest coach in NFL history who died May 4 at the age of 90, also had plenty of Ohio ties. He was born in Grand River, played his college ball at John Carroll University, spent time as a member of the Ohio National Guard and played two pro seasons with the Cleveland Browns. However, as much as I wanted there to be some kind of Ohio State tie with Shula, the only one I could find was that he played for and then coached against former OSU head coach Paul Brown in the NFL.

Last year also claimed a host of former Ohio State football players, among them fullback Joel Payton on Aug. 21, reportedly the victim of a heart attack at the age of 61. Payton led the Big Ten in scoring as a freshman in 1977 despite the fact he was not a starter. Serious knee injuries curtailed the remainder of his career, and he finished with 420 yards and 14 touchdowns on 111 carries.

Fred "Curly" Morrison boasted one of the most unusual careers in OSU football history. Morrison never achieved All-America or even All-Big Ten status, but his performance in the 1950 Rose Bowl – rushing for 124 yards and a touchdown during OSU's 17-14 win against California – earned him the honor of being inducted into the game's Hall of Fame. Morrison, who went on to a successful business career, died Nov. 16

at the age of 94 due to complications following hip surgery.

Tony Curcillo, who was Hayes' first starting quarterback on the 1951 Ohio State team, died Dec. 8 at the age of 89. Curcillo set a then-Big Ten record for a single game when he threw for 292 yards and four touchdowns against Iowa on Oct. 27, 1951. Curcillo also rushed for two scores in that game, making him responsible for six total touchdowns, a program record that stood for 65 years until J.T. Barrett threw for six TDs and ran for one more during a 77-10 win against Bowling Green in the 2016 season opener.

EDITOR'S NOTEBOOK Mark Rea

Finally, William Pollitt, who spent much of his college career as the backup middle guard behind Jim Stillwagon before embarking upon a distinguished law career that included serving as one of most respected judges in central Ohio, died Aug. 13 from complications due to the coronavirus. He was 72.

Despite the fact he was a career-long backup, Pollitt was involved in one of the most famous plays in Ohio State football history. After the Buckeyes scored a touchdown with 1:23 remaining in the 1968 Michigan game to give them a 50-14 lead, the team somewhat inexplicably went for a two-point conversion. The play was ill-conceived from the beginning, however, and backup quarterback Bill Long wound up overthrowing Pollitt (who was supposed to be blocking at an end position) in the end zone.

The conversion try has gone down in Ohio State football lore because when Hayes was asked why he went for two in that situation, he supposedly replied, "Because I couldn't go for three." Whether or not Hayes was referring to that game or another, or if he ever really uttered those words at all, is immaterial. As the old saying goes, "When the legend becomes fact, print the legend."

More Memorable Passings

In addition to those from the Ohio State family, several head football coaches who paced the opposing sideline against the Buckeyes passed away in 2020.

Fred Akers was head coach at Wyoming and Texas before beginning a four-year stint at Purdue during which he was 1-3 against the Buckeyes. That lone victory was a 31-26 decision in 1988 in front of shocked homecoming crowd at Ohio Stadium that included members of the 1968 national championship team marking the 20th anniversary of their title run. Akers, 82, died Dec. 7 from complications of Alzheimer's disease.

Frank Maloney, who at the age of 79 died March 30 of brain cancer, enjoyed a coaching career that lasted more than 20 years, but he never had much success against Ohio State. As head coach at Syracuse, Maloney lost to the Buckeyes in both the 1979 and 1980 season openers, and as an assistant on Bo Schembechler's staff at Michigan between 1968 and 1972, his teams won only two of five games. Before that, Maloney was an offensive lineman at Michigan from 1959-61 and was 1-2 vs. Ohio State.

Ray Perkins succeeded the legendary Bear Bryant as head coach at Alabama, a stint that lasted only four years. But during that brief tenure, one of his signature wins was a 16-10 victory against Ohio State in the 1986 Kickoff Classic. Perkins, who had also been an All-America receiver for Bryant at Alabama, died Dec. 9 in

Tuscaloosa just three days after celebrating his 79th birthday.

George Perles spent a dozen years as an assistant coach at Michigan State from 1959 to 1970 and then returned in 1983 for a 12-year tenure as head coach of the Spartans. Perles enjoyed a lot of success in East Lansing during those runs, but not much of it at the expense of the Buckeyes, winning just four of 16 meetings against Ohio State. Perles, who later become athletics director at MSU, died Jan. 7 from Parkinson's disease. He was 85.

Sam Wyche was much more famous for his eight seasons as head coach of the NFL's Cincinnati Bengals, but he spent one season in charge of the program at Indiana, a 3-8 campaign in 1983 that included a 56-17 loss to Ohio State in Bloomington. Wyche, who received a heart transplant in 2016, was just three days shy of his 75th birthday when he succumbed to skin cancer on Jan. 2.

Johnny Majors, who died June 3 at 85, was an All-America halfback and Heisman Trophy runner-up at Tennessee in 1956 before embarking upon a coaching career that lasted more than a quarter-century and included winning the 1976 national championship at Pittsburgh. Majors later had a 16-year run as head coach at his alma mater before returning to Pitt in 1993, an ill-fated decision that included four straight losses to Ohio State by a combined score of 216-45.

The final game in that string was a 72-0 beating administered by the Buckeyes in 1996, an outcome that so outraged former Pitt All-America lineman Mark May that the player-turned-analyst has gone out of his way to bash the Ohio State program ever since.

Finally, former Auburn head coach Pat Dye – whose sideline attire always included a white dress shirt, striped tie, baseball cap and football cleats – defeated Ohio State in his only battle against the Buckeyes, a 31-14 victory in the 1990 Hall of Fame Bowl that most OSU fans remember because of the savage, second-quarter hit delivered by defensive back Zack Dumas that nearly decapitated Auburn running back Stacy Danley.

During the run-up to that New Year's Day game, Dye, who passed away June 1 of kidney and liver failure at the age of 80, uttered one of the most remarkable quotes I have ever heard during my more than 40 years in the business.

In someone's infinite wisdom, the Hall of Fame Bowl committee had placed Auburn's team hotel near one of Tampa's most notorious gentlemen's clubs. It was something that did not escape Dye's attention as he answered a question from a female reporter during a pregame press conference about what worried him most about the upcoming game.

"To be perfectly honest," Dye replied in a slow, syrupy drawl, "what I'm worried about has nothing to do with the game or our esteemed opponent. What worries me most is my boys trying to sneak out at night and going down the street to get some of that (bleep)."

You could have heard the proverbial pin drop as reporters looked at one another in stunned disbelief. Then realizing what he had said, and who he had said it to, Dye dropped his head and quickly added in his gentlemanly drawl, "I'm sorry, ma'am, for my use of profanity. I hope you will accept my most sincere apology and grant me the courtesy of answering another of your questions." With that, the room exploded into laughter as a smile crossed Dye's face.

It was a harmless exchange that perhaps in today's environment might have merited 24/7 coverage on social media. Four decades ago, however, it was nothing more than a lighthearted aside – the kind of fond memory that elicits a smile and helps sustain us after the passing of family or friends.



Co-DC Mattison Set To Retire

Ohio State head coach Ryan Day announced on Jan. 22 during a media session over Zoom that co-defensive coordinator Greg Mattison, who spent the last two seasons with the Buckeyes, will be retiring at the end of January.

"I want to thank Greg Mattison for everything he's done," Day said. "He's going to be retiring here after an unbelievable career at the end of the month. He's a special guy. He and Ann, his wife, have been so gracious to (me and) Nina in my first two years as a head coach, and his career speaks for itself. What he's done on the field, but more importantly it's what he's done off the field – the relationships and respect he has around the country, and the impact he's had on so many people. I can't thank him enough for what he's done. I know he's going to really miss it, but he's going to have an opportunity to spend some time with his grandkids and his children after an unbelievable career in coaching football.

"If you ask Justin Hilliard and Pete Werner and all those linebackers that he spent so much time with this year and last year, the relationships that he built here, I think they'd talk for a while about what he meant to them and their development. He was just a steady force, and just a calming force with a ton of experience, and just meant so much to everybody in that room. I think he deserves a lot of credit for that. He's somebody that I leaned on just for advice with all his experience. He's an unbelievable person. He and Ann mean so much to us, so again, he had his impact these past couple of years. They've been successful. We only lost two games and a lot of that has to do with Greg."

Mattison began his coaching career at Riverdale High School in Wisconsin in 1971 and spent more than 40 years as a defensive assistant at the college level, including stops at Florida, Michigan, Navy, Northwestern, Notre Dame, Texas A&M and Western Michigan, as well as three seasons with the NFL's Baltimore Ravens. He notably helped lead the Gators to a victory over the Buckeyes in the 2007 BCS National Championship Game.

Mattison is one of just seven coaches to have spent time at both Michigan and Ohio State, a list that is led by Bo Schembechler, who was an assistant at Ohio State from 1958-63 and head coach at Michigan from 1969-89. Current linebacker coach Al Washington was also in the same position with the Wolverines in 2018.

The former Michigan man joined the Buckeye staff in 2019 along with Washington, as Day looked to build out his defensive staff after the departures of several assistants, including coordinator Greg Schiano, linebackers coach Billy Davis, cornerbacks coach Taver Johnson and safeties coach Alex

Grinch. At the time, Mattison cited the opportunity at Ohio State as his primary reason to depart from Ann Arbor.

"Leaving Michigan was a very tough decision. I spent 13 years there. But I've also spent 19 of the last 24 years coordinating," Mattison told reporters. "And to have the opportunity to be a co-coordinator at a great university like Ohio State was something, an opportunity I really wanted to pursue. That's the biggest thing."

Day spoke in his statement when bringing Mattison aboard that he liked the idea of pairing him with Jeff Hafley in a co-coordinator role.

"I love the idea of having two coordinators on defense," Day said in 2019. "I like having a diversity of opinion, but even more I like the expertise and experience that Jeff has in the secondary coupled with the expertise that Greg brings to the front seven.

"These are two outstanding coaches, and they will provide stability, wisdom and a fundamental approach to everything they teach. They will add to our culture while proving to be excellent coaches and mentors for the young men in our program."

That's a model that the Buckeyes are expected to stick to in making the hire to replace Mattison, though Day was quick to avoid boxing himself in to a certain style of hire.

"I think we have a really good group of guys there right now who are versatile, so we're going to look at all options," Day said. "Is there somebody else out there that can take Greg's spot in the same exact role that he did, or are we going to just move some things around and reassign some of the job descriptions? That's all up on the table, and we're working on that now and looking at all different options.

"I'm not really set on 'this is exactly what the role needs to be.' I want to just put the best group together to give our guys on defense the best chance to be successful."

The Buckeyes still have half of their 2020 co-defensive coordinator unit in Kerry Coombs on staff. In looking to shore up a defense that struggled in 2020, Day may look to get Coombs some help in the form of a single-high safety expert, the defensive scheme that Day wants to run, but a system that Coombs wasn't especially well-versed in when he arrived at Ohio state.

"Anybody who has a background in four-down, single-high defense certainly would fit quicker," Day said. "But then also bringing in somebody that has a little bit more of a diverse background can give us different perspective, and areas where we can maximize who we have. And I think that's what's important, because we try to do that all the time on offense. I think that that's going to be important to what we do on defense. Based on who we have that year, what gives us the best chance to be successful?"

"If it's to continue to be in a single-high, Cover 3, let's do it. But if it's not, what are the things? Do we want to have some continuity there and keep that going, or do we want to bring in somebody with a different perspective? Those are all the discussions that are being had now."

No true short lists have been released or rumored as Ohio State begins its search, though at least one fan-favorite native son is likely off the list, after former Buckeye linebacker Marcus Freeman departed from Cincinnati to take over as the defensive coordinator at Notre Dame earlier in January. Whoever the choice is, he'll have big shoes to fill in Day's eyes.

"We're working on replacing Greg. It will not be easy, but we're going to get to that here. I don't have any updates for you in that

Next Issue Is BSB's Football Recruiting Wrap-Up

This issue of Buckeye Sports Bulletin marks the official start of our winter/spring biweekly publishing schedule. The next issue, our popular Football Recruiting Wrap-Up, will be mailed on Feb. 9. We will be publishing every other week after that through the May issue, when we switch to monthly editions. As a reminder, the BSB print schedule is always printed on page 3 of each issue.

There is no need to miss any of the Ohio State sports action between issues, however, especially any late-breaking recruiting news before National Signing Day on Feb. 3.

The BSB staff provides electronic recruiting coverage at our electronic BuckeyeSports.com, along with other daily stories and updates, as well as presenting reprints from the Buckeye Sports Bulletin archives as part of our popular Reprint Thursdays. Additionally, staff members man the BuckeyeSports.com Forum, interacting with subscribers on the hot topics of the day.

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Readers who have been experiencing postal delivery problems, as so many of you have reported, can also read the entire issue of each Buckeye Sports Bulletin online at BuckeyeSports.com immediately upon its completion. Your copy of the paper will still arrive in your mailbox at its usual time.

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area, but we'll be working on that. He will not be an easy guy to replace, so I just want to say thank you to Greg."

Garrett, Jackson To Return To Ohio State

Ohio State suffered a few blows up front in the list of departures for the 2021 NFL draft, chief among them junior defensive tackle Tommy Togiai and fifth-year senior defensive end Jonathon Cooper, but the Buckeyes also picked up some good news from a pair of seniors. On Jan. 19, both Haskell Garrett and Antwan Jackson announced that they would be taking advantage of the extra year of eligibility offered by the NCAA and returning to Ohio State.

Garrett returns to the Buckeyes after being named a first-team All-American by CBS Sports and Pro Football Focus. He finished his senior year with 20 tackles (12 solo), four tackles for loss and two sacks. He also had a pass breakup and an interception against Michigan State which he caught in the end zone for a touchdown.

"Aloha Buckeye Nation," Garrett said in a video posted to his Twitter account. "2020 was a crazy year. Not only did I go through trials and tribulations, but our team did. Throughout a lot of prayer and self-talk and conversations with my family, we have decided to return for another year, at the Ohio State (University). Go Bucks!"

Garrett's story was one of the wildest in college football in 2020. He returned to Ohio State and played all eight games for the Buckeyes just a few months removed from a gunshot wound to the face that sent him to the hospital, suffered after he reportedly broke up an altercation in the street.

"I had to undergo a series of surgeries on my mouth, and I had to get a bone-graft in my mouth," Garrett said after the Buckeyes' season-opening win against Nebraska of his preparation to return to football. "After post-surgery, I couldn't do anything physically, but I could do stuff mentally. Just being prepared and when I came back, be ready to do anything and everything to help the team."

Jackson's announcement was a rebuke of his initial decision regarding his plans for the future, after he was included in senior day festivities in December. With Togiai gone, however, Jackson looks primed to slot into a starting role or as the first man off the bench in a rotation with Garrett, Taron Vincent and

Jerron Cage.

"I know my journey didn't start here at Ohio State, but choosing to play here was definitely my best decision," said Jackson, who came to OSU by way of Auburn and Blinn College, in his tweet announcing his return. "Playing here for the past three years has given me memories I'll cherish forever. I still have a lot to prove to my coaches, my teammates, and myself."

In his first season as a serious contributor for the Buckeyes, Jackson recorded 11 tackles and one sack. His best game came when filling in for Togiai against Alabama in the national title game, where he recorded that sack among with five tackles.

A former four-star recruit from Ellenwood (Ga.) Cedar Grove, Jackson originally snubbed the Buckeyes for the Tigers in his recruitment but departed from the Tiger program after just a season, making the stop at Blinn College before heading to Columbus in 2018.

Day Previews Quarterback Battle

During his first call with the media since Ohio State's loss to Alabama in the national title game, Day fielded a number of questions to pair with his Mattison announcement, several of which hinged around the upcoming quarterback battle in Columbus.

That battle will be between Jack Miller and C.J. Stroud, who were true freshmen in 2020, and Kyle McCord, the five-star signal caller in the 2021 class who Day had previously said will compete for the starting job in his first season.

"That is going to happen," Day said of McCord when he signed with OSU. "He will compete for the job. We're going to have to figure out, if Justin decides to go to the NFL, who the next quarterback is at Ohio State. And that's a big, big deal. I know he's looking forward to getting in here and getting to work right away."

While Miller and Stroud did get a year under their belts within Ohio State's system and playbook, both received minimal game time and neither threw a single pass in a game for the Buckeyes this season – though each did notch a rushing touchdown.

That led to Day saying all three quarterbacks, McCord included, will need to gain some experience in situations like they would see in a collegiate game before that time comes in the fall.

2021 Ohio State Football Schedule

| Date | Opponent | Result/Time (ET) | TV | 2020 Record |
|----------|------------------------|------------------|-----|-------------|
| Sept. 2 | at Minnesota | TBA | TBA | 3-4 |
| Sept. 11 | OREGON* | TBA | TBA | 4-3 |
| Sept. 18 | TULSA* | TBA | TBA | 6-3 |
| Sept. 25 | AKRON | TBA | TBA | 1-5 |
| Oct. 2 | at Nebraska | TBA | TBA | 3-5 |
| Oct. 9 | PURDUE | TBA | TBA | 2-4 |
| Oct. 23 | at Rutgers | TBA | TBA | 3-6 |
| Oct. 30 | MICHIGAN STATE | TBA | TBA | 2-5 |
| Nov. 6 | at Indiana* | TBA | TBA | 6-2 |
| Nov. 13 | MARYLAND | TBA | TBA | 2-3 |
| Nov. 20 | PENN STATE | TBA | TBA | 4-5 |
| Nov. 27 | at Michigan | TBA | TBA | 2-4 |
| Dec. 4 | Big Ten Championship** | TBA | TBA | |

* 2020 bowl team

** at Indianapolis (Lucas Oil Stadium)

"We're going to have to find ways this spring between C.J., Jack and Kyle to give them as many game-like situations to figure out exactly what we have," Day said. "We can't go into that first game without knowing, or at least having an idea. I guess we'll never know until we're in a game. But we have to try to simulate the games the best we can in practice, which may be a unique way of doing the spring.

"Those guys are going to roll, and they're going to get as many reps as they can. And if one guy starts to separate early on, then he goes and runs with it."

Day also said that he had hoped to get both Miller and Stroud into the game more throughout the 2020 season just to be able to see what sort of talent and capabilities each of the four-star quarterbacks has in the college game. However, as Ohio State found itself in a number of matchups that were at least slightly too close for comfort in the final frame, and with just five regular-season games played, that became easier said than done.

"I wish they had gotten more game reps," Day said. "You don't really know what you have in a quarterback until they're playing in the game. These guys had very, very limited reps.

"There were a lot of snaps out there to be had (two years ago). Right now, we didn't have those snaps. I wish we were further along."

Ohio State has a lengthy offseason to name a starting quarterback and to get all three prospects to a level where they can lead the offense, a job made easier with the return of senior tackle Thayer Munford and junior wide receiver Chris Olave.

It also helped, Day said, to see how Justin Fields went about his business both on and off the field, and he said that the second-year signal callers will need to make that extra step before next season begins.

"Being the starting quarterback at Ohio State is unlike any other position there is," Day said. "I think they get that. I think they understand it. I think they were able to see this year what Justin did and the stage. The stakes are very, very high here, and I think they learned that. In terms of the football part, they're still figuring it out, still learning. I think they both need to get stronger here in the spring physically, and then they're going to be getting the majority of the reps here as we roll, and they're going to compete."

Buckeyes Near Top Of Too-Early Rankings

Ohio State fared well in every major outlet's way-too-early top-25 rankings for the 2021 season, released in the days following the Buckeyes' 52-24 loss to Alabama on Jan. 11. At 247Sports, Athlon, CBS, ESPN, Sports Illustrated, USA Today and Yahoo, the Buckeyes sit as the unanimous No. 5 team in the nation.

In the 247Sports rankings, Ohio State

checks in behind Alabama, Oklahoma, Clemson and Georgia, though these rankings were released prior to the announcement of Chris Olave's return to Columbus in 2021. The Buckeyes are set to play 247Sports' No. 14 (Oregon), No. 16 (Indiana) and No. 17 (Penn State) teams as well.

"Even after Ohio State's substantial title loss, 2021 looks bright no matter what players on the fence decide when it comes to the NFL Draft," 247Sports writer Sam Hellman said on Jan. 12. "Ohio State will still be very dangerous in the passing game without Chris Olave. Justin Fields is expected to turn pro as one of the top overall prospects in the draft, so Ryan Day will spend spring breaking in a new QB-1 in Columbus."

In Athlon, the Tide are No. 1, followed by Clemson, Oklahoma, Georgia and the Buckeyes, again citing the departures in Columbus but mentioning a tremendously easy schedule – at least on paper. No. 12 Oregon and No. 19 Indiana are the lone ranked Buckeye foes.

"Ryan Day will have several key players to replace from the team that crushed Clemson in the Sugar Bowl and played for the national championship," Steve Lissan of Athlon wrote on Jan. 11. "However, as expected in Columbus, the Buckeyes will quickly reload and return as the team to beat in the Big Ten. Justin Fields is likely to head to the NFL, leaving 2020 four-star recruits C.J. Stroud and Jack Miller III and '21 five-star prospect Kyle McCord to battle to pilot Day's high-powered offense. Chris Olave could leave early for the NFL, but Garrett Wilson and freshmen Jaxon Smith-Njigba, Gee Scott Jr. and Julian Fleming are back.

"Master Teague headlines the backfield if Trey Sermon departs, while incoming freshman TreVeyon Henderson is also expected to push for snaps. The line is also expected to suffer some losses – likely guard Wyatt Davis – but there's plenty of talent to build around in '21. The defense will have its share of losses, as eight of the top 10 tacklers in 2020 were seniors. Additionally, other players could leave early for the NFL, which means co-coordinators Kerry Coombs and Greg Mattison will have to lean even more on end Zach Harrison, tackle Taron Vincent and cornerback Sevn Banks. The Buckeyes host Oregon for a huge non-conference showdown in September and face road trips to Minnesota, Michigan, Nebraska and Indiana next fall."

The CBS rankings switch things up a bit in the order of the top five, with Clemson atop the list, followed by Oklahoma, Georgia, Alabama and OSU. Indiana leads the Buckeye opponents at No. 13, followed by No. 17 Oregon.

"Best in the Big Ten, but the Buckeyes take a step back in 2021," Dennis Dodd prognosticated on Jan. 12. "C.J. Stroud or Jack Miller take over for Justin Fields. Ryan Day

Continued On Page 6

BSB Podcast Enhances Online Coverage

Buckeye Sports Bulletin now has a podcast to work in tandem with BuckeyeSports.com to keep BSB subscribers informed on all of the latest around Ohio State football, basketball, recruiting and everything else.

With the college football season now complete, the BSB Podcast is returning to its original schedule of one weekly episode, released on Friday mornings.

While there are no more football games to discuss, the podcast rolls on with in-depth looks at Ohio State's winter sports, including insight on the men's and women's basketball teams, the wrestling team and all of the OSU Olympic sports.

On the most recent episode released on Jan. 22, we take a look at Ohio State's potential 2021 football depth chart and take a shot at projecting our own. Then Wyatt Crosher provides a deep dive into the women's basketball team while Patrick Mayhorn previews the shortened wrestling season. We'll be keeping you posted about everything you need to know in Ohio State sports throughout the long football offseason.

The Buckeye Sports Bulletin Podcast covers Ohio State from all angles, with input from beat writers who cover everything from football and recruiting to men's volleyball and women's hockey, and everything in-between. With BSB's deep Rolodex of former Buckeye players, coaches and college sports analysts around the country, as well as in-house experts Joe Dempsey and Andrew Lind, the BSB Podcast has you covered on all things Buckeye, all the time. Staffers Mayhorn and Crosher host with a constantly rotating guest list to get insight and analysis on the latest in Ohio State sports news.

The show is free for everyone. To find it, go to your favorite podcast app or website and type in "Buckeye Sports Bulletin Podcast," and click the subscribe button. You can listen on Amazon Music, Apple Podcasts, Audible, Google Podcasts, iHeartRadio, Podbean, Spotify, Stitcher and anywhere else that podcasts are found. For those of you who are new to the podcast world, the show is also posted at 10 a.m. every Friday on BuckeyeSports.com, as well as in the BSB Fan Forum.

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has options, but we're going with Stroud, the No. 2 pro-style quarterback in the Class of 2020 who has yet to throw a pass. No more Trey Sermon. All the linebackers depart, too."

ESPN slots the Buckeyes behind Clemson, Alabama, Oklahoma and Georgia, with the Hoosiers rounding out the top 10, Ducks at No. 13 and Nittany Lions at No. 22.

"The Buckeyes have enjoyed a seamless transition from Urban Meyer to Ryan Day, who has guided them to back-to-back CFP appearances. The Buckeyes don't seem ready to slow down anytime soon. Fields is projected as a top-five pick in the NFL draft, so he's probably leaving after two seasons at OSU. Freshman Jack Miller III, who set the Arizona high school record with 115 career passing touchdowns, was Fields' backup this past season. C.J. Stroud was the No. 2 pocket passer in the 2020 ESPN 300, and incoming freshman McCord was the No. 4 pocket passer in 2021.

"There are a handful of other offensive starters who are candidates to leave, including Sermon. Defensively, the Buckeyes might have big holes to fill on the defensive line and at cornerback and linebacker, depending on who comes back. The Buckeyes' nonconference schedule next season includes home games against Oregon and Tulsa, and they're scheduled to play Big Ten road games at Minnesota, Nebraska, Rutgers, Indiana and Michigan."

Alabama, Clemson, Georgia and Oklahoma lead the Sports Illustrated rankings, with No. 12 Indiana, No. 16 Oregon and No. 18 Penn State all within the top 20.

"In the final analysis, the Buckeyes played a few great quarters of football against quality competition in 2020: most of the game against Clemson; half the game against Northwestern; one quarter against Indiana," Pat Forde wrote on Jan. 13. "Otherwise, this was a flush team that left you wanting a bit more than it delivered – that certainly was the case in the national championship game. As it stands, Ohio State doesn't have a quarterback who has thrown a collegiate pass; of course, that isn't the same as having no talent at QB. There are very good players everywhere else on offense. Defensively, the Buckeyes' top seven tacklers all were seniors. There is some rebuilding to do there."

The USA Today rankings are the kindest to the Buckeye schedule, slotting Indiana one spot ahead of Oregon at No. 12, Penn State at No. 16 and Michigan earning its lone appearance among the early rankings at No. 22.

"The questions start with the replacement for Justin Fields," Erick Smith wrote Jan. 12. "Does C.J. Stroud, Jack Miller or possibly incoming freshman Kyle McCord win the

job? And can any of them come close to being as dynamic as Fields? Master Teague and Garrett Wilson will provide threats at running back and wide receiver, respectively. Key losses along both lines can be filled as the Buckeyes have stockpiled enough pieces to remain the class of the Big Ten. However, like Clemson and Alabama, they might get pushed more than usual next year."

Lastly, the Buckeyes check in behind that same core four in the Yahoo picks, but in front of No. 10 Oregon, No. 17 Penn State and No. 20 Indiana.

"Ryan Day has done an excellent job since he took the reins from Urban Meyer and there's no reason to expect a step back from the Buckeyes in 2021," Nick Bromberg and Sam Cooper wrote on Jan. 20. "Sure, Justin Fields is moving on to the NFL, but this is easily the most-talented roster in the Big Ten despite the looming inexperience at quarterback. The surprise return of receiver Chris Olave is a massive boost for OSU as well. There will be holes to fill on defense, but OSU has recruited at an extremely high level."

Haskins Signs With Pittsburgh Steelers

Former Ohio State quarterback Dwayne Haskins reportedly reached an agreement with the Pittsburgh Steelers on a one-year contract on Jan. 21, less than one month after he was released by the Washington Football Team.

Haskins, the No. 15 overall pick in the 2019 NFL draft, was benched in the fourth quarter of Washington's loss to the Carolina Panthers on Dec. 27 after he threw two interceptions and lost a fumble. He was also fined \$40,000 and stripped of his captaincy just a few days prior for violating the NFL's COVID-19 protocols when he was photographed without a mask while attending a private party.

Haskins threw for 2,804 yards and 12 touchdowns compared to 14 interceptions in 16 career games with Washington. He recently conducted a visit with the Carolina Panthers, but a trip to Pittsburgh ultimately led to him signing with the Steelers.

Young Wins Defensive ROTY

Washington Football Team defensive end Chase Young on Jan. 19 became the fourth former Ohio State player in five years to be named the NFL Defensive Rookie of the Year by the Pro Football Writers of America.

The No. 2 overall pick in last year's draft, Young recorded 44 tackles, 12½ sacks, four forced fumbles, four pass breakups and three fumble recoveries, including one that he returned for a touchdown, to lead Washington to the NFC East title and a trip to the wild-card round of the NFL playoffs. He was voted a team captain by his peers and named to the 2021 Pro Bowl, which will be held virtually via Madden this year.

"I think the way he arrived on the scene, serious about his work and fitting in with his teammates, I think is exactly what you hope for," said defensive coordinator Jack Del Rio. "And then the biggest surprise, just something that I really didn't anticipate, is how much of a leader he is and how much of an inspiration he is. He loves football. He loves his teammates. All you have to do is watch him. Watch him during practice, watch him on game day. He loves ball. I think it's infectious."

Other Buckeyes who have garnered defensive rookie of the year honors include Los Angeles Chargers defensive end Joey Bosa in 2016, New Orleans Saints cornerback Marshon Lattimore in 2017 and San Francisco

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"We want to thank the many BSB readers who have stepped up and shown their support for Buckeye Sports Bulletin through the VIP program," BSB publisher Frank Moskowitz said. "It is a true vote of confidence in what we are doing now and what we have done the previous 39 years."

A VIP subscription can easily pay for itself each year with special VIP discounts.

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49ers defensive end Nick Bosa in 2019.

Three Buckeyes Picked In MLS Draft

A trio of OSU men's soccer standouts were selected in the 2021 MLS SuperDraft on Jan. 21, led by defender C.C. Uche, who was selected by the Los Angeles Football Club.

"Uche, we thought he showed certain qualities that did catch our eye in our scouting," manager John Thorington told reporters on a post-draft conference call. "With all of these players, it's an exciting day for them, it's an exciting day for us, that we can offer them an opportunity to come and impress our staff. Every player is given an opportunity to impress, and then it's up to them."

Uche had a rough finish to his Ohio State career but was strong for the Buckeyes as a junior, following a transfer from Duke. He started all 18 games for Ohio State in 2018, logging 1,572 minutes, but a leg injury in 2019 cut his season short after just four starts.

Three-year starting defender Joshua Jackson-Ketchup was selected in the second round as well by the Columbus Crew. The Crew sees him as a fullback at the next level, thanks to his athleticism.

"Where will Joshua fit, it's up to him obviously, but there is a hole in that second spot at right back," manager Caleb Porter said. "At the minimum the third spot, which pushes him to potentially the second team. And with his profile being athletic, we thought it made sense."

For Jackson-Ketchup, finding his way into the Crew lineup would be a significant

achievement because of his draft position.

"It's going to be a long shot," technical director Pat Onstad said. "He's the 52nd pick in the draft. That's a difficult one to try to make it, but we're hoping to have a second team, and that might be where he starts out and then see if he can make the jump."

Finally, goalkeeper Noah Lawrence was selected with the first pick of the third round by the Austin Football Club. The former Cincinnati transfer has not yet suited up for the Buckeyes but did start in 36 matches for the Bearcats before they dissolved their program in the summer of 2020.

Schmiesing, Thomas To Transfer From OSU

Ohio State junior linebacker Ben Schmiesing announced on Jan. 13 that he will transfer to Dayton to finish his collegiate career.

The 6-1, 225-pound Schmiesing was a two-star prospect from Piqua, Ohio, who joined the program as a preferred walk-on for the 2018 season, choosing to join the Buckeyes over scholarship offers from Davidson, Dayton and Ohio Dominican.

Schmiesing appeared in four games over three seasons with the Buckeyes, mostly on special teams. He was a scholar-athlete both his freshman and sophomore seasons and was named a Big Ten Distinguished Scholar this summer while majoring in business.

Joining Schmiesing in the portal is Ohio State walk-on long snapper Phillip Thomas, who announced on Facebook that he is transferring to Duquesne.

Liddell, Washington Show Star-Like Capabilities

Continued From Page 1

poised to avenge a seven-point loss to the Boilermakers from Dec. 16, but they blew a five-point lead in the final two minutes before Purdue freshman Jaden Ivey hit a game-winning triple.

Following the tough loss, junior guard Duane Washington was asked if he had thought the team was past the miscues that plagued them against Purdue.

"As a team, we get better every single day," Washington said. "It's January. It's 2021. Happy New Year. Everybody's working hard, and we're in the middle of it now. We know what to expect. We know how hard it is. We know how tough it's going to be. And there's no more exceptions."

"We've got to come out and fight every single night. We've got to be the team at the end who's fighting harder. We showed some toughness in some plays and minutes that we put together that were very tough. We've just got to continue to get better and grow and put them together, so we can complete it for 40 minutes."

A fierce competitor, Washington was clearly frustrated with his team's inefficiency against the Boilermakers. Ohio State shot just 37.7 percent from the field, and he committed five of the Buckeyes' 11 turnovers in a 21-point, six-assist effort where he went 6 of 9 from three.

"We need to get better at getting the ball where we want to get the ball," Washington said. "Purdue's defense does a good job of speeding you up and trying to get you out of your stuff that you want to run. And they took advantage of us on that end. And we've got to get better as a whole with that stuff."

After losing the heartbreaker against Purdue, the Buckeyes bounced back again, beating a talented Wisconsin team 74-62 in Madison on Jan. 23. Their offensive efficiency returned to form, shooting 50.9 percent from the floor against a Badger squad that was ranked No. 10 in the Associated Press top-25 poll at the time of the game.

Offensive efficiency has been a staple of Ohio State's early-season success, ranking No. 5 in the nation in adjusted offensive efficiency behind Iowa, Gonzaga, Baylor and Villanova.

"I think objectively it just shows that we're a really good team," senior forward Seth Towns said after the 12-point win at Wisconsin. "But for us, we take it game by game. We're locked in. We know that when we go out on the court, we have the opportunity to win every game we play. That's kind of where we're coming from. We're just locked in on executing."

Liddell, Washington Lead The Way

Ohio State would not likely enjoy the same success it has lately without the play of its two top scorers in Washington and sophomore forward E.J. Liddell.

Washington, who leads the team with 15.3 points per game, and Liddell, who averages 14.5 points and a team-high 6.8 rebounds per game through the Wisconsin victory, have complemented each other well throughout the strong start to the season.

Against Northwestern Jan. 13, Washington played his best game in scarlet and gray, setting career marks with 23 points and six assists with only one turnover in the 10-point victory.

"Duane was tremendous," Holtmann said. "I love him, and I love coaching him. What we've seen in this last string of games is a consistent, efficient Duane Washington. And when you get a consistent, efficient Duane

Washington, he is what I've always believed, and that is a very good player. To his credit, he has really committed himself to improving in that area. And his decision-making in the last four minutes probably won the game for us."

Ahrens also came away from the win over the Wildcats impressed with Washington's performance as a playmaker for himself and his teammates.

"He's just getting better each and every game, watching a lot of film, learning what shots to take, what shots not to take, when to attack, when not to attack, that type of thing. And he's done a really good job of seeing the floor," Ahrens said of Washington. "He had six assists tonight with one turnover. That's a really good stat to have, so credit to him for handling the ball the way he has been and reading certain situations and ultimately taking good shots, which he has been doing these past couple games."

While Washington shined against the Wildcats, Liddell struggled offensively, scoring a season-low six points on 0-of-6 shooting with a career-high five turnovers. Holtmann had no worries after the game about Liddell, who grabbed a team-high 10 rebounds and knocked down 6 of 8 foul shots.

"He had 10 rebounds. He did some really good things on the glass for us. I thought he got a little bit frustrated with missing some open shots, and their traps bothered him a little bit. He had a really good game at their place," said Holtmann, referencing Liddell's 15-point, eight-board Dec. 26 outing at Northwestern.

"E.J. will be fine. He's a terrific player. The young man went from coming off the bench to now being certainly one of our best players and highlighted on the scouting report. That's an adjustment period for anyone to go through, and he's had a tremendous start to his sophomore year. You look at his increase - he went from averaging about six points (6.7) to 14 (14.5). Every night, he's going to be a featured part of the other team's scouting report. He's just got to continue to work."

Liddell proved Holtmann to be a prophet in the following game at Illinois, where the former two-time Illinois Mr. Basketball winner poured in a career-high 26 points along with seven rebounds in an 87-81 win. He helped carry the Buckeyes over the Illini when Washington was held to 11 points.

Against Purdue in the next game Jan. 19, Washington led the charge while Liddell faced a swarm of double teams throughout the game and was held to 11 points to go with seven boards. Washington scored the previously mentioned 21 points in the two-point home loss to the Boilermakers.

Liddell responded to his disappointing showing against Purdue with another exceptional game to help the Buckeyes beat the Badgers Jan. 23. The former four-star prospect from Belleville (Ill.) West scored 20 points on 7-of-12 shooting and added seven rebounds in the win at Wisconsin.

"He's a tremendous person," Holtmann said of Liddell. "When you have really good people, they kind of bounce back. They figure out what they can do better. They move forward. They come back ready to watch film and work. And he's really talented. So he's a mismatch issue. He's a problem. And he's just a sophomore, so teams are going to do some things to try to take away some things. Purdue did a really good job of that, but against certain matchups, we were able to really attack tonight."

Liddell stepped up big for the Buckeyes in what was an off-game for Washington, who fin-

ished 1 of 9 from the field with nine points and a team-high four assists. Holtmann was asked about how Purdue trapped Liddell heavily and the difference in how he was defended by Wisconsin, which focused more on preventing Washington from getting hot.

"We knew that, he knew that going into it," Holtmann said. "We planned for it. Just like Duane getting a ton of attention, E.J. gets a ton of attention. And there are going to be times when other guys are going to benefit from that. That was some of the case with Duane tonight. Overall, I felt really good about his attack. His aggressiveness tonight was really good. He was able to get to his spots and do what he does, which is really score the ball."

Walker Returns For Wisconsin Win

Walker, a fifth-year senior, had played with torn ligaments in his right hand after injuring it in a preseason scrimmage. Following the Buckeyes' 17-point loss at Minnesota, Walker decided the pain in his hand was detracting too much from his performance, and he was ruled out indefinitely.

The former Florida State transfer, who sat out the 2018-19 season due to NCAA transfer rules, essentially served as an assistant coach while sidelined and earned significant praise from Holtmann for his leadership.

Ohio State went 3-1 without Walker, who averaged 8.7 points, 3.5 assists, 3.1 rebounds, and 1.3 steals per game last season, and the team's cohesion in his absence made Holtmann cautious to upset the flow.

"We were in a good rhythm offensively, and one of the things as a coach you're concerned about is the offensive rhythm we were in and disrupting that by implementing a guy that's going to play 20-25 minutes and the ball's going to be in his hands," Holtmann said. "So, we had to talk about that a lot as a coaching staff on what we were going to do, and a lot of it was play by feel."

The fourth-year head coach expressed how Walker impacts the game beyond what shows up in the box score. A 6-1, 195-pound guard from Indianapolis, Walker plays the point with physicality and tenacity.

"I don't think he gets credit enough," Holtmann said of Walker. "He's a tremendous talker defensively. He sees things, and he competes. Sometimes he competes a little too hard defensively and he gets in foul trouble, but he really competes defensively."

Walker played 24 minutes in his return at Wisconsin, scoring eight points on 3-of-6 shooting with three assists, two boards and one steal in the win. His stat line did not jump off the page, but Walker's defensive presence was essential for the Buckeyes down the stretch, cutting off multiple drives, forcing turnovers and helping keep the Badgers at bay.

"It's a lot of those things that maybe the fans don't always see," Holtmann explained. "His help awareness defensively, his communication, and then his speed gives us a different element. I thought we lacked a little bit of burst at times against some of the teams we've played in this stretch. It didn't necessarily hurt us as much. Maybe it hurt us against Purdue. But we lacked the ability to get by people and get by defenses, and he provides that. And I think those plays defensively were as critical as anything. And he got to his pull-up tonight and made great reads."

On the season, Walker has averaged 8.7 points, a career-high 4.1 assists, 2.8 rebounds and 0.8 steals per game. Through the pain in his off hand, Walker has connected on 97.8 percent of his free throws, making 44 of 45 attempts.

"Man, I'm so happy that C.J.'s back," Liddell said. "I mean, he was on the sideline being sort of like an assistant coach. But having that different leader on the floor, we needed him as a point guard. It was huge having C.J. back. It took a while to get him going, but he came out there and did what he usually does just being a leader."

Johnson Brings Fearlessness

Meechie Johnson, a freshman guard who reclassified from the 2021 class to join the Buckeyes in December, has continued to impress in Columbus.

The 17-year-old from Garfield Heights, Ohio, made his collegiate debut against Rutgers on Jan. 9, playing four minutes in the Buckeyes' 79-68 win.

Even before he saw the floor, Johnson was making an impact behind the scenes.

"Meechie Johnson has really helped this team from day one, both in practice and now in games," Holtmann said. "It says a lot about the kind of young man he is. And he's also fearless as a player, and we knew that when we recruited him. There is a fearlessness to how he plays."

In his next game, Johnson made a splash in the victory over Northwestern. He knocked down both of his three-point attempts and added one assist and one board in 11 minutes.

"I was telling Duane after he hit his second three, I was like, 'He's nice. He's going to be real nice,'" Ahrens said. "You don't see that a lot with freshmen coming in with the confidence he has been playing with, especially in practice. He's been getting his teammates involved really well as a point guard. And obviously, you saw him out there hitting those two big shots tonight. He wasn't scared to let it fly, so that's good for him. He's living up to the moment, and I'm excited for him."

The fearlessness Johnson plays with came into effect against the Wildcats when the talented guard calmly drained his second three-pointer and immediately let the defense know about it.

"I love his competitive spirit," Holtmann said. "If it gets a technical, I don't love that. And I made that point to him. But I love his competitive spirit. Love it. And I love his aggressiveness, I love his fearlessness."

Johnson continued his solid play in Ohio State's win at Illinois, providing great energy in 17 minutes off the bench, drilling another three and adding two assists with one board.

After being held scoreless against Purdue in 12 minutes in the loss, Johnson saw his role decrease against Wisconsin upon the return of Walker.

Although he played only three minutes against the Badgers, Johnson displayed that competitive spirit that made him such a coveted recruit for Holtmann.

Wisconsin's physical senior guard, Brad Davison, posted up Johnson, and the Badgers promptly gave him the ball against the young freshman. Johnson held his ground, rejecting Davison's attempt for his first career block.

In addition to playing without fear, Johnson has impressed with his serious approach to basketball and his attention to detail.

"First of all, Meechie deserves a lot of credit for just how attentive he's been," Holtmann said. "He deserves a ton of credit. He's been really focused on learning how we want to do things and stepping into an important role. And he can really shoot the ball. The young man can really shoot the ball and score the ball."

OSU Deals With COVID Hurdles In Big Ten Play

Continued From Page 1

Even at that point, there was plenty of uncertainty about if the college football season was going to happen at all in 2020. But then, on July 24, those voluntary workouts turned to walk-through practices, and on Aug. 5, the Big Ten announced a 10-game, conference-only schedule that would begin for the Buckeyes with a Sept. 3 game against Illinois.

That schedule lasted less than a week. By Aug. 11, the Big Ten had decided to cancel all fall sports for the rest of the calendar year, with the plan to attempt to move those sports to the spring of 2021. This decision came despite Ohio State head coach Ryan Day speaking out against it.

"We cannot cancel the season right now," Day said on Aug. 10. "We have to, at the very least, postpone it and allow us a little bit of time to re-evaluate what's going on. That's the reason why we put this schedule together to have some flexibility. If we need to take a deep breath, let's take a deep breath. We owe it to these kids to exhaust every single option we possibly can, and then we go from there."

The day after the conference's decision to postpone, Day said his focus was on making the Big Ten's idea of a spring season into a reality, but others were not ready to move on from the idea of a fall football season just yet.

Within a week of the Big Ten's decision to postpone, the parents of Ohio State football student-athletes came together to create a letter for conference commissioner Kevin Warren, which asked the Big Ten to reverse

its decision. A day after that, Ohio State quarterback Justin Fields created a petition on MoveOn.org asking for the season to be reinstated. The petition ended up with more than 300,000 signatures.

Former BSB editor and current 247Sports writer Steve Helwagen said that the conference was just being overly safe with its decision-making, including with its concerns about myocarditis, a heart defect that has the potential to be caused by COVID-19.

"I think they operated from a position of caution. They were concerned about the heart aspect and the impact of the heart on the high-end athletes who contracted COVID," Helwagen said. "As they got more research and more data, they realized that perhaps that was not as big of a problem or a stumbling block to playing during COVID as it was originally thought, and so I think they operated with the information they had at the time. I know a lot of people were very upset, but you have to understand they were doing that for the good of everybody involved."

For a while, it appeared that the letters, the protests by parents outside of the Big Ten headquarters, and the petition by Fields might all be for nothing. But then, on Sept. 16, the Big Ten released a statement that it would be reinstating the football season for the fall, starting on the weekend of Oct. 23-24.

"Everyone associated with the Big Ten should be very proud of the groundbreaking steps that are now being taken to better protect the health and safety of the student-athletes and surrounding communities," Dr. Jim Borchers, head team physician at Ohio State

and co-chair of the conference's Return to Competition Task Force medical subcommittee, said in a statement. "The data we are going to collect from testing and the cardiac registry will provide major contributions for all 14 Big Ten institutions as they study COVID-19 and attempt to mitigate the spread of the disease among wider communities."

The new schedule did not have the same wiggle room as the previous slate, consisting of eight games in eight weeks with a ninth week labeled as Big Ten Championship Week, when the top seeds of the division would face off in the championship game while the No. 2, 3, etc. seeds on each side would also go against one another.

Along with the new set of games, the conference stated that there would be no fans in attendance and that it would have stringent COVID protocols and daily testing in order to help stop the spread of the virus. Helwagen said he thought these protocols would end up benefiting the conference in the long run.

"I didn't think that there would be that many cancellations because I figured the protocols would be pretty foolproof," Helwagen said. "To me, it just illustrates how awful this whole situation was. I mean we've never seen anything like this in my lifetime, so it's been awful and yet inspiring in other ways with how people dealt with it."

Even before the season officially got under way, Ohio State was off to the races when it found out that guard Wyatt Davis and cornerback Shaun Wade, a pair of team captains and preseason All-Americans who had initially opted out of the season, had both decided to return for their junior seasons now that the Big Ten had a firm schedule in place.

From there, the games finally arrived. The Buckeyes took control to defeat Nebraska 52-17, and all 14 teams were able to play in their respective matchups to open up the conference-only schedule on a positive note.

It would be the only week of the Big Ten schedule when every team played its games.

In Week 9 of the college football season and Week 2 of the conference slate, Wisconsin went down with positive cases and missed its next two matchups. In Week 4 of the Big Ten schedule, it was time for Ohio State's schedule to get impacted, with Maryland canceling on the Buckeyes in the fourth game of the year.

The following Saturday, Ohio State took on Indiana, a team that has not beaten the Buckeyes since 1988. This time around, the two teams faced off in what would end up being the toughest test for the Buckeyes before postseason play, with the Scarlet and Gray holding on to a 42-35 win despite 491 passing yards from Hoosier quarterback Michael Penix.

That game in itself was something that Helwagen said truly signified just how bizarre the 2020 campaign was.

"The Indiana game was very surreal," he said. "To play such an important game, first of all against Indiana, who you rarely, if ever, have played important games against, and secondly in front of an empty stadium, and third, for the game to be a thrill ride as it turned out to be. That's going to be something that always kind of stands out."

The week after the big victory over the Hoosiers, Ohio State had its first internal issues with COVID-19 of the season. On the Tuesday following the win, the program started to have its first positive tests as a team. By Friday, the problem grew to a point where the team had to cancel its game against Illinois less than 24 hours before it was set

to kick off.

That cancellation meant the Buckeyes had the potential to play a maximum of six regular-season games, which was the minimum amount required to qualify for the Big Ten Championship Game at the time.

"Our student-athletes and staff have done an unbelievable job since August," Borchers said on Nov. 28, the day after the announcement of the cancellation. "We have essentially had no cases of COVID-19 until this week, and earlier in the week, we did experience small numbers of cases that then increased. As of yesterday, it pushed us over a threshold in our population positivity rate, one of the metrics from the Big Ten, into an area where we thought that we needed to pause."

Ohio State athletic director Gene Smith echoed what Borchers said, stating that, while the football program was not yet at both percentage thresholds set by the conference, the "positivity rate was concerning enough where we felt we needed to pause and try and find a way to mitigate its spread and continue to ensure the safety of our student-athletes."

"We are in the midst of a global pandemic, we live in Franklin County, which has a Level 4 purple emergency rating, with severe exposure and spread," Smith said. "This is our reality. We're struggling as a community to stop the spread of COVID-19, and we're operating in a very challenging environment, so having definitive guidance as we go through this process is always challenging. We're learning a great deal as we go through this environment."

Among those who tested positive before the scheduled matchup with the Illini was Day, who said he was not feeling any of the symptoms but still felt horrible for his players, especially considering the spread came during the week of Thanksgiving, a time that is usually spent with friends and family.

"I'm resting comfortably," Day said. "I have an extremely heavy heart though. The sacrifices that have been made by so many and the anxiety over months and months of every day getting test results back to make sure that the entire program is safe and then to experience it this week, Thanksgiving week - I can't sit here and tell you it's anything other than really, really hard."

"But, like I told the team, it's just another opportunity to get through some adversity and work through adversity and learn more about yourselves. And that's the only way that I can really describe and put a positive spin on it right now, because it isn't fun. Nothing about this is good. But I guess it's just going to make us tougher, it's going to make us stronger, it's going to make our young men better husbands, better fathers. And I really believe that going through all this is going to make us all stronger."

The Buckeyes returned to the field the following week to defeat Michigan State 52-12, doing so despite the absence of 23 players, including three starting offensive linemen, linebacker Tuf Borland and safety Josh Proctor. They were also still without Day, which allowed associate head coach Larry Johnson to earn his first career win as a head coach, also marking the first time in program history that a Black coach has been the head coach in, and won, a game.

It appeared Ohio State was then on track to continue the 102-year annual tradition of playing The Game against Michigan, with this installment taking place on Dec. 12, the first time since 1933 that it was not in November.

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The Buckeyes were ready to play, but the Wolverines had their own COVID issues to deal with, and the game was canceled, marking the first time since 1917 that it had not been played.

“Without question the thing I’ll remember most is learning on that Tuesday that the Michigan game for Saturday had been canceled,” Park said. “When that news came out that that game had been canceled, it probably took me at least an hour to fully comprehend what that was. I mean I said, ‘They can’t do that. No, they’ll reschedule that for next week, I mean they’re not going to – I mean there’s some way we have to have the Michigan game,’ and to me, that’s what I’ll probably remember about this season more than anything.”

The game that started the yearly tradition of The Game was a Nov. 30, 1918, matchup that Michigan won 14-0. While what happened on the field was not all that eventful, it was a game that took place amid the 1918 flu pandemic that killed approximately 50 million people worldwide.

“There were a lot of games that year that were canceled. I mean, it was kind of a week-to-week thing,” Park said. “We were supposed to play Michigan that year I think on the 26th of October, and it got canceled because of the Spanish Flu, and school was shut down. Ohio State University I think was shut down for about three weeks. There was an ordinance that you couldn’t have meetings with more than 10 people in public and things like that for a part of that fall, but Ohio State and Michigan were able to reschedule that game and play it on the 30th of November.”

The 2020 cancellation also led to another problem for Ohio State in that the team now had only five regular-season games, one below the threshold to make the conference championship game. But the Big Ten came to the rescue, amending the rule to allow the Buckeyes to take on Northwestern for a shot at their fourth-straight Big Ten title.

Ohio State was able to play out the rest of its games, taking down the Wildcats, then upsetting No. 2 Clemson 49-28 in the College Football Playoff semifinal before ultimately falling to top-seeded Alabama 52-24 to come one win short of a national championship.

After all of that, Smith told The Columbus Dispatch that, despite the outcome of the final game, there was a major sense of pride in getting to the finish line after everything that the team went through.

“You just have this sense of accomplishment,” Smith told the newspaper. “One of the reasons we fought so hard was to give the kids a chance to play, but you felt like you had a team that had a chance to be there. Everything you went through, the sacrifices, the pain, the pace, everything was worth it, because you gave those kids a chance.”

When painting with broad strokes, it looks like the Buckeyes avoided any more struggles with the pandemic after the Michigan cancellation, but that was not the case. Ohio State was missing key players in each game the rest of the year: Linebacker Baron Browning, punter Drue Chrisman and wide receiver Chris Olave were among the 22 players out against Northwestern; defensive end Zach Harrison and guard Harry Miller were among the 16 out against the Tigers; and kicker Blake Haubeil, defensive end Tyreke Smith and defensive tackle Tommy Togiai were among the 13 out against the Crimson Tide.

While not all of the combined 51 total absences in the final three games were COVID-related, it was clear that Ohio State still dealt with the virus every single week for the remainder of the season.

“Everything that went into this year, you can’t really put it into words the amount

of adjusting and sacrifice that went on this season to make this season even possible,” Day said on Jan. 22. “I’m really proud of our whole program for not only winning the Big Ten championship and going on and making it to the national championship, but the fact that we really followed the protocol to keep our guys safe, and we did a great job of that.”

“It was hard. I mean you talk about contact tracing all the way up until the last game, losing guys throughout the season, guys being pulled out, the constant testing, and all the things that went with that. We’d have virtual meetings. We wouldn’t always have guys together during the week. Practices (were) canceled and turned into walk-throughs. We made so many adjustments along the way to make sure our guys were safe.”

Smith echoed Day’s sentiments when speaking to the Dispatch, emphasizing just how grueling the protocols were for the entire team.

“You’re not seeing your families. You’re not seeing your loved ones,” Smith said. “And then I can’t express enough with people, unless you went through it, being tested every day. Think about that for a whole season, six days a week, and while you may get used to it, you still have that anxiety because you think you’ve done everything to not catch the virus, but we’ve had kids that just don’t know how the hell they got it.”

On the field, this 2020 Ohio State team may be remembered for earning the program’s first win ever against Clemson and doing so after a heartbreaking defeat to the Tigers the season before. But because of what happened off the field, Park said this season is going to be remembered for much more than what happened on the field.

“It’s the most unusual football season that I’ve ever covered. I mean, I never thought we’d have a situation like this,” Park said. “I never dreamed of a situation like this. I think the team will be remembered as an excellent year. And I think it’ll be remembered as a year of extraordinary effort and stick-to-itiveness, as you might say, on the part of the entire Ohio State football program, and the Big Ten, too for that matter, and other college football programs, just to have a football season this year, and to cope with all the weekly different things that happened.”

Helwagen said the only season that can even remotely prepare to 2020 was the 2001 campaign, when Ohio State had a game against San Diego State rescheduled after the NCAA shut down all games the weekend after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. The Buckeyes would travel to play UCLA the weekend after and play the Aztecs on Oct. 20 of the same year.

“The very next game was at UCLA on Sept. 22, and I can remember flying out to Los Angeles to cover that game and it was all surreal,” Helwagen said. “That’s about the only thing in my time doing this that really kind of compares – that our entire nation came to a standstill. But that was brief, I mean, we went forward with new security protocols after that and were able to kind of get back to some normalcy pretty quickly. This is going to be almost two full years where we are dealing with protocols, and it’s disrupted daily life, plus this other thing that we all follow, college athletics. I mean, it’s disrupted every phase of our lives.”

The year 2020 was one dominated by the pandemic, and it is one that Helwagen, and likely many others, will want to put in the rearview mirror as soon as possible.

“Hopefully we’ll never have to endure anything like that ever again,” Helwagen said. “I hope I’m retired the next time something like this comes about because it was no fun. I mean it was a hard year.”

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The screenshot shows the website's navigation bar with links for HOME, FOOTBALL, BASKETBALL, SPORTS, FORUM, BSB ONLINE, and EAT & STAY, along with a LOGIN button. The main content area features a large article titled "OHIO STATE WOMEN'S BASKETBALL MOVES INDIANA MATCHUP TO JAN. 28, RESCHEDULES IOWA FOR FEB. 4" with a sub-headline "OHIO STATE MEN'S BASKETBALL JUMPS TO NO. 13, WOMEN'S HOOPS LEAPS TO NO. 14 IN AP POLL". Below this, there are three smaller article teasers: "Another Series Split For Buckeyes After Winning Opener", "Ohio State's Matchup With Penn State Rescheduled For Wednesday, Jan. 27", and "The No. 15 Ohio State men's basketball team will take on Penn State on Wednesday, Jan. 27 at 7 p.m. at Value City Arena. The..."

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Opportunity For Revenge Vs. Tigers Highlights 2020

By ANDREW LIND
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

It's impossible to deny the impact the coronavirus pandemic had on Ohio State athletics in 2020, from the cancellation of spring practice to the postponement and reinstatement of the fall football season, making the pandemic far and away the biggest story of the year, all of which has been detailed at length in our cover story for this edition of Buckeye Sports Bulletin.

The following is our look back at the top 10 non-COVID-related storylines from 2020, including the Buckeyes making their second straight trip to the College Football Playoff, running back Trey Sermon breaking the school single-game rushing record and more.

1. Ohio State Makes Playoff, Looks For Revenge Vs. Clemson

From the moment that quarterback Justin Fields' potential game-winning pass was intercepted in the end zone of the 2019 College Football Playoff semifinal game against Clemson, Ohio State had revenge on its mind.

The Buckeyes immediately put up a sign in the weight room at the Woody Hayes Athletic Center with the score from that game – a 29-23 win by the Tigers – as motivation to avenge the heartbreaking loss.

They got their chance after it was revealed on Dec. 20 that Ohio State and Clemson would meet in the Sugar Bowl on Jan. 1 with a berth in the national championship on the line.

"Coming off of that game, we just didn't get over it in one day," head coach Ryan Day said. "It took time. The goal was to get back here. How we got back here is just amazing, though. The journey we have gone on as a program to get back here, to have a chance to play Clemson in this game, is amazing. You couldn't make it up. Some of the best storytellers couldn't have come up with this story, but here we are."

The Buckeyes had to deal with plenty of adversity in 2020, from the Big Ten initially postponing and subsequently reinstating the season amid the coronavirus pandemic to having their game against Illinois canceled due to an increase in positive tests within the program.

They also had games against Maryland and Michigan wiped out when those programs had outbreaks of their own.

"To me, our story is just simply amazing," Day said. "We weren't even playing the season for a month, and then here we are right now. I think we have an opportunity to write one of the greatest stories in the history of college football."

2. Trey Sermon Breaks School Single-Game Rushing Record

Ohio State senior running back Trey Sermon broke Ohio State's single-game record by rushing for 331 yards in the fourth-ranked Buckeyes' win over No. 14 Northwestern in the Big Ten Championship Game in Indianapolis on Dec. 19.

"Trey had a lot of explosive runs out there," Fields said. "I mean he played his ass off. He did a great job today. I think when you have a player that's in a rhythm



COURTESY OF THE OHIO STATE DEPT. OF ATHLETICS

MADE HIS MARK – Senior running back Trey Sermon, right, rushed for a single-game school record 331 yards in Ohio States' Big Ten Championship Game win over Northwestern on Dec. 19.

like that, you just have to keep feeding him the ball, and that's what we did."

Sermon, who came to Ohio State last offseason as a graduate transfer from Oklahoma, entered the game with just 344 yards on the season. He carried the ball 29 times, breaking the previous school record of 314 yards – set by Heisman Trophy-winning running back Eddie George in a 41-3 win over Illinois in 1995 – on his 27th carry of the game.

"When I'm in the zone, I just feel like, personally, everything just really slows down," Sermon said. "The game really just slows down, and I'm able to just see everything develop and just continue to be decisive and just make the right reads and make the right cuts. I was able to really just get in a groove and just keep it rolling, and my teammates were there to support me. They just kind of made it easy for me."

3. Student-Athletes Speak Out Against Racism

Amid the nationwide protests over the killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis police, the Ohio State football program shared a video on social media on June 1 urging fans to fight racism.

Captioned with the hashtags #BlackLivesMatter and #FightForAChange, the video featured appearances by several players, including defensive ends Jonathon Cooper and Tyreke Smith; wide receivers C.J. Saunders and Chris Olave; offensive guard Wyatt Davis; cornerbacks Marcus Williamson, Shaun Wade and Sevyn Banks; tight end Luke Farrell; quarterback Justin Fields; punter Drue Chrisman; center Josh Myers; linebackers Tuf Borland, Pete Werner and Justin Hilliard; and running back Master Teague, as well as head coach Ryan Day.

"Don't ignore George Floyd," their combined voices said. "His senseless killing at the hands of law enforcement has shaken this nation at its core. His death, along with countless others, has once

again brought these injustices to the forefront of our society. For far too long, Black Americans have suffered under systems of racism and oppression. This time, it's different. This time we've had enough.

"As members of the Ohio State football team, we have a platform not only in Central Ohio, but around the globe. With this platform, it is our duty to promote awareness and evoke change. We will no longer stand silent as these issues continue to plague our friends, citizens, neighbors, and teammates. We stand in solidarity with the black community and equal rights for all. This is not white vs. black. This is everyone against racism. As a team, we've committed ourselves to fight for change. And now, we're asking for you to join us."

The following day, many of those football players were joined by other student-athletes and faculty such as then-school president Michel Drake and athletic director Gene Smith in a peaceful protest outside the Ohio Stadium rotunda, kneeling for nine minutes in honor of Floyd.

4. Haskell Garrett Shot, Has All-American Season

When Ohio State senior defensive tackle Haskell Garrett suffered a gunshot wound to the face on Aug. 30 when he reportedly attempted to break up an altercation between a man and a woman just off campus, some wondered if that meant the end of his playing days.

It turns out, Garrett didn't miss a single game and went on to have the best season of his career in 2020, recording 20 tackles, four tackles for loss, two sacks and an interception that he returned for a touchdown. He was named a first-team All-American by CBS Sports on Dec. 23.

"This was a crazy year," Garrett said in a video he posted to Twitter on Jan. 19, announcing his return for an extra year of eligibility. "Not only did I go through trials and tribulations, but our team did."

Garrett, who was cleared to play just four days before the Buckeyes' season opener against Nebraska on Oct. 24, joined a small group of defensive tackles in Ohio State history to be named All-Americans, including Jim Stillwagon in 1969-70, Dan Wilkinson in 1993, Mike Vrabel in 1996 and Quinn Pitcock in 2006.

"This kid was shot in the face," defensive coordinator Kerry Coombs said after the 52-17 win over the Cornhuskers. "I don't know how many days ago, but it wasn't that long ago. And he just never gave up. He kept coming in. My office is right across the hall from (defensive line coach) Larry Johnson's, and he was meeting with Larry with stitches in, learning and preparing without being able to do anything physically.

"For him to do that and then be able to play – and I can't tell you how he played because I don't know that until I watch the tape – but having him on the field was a difference-maker for the Buckeyes in every way, shape or form. You can't overvalue the impact on his teammates and the defense in general (in terms of) the experience he went through and how he got back on the field."

5. Ohio State Names Johnson 16th University President

Dr. Kristina M. Johnson was officially named the 16th president of The Ohio State University during a board of trustees meeting on June 3.

Johnson, who began her tenure with the university on Sept. 1, spent the previous three years as the chancellor of the 64-college system known as the State University of New York, which boasts more than 1.3 million students and 30,000 faculty members and includes five academic health centers and three hospital networks.

Prior to that, Johnson founded and served as the CEO of Cube Hydro Partners, a clean-energy infrastructure company focused on building and operating hydropower plants in North America. She also served as the undersecretary of energy for the United States Department of Energy under former president Barack Obama.

"Her credentials are long and impeccable, and her references are glowing," said Lewis Von Thaeer, the chairman of Ohio State's presidential search committee. "Everyone we talked to praised her boundless energy, unwavering integrity and keen ability to unite people around a shared vision. One person even went so far as to say I would bet my life on Kristina. To me, that speaks volumes."

Johnson, who is just the second female president in Ohio State history (Karen Holbrook, 2002-07), has an extensive background in sports, as well. She played field hockey at Stanford and created the Cardinal's club women's lacrosse team, which was promoted to a varsity sport in 1995.

Although she was born in St. Louis and grew up in Denver, Johnson also has significant family ties to Ohio. Her grandfather played right guard for the football team and graduated from Ohio State in 1896, while her roots trace back to the first families in the state.

"Ohio State has always been a special place to me, well beyond its standing as one of the most respected teaching,

research and patient-care institutions in the world,” Johnson said. “I am humbled to be selected to lead this great land-grant university, and I look forward to meeting with students, faculty and staff to begin our work together.”

6. Johnson Leads Buckeyes To Victory Over Spartans

With 23 players and four coaches, including Day, sidelined due to a coronavirus outbreak within the Woody Hayes Athletic Center, defensive line coach Larry Johnson led Ohio State to a 52-12 win at Michigan State on Dec. 5.

Johnson, who was in his seventh season with the Buckeyes in 2020, credited Fields for making his job easier after he threw for 199 yards and two touchdowns and rushed for a career-high 104 yards and two more scores.

“If you’re going to be a head coach for one day, you want Justin Fields with you,” Johnson said. “That was pretty special. He’s a special young man. Coaching the defensive side of the ball, you don’t get to talk to those guys a lot. But this week, he and I talked a lot.

“What a great kid. He’s just a great leader. He stood in front of the team and talked to them and encouraged the offensive line. I thought it was great. Every time I saw him, he had a smile on his face, so I knew we were in good hands.”

Day could say the same thing about Johnson, though, who earned his first head-coaching win since he was at legendary T.C. Williams High School just outside of Washington, D.C., in 1993.

“I think Larry has great leadership and understands how to motivate the team,” Day said. “When he stands in front of the team, guys listen. I think his leadership had a big part in how well our team played today and the energy they played with. I couldn’t be happier for him.”

Though it was only for one game, Johnson became the 26th head coach – and first Black head coach – in Ohio State history. But he also said he didn’t think about any of that during the win over Michigan State.

“I’m really just coaching one game. All I’m doing is standing the gap,” Johnson said. “I was just thinking about coming here to East Lansing, getting the win and making sure when I turn it back over to Coach Day that we were 5-0.

“It was never about me. It was about the team. That’s just my mind-set. It’s a great honor, but everything I do is for the players.”

7. Stroke Claims Former Athletic Director Jones

Jim Jones, who served as Ohio State’s athletic director from 1987-94, died on April 22 after he suffered a stroke at his winter home in Bonita Springs, Fla. He was 83.

“Jim Jones had a significant and positive impact on my life,” current athletic director Gene Smith said. “I will miss him greatly. He had a commitment to diversity and made a tremendous contribution to the growth of Ohio State athletics. Sheila and I share our condolences to Linda and his family.”

Jones came to Ohio State in 1965 as a physical education instructor before moving to the athletic departments staff just two years later. There, he worked in academic advising, primarily with the football team, which was coached at the time by Woody Hayes.

Jones was promoted to assistant ath-

letic director in 1970 and then became the associate athletic director in 1977. He supervised many of the day-to-day duties within the athletic department for more than 20 years, including the department’s eligibility, compliance, travel and aid programs, before he was elevated to athletic director in 1987. He held that position for seven years until his retirement in 1994.

Jones was honored in 2013 with the James J. Corbett Memorial Award, which is presented annually by the National Association of Collegiate Directors of Athletics to an administrator who has “most typified Corbett’s devotion to intercollegiate athletics and worked unceasingly for its betterment.” It is widely regarded as the highest honor one can achieve in intercollegiate athletics administration.

Jones – a native of Cuyahoga Falls, Ohio – also had an award named after him in 2018 by Ohio State’s Varsity “O” organization to pay tribute to male letter winners who have contributed to the honor and fame of the university.

8. Riep, Wint Arrested, Dismissed From Team

Ohio State senior cornerback Amir Riep and fifth-year senior linebacker/safety Jahsen Wint were arrested and charged with rape and kidnapping by Columbus Police on Feb. 12 and subsequently dismissed from the football program by Day.

“I am not making any statement on the criminal charges, but it is clear they did not live up to our standards and my expectations,” Day said. “The athletics department will make sure they both continue to have access to the health and well-being resources available to students and student-athletes. Due to the ongoing criminal investigation, I will not be commenting further.”

According to an affidavit filed by Columbus Police, the 19-year-old alleged victim visited the defendants’ apartment on the night of Feb. 4 to watch a movie. She began to engage in consensual sex with Riep but moved away and said she did not want to continue.

Wint is then accused of entering the room and restraining the woman while both defendants forced her to have non-consensual vaginal and oral sex. After the encounter had ended but before he drove her home, Riep made the woman shower and record a video stating the encounter was consensual, although reportedly she can be seen crying in the video.

Riep was expected to compete for a starting spot at slot corner in 2020 after backing up Wade at the position last season.

Wint, meanwhile, was expected to compete for playing time at the Bullet position manned by senior Pete Werner.

The pair pleaded not guilty to the charges but were indicted on Feb. 21 on two felony counts of rape and one felony count of kidnapping. They are facing up to 33 years in prison if they are found guilty and convicted, though a trial date has not been set due to the pandemic.

8. Cooper Earns First Block “O” Jersey

Following Ohio State’s preseason practice on Oct. 10, Day announced that Cooper would be the first player in school history to don the No. 0 jersey, allowed in college football due to a rule change prior to the 2020 season.

The Buckeyes are referring to the new tradition as the Block “0” in honor of former defensive lineman Bill Willis,

who was an All-American and national champion during his career in Columbus (1942-44) and later helped break the color barrier in the NFL. It will be awarded each year to the player who best exemplifies the things Willis stood for, including toughness, accountability and character.

“Jonathon Cooper represents everything that an Ohio State football player should be,” Day said. “He’s tough. He’s accountable. He loves this university and this state. He’s someone who continually embodies our culture of ‘fight.’ And that’s in everything that he does, on and off the field. He’s a Columbus native, been through a lot of adversity. It was a great fit. It was a really cool moment, and I know he was really excited about it.”

Cooper, a fifth-year senior and team captain in 2020, said the honor stood out above everything else he’s done at Ohio State.

“Being a captain, all the great things that have happened here at Ohio State, this one stands out a lot more to me personally,” Cooper said. “It doesn’t just represent me, it represents a great man, a great player who played here. I know when I put that jersey on, I’m representing him and I have to go out there and be my very best, and I have to do that every single day. This one really means a lot to me.

“I will wear No. 0 because it’s not about me. No one understood why I wore No. 18. It’s because my birthday is Jan. 8. That represents just me. When I wear that Block ‘0’ it will be in honor of a great Ohio State Buckeye and it will represent Ohio State University and all my teammates and coaches. I know I have to play at my very best, and I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

10. Coombs Returns To OSU As Defensive Coordinator

After a two-year stint with the NFL’s Tennessee Titans, Coombs was hired by Day on Jan. 20 to be Ohio State’s new defensive coordinator, replacing the departed Jeff Hafley, who accepted a job as the head coach at Boston College.

“Kerry Coombs is the coach I was really hoping we could hire and bring back to Ohio State,” Day said. “He is an excellent coach, and he has had two outstanding seasons in the NFL on Mike Vrabel’s staff with the Tennessee Titans.”

Coombs spent the first 35 years of his coaching career in Ohio, including a lengthy tenure at powerhouse high school program Cincinnati Colerain from 1991-2006. He then moved to the college level when he was named the defensive backs coach at Cincinnati, where he coached for five seasons before the Buckeyes and then-head coach Urban Meyer came calling after the 2011 season.

Known for his high-energy demeanor and on-field antics, Coombs became a fan favorite during his initial six seasons in Columbus from 2012-17. He also reeled in 21 blue-chip defensive backs during that time, including Eli Apple, Vonn Bell and Gareon Conley in 2013; Marshon Lattimore and Damon Webb in 2014; Denzel Ward in 2015; Jordan Fuller in 2016; and Jeff Okudah and Shaun Wade in 2017, and he uncovered three-star prospects such as Malik Hooker and Damon Arnette.

“I’ve spent a season on staff with Kerry, and I really like his coaching and knowledge of the game, but I also like that he knows Ohio State and he knows how to recruit to Ohio State,” Day said. “He’s

recruited some of the players currently on the team, and he coached a handful of Buckeye defensive backs who went on to become first-round NFL draft picks.”

Coombs’ return came with not only a better title, but also a hefty salary increase from when he was the cornerbacks and special teams coach. He’s making \$1.2 million per year, up more than \$700,000 from his 2017 salary.

Honorable Mention

Early Signing Period Goes Off Without A Hitch: Ohio State received letters of intent from 21 recruits on Dec 16, the first day of the early signing period. The group was headlined by five five-star prospects, including Pickerington (Ohio) North defensive end Jack Sawyer; Steilacoom, Wash., wide receiver Emeka Egbuka; Bellaire (Texas) Episcopal offensive guard Donovan Jackson; Hopewell, Va., running back TreVeyon Henderson; and Philadelphia St. Joseph’s Prep quarterback Kyle McCord.

“Early on, we identified some really special families that helped build this thing,” Day said. “We just kept talking about, ‘Who are the guys who fit our culture?’ If they don’t fit, then they probably need to go somewhere else. We’ve been very honest in recruiting.

“I think that people recognize the fact that if you come here, we’re going to do everything we can to take care of your son and maximize them to be great. This has been a strange year, and we’ve worked hard to take care of our guys and give them every chance to get on the field and fight for them, to keep them safe and maximize them the best we possibly can. I think people see that about us, and that allowed us to build a special class.”

Fall Athletes Granted Extra Year Of Eligibility: The NCAA Division I board of directors voted on Aug. 21 to give all fall student-athletes an extra year of eligibility and an additional year to complete it – no matter how much they played in 2020 – through a blanket waiver.

“We want to provide opportunities for student-athletes whenever possible,” acting board chair and Texas State president Denise Trauth said. “We understand it will be complicated and different, and we’re not certain how it will look. But we believe it’s important to try to give students that championship experience.”

Football programs are allowed just 85 scholarship players on the roster, but the players who take advantage of that extra year of eligibility will not count toward the limit.

Ohio State Has Double-Digit Draft Selections: Though it was handled remotely due to the coronavirus pandemic, the 2020 NFL draft felt the same as ever after Ohio State had 10 players selected, including three in the first round in defensive end Chase Young at No. 2 overall to the Washington Redskins (name at the time), cornerback Jeff Okudah at No. 3 overall to the Detroit Lions and Damon Arnette at No. 19 overall to the Las Vegas Raiders.

“That’s why we do what we do,” said Ohio State director of player personnel Mark Pantoni. “Guys we recruit early on, hopefully they come here, develop and accomplish their dreams.”

Meanwhile, former Ohio State quarterback Joe Burrow, who transferred to LSU and then won the Heisman Trophy and national championship in 2019, went to the Cincinnati Bengals with the No. 1 overall pick.

Last Game Aside, Offense Was Strength For Buckeyes

By JOE DEMPSEY
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

Entering the College Football Playoff national championship, the Ohio State offense was averaging 41.0 points and 557.7 yards per game through three games of the second half of the season.

Alabama stifled the potent Buckeye offense, holding it to just 24 points and 341 yards in the national title game, which resulted in a 52-24 loss for Ryan Day's group.

Despite a disappointing showing in the national championship game with a short-handed squad, Ohio State's offense had an excellent season, ranking No. 11 nationally with 41.0 points per game and No. 7 with 519.4 yards per game.

The Buckeyes' 2020 season was unlike any other, with games against Maryland, Illinois, and Michigan being canceled due to concerns regarding COVID-19 and key players missing such as fourth-year junior center Josh Myers against Michigan State and junior wide receiver Chris Olave in the Big Ten Championship Game against Northwestern.

"The culture of our program, the leadership of our program, the way that our kids fought for a season and then came back, dealt with all the adversity along the way of games being canceled, guys being out – for some programs there was a lot of guys out early and they kind of got them back and were able to get in a rhythm," Day said after the national championship loss Jan. 11. "It was very, very difficult for us to do that.

"The offensive line was out for an extended period of time, and in this game, we had the defensive line (out), we had wide receivers (out) during the Big Ten Championship Game. So, for us to continually work through all of that and get to this moment right here was an unbelievable success. The goal of the game was not to get here; the goal was to win the game.

"But all that being said, I couldn't be prouder of our culture, what our kids are made of and where the program is headed."

Though Ohio State came up short of its goals, there were many positives from a 7-1 season that concluded with a loss to the nation's top team in the CFP title game. Junior quarterback Justin Fields, who later announced his entry into the 2021 NFL draft, earned his second straight Big Ten Offensive Player of the Year award. Even though he will not be in Columbus, he spoke confidently about how his teammates will respond to their shortcomings.

"We didn't get the turnout that we wanted to, didn't get the result that we wanted," Fields said. "But that's just going to make us work harder. This team deals with adversity very well. We've been through a lot of adversity this past year. We're just going to use it to get back and just work our butts off."

Olave, who surprised some by deciding to return for his senior season in 2021, emphasized how the aspiration to be at the pinnacle of the sport will push Ohio State to end next season on top.

"It was tough. I mean, we have high standards for ourselves, high standards for each other," Olave said. "We worked so hard all season to get to this point. And we didn't play our best game today. It's tough. And it's a down moment, but we've just got to soak it in and bounce back."

What follows is a position-by-position evaluation of how Ohio State's offensive

units performed in the second half of the season, including first-half, second-half and overall grades.

Quarterback

Fields' second half of his junior season saw ups and downs, with the talented quarterback struggling against Northwestern and Alabama and turning in brilliant performances against Michigan State and Clemson.

At Michigan State on Dec. 5, Fields stood out in a 52-12 Buckeye victory for more than his passing ability. With Myers out at center, sophomore guard Harry Miller slid over to take on snapping responsibilities. Miller struggled by giving Fields snaps over his head and on the ground to deal with, but the signal caller flashed back to his days as a shortstop on the baseball field by scooping the errant snaps and turning potential disasters into positive plays.

"That's how the game played out," Fields said. "I think Harry was a little bit antsy on the first drive, so the snaps were a little bit wild. But as the game went along, he got more comfortable. I had to make some plays with my feet today, but that's going to happen in big games. Whatever I have to do to help this team win, that's what I'm going to do."

The Kennesaw, Ga., native completed 17 of 24 passes (70.8 percent) for 199 yards and two touchdowns, and he added a career-high 104 rushing yards and two scores on the ground in the 40-point win. Backup quarterback C.J. Stroud spelled Fields in East Lansing with the game in hand, and the freshman dashed down the field for a 48-yard rushing touchdown.

Fields has been known as a dynamic dual-threat quarterback since he was in junior high, so his exceptional passing and rushing ability was no surprise, but he proved himself as an excellent leader.

"He's a warrior," Olave said of Fields. "I mean, that's a guy you always want on your team. He's a leader on and off the field. And people look up to him. And the season he had this year, the growth he had from last year, it's huge. And I've got all love and all respect for him. I can't wait to see him do big things."

Fields struggled in the 2020 Big Ten Championship Game against Northwestern, completing just 12 of 27 passes (44.4 percent) for 114 yards and adding 35 rushing yards in a 22-10 win. The uncharacteristic outing against the Wildcats provided pun-dits with reasonable doubt ahead of a showdown with Clemson in the College Football Playoff semifinal.

Avenging a loss from the prior year, Fields shredded the Tigers for 385 yards and six touchdowns on 22-of-28 passing (78.6 percent) in a dominant 49-28 Ohio State victory. He gashed Clemson's stellar defense despite taking a significant hit to his back that caused linebacker James Skalski to be ejected in the second quarter.

"I mean, it's just a perfect example of how tough that guy is," Ohio State junior tight end Jeremy Ruckert said of Fields. "You take a hit like that and come back pretty much right away and make some of the throws that he made. You just stand there in awe of the toughness and his ability to execute after taking a hit like that and just the leadership it shows. It really gets the rest of your offense and the rest of your team going when you see a guy do something like that. Just incredible toughness and super gutsy."

Fields also ran for 42 yards on eight attempts in the CFP semifinal, displaying his versatility in addition to his program record-tying six touchdown tosses.

"That was one of the gutsiest performances I've ever seen in person," Day said. "Justin is such a competitive guy. He wasn't going to come off the field, and that's just the way he's wired. You were going to have to pull him off the field. It was a pretty amazing performance."

In the CFP national championship matchup with Alabama, Fields played through injury again but found less success against the stout Crimson Tide defense in the 52-24 loss. He completed 17 of 33 passes (51.5 percent) for 194 yards and one score, adding a team-high 67 rushing yards on six carries.

Though the season ended on a sour note for Fields and the Buckeyes, the standout quarterback left a legacy in Columbus that will live on long after his time in scarlet and gray. In just 22 career games at Ohio State, Fields threw the second-most touchdown passes in school history with 63, trailing only J.T. Barrett's Big Ten record of 104. His 78 touchdowns responsible for ranks fourth behind Barrett (147), Braxton Miller (88) and Art Schlichter (85).

He struggled against Northwestern and Alabama, but his showing to lead the Buckeyes over Clemson for the first time in school history will live on in Buckeye lore. Just ask three-time captain Tuf Borland, a fifth-year senior linebacker who also played with Barrett.

"He's a guy that's come in, since day one he's been here he's done everything that the coaches have asked of him," Borland said of Fields. "He really built that trust and that respect of everyone in the program. You can go every week, he's always battling something, and you guys saw it. It was one of the gutsiest performances from a player that I can remember in my time here. You can't say enough good things about Justin and what he's doing and what he means to this program."

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

Running Back

Master Teague capped the first half of the season with a 169-yard, two-touchdown rushing outing against Indiana, and the third-year sophomore tailback seemed poised to become the bell cow.

Teague took 14 carries for 46 yards against Michigan State, while senior running back Trey Sermon erupted for 112 yards on 10 carries, including a 64-yard scoring scamper. After a slow start to the season, Sermon wanted to show why he was such a coveted transfer target as an Oklahoma graduate.

"I just wanted to be able to contribute more and just make the most of my opportunities," Sermon said. "I mean, I feel like before, I just wasn't playing my best. It just kind of started in practice. I just started practicing a lot harder than I was, just trying to just do whatever I can to just help myself improve."

As one of the leaders of Ohio State's offensive line, Myers enjoyed the lunch-pail mentality of Sermon. Many backs in Sermon's position might have hung their heads or demanded more touches. Instead, Sermon focused on how he could improve.

"He was a big-time running back from Oklahoma that transferred to Ohio State, and the start of his career at Ohio State

didn't exactly go perfectly," Myers said of Sermon. "Things were different, and he had a bit of a slower start than he would have wanted, and he never said anything. Never not one time did he complain. Never not one time did he ask for more carries. He never had a bad attitude. He just kept coming to work.

"I think that's the most satisfying part for me in watching him succeed now and how well he's playing. He just does everything right. He never complains. Honestly, I can't say enough how happy I am for him."

In the Big Ten title game, Teague went down with an undisclosed injury following just two carries for 23 yards. Sermon stepped up in a big way, breaking Eddie George's program rushing record while leading the Buckeyes to a 22-10 victory. The Oklahoma transfer finished with 331 rushing yards and two touchdowns on 29 carries, breaking George's 314-yard mark against Illinois from 1995.

Sermon followed up his record-breaking performance with another dominant post-season outing, gaining 254 yards from scrimmage and scoring once against Clemson in a 21-point win in the CFP semifinal.

In the two games against the Wildcats and Tigers, Sermon totaled 524 rushing yards and three touchdowns with seven receptions for 65 yards. His late-season explosion led many to ask where that type of output came from, and his head coach credited Sermon's team-first mentality for his immense success.

"One, he didn't have the lead-up like a normal running back would have going into the season because of the lack of the preseason," Day said. "He came in during the summer, didn't have that lead-up like he typically would, and then he was coming off of the injury. Again, those are the two things I use. I don't know if he would say that or not, but I look to those two things. And then also our run game is a little different than what he was used to. He was also splitting time with Master. So when he started to get more at-bats, he started to get more runs, got into a rhythm of the game, and I think you're seeing the best version of Trey."

"The best part about Trey is when all that was going on, he never came into my office, never complained, never said, 'I need more carries,' none of that stuff. He just kept his mouth shut and kept going to work. I think that is the best part of this whole story, is he just kept going every single day to work and never said anything about it, and now he's playing at a high, high level.

"It's really remarkable what he's done."

Fields, a longtime friend of Sermon's, spoke highly of the veteran tailback and how he found his groove at the right time for the Scarlet and Gray.

"It's definitely crazy just seeing the position that we are, where we are right now," Fields said. "I've known Trey for a long time. He's always been a hard worker. I think we'll talk about this in a few years from now, but I think right now we're more so living in the moment. So we haven't really looked back on it.

"Of course I tell him after every big game we win, I usually go up to him after the game and say to him, 'I told you that you should have come here.'"

Ohio State planned to ride the hot hand with Sermon in the CFP national championship against Alabama, but he went down with a collarbone injury on the Buckeyes' first play. Teague, who had missed the

Clemson game due to injury, returned for a 65-yard, two-touchdown showing in the CFP final.

Beyond Sermon and Teague, freshman tailback Miyan Williams emerged late in the year. The former three-star back from Cincinnati Winton Woods tallied 59 yards on nine carries against Michigan State, Northwestern and Clemson.

"Oh man, Miyan, he's been great," Sermon said of Williams. "I've just seen him improve from when we started camp. You could tell like a freshman coming in he was like a little bit lost, just trying to learn everything. And just to see how far he's come. He just makes plays and he plays with so much energy and emotion. It just gets everybody motivated and hyped up."

Redshirt freshman tailback Steele Chambers carried only once for 8 yards against Michigan State after totaling 78 yards on eight carries in the first four games. Sophomore running back Marcus Crowley carried the ball six times for 14 yards once the game was out of hand against Alabama, marking his only rushing action of the season.

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

Wide Receiver

The Buckeye receiver room was led by Olave down the stretch, with the junior standout leading the team in catches and receiving yards each of the three games he played in during the second half of the season.

Against Michigan State, Olave caught a career-high 10 passes and tied his career high of 139 yards along with a touchdown. The former three-star prospect's touchdown came from 41 yards out on a beautiful pass from Fields. Countless reps in the offseason helped strengthen the Fields-Olave connection.

"Pre-snap I could see coverages. I could see where guys were going to be," Olave said. "I'm on the same page as Justin, so whatever he sees I see. Definitely on the deep balls, on the play-action balls, I definitely know when it's coming to me or when it's going to somebody else pre-snap. If they switch it post-snap, I can see that, too. We're all on the same page and we know where the ball is going to go."

Ohio State's No. 1 wideout was forced to miss the Big Ten title game against Northwestern, but his teammates stepped up in his absence, particularly freshman Julian Fleming. The No. 1 wide receiver in the 2020 class caught four passes for a team-high 53 yards against the Wildcats.

Sophomore receiver Garrett Wilson reeled in four receptions for 49 yards against Northwestern a week after his streak of four straight 100-yard receiving efforts ended when he caught three passes for 59 yards and a touchdown against the Spartans.

Olave returned for the CFP semifinal showdown with Clemson, and he dominated the Tigers with 132 yards and two scores on six catches. Wilson reeled in two receptions for 52 yards, freshman Jaxon Smith-Njigba added two catches for 12 yards, and sophomore speedster Jameson Williams snagged three catches for 62 yards, including a 45-yard touchdown.

"Me and Jameson, Garrett, we all competed in the offseason; we still compete to this day. But he's really underrated," Olave said of Williams. "He can take the top off at any time, one of the fastest players I've seen. He's my guy, and I'm happy he had the game that he had last week."

After a historic showing against Clemson,

the Buckeye passing offense struggled against Alabama in the CFP national title. Olave led the unit with eight receptions for 69 yards, but he struggled to break free against lockdown cornerback Patrick Surtain. Wilson corralled three catches for 50 yards, including a 20-yard touchdown, and Smith-Njigba added two receptions for 20 yards in the 28-point loss.

Overall, the Ohio State receivers were solid in the second half of the season. Wilson's streak of 100-yard games came to an end, but he still made plays, and Olave took his game to another level toward the end of the year.

Olave, who announced he will return for his senior season, concluded his junior campaign needing 91 more catches to break K.J. Hill's program record of 201; 1,124 more yards to pass Michael Jenkins' mark of 2,898 yards; and 13 more touchdowns to surpass David Boston's record 34 touchdowns.

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

Tight End

The tight end unit may be the most unheralded part of the potent Ohio State offense. The Buckeyes' tight ends rarely filled up the stat sheet, but their blocking on the edge was invaluable to the success of the offense.

Ruckert led a solid tight end group that also featured fifth-year seniors Luke Farrell and Jake Hausmann. While Farrell and Hausmann were already known for their stellar blocking abilities, Ruckert improved vastly in that area as a junior.

The dynamic Ohio State rushing attack would not have been what it was without superb blocking by the tight ends. Ruckert, Farrell and Hausmann helped set the edge and provide seams for Sermon to exploit.

In the passing game, the Buckeye tight end trio did not register a single reception against Michigan State or Northwestern. Perhaps the Buckeyes were saving them for the CFP semifinal matchup with Clemson because that is where they shined.

Farrell started the productive day with an 8-yard touchdown, and Ruckert reeled in a pair of scores as part of his three-catch, 55-yard outing.

The heavy involvement of the tight ends caught many off guard, including Clemson, and even Ruckert said he did not expect so many targets.

"You get your opportunities in practice and then it's just whether it's going to work out coverage-wise, where you're at in the game, what gets called," Ruckert said. "We couldn't be happier. I mean, I don't know what more we would want, dominating the ball, three touchdowns for the tight end unit. That was great."

In the national championship game against Alabama, the tight ends did not enjoy the same success, but Ruckert still made a big play. After breaking open over the middle, Ruckert reeled in a 36-yard reception with one hand, displaying elite skill at 6-5 and 253 pounds.

The tight ends finished the year strong, highlighted by a breakout performance in the CFP semifinal, and Ruckert's return bodes well for the unit moving forward.

"It's also complemented by a couple really good tight ends that no one wants to talk about unless they catch a ball," said co-offensive coordinator/tight ends coach Kevin Wilson. "Those guys block their butts off every week."

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

Offensive Line

The Ohio State offensive line may have been the most impressive unit for the Buckeyes during the second half of the season given the circumstances it faced.

Before the Michigan State game, Myers, senior tackle Thayer Munford and third-year sophomore tackle Nicholas Petit-Frere were ruled out due to COVID-19 protocols. Miller slid over to center, and third-year sophomore Matthew Jones filled in at guard.

Sophomores Dawand Jones and Max Wray stepped up at tackle for the Buckeyes.

Despite missing three starters along the offensive line, the Buckeyes still gained 521 yards against the Spartans, including 322 on the ground in the 52-12 victory.

"We had a game where we had a couple linemen out, but to me, I wasn't really overly concerned about that game," Kevin Wilson said. "I knew we had some talented players coming in. They had been practicing well. I don't think you run the ball the way we've been running on a team that's not an option-oriented team and don't have pretty good line play and cohesion."

Myers, a team captain, was extremely impressed with both the physical capabilities and mental fortitude of Paris Johnson, a true freshman who saw 15 total snaps against Clemson and Alabama.

"Paris is an extremely talented football player and offensive lineman," Myers said. "He has the right skill set. He has what God has given him, and God has given him a lot. And he also has the mind-set. I don't know if I should say this or not because it's pretty early on in Paris' career, but in my personal opinion, if Paris isn't an Outland Trophy winner before he leaves here, then he's screwed something up because he should be by the time he leaves, in my opinion. He's that talented."

Myers, Munford and Petit-Frere returned for the matchup with Northwestern in the Big Ten title game, and they played great along with Miller and fourth-year junior guard Wyatt Davis, who earned unanimous All-American accolades.

The offensive line helped pave the way for Sermon's record-breaking performance, and the talented tailback was quick to give credit where it was due.

"Those guys are great up front. They make my job easy," Sermon said. "They control the line of scrimmage. They get great

push, and they make my job a lot easier.

"I mean, just being able to just get in sync with them, it's gotten easy over time just because of how great they've been. They do a great job of just getting off the ball and just moving bodies."

Sermon followed the big men up front for another excellent outing against Clemson in the CFP semifinal, gaining 193 of the Buckeyes' 254 rushing yards.

Ohio State totaled 639 yards of offense in the 49-28 win, despite missing Miller due to COVID-19 protocols. Matt Jones stepped in again, and the former four-star prospect played great on the big CFP stage.

"Matt has done a great job, and that's huge," Myers said. "They haven't been two easy games, either. They've been really important games, so he's done a great job."

"It's a very different mind-set when you're going into a game and you're a second-team guy and you're probably not going to play as compared to when you know you're going to start and you have no choice but to play, but to prepare, but to take the week dead serious the whole time. I think that's been huge for Matt."

"He was in that situation, and he had no choice. He's there. He has to perform, and he knows it, and that's what he's done. I think it speaks volumes to the character of our team."

Ohio State's offensive line could have performed better against Alabama in the national title game, but every unit needed to do more. Overall, it was still a solid year for the Buckeye front.

In addition to Davis earning unanimous All-American honors, he was named to the All-Big Ten first team along with Myers, Munford and Petit-Frere. Myers took a big step forward in 2020, also earning second-team All-American recognition from Sporting News.

"It's been really cool just to see the evolution of Josh Myers take off," Davis said of Myers. "It's been great, and I'm really excited for the future he's going to have as far as football goes. He pushes me to go harder every day. That's a guy that I know going into each game I've got to compete with him with knockdowns, because if he has more than me, he'll definitely let me hear it."

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

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OSU's Defense Takes Step Back During 2020 Season

By **ANDREW LIND**
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

After allowing just 259.7 yards and 13.7 points per game in 2019, Ohio State's defense took a significant step back this past season.

In fact, the Buckeyes surrendered a whopping 401.6 yards and 25.8 points per game, which ranked 59th and 43rd in the Football Bowl Subdivision, respectively.

The statistical drop-off was somewhat understandable since Ohio State lost its defensive coordinator in Jeff Hafley, who accepted the head coaching job at Boston College after just one season in Columbus, as well as three first-round picks in defensive end Chase Young and cornerbacks Jeff Okudah and Damon Arnette.

The Buckeyes were also missing other key contributors from the 2019 team, which reached the College Football Playoff semifinals, including defensive tackles DaVon Hamilton and Jashon Cornell, linebacker Malik Harrison and safety Jordan Fuller, who all made their presence felt on Sundays last fall.

Their collective absence was never more apparent than it was in Ohio State's 42-35 win over Indiana on Nov. 21, when Hoosiers quarterback Michael Penix threw for 491 yards and five touchdowns. It was the fourth-most passing yards ever in a game against the Buckeyes.

Indiana senior wide receiver Ty Fryfogle was the primary beneficiary of Penix's big afternoon, hauling in seven passes for 218 yards and three scores. That was also the second-most receiving yards ever surrendered in a single game by Ohio State – and a sign of things still to come.

The Buckeyes didn't have any notable defensive lapses in their next three games, which included wins over Michigan State, Northwestern in the Big Ten Championship Game and Clemson in the Sugar Bowl, even if Tigers quarterback Trevor Lawrence did throw for 400 yards in a losing effort. But then issues reared their ugly head once again at the worst possible time, as Ohio State gave up 52 points and 621 yards of total offense to Alabama in the College Football Playoff national championship.

That included 464 passing yards from quarterback Mac Jones, the fifth-most ever allowed in a single game by the Buckeyes, with Heisman Trophy-winning wide receiver DeVonta Smith hauling in 12 of Jones' passes for 215 yards and three touchdowns before exiting in the third quarter with an apparent thumb injury.

"We didn't play very good against Indiana, and there were times early in the season where it just didn't look the way it should," head coach Ryan Day said during a teleconference on Jan. 22. "I thought we did a good job against Clemson. I thought our guys played well. We created turnovers and they played really well there. I thought we played well for the most part against Northwestern, too. Then it all kind of culminated at the end against Alabama."

Ohio State played just eight games this season due to the coronavirus pandemic, and Day acknowledged the situation played a role in the defense's struggles.

The Buckeyes were without players on both sides of the ball for weeks at a time because of positive tests, including defensive tackle Tommy Togiai and defensive end Tyreke Smith being sidelined for the national championship game, and were able to hold only one padded practice in the week leading up to the matchup with the Crimson Tide.

"We had some interruptions just in terms of practice and things like that," Day said. "Not that that's an excuse. It's just that when you look at the number of games we had, you find out a little bit more about your defense. You can experiment with some things a little bit more when you have five or six more games than we did. But that's the line you toe and you try to figure that out. What do you feel like you can handle? I think it was a combination of things there at the end, but certainly, there are things that we need to look at and big-time discussions that we have to have going into next fall."

So with Ohio State now in offseason evaluation mode, the staff of Buckeye Sports Bulletin will follow the coaching staff's lead in assessing each unit of the defense and handing out second-half and final grades below.

Defensive Line

Defensive line coach Larry Johnson has proved his success year in and year out during his seven seasons at Ohio State.

After losing Young, who was recently named the NFL's defensive rookie of the year, Johnson's unit was once again the strongest part of the Buckeyes' defensive attack thanks to an extensive rotation on both the interior and exterior of the defensive line.

Ohio State ranked sixth in the FBS in allowing just 97.6 yards per game on the ground and ninth with 1.38 forced fumbles per game. The Buckeyes also tied for third in the Big Ten with 21 sacks,

including a team-high 3½ sacks from fifth-year senior defensive end Jonathon Cooper and three from Togiai.

"I don't feel like it's just one guy," Cooper said. "Across the board, we have great players from first-, second- and third-string that I feel like we can put in the game and rely on. That's what makes us different. You can sub guys in and get the same results as you would a starter."

Ohio State typically rotated five players at the two defensive end positions in Cooper, juniors Tyreke Smith and Tyler Friday, and sophomores Zach Harrison and Javontae Jean-Baptiste. That depth was tested, though, as Cooper was the only one who did not miss a game this season due to either injury or testing positive for coronavirus.

"I feel like I played pretty well," Cooper said. "There are definitely some things I can get better at, but for the most part, we've gotten the job done. At the end of the day, it doesn't matter how it gets done or what goes on throughout the game – plays missed, tackles missed, penalties, sacks, all of those things. The bottom line is winning."

"You just have to get pressure on them any way you can, whether that's getting your hands up, batting balls down, making them feel your presence, collapsing the pocket. Really, just doing anything you can to make it very uncomfortable so they can't just sit back there and find the open man. That helps out our secondary, as well."

Cooper was recently named by Pro Football Focus as the highest-graded pass-rusher in the Big Ten, becoming the third Buckeye in the last four seasons (Nick Bosa in 2017 and Young in 2019) to claim that honor. He finished the season with 24 tackles, 3½ sacks, two quarterback hurries, one forced fumble and one pass breakup.

That dominant effort was replicated inside by Togiai and senior defensive tackle Haskell Garrett, who suffered a gunshot wound to the face during the offseason but rebounded to be named first-team All-American. He recorded 20 tackles, four tackles for loss, two sacks and an interception that he returned for a touchdown in the 52-12 win over Michigan State on Dec. 5.

"I still think Haskell has a lot of area to grow," Day said. "He came on the scene quickly this year. With another season of preparation, I think he can be one of the best defensive tackles in the country."

"You think about Haskell's situation, he had COVID earlier in the summer, then he had his incident (where he was shot) and he was out for some time before the season. There was really no lead-up for the season for him, and he still played the way he did. He did a good job of leadership and being strong for our guys."

The depth of the interior was tested in the national championship, though, as Togiai tested positive for coronavirus and missed the game. Fifth-year senior Antwan Jackson, junior Jerron Cage and sophomore Taron Vincent each played a season-high in snaps against the Crimson Tide, but Togiai's absence was still notable.

"I have to give a lot of credit to the guys that stepped in their place,"

Cooper said. "They definitely stepped up to play. I'm very proud of them. Even with us missing guys, they stepped up and played really well in my opinion. I'm really excited to see what they all do next year."

BSB Midseason Grade: A-
BSB Second-half Grade: A
BSB Final Grade: A

Linebackers

Al Washington oversaw what was arguably Ohio State's most-experienced unit in 2020, with fifth-year senior Tuf Borland and seniors Pete Werner and Baron Browning as the starting linebackers.

Yet Borland, who last season became just the second three-time team captain in school history, was quick to credit his position coach for the group's continued improvement over the course of the season.

"Coach Washington has been amazing," Borland said. "He deserves a lot of credit for what we've done. Day in and day out, he's always there for us. Just the way he approaches his business every day with an energy and a passion, it's truly contagious. It just shows in how we've kind of taken off over the last season. I give him a lot of credit."

Although limited athletically, which showed when he lined up in coverage against DeVonta Smith in the national championship game, Borland was a solid run-stopper for the Buckeyes. He finished the season second on the team with 48 tackles, most of which came near the line of scrimmage.

Werner, meanwhile, played a number of different roles but notably excelled in his ability to cover tight ends and running backs looking to catch passes out of the backfield, which is why he led the team with 54 tackles.

Browning, last but not least, was undoubtedly the most athletic of the three and brought even more versatility to the group, sometimes lining up as a defensive end. He finished the year with 30 tackles, including three tackles for loss and one sack.

That trio was exceptional in the Sugar Bowl against Clemson, holding Tigers running back Travis Etienne to just 32 yards and one score on 10 carries and four catches for 64 yards, one year after he torched the Buckeyes to the tune of 134 all-purpose yards and three scores in the 2019 Fiesta Bowl.

"We're just a group of guys who love the game of football," Werner said. "Our knowledge for the game increases every single day, and our communication has increased so much to where you can put a lot of things on the linebackers and we're willing to get it done. If you look at the first game through (the national championship), we've improved so much because we've taken that coaching and run with it."

The linebackers were equally lost against Alabama, when running back Najee Harris rushed 22 times for 79 yards and two touchdowns and caught seven passes for 79 yards and another score.

It was a disappointing end for a unit that had showed so much promise.

On the other hand, the late-season play from sixth-year senior Justin Hilliard

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Hilliard – who dealt with a litany of injuries over the course of his career, including tearing both biceps, his meniscus and Achilles – was perhaps the Buckeyes' best defensive player over the final three-game stretch.

"He's a guy that's pretty much seen it all – the good, the bad, the ugly," Borland said. "He's fought through so much on and off the field, and to see the success that he's having, it's awesome."

"Justin is an unbelievable player, but he's an unbelievable person as well. Nobody is surprised to see the success he's having, because of how hard he works. He deserves everything that comes his way because he's a warrior. He always has been, and he's getting everything he deserves."

Hilliard recorded 33 tackles, a team-high five tackles for loss, three fumble recoveries, one forced fumble and one interception, which saved a touchdown in Ohio State's come-from-behind victory over Northwestern in the Big Ten Championship Game on Dec. 19.

"To see his improvements throughout the season and the way he's playing and operating on the football field, it's crazy," Werner said. "All of the injuries and the adversity he's gone through. I credit him and his hard work and how much he loves this team. He's just great to play alongside."

Because those four saw the bulk of the snaps, next year's presumed starters Teradja Mitchell and Dallas Gant, as well as Craig Young or K'Vaughan Pope, saw limited action in 2020.

It's worth noting, though, that what

they bring the Buckeyes in terms of athleticism, they lack in the amount of leadership displayed by those departing.

BSB Midseason Grade: A

BSB Second-half Grade: B+

BSB Final Grade: A-

Defensive Backs

Most of Ohio State's defensive struggles in 2020 can be attributed to a lack of depth and experience in the secondary, which had to replace three starters in Arnette, Fuller and Okudah and saw two contributors, cornerback Amir Riep and safety Jahsen Wint, dismissed from the team after they were arrested and charged with rape and kidnapping during the offseason.

Shaun Wade, after a successful 2019 campaign in the slot, opted to return to school for another season and move to outside corner in an effort to improve his draft stock and take a leadership role in the defensive backfield. But things didn't work out exactly as he or the Buckeyes had planned.

Though Wade was named a consensus All-American – earning first-team recognition from the American Football Coaches Association, The Associated Press and Sporting News – and the Big Ten's defensive back of the year, there's no denying he struggled with the transition.

He was mostly matched up with the opposing team's best wide receiver, including Fryfogle and Smith, and allowed seven touchdowns in eight games, and 63.9 percent of the passes thrown his way were completed.

For comparison, Okudah, who was

Ohio State's top cornerback last season before he was drafted No. 3 overall, surrendered just one touchdown in 14 games and held opponents to a 43.4 percent completion rate in 2019.

Ideally, Ohio State would have been able to hide Wade's deficiencies in coverage by moving him back inside, where he excels in zone schemes, but the lack of depth was only amplified by the loss of junior cornerback Cameron Brown in the second game of the season at Penn State. That meant the Buckeyes had to rely heavily upon Wade and junior Sevn Banks on the outside, with senior Marcus Williamson manning the slot.

It wasn't all bad for Wade. He finished the season with 35 tackles, four pass breakups and two interceptions, including a pick-six that proved to be the difference in the 42-35 win over Indiana. But it was certainly a surprise to see him and the rest of the secondary struggle so much under the guidance of new defensive coordinator Kerry Coombs, who coached the Ohio State cornerbacks from 2012-17 before a two-year stint with the NFL's Tennessee Titans.

In their lone season under Hafley in 2019, the Buckeyes led the FBS in allowing just 156.0 yards passing per game. This year, though, teams threw for 304.0 yards per game, which ranked 122nd nationally.

The statistics are slightly skewed given Ohio State played just eight games, including matchups against the high-powered Tigers and Crimson Tide and not including regularly scheduled nonconference games that would have balanced the numbers a bit.

Regardless, the Buckeyes did not play championship-level defense in 2020, and Day knows it.

With co-defensive coordinator Greg Mattison retiring at the end of the month, Ohio State now has the opportunity to switch things up defensively. Whether it's hiring someone who can simply assume Mattison's duties or moving some of the returning assistant coaches into new roles in addition to hiring someone who can bring something new to the table, this offseason will be especially important as the Buckeyes look to close the gap with the Crimson Tide.

One bright spot in the defensive backfield, meanwhile, was the emergence of freshman safety Lathan Ransom, who saw an expanded role late in the season. After playing just 24 total snaps as the third-string safety behind Josh Proctor and Marcus Hooker in Ohio State's first six games, he saw 37 plays as the fifth defensive back in the Buckeyes' nickel packages against Clemson and Alabama.

"He's just continued to improve every day," Coombs said. "Those are the kids who have suffered the most from how the summer went and the shorter season and not having the opportunity to get those kids in games early in the year to help them develop. We all felt like he was doing really well in practice, but as you know, that's a lot different than the game. But he showed up really big when we needed him to, and he continues to improve and develop."

"We're excited for his future."

BSB Midseason Grade: C

BSB Second-half Grade: B-

BSB Final Grade: C+

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OSU's Special Teams Were Nothing Special In 2020

By WYATT CROSER
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

Ohio State's special teams units did not have the most stellar first half of the season, mostly just existing without doing anything particularly exceptional on either the punting or the kicking side of things.

In the second half of the year, aside from a pair of particularly strong punting showcases against Michigan State and Northwestern, it was much of the same for the units, with the return games specifically continuing to not add any real sort of benefit to game production.

The following are BSB's midterm, second-half and final grades for the five special teams units for their efforts in the 2020 season.

Punt Block, Field-Goal Block

There were 85 teams in the Football Bowl Subdivision that blocked at least one punt or field goal at some point during the 2020 season. Ohio State was not one of them.

And, much like it was at the midterms, the pressure did not seem to be impacting the punts or the kicks much, with opponents averaging 44.6 yards per punt, 10th-most in the FBS, and missing just one field goal: a 46-yard attempt by Wildcats kicker Charlie Kuhbander that could have extended Northwestern's lead to 13-6.

That 87.5-percent success rate on field goals by opponents was tied for No. 105 in the FBS, while opposing teams also hit all 21 of their extra-point attempts.

All this leads to a disappointing year for the punt and field-goal block units after they combined to block four kicks in 2019, tied for No. 14 in the country.

BSB Midterm Grade: C-
BSB Second-half Grade: C-
BSB Final Grade: C-

Punt Team

After a slow start to 2020, averaging just 42.0 yards per punt with a long of 52 through the first four games of the season, fifth-year senior punter Drue Chrisman ended his final year at Ohio State on a positive note.

Chrisman ended up punting 27 times for 1,216 yards, good for 45.0 yards per punt, which ranked No. 13 in the FBS. His highlight performance came, once again, in East Lansing, the scene of the most memorable performance of his career.

In 2018, Chrisman had nine punts for 340 yards (37.8 average), including a long of 53 yards and a whopping six punts that landed inside the 20-yard line, many of which were inside the 5 to lead the Buckeyes to a 26-6 win against Michigan State.

This year, while he didn't have as many opportunities, Chrisman made the most of them, punting five times for 267 yards (53.4 average), three of which landed inside the 20, and one of which was a booming kick that went for 74 yards, the ninth longest in the FBS.

"I thought Drue Chrisman had two really big punts in the game," said Ohio State head coach Ryan Day. "That was really huge."

But Chrisman had troubles with COVID-19 before Ohio State's next game against Northwestern, leading to fifth-



COURTESY OF THE OHIO STATE DEPT. OF ATHLETICS

HIS BEST EFFORT – Punter Drue Chrisman, left, shared the Big Ten Special Teams Player of the Week honors with Indiana's Haydon Whitehead after he averaged 53.4 yards per punt on five punts, including a career-long 74-yarder, in Ohio State's win at Michigan State on Dec. 5.

year senior and former walk-on Zach Hoover getting the start in the Big Ten Championship Game.

Hoover punted three times for 118 yards (39.3 average), with two of those punts landing at the Northwestern 5- and 6-yard lines.

"How about Zach Hoover stepping up?" Day said after the 22-10 win over the Wildcats. "I mean he had never punted before in a game, I don't think. I think that was the first time he had ever punted, and he did a great job."

Between the pair, Ohio State finished No. 17 in the FBS with 44.5 yards per punt and improved on what was a mediocre start to the season.

When it came to punt coverage, the Buckeyes faced only five punt returns all year, and only two of those came in the second half of the season. Those latter two went for 18 total yards to help bring the average yards allowed per return down to 19.6 (five returns, 98 yards), still fifth worst in the FBS.

This is still heavily affected by the 58-yard touchdown return by Rutgers' Aron Cruickshank, but the four other returns for 40 yards would still have made Ohio State's average subpar. Simply put, the Buckeyes did not have many opportunities to stop punt returns, but when they had the chance, it wasn't very pretty.

BSB Midterm Grade: B-
BSB Second-half Grade: A-
BSB Final Grade: B+

Kickoff Return Defense

Ohio State's kickoff coverage remained relatively solid in the back half of the season, finishing the year with 19 returns that went for 337 yards, with the 17.7 yards allowed per return finishing No. 21 in the FBS.

The unit's lone weak point was against the Spartans, when they allowed 100 yards on four returns with a long of 39, but the group righted the ship the rest of the way, allowing just 71 yards on the final

five returns of the season, including 54 yards on the four combined returns in the College Football Playoff semifinal against Clemson and the national championship against Alabama.

The 2020 ranking was a slight improvement from the performance in 2019, when the unit allowed 17.9 yards per return on 43 return attempts.

BSB Midterm Grade: A-
BSB Second-half Grade: A-
BSB Final Grade: A-

Punt, Kick Return

There was a lot of buzz heading into the season surrounding the amount of talent that Ohio State had in its arsenal and which of those players could shine on special teams as punt or kick returners. The Buckeye Sports Bulletin Podcast had even predicted a special teams touchdown in the form of a Garrett Wilson punt-return score.

That touchdown didn't happen, and all the buzz on the potential of the return game was completely wasted in what was a poor year for the punt and kick return units.

The punt return group gets less flak for what was more a below-average showing than a horrible one. The Buckeyes had 10 punt returns for 62 yards and no touchdowns on the season, with the 6.2 yards-per-return average ranking 73rd in the nation.

The long for the unit was a 22-yard return by Wilson in the season opener against Nebraska. The other nine returns – six by Wilson and three by true freshman wide receiver Jaxon Smith-Njigba – went for just 40 yards.

For as underwhelming as the punt return game was, it felt explosive compared to what the kick return unit was able to accomplish in 2020.

Ohio State returned the ball on seven kickoffs this season and amassed a total of 93 yards on those returns for a paltry 13.3 yards per return. That average was the

second worst in country, beating out only Texas A&M, which returned three kicks for 30 yards all season.

The bright spot for the kick return game in the second half of the season was that it returned only one kickoff in the final four contests – an 18-yard effort by senior Demario McCall against Michigan State – before taking touchbacks throughout the final three games of the season.

BSB Midterm Grade: D+
BSB Second-half Grade: C-
BSB Final Grade: D+

Field Goal, PAT

After a rocky start to the season thanks to injuries and a couple of missed chip shots in the Penn State game, Ohio State's kicking unit was mostly strong in the back half of the season, hitting on three of its four field-goal attempts and all of its extra points.

The Buckeyes finished a perfect 43 of 43 on point-after tries this year after one miss in 2019, and this season it was even more of a combined effort, with senior Blake Haubeil (24), freshman Jake Seibert (16) and sophomore Dominic DiMaggio (three) all adding to the tally.

Haubeil finished the year connecting on five of his seven field-goal attempts, missing from 20 yards against the Nittany Lions, when he was hampered with a groin injury, and from 46 yards out against Northwestern.

But the veteran kicker, who has since announced he will be declaring for the 2021 NFL draft, was unable to finish out his Ohio State career the way he wanted, as he was unavailable for the national title game against the Crimson Tide following a positive COVID-19 test.

"I'm extremely upset, but at the same time I'm overwhelmingly thankful to be an individual who is asymptomatic," Haubeil wrote in an Instagram post on Jan. 11. "I have spent the past four months making sacrifices and have not seen family and friends one single time. So, to say I'm pissed off is a complete understatement."

"With that being said, a game like tonight has never been about me, the kicker for Ohio State. I'm just one person. Ohio State Football was around long before me and will be around long after my time here. It is a special brotherhood that I am blessed to be a part of."

Seibert took the field goal and extra point duties in the national championship and made his only field goal try from 23 yards out, as well as all three point-after attempts. That three-point attempt came from the Alabama 6-yard line in the second quarter with the Buckeyes down 21-14, and the Crimson Tide outscored Ohio State 31-7 after the make, which allowed for Day to be questioned on the conservative call after the play.

"Well, I think if it was fourth-and-1, fourth-and-2, fourth-and-3, I think you'd probably go for it," Day said. "But I think it was either on the 5 or the 6, and I think that the percentages there are very low conversion rate. I just said, let's just take the three points and move on."

Ohio State finished the year 7 of 11 on its field-goal attempts, with the 63.6 percent success rate ranking tied for No. 93 in the FBS.

BSB Midterm Grade: D+
BSB Second-half Grade: B-
BSB Final Grade: C

Cooper Makes Impact In Final Collegiate Season

By WYATT CROSER
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

At the start of the 2019 season, Jonathon Cooper was expected to be one of the key leaders for the Ohio State defense, even if Chase Young was the more dominant player at the defensive end position for the Buckeyes.

This was proven when Cooper, as well as Young, was named a captain that season, but after that, only the latter was able to prove themselves as a leader on the field for most of the year. Cooper, who dealt with an ankle injury for most of the 2019 campaign, played in only four contests.

But the former local four-star prospect out of Gahanna Lincoln decided to stop his season at four games in order to redshirt and come back for a fifth year in 2020, and he immediately proved himself as a true leader of the team in the following offseason.

"His leadership is off the charts," associate head coach Larry Johnson said in April. "He's been around some great players. He's seen it. You know how he works in that room, and he's taken a role that you expect a guy at this stage in his fifth year to have a chance to do. I'm just really pleased with where he's at right now. He's in a good place. He's healthy. He's strong. And really, he's just chomping at the bit to get going. I think he's going to be real valuable going into the fall, not only his position play, but his leadership role for the team and for our unit."

After being named a captain for the second straight season, Cooper finally was able to prove it on the field, playing in every game for the Buckeyes in 2020 and officially declaring for the 2021 NFL draft on Jan. 18.

This season, though, playing in every Ohio State game meant playing in only eight contests after the shortened Big Ten schedule and three regular-season cancellations due to COVID-19. But there was a time when it looked like the Buckeyes were not going to have a season at all this year, and when that was a possibility, it was Cooper who spoke to the team in a video posted by Ohio State to Twitter on Aug. 10.

"When I think about my five years here and how much I sacrificed to try have a healthy year, a healthy season, to get through it and do what I want to do with you all, like this is easy for me. This is an easy sacrifice," Cooper said. "I can wear a mask. I don't have to go out and see anybody. I live by myself. I'm cool. I don't need to be around anybody. This is one of the easiest sacrifices I've ever had to make here. This is nothing to me because of all the years and the work that I put in."

"Me getting hurt last year and not being with you brothers, not being there every single game, that means way more than me not being able to go out to the club, me not being able to see my friends. That means nothing to me. The only thing that matters to me is you all being safe in this season. That's why I'm here, that's why I'm back. I don't care about wearing a mask. I don't care about being socially distanced."

Cooper's position as a key voice on



COURTESY OF THE OHIO STATE DEPT. OF ATHLETICS

GAVE IT HIS ALL – Rather than return for an extra year of eligibility, Ohio State fifth-year senior defensive end and team captain Jonathon Cooper declared for the NFL draft on Jan. 18 following a season in which he recorded 24 tackles, 3½ sacks and one pass breakup.

the team was shown even further when he was selected as the first representative of the Block "0" jersey, a jersey that is in honor of former Buckeye Bill Willis and that goes to a player who represents his values of "toughness, accountability and the highest of character," according to Ohio State's release.

"Jonathon Cooper represents everything that an Ohio State football player should be," head coach Ryan Day said. "He's tough. He's accountable. He loves this university and this state. He's someone who continually embodies our culture of 'fight.' And that's in everything that he does, on and off the field. I'm proud of Coop. He's the perfect person to wear the Block 0 for the first time."

Cooper said that the honor of wearing the Block 0 was one that stands out from the rest.

"Being a captain, all the great things that have happened here at Ohio State, this one stands out a lot more to me personally," Cooper said. "It doesn't just represent me. It represents a great man, a great player who played here. I know when I put that jersey on, I'm representing him and I have to go out there and be my very best, and I have to do that every single day. This one really means

a lot to me.

"No one understood why I wore No. 18. It's because my birthday is Jan. 8. That represents just me. When I wear that Block 0 it will be in honor of a great Ohio State Buckeye and it will represent Ohio State University and all my teammates and coaches. I know I have to play at my very best, and I wouldn't want it any other way."

Once it was time to actually play the games, Cooper played well, finishing his final season at Ohio State with 24 tackles (12 solo), 3½ tackles for loss, all of which were sacks, as well as a pass breakup and a forced fumble. He was named a second-team All-American by the American Football Coaches Association for his efforts.

One of his strongest efforts came against Clemson, where Cooper had only two tackles but was consistently in the backfield pressuring quarterback Trevor Lawrence, including for one of the two Ohio State sacks in the 49-28 win.

"I came back for my teammates, and I wanted to show the world the type of football player that I am," Cooper said in the lead-up to the Alabama game. "I feel like I played pretty well against Clemson. I definitely went back and watched the

film. There's definitely some things I could get better at, but for the most part we got the job done and we won the game, and that's the whole entire goal."

Cooper also had two tackles in the national championship game against Alabama, though they came in a 52-24 loss to end Ohio State's season. Still, after the game, Cooper was simply happy with the performances that his teammates had to get to that point in the season.

"I'm so proud of my guys and my team," he said. "I'm so proud of those guys. They're truly special, and I know we didn't win this game and all that, but they're champions in my heart honestly. I couldn't be prouder. I give all my thanks to them for letting me play with them, have an opportunity to do this stuff with them. You know, I'm just trying to keep my head held high for them. They deserve it for everything that they've done."

Cooper's official declaration to the NFL draft came on Jan. 18, but the fifth-year senior defensive end published a letter two days earlier on Lettermen Row thanking his teammates and the fans for his time with the program.

"Growing up in Columbus, I always dreamed of playing for Ohio State," Cooper wrote. "I grew up watching guys like Troy Smith, James Laurinaitis, Maurice Clarett, Ted Ginn Jr. and wanted to be just like them. It's been the honor of my life to suit up for the Buckeyes. My time playing at Ohio State was honestly a dream come true. I realized through my hard work that I actually got to where I wanted to be – and putting on that jersey for the first time was a feeling I'll never forget."

"When the national championship game ended on Monday night, I had a very tough time leaving the field in Miami. It's crazy, because sure I was hurt at the way this season ended, but more than anything else I just didn't want to have to take off my uniform. It has meant everything to me, and I've given all of me to it. I hope I've represented myself, my family, and everyone who ever dreamt of being in the situation I've been fortunate enough to find myself in these last few years in a way that makes Buckeye Nation proud. Thank you for making my dreams become reality."

Cooper's departure will leave a dent on the defensive line but, more importantly, will leave the Buckeyes without one of their core leaders over the past two seasons.

But Cooper is not worried about the 2021 team. He said he thinks that the future is still bright for the returning players and that the 28-point defeat to end the season will work as some key motivation to light a fire under the team during the offseason and throughout the upcoming year.

"I feel like they're going to respond the same way that they felt last year with the Clemson loss," Cooper said after the Alabama loss. "I'm sad that I won't be a part of this group next year, because, I mean, it's a bunch of great guys who truly love each other. But I'm excited to watch and see what they do next year. I feel like this is just going to fuel and motivate them to greater heights and achieve more."

"I feel like they got a taste of it, and now they just need to go finish it."

Corner Williamson To Take Advantage Of Extra Year

By ANDREW LIND
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

Marcus Williamson waited four seasons to earn a starting spot in Ohio State's defensive backfield, stepping into the slot when cornerback Shaun Wade moved outside to replace the departed Jeff Okudah and Damon Arnette this past fall.

Williamson finished the season sixth on the team in total tackles with 27 and also contributed two pass breakups, including batting a pass out of the hands of Clemson wide receiver Amari Rodgers in the end zone in the final two minutes of the Buckeyes' Sugar Bowl victory on Jan. 1. The ball popped up in the air and was intercepted by fellow cornerback Sevn Banks and allowed Ohio State to run out the clock.

Williamson could have parlayed that performance into an NFL future, but he announced just days later that he plans to take advantage of the NCAA granting players an extra year of eligibility due to the coronavirus pandemic and return to the Buckeyes for the 2021 season.

"I'm still enjoying being a Buckeye," Williamson said after Ohio State's national championship practice on Jan. 6. "This year has been just crazy. I know we had a shortened season, lost games (to cancellations) here and there. I'm ready to come back and help our unit get to the standard we know we hold ourselves to and what we should be."

Williamson, who also earned special teams player of the game honors with his tackle of Tigers running back Travis Etienne at the 18-yard line on the opening kickoff of the game,



COURTESY OF THE OHIO STATE DEPT. OF ATHLETICS
COMING BACK – Although he's a senior, cornerback Marcus Williamson announced on Jan. 6 that he will return for his extra year of eligibility in 2021.

played all but one defensive snap in the Sugar Bowl. Overall, he played the third-most snaps of any defensive back this season behind Wade (520) and Banks (483), seeing 414 snaps in Ohio State's base and nickel packages.

"Marcus coming back next year is a good thing for him and that defensive backs group," Wade said that same afternoon, "just having a leader and somebody that's older and been through the program so many years and being the older guy in the room."

Williamson – and the entire Ohio State secondary, for that matter – struggled at times this season with consistency.

The Buckeyes notably allowed Indiana quarterback Michael Penix to throw for 491 yards and five touchdowns in a 42-35 victory

over the Hoosiers on Nov. 21, with wide receiver Ty Fryfogle hauling in seven passes for 218 yards and three scores of his own.

Unfortunately, that reared its ugly head once again nearly two months later in a 52-24 loss to Alabama in the CFP national championship on Jan. 11, as Ohio State's secondary was picked apart by quarterback Mac Jones, who threw for 464 yards and five touchdowns. Heisman Trophy-winning wide receiver DeVonta Smith caught 12 of Jones' passes for 215 yards and three touchdowns, all of which came before he suffered a game-ending thumb injury early in the third quarter.

Williamson noted a lot of those struggles were because of the lack of spring practice and a true offseason, as well as the off-and-on nature

of the Big Ten's conference-only season. Still, he is proud of his and his teammates' efforts.

"Not seeing our families, many of use not being able to see our girlfriends, and to just be in this bubble and just around each other, it's been tough," Williamson said. "To go through all that since June and then to have our season wiped away, there was a lot of grieving going on around these walls and these hallways. To have it come back and show up to work every day, putting in the hours that we do, it can be rough on your health and your mental health. This year as a whole has just been wild, so to finally reach this point to where we're playing for it all, you can't write a better story than that."

Of course, the Buckeyes came up just short of winning the national title, so it's probably safe to say that's one reason why Williamson isn't the only senior returning to Ohio State for his additional season of eligibility. In fact, he'll be joined by left tackle Thayer Munford and defensive tackles Haskell Garrett and Antwan Jackson, who also announced their intentions to play one more year of college ball after the crushing defeat at the hands of the Crimson Tide.

Several others, including running back/wide receiver Demario McCall and wide receiver Jaylen Harris, were not recognized during the program's virtual Senior Day, perhaps giving a hint of their looming decisions, though they have until March 1 to officially declare for the NFL draft or announce their return to school.

"Like I said, I'm too happy to be a Buckeye," Williamson said. "I'm not ready to leave yet. I've still got unfinished business."

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Meyer Takes On New Project In Jacksonville Jaguars

By PATRICK MAYHORN
Special To Buckeye Sports Bulletin

When Urban Meyer announced his retirement from Ohio State and from coaching on Dec. 4, 2018, he did so firmly under the belief that he would not again return from this retirement, as he had from his first seven years prior. He said as much to a group of reporters, saying, "I believe I will not coach again," during his retirement press conference.

Meyer said something else during that press conference, though. He spoke about his legacy and the importance that word has to him. He spoke of his desire to be considered the best and to be remembered as the best.

"The legacy is – you can only control so much," Meyer said. "And I can lie to you and say that's not important to me. For any human being, that's important to you. And people have their opinions. Just do the best to do things the right way."

At the time, after a season of pained looks due to an arachnoid cyst that brought Meyer to his knees and forced athletic director Gene Smith to develop an escape plan for Meyer if he were to collapse during a game, Meyer sidelined his drive to improve on his own legacy. He cited his health problems, similar to those that he had faced at Florida, and indicated that while he didn't like the decision, he understood that he had to make it.

Just over two years later, Meyer announced to the world that he could no longer pass up the drive to further improve upon his legacy and that he felt healthy enough to return to the coaching world – this time not at the college level where he had made his name, but in the professional ranks. Meyer was introduced as the new head coach of the Jacksonville Jaguars on Jan. 14. In his introductory press conference, he spoke again about his health, this time in a much more positive light, mentioning an increased focus on taking care of himself and a renewed desire to avoid the hands-on, daily activity that had caused him problems at Ohio State.

"It's well-documented what happened in 2014 (when Meyer had brain surgery), and preventive (care) ... that's what I've looked into," Meyer said. "That's something I'm going to watch closely, the headache issues. I've had long detailed conversations with physicians very close to me."

"I'm older. It's something I'm going to be very conscious of, it's something I'm going to watch very closely. I will be the head coach, but I'm going to hire great coaches that are going to be expected to do their jobs. I'm not going to be running around like a nut on the practice field. Those days are gone. I know what it's supposed to look like and I'm going to be demanding of everyone, but it's something I'm going to watch very closely."

While the health is – and likely always be – a concern for the former Buckeye coach, Meyer was quick in his attempts to assuage those concerns and even quicker to explain his reasoning for returning to coaching at this specific time, with this specific team. Given that Meyer was reportedly offered several opportunities in recent years, including a high-profile courting by Texas this offseason, his excitement to head to a 1-15 Jaguars team caught some analysts by surprise. However, Meyer said that this was



COURTESY OF THE JACKSONVILLE JAGUARS

COULDN'T STAY AWAY – After a two-year hiatus, former Ohio State head coach Urban Meyer accepted the head-coaching job with the NFL's Jacksonville Jaguars.

the perfect opportunity for him to return to the game.

"Some college opportunities showed up and made me start thinking," Meyer said. "There's not a day that goes by that you don't see that grass, you see the team and locker room and you think. The comment I made was that it would have to be perfect. College, I don't plan on doing it. NFL has always been an intrigue."

"This was not a knee-jerk reaction. This is something that I've been studying for a long time. Not necessarily this job, but just the NFL, in particular, and then this one, the opportunity presented itself. Whether it's watching film, whether it's studying a roster, whether it's understanding the salary cap, what we have available to us, the No. 1 pick."

"The fact that I love Jacksonville. I spend a lot of time in Florida. My family loves it here. And then, quite honestly, Duval (County) and 904 (area code) deserve a chance to go win. I'm going to hire people that want to help the Jaguars win."

As Meyer mentioned, Jacksonville's ownership of the No. 1 overall pick in the upcoming NFL draft likely played a significant part in Jacksonville's pitch to Meyer. With Clemson quarterback Trevor Lawrence on the table, Meyer will most likely be stepping into the job with a top quarterback prospect on his roster from day one. Lawrence isn't the only pitch, though, at least according to Jaguars Report writer John Shipley, who broke down to BSB the Jacksonville roster that Meyer is inheriting.

"Anytime you walk into a team that's 1-15, there's going to be a lot of work that needs to be done on the roster side," Shipley said. "With that said, the Jaguars, they have a lot of promising young players, and for as bad as they were last season, probably the biggest reason that they were 1-15 is because of the quarterback position. And you already know you're upgrading that with Lawrence."

"So you look at the other areas on the roster, and they have a few exciting players on both sides of the ball. Wideouts Laviska Shenault and D.J. Chark and halfback James Robinson can all be weapons right away for Meyer. Brandon Linder's a smart center that Meyer's past offenses have always had. And then on defense, you have young players like cornerback C.J. Henderson, linebacker Josh Allen, defensive end K'Lavon Chaisson,

and then defensive tackle DaVon Hamilton, who before his injury last year was one of the team's better defenders.

"With that said, though, for as much interesting young talent as there is on offense and defense, there's still a long way to go," Shipley continued. "They have to completely rebuild the secondary. They need to answer the question of who the left tackle is going to be. The defensive line, especially the interior, needs to be retooled. And then they have questions just in terms of depth around their offense in general. They have a bunch of talented receivers, but do they have a true No. 1 receiver?"

"There are just countless questions. It's much more a team where its parts are impressive, but the whole isn't, and that's a big reason why you hear a lot about the draft picks and the cap space they have. They're going to need all of that, just to get the roster to a competitive level."

With Lawrence almost certainly set to join the fold, along with those young offensive pieces, Meyer's specialty as a coach – offense – may be the biggest story of his tenure in Jacksonville, at least early on. He told reporters that he wouldn't be calling plays but that he would like to adhere to his primary identity in building a team rather than a specific system. That identity? Speed.

"It's a very adaptable (offense)," Meyer said of his system. "If you happen to have Zeke Elliott at tailback, we happen to run it more. There's not a set system yet. That will certainly be impacted by the coordinator in place. My vision is that when you grab a seat in this beautiful stadium, you're going to see a team that plays really, really fast."

"I'm not going to be the play-caller. I've been active doing that in my career, but I'm not (here). Schematically, I think the NFL is different. One thing about offensive football is you find weaknesses. In the NFL, they're all the best players in America."

The talk of a high-flying offense paired with Meyer's background with and affinity for teams that can score points in bunches has piqued the interest of Jaguars fans, according to Shipley, though not exclusively for positive reasons due to his lack of NFL experience.

"I think people that are the Jaguars support base, they're definitely excited, just because this is kind of the first splash hire the Jaguars ever made," Shipley told

BSB. "Going back all the way to even Tom Coughlin, this is the biggest move they've made, and it's the first time that the Jaguars – even when they were successful in 2017, they weren't really in the national conversation. And right now, just because of the legitimacy that Urban Meyer's reputation and name carries in football, he's put them into the national conversation."

"So I think there was definitely excitement, but I think there's a fair number of people who are maybe raising their eyebrows, or maybe waiting to see how it plays out first, because as you and I both know, there's a ton of positives to his credentials, but the NFL is a different game. So there's some drawbacks as well."

Ultimately, regardless of what his offense looks like or how involved he is in the day-to-day hands-on coaching, the expectation and the goal for the Meyer tenure at Jacksonville is already set. Meyer has been clear about it, as has owner Shad Khan and everyone else around the Jaguars organization: Meyer is a program builder, and the Jaguars want to build a sustainable program.

"I think if Urban Meyer gave them four good years and set up a foundation, and they're able to get somebody from his staff of a Ryan Day type situation, where they can naturally succeed him, I think the Jaguars would take that," Shipley said. "I really do, just because I think the hiring of Meyer, they wanted somebody to come in and completely reset everything they do when it comes to their football operation. And I think he needs at least four or five years to do that."

"The expectation when any new tenure begins, or at least the goal, is always to get to a Super Bowl level. But at least the expectation in Jacksonville among the supporters and people that follow the team is to see them at least get to a level where they can consistently be competitive and self-sustainable – no instances where they are hot one season and then completely fall apart the next."

"I think what people really want to see is just for the Jags to build a consistent team that is in the mix every year. I don't think any fans are going to expect 12-4, 11-5 next year, because they just went 1-15. They know there's a long way to go for that team. But on the other hand, I think they also don't really expect them to have any more seasons like they've had. I think if they have any seasons like this past one, or perhaps like 2018 when they went 5-11, people would be supremely disappointed in that event. But I don't think you're going to have many people mad if he goes, say, 9-7, 10-6."

For Meyer, the return to the sidelines with the Jaguars presents a similar opportunity to the one that he took at Florida more than 15 years ago and Ohio State in late 2011. It's a chance to put his stamp on a team and to establish an identity on the field that becomes fully intertwined with the way that people view the program. If it's a push for legacy, it seems that Meyer would like to prove that after doing that in college, he can have the same impact in the pros.

"When they see that Jaguar emblem, I want there to be a sense of pride," Meyer said. "I can see a fast team. I see people who care deeply about that organization, and the two things I always talk about that are a part of inspiration are love and ownership. I want you to own it, and if you don't want to do that, then you really can't be here. Own that emblem."

Ohio State Welcomes Record 15 Early Enrollees

Ohio State officially welcomed a school-record 15 early enrollees to campus over the weekend of Jan. 22-24.

That list includes Pickerington (Ohio) North five-star defensive end Jack Sawyer; Steilacoom, Wash., five-star wide receiver Emeka Egbuka; Hopewell, Va., five-star running back TreVeyon Henderson; Philadelphia St. Joseph's Prep five-star quarterback Kyle McCord; Massillon (Ohio) Washington four-star wide receiver Jayden Ballard; Cornelius (N.C.) William Amos Hough four-star running back Evan Pryor; Ironton, Ohio, four-star linebacker Reid Carrico; Philadelphia St. Joseph's Prep four-star wide receiver Marvin Harrison; Richfield (Ohio) Revere four-star offensive guard Ben Christman; Manassas (Va.) Unity Reed four-star defensive tackle Tyleik Williams; Scottsdale (Ariz.) Saguaro four-star athlete Denzel Burke; Bowling Green (Ky.) South Warren four-star safety Jantzen Dunn; Floyds Knobs (Ind.) Floyd Central four-star offensive tackle Zen Michalski; Aurora (Colo.) Cherokee Trail three-star tight end Sam Hart; and Fremantle, Western Australia, three-star punter Jesse Mirco.

RECRUITING OUTLOOK Andrew Lind



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE OHIO STATE DEPT. OF ATHLETICS

A WHOLE NEW WORLD – Scottsdale (Ariz.) Saguaro four-star athlete Denzel Burke did not visit Ohio State before he committed, which made move-in day his first time on campus.

The group surpasses the previous high of 14, set when the members of the Buckeyes' 2020 recruiting class arrived last January.

This year's group arrived a few weeks later than normal, though, as the coronavirus pandemic pushed back the start of in-person classes. They are also required to quarantine for one week before they can gain access the Woody Hayes Athletic Center.

"It's a very unique situation for them to be here with no students and to have to quarantine. It's not ideal," head coach Ryan Day said during a conference call on Jan. 22. "I told Jesse it only gets better from here. He's going from Australia to here. It was 28 degrees the other day, no students on campus and they were quarantining for a week. It can't get any worse. He's excited to be here."

The returning players and coaches are currently on a postseason break, but they'll soon return to campus to begin offseason

workouts on Feb. 1. That's also when they'll finally meet their new teammates, including Burke, who had never stepped foot on campus until he moved into his dorm room on Jan. 23.

"It was important for everybody to take a deep breath and get away from each other," Day said. "The players missed their families. We got tired of looking at each other for the last however many months it has been. Guys are still recharging."

"Once Feb. 1 hits, though, that's when we start getting back to work with lifting and our offseason program with (strength and conditioning coach Mickey Marotti). Then we'll get into spring ball in March."

Ohio State will have at least six additional signees from the class of 2021 join the team this summer in Bellaire (Texas)

Episcopal five-star offensive guard Donovan Jackson; St. Louis De Smet Jesuit four-star cornerback Jakailin Johnson; Streetsboro, Ohio, four-star defensive tackle Mike Hall; Suwanee (Ga.) North Gwinnett four-star cornerback Jordan Hancock; Nashville Ensworth four-star safety Andre Turrentine; and Cincinnati La Salle three-star safety Jaylen Johnson.

The Buckeyes still hope to land commitments from Sannamish (Wash.) Eastside Catholic five-star defensive end J.T. Tuimoloau and Santa Ana (Calif.) Mater Dei four-star linebacker Raesjon Davis on the traditional National Signing Day on Feb. 3.

Davis Visits Columbus As Decision Date Looms

Although USC is believed to be the favorite in his recruitment, the odds that the Buckeyes land a commitment from Davis have gone up considerably after he took an

unofficial visit to Ohio State over the weekend of Jan. 22-24.

The 6-1, 215-pound Davis – who is considered the fourth-best outside linebacker and No. 45 prospect overall in the class of 2021 – made the trip with his parents and uncle. It was his second time on campus, although his first visit was just a quick two-hour look around the facilities as part of a nationwide bus tour with his 7-on-7 team back in March.

Although Davis and his family were unable to meet with Ohio State's coaching staff due to the ongoing recruiting dead period, Day and linebackers coach Al Washington gave them an itinerary of things to do and see around Columbus. They also got to spend time with some of the early enrollees, thanks to a well-timed move-in, and Jaylen Johnson, whom Day once referred to as the glue that kept the 2021 class together, made the trip up from



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A Look Back At Recruiting From The Pages Of BSB

35 Years Ago – 1986

According to the experts in the field of recruiting, the Buckeyes, with Earle Bruce heading up the team, were going to have a banner year in the class of 1986.

"It looks like they're going to clean up in the state," said Tom Lemming, a recruiting analyst. "I think they're going to do excellent. Bruce's staff is real good at recruiting.

"People put Bruce down as not being a good recruiter. But he's an excellent recruiter. I don't think he's as flamboyant as some of the other coaches, but he always seems to get the job done year after year.

Last year's class wasn't highly thought of by a lot of people, but it didn't turn out that bad."

30 Years Ago – 1991

Ohio State added three more names to its bankroll of future prospects as the 1991 recruiting season headed into the home stretch.

Defensive back Jason Louis of Hyattsville (Md.) DeMatha, offensive lineman Carl "C.J." Kelly of Rowley (Mass.) Triton Regional and quarterback/wide receiver Robert Davis of Twinsburg (Ohio) Chamberlin verbally committed to play their college football for the Buckeyes.

The trio brought the total number of commitments to Ohio State to 10 during a recruiting season in which the Buckeyes hoped to sign as many as 20 players.

25 Years Ago – 1996

Ohio State accepted verbal commitments from another junior college transfer as well as from one of the nation's top high school running backs and kept the heat on a number of other top prospects in another lively week of football recruiting.

The JUCO transfer was cornerback James Dumas from City College of San Francisco. Dumas, who graduated from nearby Westerville South High School two years prior, became the second JUCO transfer in the class of 1996, joining quarterback Mark Garcia from Modesto (Calif.) Junior College, and the fifth such transfer in two years for the Buckeyes.

The top-rated running back was Durrell Price of Sylmar, Calif. Price finished his official visit schedule with a trip to Cal on Jan. 19, but an in-home visit by head coach John Cooper and running backs coach Tim Spencer had an impact and he committed to the Buckeyes on Jan. 21.

20 Years Ago – 2001

It appeared that the mere announcement of Jim Tressel as Ohio State's new football coach Jan. 18 netted the Buckeyes an early commitment for the class of 2002.

Reports surfaced Jan. 21 that Warren (Ohio) Harding junior running back Maurice Clarett had committed to the Buckeyes. Clarett actually lived in Youngstown and commuted 10 miles each day to Warren to attend Harding, so he was well-acquainted with Tressel's work at nearby Youngstown State.

BSB reached Clarett on the evening on Jan. 21 to confirm his commitment. He reiterated his interest in playing for Tressel.

"For a while, I favored Notre Dame," said Clarett, who first met Tressel when he was 5 years old. "But with Coach Cooper getting fired and Coach Tressel going down there, that changed everything.

"I know a lot about Coach Tressel. He's all about winning and running a good, disciplined program. He stresses academics. The people who come out of his program here at YSU are good people."

15 Years Ago – 2006

With seven consecutive victories to close out the 2005 season, the Ohio State football team was able to finish strong. Following that, the coaching staff was in the process of doing the same on the recruiting trail.

Entering the month of December, nine high school seniors had made their OSU commitments public. In the month and a half since December, that total had more than doubled, giving the Buckeyes 19 verbal commitments as the recruiting season entered its final stretch run. Eight of those commitments came in the month of January, with the four most recent – Bryant Browning, Aaron Gant, Aram Olson and Thaddeus Gibson – joining the class in a one-week span from Jan. 16-23.

"I think this past week or so has gone very well for Ohio State," said Bill Kurelic, BuckeyeSports.com recruiting analyst. "There are still some very good prospects out there they have a decent shot at getting, but they're doing very well late at this point in time."

10 Years Ago – 2011

Ejuan Price had seen enough of Ohio State. On Jan. 17, he decided that was where he wanted to play his college football.

After having taken numerous unofficial visits to Ohio State during the year prior, the four-star linebacker prospect from

Pittsburgh Woodland Hills pulled the trigger and issued his verbal commitment to the program.

His decision came following an in-home visit the night before from Tressel and linebackers coach Luke Fickell. Price had narrowed his list to include Iowa, Rutgers and the Buckeyes.

Price, who was rated the No. 10 middle linebacker in the nation and had been elevated to four-star status in January by Scout.com, had a familial tie to Ohio State. His cousin Dorian Bell was a red-shirt-freshman linebacker for the Buckeyes.

Five Years Ago – 2016

Head coach Urban Meyer continued his recruiting heroics in mid-January by landing a trio of four-star prospects during a four-hour span. The head coach brought in quarterback Dwayne Haskins (Potomac, Md.), linebacker Keandre Jones (Olney, Md.) and wide receiver Binjimen Victor (Pompano Beach, Fla.). Haskins and Jones were previously committed to Maryland.

"It created such a buzz throughout the recruiting world," said Scout.com recruiting analyst Bill Greene. "To get one guy like that would be amazing because they're all among the highest at their position, but then to land three in a matter of hours created a lot of buzz and contributes to the perception that Ohio State can get whoever they want."

One Year Ago – 2020

Hoping to pair another running back with Cincinnati Winton Woods three-star Miyan Williams, Ohio State was set to host Dalton, Ga., four-star running back Jahmyr Gibbs on an official visit the weekend of Jan. 18.

But with 86 scholarship players already on the roster and cornerback Cameron Martinez's possible signature putting the Buckeyes even further over the 85-scholarship limit, the staff abruptly decided to end its pursuit of Gibbs just days before he was set to arrive on campus.

"The numbers are pretty tight right now, so probably not," head coach Ryan Day said when asked during his press conference on Jan. 15 if Ohio State would add another running back in 2020. "But we'll kind of see how things go."

That left Williams – who was set to join the program in June – as the lone addition to a running backs room that featured presumed sophomore starter Master Teague, fifth-year senior Demario McCall, sophomore Marcus Crowley and redshirt freshman Steele Chambers.

Cincinnati just to hang out with Davis.

It's unclear as of publication if this visit was enough to push Ohio State into the lead for Davis' services, but sources inside the Woody Hayes Athletic Center – as well as among the early enrollees – have expressed confidence in the Buckeyes' chances.

Bucks Keep Eye On Transfer Portal

Over the last two seasons, Ohio State has received significant contributions from players who arrived in Columbus through the transfer portal, including quarterback Justin Fields (by way of Georgia), offensive guard Jonah Jackson (Rutgers) and running back Trey Sermon (Oklahoma).

So it should come as no surprise the Buckeyes might go back to the well again this offseason in search of players the coaching staff feels can contribute at a high level.

"When you look at the position groups, we are pretty healthy in most positions, but we are always looking at (the portal)," Day said. "(Director of player personnel) Mark Pantoni and his staff are always looking to see who's out there. But it has to be the right fit.

"We feel like there are a lot of guys in our program who can play for us. We are coming off a very successful season. We didn't finish it the way we wanted to. I think there are a lot of good young players in our program. But we're always going to be looking to see if we can upgrade in different areas if we can. We're always looking."

Sources have told Buckeye Sports Bulletin that Ohio State has shown interest

and been in communication with several players in recent weeks, including former Tennessee linebacker Henry To'oto'o, former USC linebacker Palaie Gaoteote and former Texas cornerback Jalen Green. Gaoteote is the cousin and former high school teammate of Buckeyes' defensive tackle Haskell Garrett, whereas Green is a one-time target who became close with linebacker Teradja Mitchell, defensive tackle Taron Vincent, cornerback Sevyn Banks and safety Josh Proctor when they played for the same 7-on-7 team at The Opening Finals in Beaverton, Ore., in July 2017.

Ohio State is also monitoring the status of LSU cornerback Elias Ricks, who is reportedly considering entering the transfer portal. He's a close family friend of Buckeyes cornerback Lejond Cavazos, and most prognosticators expected the duo to play together in college before Ricks pledged his services to the Tigers during the 2020 recruiting cycle.

Coordinator's Son Accepts Preferred Walk-On Offer

Lewis Center (Ohio) Olentangy three-star center Toby Wilson announced Jan. 20 that he had accepted a preferred walk-on offer from Ohio State, where he'll join his father, Buckeyes offensive coordinator Kevin Wilson.

The 6-3, 273-pound Wilson is considered the 25th-best center and No. 2,230 prospect overall in the class of 2021. He garnered second-team All-Ohio Capital Conference Cardinal Division honors for the Braves last season.

Wilson, who camped at Ohio State in June 2019, chose the Buckeyes over scholarship offers from programs such as Air Force, Akron, Army, Navy, North Texas, Toledo, West Virginia and Western Kentucky. He eventually plans to follow in his father's footsteps by becoming a coach

after his playing days are over.

California Corner Commits To USC

As expected, Santa Ana (Calif.) Mater

Continued On Page 22



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|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

presscolumbus.com

2022 Targets Trim Lists

Continued From Page 21

Dei five-star cornerback Domani Jackson committed to USC on Jan. 23 over finalists Arizona State, Clemson, Michigan, Ohio State and Oklahoma.

The 6-1, 185-pound Jackson is considered the top-rated cornerback and No. 3 prospect overall in the class of 2022. He has recorded 62 tackles, 12 pass breakups, three interceptions and one fumble recovery in 20 games with the Monarchs, who are set to begin their postponed fall season on Jan. 29.

Jackson landed an offer from the Buckeyes during a virtual visit last April, and although he's never been to campus, his relationship with Day, defensive coordinator Kerry Coombs and Washington is why Ohio State was widely viewed as the biggest threat to USC's chances. He hoped to make his first trip to Columbus during the season, but that never materialized due to the ongoing recruiting dead period.

On the other hand, Jackson is quite familiar with the Trojans, seeing as his high school is less than an hour from Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum. He's made numerous trips to campus over the course of his recruitment as a result, and the allure of playing for the hometown program – coupled with his growing relationship with associate head coach/cornerbacks coach Donte Williams – was simply too much for the Buckeyes to overcome.

Other Notes From Around The Country

• Ohio State handed out a couple of new scholarship offers in recent weeks, including 2023 Bradenton (Fla.) IMG Academy four-star linebacker Malik Bryant on Jan. 16 and 2022 Allen, Texas, three-star offensive

guard Neto Umeozulu on Jan. 20.

• Shelby, N.C., four-star linebacker Malaki Hamrick shared to social media on Jan. 18 that he will announce his commitment on Feb. 26.

The 6-4, 200-pound Hamrick is considered the 12th-best outside linebacker and No. 142 prospect overall in the class of 2022. He included Ohio State in his top five back in November alongside Appalachian State, North Carolina, Notre Dame and Penn State.

The Tar Heels are the perceived favorite in his recruitment, especially since he's never been to Columbus and Buckeye defensive line coach Larry Johnson likes to do in-person evaluations before accepting someone's pledge.

• Lakeland, Fla., five-star defensive tackle Gabriel Brownlow-Dindy included Ohio State in his top 11 on Jan. 19 with Clemson, Florida, LSU, Nebraska, Oklahoma, Pittsburgh, South Carolina, Texas A&M, USC and USF.

The 6-3, 275-pound Brownlow-Dindy – who is listed as the third-best defensive tackle and No. 16 prospect overall in the 2022 class – has been in contact with Larry Johnson and running backs coach Tony Alford and hopes to make his first trip to campus when the dead period ends.

• Dickinson, Texas, four-star tight end Donovan Green committed to Texas A&M on Jan. 21. The 6-4, 220-pound Green, who is considered the third-best tight end and No. 106 prospect overall in the class of 2022, held an offer from Ohio State, but the Buckeyes already have a pair of commitments at the position in Pilot Mountain (N.C.) East Surry four-star Benji Gosnell and Acworth (Ga.) Allatoona three-star Bennett Christian.

• Aledo, Texas, four-star safety Bryan Allen decommitted from LSU on Jan. 21.

OSU Football Signees & Verbal Commits

Players in the class of 2021 who have signed a letter of intent to play football at Ohio State.

| Player | Pos. | Ht. | Wt. | Stars | High School |
|--------------------|------|------|-----|-------|-----------------------------------|
| Jayden Ballard | WR | 6-2 | 175 | ★★★★ | Massillon (Ohio) Washington |
| Denzel Burke | ATH | 6-0 | 189 | ★★★★ | Scottsdale (Ariz.) Saguaro |
| Reid Carrico | LB | 6-3 | 225 | ★★★★ | Ironton, Ohio |
| Ben Christman | OG | 6-6 | 299 | ★★★★ | Richfield (Ohio) Revere |
| Jantzen Dunn | S | 6-2 | 178 | ★★★★ | Bowling Green (Ky.) South Warren |
| Emeka Egbuka | WR | 6-1 | 190 | ★★★★★ | Steilacoom, Wash. |
| Michael Hall | DT | 6-3 | 290 | ★★★★ | Streetsboro, Ohio |
| Jordan Hancock | CB | 6-1 | 170 | ★★★★ | Suwanee (Ga.) North Gwinnett |
| Marvin Harrison | WR | 6-3 | 190 | ★★★★ | Philadelphia St. Joseph's Prep |
| Sam Hart | TE | 6-5 | 225 | ★★★ | Aurora (Colo.) Cherokee Trail |
| TreVeyon Henderson | RB | 5-11 | 195 | ★★★★★ | Hopewell, Va. |
| Donovan Jackson | OG | 6-4 | 308 | ★★★★★ | Bellaire (Texas) Episcopal |
| Jakailin Johnson | CB | 6-1 | 175 | ★★★★ | St. Louis De Smet Jesuit |
| Jaylen Johnson | S | 6-1 | 200 | ★★★ | Cincinnati La Salle |
| Kyle McCord | QB | 6-3 | 215 | ★★★★★ | Philadelphia St. Joseph's Prep |
| Zen Michalski | OT | 6-7 | 288 | ★★★★ | Floyds Knobs (Ind.) Floyd Central |
| Jesse Mirco | P | 6-3 | 200 | ★★★ | Fremantle, Western Australia |
| Evan Pryor | RB | 5-10 | 190 | ★★★★ | Cornelius (N.C.) W.A. Hough |
| Jack Sawyer | DE | 6-5 | 248 | ★★★★★ | Pickerington (Ohio) North |
| Andre Turrentine | S | 6-0 | 175 | ★★★★ | Nashville (Tenn.) Ensworth |
| Tyleik Williams | DT | 6-3 | 330 | ★★★★ | Manassas (Va.) Unity Reed |

Players in the class of 2022 who have issued a verbal commitment to play football at Ohio State.

| Player | Pos. | Ht. | Wt. | Stars | High School |
|-------------------|------|------|-----|-------|-----------------------------------|
| Jyaire Brown | CB | 5-11 | 165 | ★★★★ | West Chester (Ohio) Lakota West |
| Caleb Burton | WR | 6-0 | 165 | ★★★★★ | Del Valle, Texas |
| Bennett Christian | TE | 6-6 | 235 | ★★★ | Acworth (Ga.) Allatoona |
| Quinn Ewers | QB | 6-3 | 195 | ★★★★★ | Southlake (Texas) Carroll |
| Benji Gosnell | TE | 6-4 | 225 | ★★★★ | Pilot Mountain (N.C.) East Surry |
| C.J. Hicks | LB | 6-4 | 218 | ★★★★ | Kettering (Ohio) Archbishop Alter |
| Dasan McCullough | ATH | 6-5 | 220 | ★★★★ | Overland Park (Kan.) B.V. North |
| Gabe Powers | LB | 6-4 | 220 | ★★★★ | Marysville, Ohio |
| Jaheim Singletary | CB | 6-1 | 170 | ★★★★★ | Jacksonville Robert E. Lee |
| Tegra Tshabola | OT | 6-5 | 340 | ★★★★ | West Chester (Ohio) Lakota West |



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ASK AN ANALYST

With Lettermen Row's Jeremy Birmingham

Do you think 2021 Sammamish (Wash.) Eastside Catholic five-star defensive end J.T. Tuimoloau holds off on making a decision until he can take an official visit to Ohio State, which won't be until April 15 at the earliest due to the recruiting dead period, or will he choose a school on National Signing Day without ever having stepped foot on campus?

"If I were in Tuimoloau's shoes, I would take as much time as needed to make a decision. While that sounds vague, it's pretty much where things stand with the country's top-ranked prospect. There are some folks he talks with that believe he'll decide in February and others think it could get pushed into April or May, but there's no one who really has a good handle on what he's thinking or leaning toward exactly. That said, the Buckeyes have been the presumptive leader for months without a visit, and there's no reason to think that they'd be incapable of getting a signature without a visit."

What is your final prediction for where 2021 Santa Ana (Calif.) Mater Dei four-star linebacker

Raesjon Davis ends up on Feb. 3, and why will it be or why will it not be Ohio State?

"Personally, I have believed for a while that unless Davis visited Ohio State with his family that it would be hard to see him signing with the Buckeyes. That visit just happened over the weekend of Jan. 24 and the odds of him picking Ohio State have gone way up, but I'd probably still lean toward him staying in Southern California and signing with the Trojans. They've made big splashes lately with 2021 Corona (Calif.) Centennial five-star defensive end Korey Foreman and Davis' teammate, 2022 five-star cornerback Domani Jackson. It just feels like Davis will stay closer to home, but the Ohio State visit isn't being made just for fun."

Do you anticipate Ohio State being active in the transfer portal this offseason, and what are some positions worth keeping an eye on?

"There's no doubt that if a big-time player becomes available Ohio State is going to be both interested and that it's going to be intriguing for the player themselves. The roster management aspect of the

2021 season is already going to be causing some headaches, so any transfer option would need to be a surefire, home-run type of talent. There's an obvious need for experienced depth at cornerback but not as glaring a need – right now – at linebacker, especially if the Buckeyes were to steal the aforementioned Davis away from USC."

Of the 15 early enrollees from the class of 2021, who do you expect to make an immediate impact in Columbus and why?

"There's a few really talented young guys enrolling at Ohio State this week, but for me, and it may seem obvious, Hopewell, Va., five-star running back TreVeyon Henderson seems like the obvious choice. Yes, he's entering a deep running back room with a lot of talent, but his ceiling is much different than the other guys in that room from a talent standpoint and I think he'll be hard to keep off the field for the Buckeyes. It'd not be a surprise to see Pickerington (Ohio) North five-star defensive end Jack Sawyer make the same kind of impact on the defensive side of the ball either."

The 6-0, 180-pound Allen – who is considered the fifth-best safety and No. 71 prospect overall in the 2022 cycle – landed an offer from Ohio State last May, a little more than a month after he initially picked the Tigers.

• Fort Wayne (Ind.) R. Nelson Snider four-star offensive guard Demon Moore named his top eight schools on Jan. 21, listing Ohio State along with Arizona State, Indiana, Missouri, Nebraska, Oregon, Penn State and Texas A&M.

The 6-5, 315-pound Moore is considered the sixth-best offensive guard and No. 288 prospect overall in the class of 2022. He landed an offer from the Buckeyes in May and has been in constant communication with offensive line coach Greg Studrawa ever since.

• Columbus (Ga.) Hardaway four-star defensive tackle Mykel Williams announced on Jan. 23 that he will make his college decision among Alabama, Arizona State,

Clemson, Georgia, Georgia Tech, Kentucky, LSU, Ohio State, Penn State and USC on March 25.

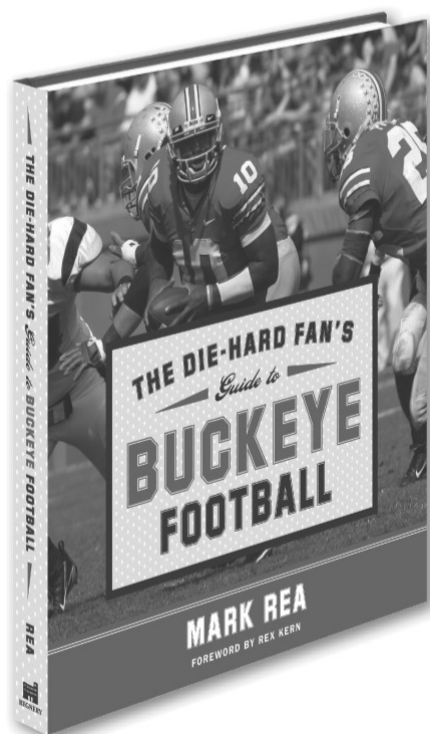
The 6-5, 255-pound Williams – who is listed as the fourth-best defensive tackle and No. 41 prospect overall in the 2022 cycle – originally planned to name a top five in March, reveal a top three on his birthday

on June 29 and then commit on his sister's birthday on Aug. 23. Those plans have been scrapped, however.

For the latest in Ohio State football recruiting news, be sure to check out BuckeyeSports.com, free to all BSB subscribers, daily.

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Victories On Road Are Special Even Without Fans

When Ohio State went to the land of cheese and defeated the Wisconsin Badgers on Jan. 23, it was significant for several reasons.

Notably, the wire-to-wire 74-62 win against the then-No. 10 Badgers stamped the No. 15 Buckeyes (12-4, 6-4 Big Ten) as a contender for the regular-season title in the most competitive conference in the country.

The victory also marked a third straight road win against a top-15 opponent – a first for the program – after beating No. 15 Rutgers 79-68 on Jan. 9 and No. 14 Illinois 87-81 on Jan. 16.

COURT REPORT

Craig Merz

To put it in perspective, the Buckeyes once previously won three straight games against top-15 teams outside of Columbus, but those were at neutral sites, according to the OSU sports information department.

In 1960, No. 3 Ohio State beat No. 13 Georgia Tech (86-69) in the NCAA Midwest Regionals in Louisville, Ky., and then No. 12 New York University (76-54) and No. 2 California (75-55) at the Final Four in San Francisco to win the school's lone national championship.

It was a fair question to ask Holtmann following the game vs. the Badgers whether that school record should come with a caveat – being that there were no fans in attendance at any of the venues because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Holtmann said a win anywhere against a team like Wisconsin is significant and the lack of fans should not diminish the result, but he acknowledged the atmosphere was just not the same in the Kohl Center without 17,000-plus screaming fans.

"It's very much different. Every environment is a neutral environment, and



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2020-21 Ohio State Men's Basketball Statistics

12-4 Overall (6-4 Big Ten) Statistics through games of Jan. 23

| Player | G-GS | Min.-Avg. | FG-FGA | Pct. | 3P-3PA | Pct. | FT-FTA | Pct. | Rebounds | | PF-FO | A | TO | BS | ST | Pts.-Avg. |
|------------------|-----------|-------------|----------------|-------------|----------------|-------------|----------------|-------------|----------------|-----------------|--------------|------------|------------|-----------|-----------|------------------|
| | | | | | | | | | O-D | T-Avg. | | | | | | |
| Duane Washington | 16-16 | 498-31.1 | 75-199 | .377 | 45-117 | .385 | 50-56 | .893 | 1-45 | 46-2.9 | 22-0 | 47 | 34 | 0 | 9 | 245-15.3 |
| E.J. Liddell | 14-14 | 386-27.6 | 71-140 | .507 | 9-32 | .281 | 52-73 | .712 | 24-71 | 95-6.8 | 44-1 | 18 | 18 | 16 | 12 | 203-14.5 |
| Justice Sueing | 16-16 | 421-26.3 | 57-119 | .479 | 10-38 | .263 | 42-58 | .724 | 23-57 | 80-5.0 | 35-0 | 31 | 34 | 1 | 13 | 166-10.4 |
| C.J. Walker | 12-10 | 370-30.8 | 28-89 | .315 | 4-21 | .190 | 44-45 | .978 | 5-28 | 33-2.8 | 28-0 | 49 | 24 | 2 | 9 | 104-8.7 |
| Kyle Young | 16-15 | 410-25.6 | 49-92 | .533 | 4-16 | .250 | 26-34 | .765 | 31-64 | 95-5.9 | 37-0 | 18 | 6 | 7 | 5 | 128-8.0 |
| Justin Ahrens | 16-5 | 279-17.5 | 35-69 | .507 | 34-67 | .507 | 4-5 | .800 | 3-27 | 30-1.9 | 19-1 | 3 | 7 | 2 | 5 | 108-6.8 |
| Zed Key | 16-1 | 213-13.3 | 35-58 | .603 | 0-0 | .000 | 33-54 | .611 | 30-30 | 60-3.8 | 31-0 | 7 | 12 | 14 | 2 | 103-6.4 |
| Seth Towns | 10-0 | 103-10.3 | 19-36 | .528 | 8-20 | .400 | 8-9 | .889 | 4-17 | 21-2.1 | 12-0 | 3 | 4 | 0 | 3 | 54-5.4 |
| Musa Jallow | 12-1 | 193-16.1 | 18-41 | .439 | 1-17 | .059 | 11-19 | .579 | 7-24 | 31-2.6 | 19-0 | 6 | 7 | 4 | 5 | 48-4.0 |
| Harrison Hookfin | 3-0 | 12-3.9 | 3-6 | .500 | 0-1 | .000 | 0-0 | .000 | 2-2 | 4-1.3 | 3-0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 6-2.0 |
| Meechie Johnson | 5-0 | 47-9.5 | 3-7 | .429 | 3-5 | .600 | 0-1 | .000 | 0-3 | 3-0.6 | 2-0 | 3 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 9-1.8 |
| Eugene Brown | 16-0 | 136-8.5 | 10-31 | .323 | 5-22 | .227 | 2-4 | .500 | 7-24 | 31-1.9 | 6-0 | 5 | 3 | 3 | 1 | 27-1.7 |
| Jimmy Sotos | 12-2 | 115-9.6 | 6-18 | .333 | 5-15 | .333 | 3-4 | .750 | 3-6 | 9-0.8 | 15-1 | 13 | 6 | 1 | 3 | 20-1.7 |
| Jansen Davison | 2-0 | 7-3.6 | 0-1 | .000 | 0-0 | .000 | 3-4 | .750 | 0-1 | 1-0.5 | 0-0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 3-1.5 |
| Ibrahima Diallo | 3-0 | 10-3.2 | 0-2 | .000 | 0-0 | .000 | 1-4 | .250 | 2-1 | 3-1.0 | 0-0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1-0.3 |
| Team | | | | | | | | | 28-28 | 56 | | 6 | | | | |
| Total | 16 | 3200 | 409-908 | .450 | 128-371 | .345 | 279-370 | .754 | 170-428 | 598-37.4 | 273-3 | 203 | 164 | 52 | 67 | 1225-76.6 |
| Opponents | 16 | 3200 | 384-924 | .416 | 116-356 | .326 | 193-278 | .694 | 153-375 | 528-33.0 | 324-6 | 199 | 172 | 45 | 79 | 1077-67.3 |

that's just the reality," he said. "You're playing the other team. You're trying to execute against the other team. It's a bit awkward at home for everybody, but at the end of the day, between the lines, it is about execution and how you're playing. It's a great win because you're beating a terrific team.

"It's certainly different with the fans (there) but the quality of the opponent makes it a wonderful win."

He improved to 2-1 at Wisconsin since becoming the Buckeye boss before the 2017-18 season. OSU was victorious 83-58 on Dec. 2, 2017, but lost 70-57 on Feb. 9, 2020, so he knows what a full house is all about.

"I think of the environment and what it would have been here," Holtmann said. "Our first year they weren't nearly the team they are now when we won here, and they took us to the woodshed here last year."

Taking It In

Holtmann in his post-Wisconsin comments also emphasized the importance of appreciating every win this season because of the trying circumstances. With games being postponed or canceled and programs across the NCAA pausing activities because of COVID-19 issues, Holtmann wants his team to understand how fortunate it is.

"You want your players to celebrate the wins this year more than ever," the coach said. "You really want them to enjoy wins playing in the middle of a pandemic against a top-10 opponent, the last couple of games, top-15 opponents.

"You want to see big smiles on your players' faces because you know tomorrow morning we're going to get up and get tested at 8 o'clock in the morning. We're going to go through that routine and they're not going to be able to see their families. You really do want your guys to enjoy it."

That's why he was thrilled the players' families were able to attend a game at Value City Arena for the first time Jan. 13 for the 81-71 win against Northwestern.

"Best thing for me tonight, 1A the win and 1B having the families here," he said. "As a coach, you just love the families hav-



Justin Ahrens

OSU Men's Basketball Signees & Verbal Commits

Players in the class of 2021 who have signed a letter of intent to play basketball at Ohio State. (Star ratings are from the 247Sports composite rankings.)

| Player | Pos. | Ht. | Wt. | Stars | High School |
|----------------|------|-----|-----|-------|-----------------------------------|
| Malaki Branham | SG | 6-4 | 175 | ★★★★ | Akron (Ohio) St. Vincent-St. Mary |
| Kalen Etzler | PF | 6-8 | 195 | ★★★ | Convoy (Ohio) Crestview |

Players in the class of 2022 who have issued verbal commitments to play basketball at Ohio State. (Star ratings are from the 247Sports composite rankings.)

| Player | Pos. | Ht. | Wt. | Stars | High School |
|----------------|------|-----|-----|-------|-----------------------------------|
| Roddy Gayle | SG | 6-4 | 195 | ★★★★ | Youngstown (N.Y.) Lewiston Porter |
| Bowen Hardman | SG | 6-3 | 160 | ★★★ | Cincinnati Princeton |
| Bruce Thornton | PG | 6-2 | 195 | ★★★★ | Alpharetta (Ga.) Milton |

ing a chance to see their players. It makes me feel really good. I really appreciate everything that's been done to get our families here."

Three-Peat

Certain athletes get labeled as specialists in their sports, and the moniker can either be a blessing or a curse. On one hand it means they are exceptional at what they do and can be relied upon. Or it can limit their options because they are viewed as one-dimensional and not trustworthy at times.

Junior forward Justin Ahrens is embracing his role as the Buckeyes' long-distance shooter who can be counted on in the clutch. When Ahrens made 3 of 5 from three-point range vs. the Badgers, it marked his fourth straight game with at least three triples.

During that span he connected on 13 of 24 treys (54.2 percent).

"His confidence is through the roof," graduate transfer Seth Towns said after the Wisconsin game. "He's one of the best shooters in the conference in my opinion, and he's shown that. He's got a lot more in him. He's just playing a great role for our team."

Ahrens has made 34 of 67 threes (50.7 percent) this season, which is better than he is shooting from inside the line (1 of 2). Yes, Ahrens has attempted just two non-threes.

"He's such a good shooter that when he has space, you don't want him to turn it down," Holtmann said.

Included among Ahrens' threes was a

critical one against Northwestern on Jan. 13 to quell the Wildcats' rally, prompting Holtmann to call it the "biggest shot of his career."

In a similar situation at Illinois, Ahrens once again came through with a triple.

It helps to have a shooter's mentality, as he explained earlier in the season: "Once I see one or two go through, I'm going to keep shooting until I miss. Once one or two get through, you get a feeling, and I feel like I've just got to shoot it if I touch it and I'm open."

On The Fly

With no midweek game prior to playing Michigan State at Value City Arena on Jan. 31, Holtmann pondered whether to add a game.

"I'm debating. It is a gauntlet," he said post-Wisconsin. "We've got some time off, but we also have a tremendous opponent in Michigan State coming up. We will decide if we need a game in here to get our guys some game freshness and readiness during this seven- or eight-day layoff."

Well, the decision became clear later that day when Michigan announced it was shutting down its athletics department for two weeks. The Nittany Lions were to play Michigan on Jan. 27, but instead the Buckeyes will host Penn State on that date to make up for the Jan. 6 postponement due to COVID-19 issues within the PSU program.

Something to watch is that Michigan State has not played since Jan. 8 because four players tested positive for the virus. So far, games vs. Rutgers (Jan. 28) and OSU are still on.

Buckeyes Bounce Back On Road After Home Loss

By JOE DEMPSEY
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

The No. 15 Ohio State men's basketball team entered the week of Jan. 18 red-hot off a three-game winning streak in the Big Ten. The impressive run for the Buckeyes – which included wins over Rutgers, Northwestern and Illinois – came to an end in a devastating loss to Purdue.

Staying true to the resilient character of head coach Chris Holtmann's squad, Ohio State bounced back in a big way with an upset win at Wisconsin.

Offensively, Ohio State has impressed many as one of the most efficient teams in the country. Holtmann will not be satisfied until the team picks up its play on the other end of the floor, however.

"We've got to make improvements defensively, but we have become an elite offensive-efficiency team right now," Holtmann said of his team's identity. "We have to improve in our overall defensive effort and defensive attention to detail."

Though the defensive performance has not been up to Holtmann's standards, the leader of the Buckeyes has thoroughly enjoyed watching his hardworking group steadily improve.

"The progress and the growth of this group has been incredibly rewarding for us as a coaching staff," Holtmann said. "If you saw us play some of our early games, you would have had legitimate concerns about our group, and I was right there with you. But I knew that we had great guys and hopefully we can continue to use every day that's in front of us to get better."

"We're not there yet. We've got a lot to improve on. We've got to coach better and play better, but it's been a phenomenal group to coach because we've seen growth with each passing week."

Bucks Drop Heartbreaker To Boilers At Home

The No. 15 Ohio State men's basketball team fell 67-65 to Purdue in heartbreaking fashion despite a 21-point, six-assist performance by junior guard Duane Washington at Value City Arena on Jan. 19.

Purdue freshman guard Jaden Ivey hit a step-back three-pointer over junior wing Justice Sueing with just five seconds left to lead the Boilermakers (11-5, 6-3) over the Buckeyes (11-4, 5-4) in Columbus.

"They made a lot of really tough plays in the game, so give them credit," Holtmann said. "It was a hard-fought Big Ten game. We have to figure out how to get better and move forward. This one obviously stings. We'll have to move forward."

Trailing by five with just 1:48 left, Purdue junior forward Trevion Williams made a tough shot over sophomore forward E.J. Liddell before the Boilermakers forced a shot-clock violation on the Buckeyes' next possession. Then Boilermaker junior guard Sasha Stefanovic drilled a three-pointer to tie the game at 64 with just 52 ticks remaining.

The Buckeyes misfired on their chance to break the tie when junior wing Justin Ahrens missed a contested three where he drew contact, leading to Ivey's game-winner.

In the first half, Ivey had tied the game at 21 with a bucket with 7:24 left, and Ohio State responded with an 11-0 spurt in just 2:03 to take its biggest lead of the game at 32-21. Washington led the run with eight points, capping it with back-to-back triples. The other basket during the stretch was an Ahrens three-pointer that came on the play of the game with 6:41 until halftime.

The Boilermakers bounced back from the Buckeyes' first-half onslaught of three-point shooting with a 9-3 stretch to cut an 11-point deficit to 35-30 with 1:02 until the break, and Ohio State took a 37-31 lead to the locker room.

The teams battled back and forth to open the second half, and the visitors cut the Buckeye lead to 43-39 with 15:56 left on Stefanovic's old-fashioned three-point play. Later, Washington drained a pull-up three-pointer to extend the Scarlet and Gray edge to 48-41 with 12:23 on the clock. Ivey responded with a bucket after an offensive rebound by forward Aaron Wheeler.

The defensive intensity picked up for both teams midway through the second half, leading to sloppier play featuring turnovers and foul shots. From 11:22-7:30, neither team made a field goal, and Ohio State committed four of its eight second-half turnovers during that stretch.

The Boilermakers took a 52-50 lead with 6:19 left on a basket by Williams off a steal, marking their first lead since midway through the first half. Then Williams, Purdue's leading scorer, slammed the ball down with a one-handed dunk off an offensive rebound to give the Boilermakers a 54-53 lead with 5:30 to play.

The Buckeyes then put together a 7-0 spurt capped by a step-back three-pointer by Washington after a pair of buckets by senior forward Kyle Young and Liddell to take a 60-54 lead with 3:35 to play. Ivey answered the Ohio State streak with five points on two baskets of his own to cut the deficit to 60-59 with 2:38 left.

With 2:11 on the clock, Liddell drew a foul, and after making the first foul shot, he missed the second. Young grabbed the rebound on Liddell's missed free throw and then found Ahrens for his third triple of the game to push the lead to 64-59 with 2:08 to go, setting up the frantic finish.

"We played hard in stretches, just not quite hard enough, but we played really hard in stretches, really hard," Holtmann said. "We had some stretches of really good play and some stretches of really hard play."

Overall, Ohio State shot 37.7 from the field (20 of 53) and 40.0 percent from deep (14 of 35), while Purdue connected on 48.1 percent of its field goals (26 of 54) and 25.0 percent of its treys (5 of 20). The Buckeyes committed eight of their 11 turnovers in the second half, compared to the Boilermakers giving the ball away twice in the final frame after eight first-half turnovers.

"We were just getting good, open looks the majority of the time," Young said of the high number of three-point attempts. "They were playing off, multiple different guys. But we were getting good looks for the most part, so we want to take those shots because we have confidence in everybody that can shoot them."

Ahrens scored 12 for the Buckeyes, and Liddell added 11 points and a team-high seven rebounds in the two-point loss.

Williams paced Purdue with 16 points and seven boards, while Ivey and Stefanovic pitched in 15 points apiece. The trio did most of their work in the second half, scoring 11, 10 and 13 during the game's final 20 minutes, respectively.

Liddell Leads OSU To Upset Badgers

Ohio State defeated No. 10 Wisconsin 74-62 at the Kohl Center in Madison, Wis., on Jan. 23.

"As a team, we were really disciplined. We executed really well on defense, and on offense, we took really good shots," said Ohio State senior forward Seth Towns, who enjoyed donning the anthracite alternate jerseys that the Buckeyes wore. "And then, the jerseys definitely had something to do with it. We all felt it when we put on the jerseys. We all felt these superpowers come in us, and we played, and we

Purdue 67, Ohio State 65

| Jan. 19, 2021 | | | | | | | | | | |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------|----------------------|----|----|--|--|--|--|--|--|
| Value City Arena • Columbus, Ohio | | | | | | | | | | |
| | | 1 | 2 | F | | | | | | |
| Purdue (11-5, 6-3) | | 31 | 36 | 67 | | | | | | |
| Ohio State (11-4, 5-4) | | 37 | 28 | 65 | | | | | | |
| Purdue | Total FG FT | Reb. | | | | | | | | |
| | Min. M-A M-A | O-D A PF Pts. | | | | | | | | |
| Gillis | 16 0-0 0-0 | 1-0 0 5 0 | | | | | | | | |
| Hunter | 33 3-9 1-2 | 1-3 0 2 8 | | | | | | | | |
| Newman | 17 0-2 0-0 | 0-0 0 1 0 | | | | | | | | |
| Williams | 21 7-13 2-4 | 2-5 1 2 16 | | | | | | | | |
| Stefanovic | 28 5-9 4-4 | 0-4 0 1 15 | | | | | | | | |
| Wheeler | 24 1-2 0-0 | 1-4 1 4 2 | | | | | | | | |
| Thompson | 12 1-2 0-0 | 0-1 0 0 3 | | | | | | | | |
| Edey | 19 3-5 2-4 | 1-4 0 2 8 | | | | | | | | |
| Ivey | 27 6-12 1-3 | 1-3 2 1 15 | | | | | | | | |
| Morton | 3 0-0 0-0 | 0-2 0 0 0 | | | | | | | | |
| Totals | 200 26-54 10-17 | 9-29 4 18 67 | | | | | | | | |
| Percentages: FG: 48.1%. FT: 58.8%. Three-point field goals: 5-20 (Ivey 2-6, Thompson 1-2, Hunter 1-3, Stefanovic 1-5, Williams 0-1, Wheeler 0-1, Newman 0-2). Team rebounds: 5. Blocked shots: 1 (Edey). Turnovers: 10 (Williams 2, Stefanovic 2, Ivey 2, Gillis, Hunter, Newman, Wheeler). Steals: 5 (Stefanovic 2, Hunter, Newman, Williams). | | | | | | | | | | |
| Ohio State | Total FG FT | Reb. | | | | | | | | |
| | Min. M-A M-A | O-D A PF Pts. | | | | | | | | |
| Washington | 33 7-14 1-2 | 0-3 6 3 21 | | | | | | | | |
| Ahrens | 34 3-9 3-3 | 0-4 0 3 12 | | | | | | | | |
| Sueing | 31 2-8 2-2 | 2-2 1 1 8 | | | | | | | | |
| Young | 28 3-7 0-0 | 2-3 3 2 7 | | | | | | | | |
| Johnson | 12 0-2 0-1 | 0-1 0 0 0 | | | | | | | | |
| Liddell | 30 3-7 4-7 | 3-4 0 3 11 | | | | | | | | |
| Jallow | 2 0-1 0-0 | 0-0 0 1 0 | | | | | | | | |
| Brown | 4 0-1 0-0 | 0-0 1 0 0 | | | | | | | | |
| Key | 10 1-2 1-2 | 1-0 0 3 3 | | | | | | | | |
| Towns | 16 1-2 0-0 | 0-1 0 2 3 | | | | | | | | |
| Totals | 200 20-53 11-17 | 8-22 11 18 65 | | | | | | | | |
| Percentages: FG: 37.7%. FT: 64.7%. Three-point field goals: 14-35 (Washington 6-9, Ahrens 3-9, Sueing 2-4, Towns 1-2, Young 1-3, Liddell 1-4, Jallow 0-1, Brown 0-1, Johnson 0-2). Team rebounds: 4. Blocked shots: 2 (Young, Brown). Turnovers: 11 (Washington 5, TEAM 2, Sueing, Young, Liddell, Towns). Steals: 2 (Liddell, Towns). Officials: Cartensen, Garrison, McClunkins. Attendance: N/A. | | | | | | | | | | |

Ohio State 74, Wisconsin 62

| Jan. 23, 2021 | | | | | | | | | | |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------|----------------------|----|----|--|--|--|--|--|--|
| Kohl Center • Madison, Wisc. | | | | | | | | | | |
| | | 1 | 2 | F | | | | | | |
| Ohio State (12-4, 6-4) | | 32 | 42 | 74 | | | | | | |
| Wisconsin (12-4, 6-3) | | 25 | 37 | 62 | | | | | | |
| Ohio State | Total FG FT | Reb. | | | | | | | | |
| | Min. M-A M-A | O-D A PF Pts. | | | | | | | | |
| Ahrens | 25 3-5 0-0 | 0-5 0 3 9 | | | | | | | | |
| Sueing | 25 4-8 0-1 | 0-2 1 2 8 | | | | | | | | |
| Young | 25 3-4 2-2 | 2-2 1 2 8 | | | | | | | | |
| Liddell | 32 7-12 5-7 | 0-7 0 2 20 | | | | | | | | |
| Washington | 33 1-9 6-6 | 0-3 4 1 9 | | | | | | | | |
| Key | 7 1-1 0-0 | 1-4 0 2 2 | | | | | | | | |
| Walker | 24 3-6 2-2 | 0-2 3 2 8 | | | | | | | | |
| Brown | 9 0-0 0-0 | 0-1 0 0 0 | | | | | | | | |
| Towns | 17 5-8 0-0 | 0-2 0 2 10 | | | | | | | | |
| Johnson | 3 0-0 0-0 | 0-0 0 0 0 | | | | | | | | |
| Totals | 200 27-53 15-18 | 5-30 9 16 74 | | | | | | | | |
| Percentages: FG: 50.9%. FT: 83.3%. Three-point field goals: 5-16 (Ahrens 3-5, Liddell 1-3, Washington 1-5, Walker 0-1, Towns 0-2). Team rebounds: 4. Blocked shots: 2 (Liddell, Johnson). Turnovers: 11 (Sueing 3, Walker 2, Washington 2, Young, Liddell, Key, Brown). Steals: 6 (Ahrens, Sueing, Liddell, Walker, Brown, Towns). | | | | | | | | | | |
| Wisconsin | Total FG FT | Reb. | | | | | | | | |
| | Min. M-A M-A | O-D A PF Pts. | | | | | | | | |
| Ford | 28 4-10 1-2 | 2-5 1 0 13 | | | | | | | | |
| Wahl | 17 2-6 0-0 | 0-4 0 4 4 | | | | | | | | |
| Potter | 21 4-9 3-5 | 1-3 0 3 11 | | | | | | | | |
| Trice | 38 4-8 2-4 | 0-4 8 4 12 | | | | | | | | |
| Davison | 33 1-7 0-0 | 0-0 2 3 3 | | | | | | | | |
| Reuvers | 20 5-9 1-1 | 0-3 0 1 11 | | | | | | | | |
| Davis | 31 2-6 1-2 | 2-3 2 3 5 | | | | | | | | |
| Anderson | 12 1-2 1-1 | 0-0 1 1 3 | | | | | | | | |
| Totals | 200 23-57 9-15 | 7-23 14 19 62 | | | | | | | | |
| Percentages: FG: 40.4%. FT: 60.0%. Three-point field goals: 7-28 (Ford 4-8, Trice 2-5, Davison 1-6, Wahl 0-1, Davis 0-1, Reuvers 0-3, Potter 0-4). Team rebounds: 3. Blocked shots: 4 (Ford, Wahl, Potter, Reuvers). Turnovers: 10 (Ford 2, Potter 2, Trice 2, Davison 2, Wahl, TEAM). Steals: 7 (Ford 2, Davison 2, Wahl, Potter, Davis). Officials: Boroski, Green, Epley. Attendance: N/A. | | | | | | | | | | |

didn't hold back from it the entire game."

Liddell led the No. 15 Buckeyes (12-4, 6-4) with 20 points and seven rebounds in the 12-point victory over the Badgers (12-4, 6-3).

In the first half, C.J. Walker, in his first game back after a hand injury, found freshman center Zed Key for an alley-oop slam to give the Buckeyes an early 11-3 lead with 15:38 until halftime.

The Badgers battled back, but Towns helped the Buckeyes hold off the home team by sparking a stretch of five straight field-goal makes from 12:06-8:24. Towns hit three of the shots, with Sueing knocking down one and Washington connecting from deep to push Ohio State's advantage to 24-13.

A 7-3 stretch by Wisconsin cut Ohio State's lead to 27-20 with 3:13 until the midway point, and Liddell answered with a strong and-one finish over Micah Potter, a former Buckeye, to put the Bucks up 10 with 2:57 until halftime. OSU led 32-25 at the break.

After being held scoreless through the opening 14:19, Wisconsin leading scorer D'Mitrik Trice rattled off nine of the Badgers' final 10 points of the first half.

Wisconsin then cut the Ohio State lead to 34-28 on a three-pointer by Trice just 1:33 into the second half.

After the Badgers had cut the deficit to six, Ohio State rallied on an extended 12-5 stretch, led by seven points from Liddell, a strong make by Young, and a three-pointer from Ahrens to cap the run and take a 46-33 lead with 15:20 left.

A Walker basket put the Buckeyes up 51-38 with 13:08 on the clock, but the Badgers did not give up at home. Wisconsin ripped off a 9-2 run highlighted by five points by Potter to cut the deficit to 53-47 with 10:22 to play.

Liddell then scored through contact to push the lead to 59-50 with 6:10 left before Wisconsin scored five straight points to cut the deficit to four with 5:16 on the clock.

Young then came up with a clutch and-one finish to put Ohio State up 62-55 with 4:53 left.

"Kyle's and-one was critical when they cut it to four, but that was a critical possession for

us, a really critical possession," Holtmann said. "I very nearly called a timeout. We had two timeouts. I was debating on whether or not to call the timeout, and our guys just played. Justice (Sueing) made a nice pocket bounce to Kyle, and Kyle was able to finish with the and-one."

"You've got to trust your guys. You've got to trust your team. And they answered the bell every time."

The Badgers responded to Young's old-fashioned three-point play with fifth-year senior wing Alem Ford's third three-pointer in a two-minute span to cut the lead back down to four with 4:40 left.

"It took everybody to stay connected and just be together as a unit instead of like everybody becoming individuals," Liddell said. "Because they had their run. (Ford) hit three big threes in a row, and then we just had to stay together."

A basket by Walker at the 3:03 mark put Ohio State back up by eight, and the Badgers were never closer than six again.

"What he's done really well he did really well in this game," Holtmann said of Walker, who finished with eight points and three assists. "He got to the paint and made really good decisions. And when he's playing well, that's what he does – gets to the paint and makes really good decisions."

Towns, who scored eight points in the first half, finished with 10 off the bench on 5-of-8 shooting. Ahrens and Washington both scored nine points, and Sueing and Young added eight apiece.

Overall, Ohio State shot 50.9 percent (27 of 53) from the floor, 31.3 percent (5 of 16) from three and 83.3 percent (15 of 18) from the foul line. Wisconsin hit 23 of 57 field goals (40.4 percent), 7 of 28 threes (25.0 percent) and 9 of 15 free throws (60.0 percent).

"That was probably as good as we've played offensively in our three-plus years against an elite defense," Holtmann said. "It was really efficient. It was really smart."

Ford paced the Badgers with 13 points and seven rebounds. Trice had 12 points and eight assists, and Potter posted 11 points with four boards.

Juhasz Faced Challenges After Testing Positive

Ohio State returned from its extended COVID-19 absence on Jan. 4, ending a span of 25 days between games, but junior forward Dorka Juhasz did not.

Juhasz had to sit out that game against Penn State then two more games against Illinois and Iowa before finally getting back on the court against Nebraska on Jan. 16, ending a 37-day period without getting on the court for a regular-season matchup.

DOUBLE DRIBBLE Wyatt Crosher

The third-year forward confirmed on Jan. 19 that she sat out that time frame because she had tested positive for COVID, though she remained asymptomatic throughout the isolation.

"It was really challenging, just because it's been such a long time," Juhasz said. "We've been in quarantine forever, and it's just contact tracing and just staying in quarantine. It was really mentally challenging for me. I wasn't able to work out or go anywhere. It was definitely mentally challenging, and I really missed the game. I really missed basketball, I really missed being around people, and it's hard when you're away from family. It was very challenging for me feeling homesickness, not being able to go home for Christmas. That was my first Christmas without my family.

"It was very challenging, but I'm glad it's over. Hopefully nothing is going to happen the rest of the season, we can keep playing and we can keep getting better. But it was tough."

Juhasz was not the only player or staff member to test positive for the coronavirus, but her positive test came later than most, which led to her extended absence from the court. Still, she said it was great that she was able to avoid symptoms and that she did not have any red flags when it came to potential heart issues.

"It was pretty easy if I can say that, but it was just mentally hard," Juhasz said. "And it was just bad timing, because I was one of the last ones in the whole process, so I had to be out for the most, which was kind of bad. But I'm glad it's over."

There was another thing that Juhasz, and the rest of the Buckeyes, had to deal with during the absence of games, and that was a self-imposed postseason ban for the 2020-21 season following the results of the Patrick Klein investigation.

Juhasz said that was a difficult time for the whole team and that the NCAA allowing every player another year of eligibility helped to somewhat lessen the pain of losing a chance at the Big Ten and NCAA tournaments with this group.

"That was a really hard day for us, I think for coaches, for players, because just seeing the potential of this team, just seeing us being in the top 25 and everything, we were really excited to show that this year we can make it to the NCAA tournament," Juhasz said. "It was very tough, but I think everybody was very positive about it after, like all right, let's make sure that we're getting the most out of this season. We don't want to opt out, we just want to play basketball because that's why we're here, and we should just focus on winning every game and just have fun.

2020-21 Ohio State Women's Basketball Statistics

8-1 Overall (4-1 Big Ten) Statistics through games of Jan. 21

| Player | G-GS | Min.-Avg. | FG-FGA | Pct. | 3P-3PA | Pct. | FT-FTA | Pct. | Rebounds | | | A | TO | BS | ST | Pts.-Avg. |
|---------------------|----------|-------------|----------------|-------------|---------------|-------------|----------------|-------------|----------------|-----------------|--------------|------------|------------|-----------|-----------|-----------------|
| | | | | | | | | | O-D | T-Avg. | PF-FO | | | | | |
| Jacy Sheldon | 9-9 | 281-31.2 | 61-117 | .521 | 18-47 | .383 | 19-22 | .864 | 11-25 | 36-4.0 | 24-0 | 23 | 15 | 2 | 15 | 159-17.7 |
| Dorka Juhasz | 6-6 | 154-25.7 | 40-83 | .482 | 5-23 | .217 | 13-26 | .500 | 20-41 | 61-10.2 | 11-0 | 6 | 12 | 6 | 3 | 98-16.3 |
| Madison Greene | 9-9 | 293-32.6 | 43-90 | .478 | 7-21 | .333 | 33-39 | .846 | 13-23 | 36-4.0 | 19-0 | 37 | 14 | 1 | 16 | 126-14.0 |
| Aaliyah Patty | 8-8 | 193-24.1 | 39-78 | .500 | 5-18 | .278 | 12-17 | .706 | 12-42 | 54-6.8 | 22-0 | 9 | 10 | 7 | 6 | 95-11.9 |
| Braxtin Miller | 8-8 | 265-33.1 | 31-79 | .392 | 7-26 | .269 | 16-21 | .762 | 6-25 | 31-3.9 | 10-0 | 26 | 10 | 5 | 10 | 85-10.6 |
| Kateri Poole | 9-0 | 137-15.2 | 16-35 | .457 | 5-15 | .333 | 17-25 | .680 | 5-18 | 23-2.6 | 18-0 | 11 | 10 | 2 | 7 | 54-6.0 |
| Rebeka Mikulasikova | 7-0 | 111-15.9 | 14-31 | .452 | 3-13 | .231 | 7-9 | .778 | 2-20 | 22-3.1 | 22-2 | 8 | 10 | 0 | 0 | 38-5.4 |
| Tanaya Beacham | 8-4 | 138-17.3 | 15-34 | .441 | 1-4 | .250 | 6-8 | .750 | 11-28 | 39-4.9 | 19-0 | 5 | 8 | 2 | 7 | 37-4.6 |
| Gabby Hutcherson | 9-0 | 139-15.4 | 15-39 | .385 | 7-18 | .389 | 2-4 | .500 | 1-27 | 28-3.1 | 10-0 | 3 | 4 | 6 | 9 | 39-4.3 |
| Rikki Harris | 7-1 | 84-12.0 | 11-24 | .458 | 5-14 | .357 | 1-3 | .333 | 3-10 | 13-1.9 | 8-0 | 5 | 3 | 2 | 5 | 28-4.0 |
| Hevynne Bristow | 2-0 | 10-5.0 | 1-2 | .500 | 0-0 | .000 | 0-0 | .000 | 1-0 | 1-0.5 | 4-0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 2-1.0 |
| Anyssa Jones | 5-0 | 20-4.0 | 1-3 | .333 | 0-0 | .000 | 2-3 | .667 | 1-0 | 1-0.2 | 5-0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 4-0.8 |
| Team | | | | | | | | | 17-17 | 34 | | | 3 | | | |
| Ohio State | 9 | 1825 | 287-615 | .467 | 63-199 | .317 | 128-177 | .723 | 103-276 | 379-42.1 | 172-2 | 134 | 100 | 34 | 80 | 765-85.0 |
| Opponents | 9 | 1825 | 207-580 | .357 | 46-198 | .232 | 108-161 | .671 | 119-252 | 371-41.2 | 158-0 | 90 | 160 | 34 | 32 | 568-63.1 |

"I think we have a lot of potential, and just thinking about that everybody is getting back another year, that's huge and I think that helped us. Like even seniors can come back. But it was definitely tough because this team has nothing to do with (the violations), and it's very sad that, at the end of it, we are the ones that are banned out of it, so it was very tough."

Ohio State head coach Kevin McGuff echoed many of the same thoughts as Juhasz and said that this season has really shown exactly the mentalities of the players whom he was able to recruit to the program because of all the challenges that this group has faced off the court.

"It's difficult, but I think we have enough kids that really love to play the game period, Dorka being one," McGuff said. "I think the opportunity to compete, and they like each other, the chemistry is good, so they like playing with each other and for each other. I think those have been the biggest keys. You get hit with something like this, you have to hope that you've recruited good kids, because you really need their character at this point to kind of make sure we continue to compete and play the game the right way, and we've done that. I think that's just a testament to the type of kids we have."

The last game before Juhasz's month-long absence was a 104-65 victory over Miami (Ohio). While that was a strong performance all around by the Buckeyes to get to 4-0, it was a specifically impressive showing from Juhasz, who finished that game with 27 points and 15 rebounds on 11-of-16 shooting.

To immediately follow up her best performance of the year with a 37-day lull was difficult for the junior forward, but she said she found ways to not focus on that during her isolation.

"I had lots of time," she said. "I started reading, I started doing reflection because it's hard. You can get into your head a lot, like, 'Oh my god, I want to play.' My last game was probably the best game I have had so far this season, so it was very hard to end with that and then one month (not playing) and then start again. That's so far away from each other, so obviously I had to prepare myself mentally that it's not going to be easy and I'm not going to be that Dorka that played the last game."

When Juhasz finally did return to the floor, she was not the same Dorka, but Ohio State was also not the same Ohio State in its 63-55 loss to the Cornhuskers, the only blemish on the Buckeyes' 8-1 record.

Juhasz still tallied a double-double, and she still tied for the team lead with 13 points and led the Buckeyes with 12 rebounds, but she

OSU Women's Basketball Signees

Players in the class of 2021 who have signed a letter of intent to play basketball at Ohio State. (Star ratings are from the ESPN rankings.)

| Player | Pos. | Ht. | Stars | High School |
|-----------------|------|------|-------|--------------------------|
| Kaitlyn Costner | PG | 5-8 | N/A | Mishawaka (Ind.) Penn |
| Taylor Thierry | SG | 5-10 | N/A | Willoughby (Ohio) Laurel |

Players in the class of 2022 who have verbally committed to play basketball at Ohio State. (Star ratings are from the ESPN rankings.)

| Player | Pos. | Ht. | Stars | High School |
|---------------|------|------|-------|--------------------|
| Cotie McMahon | SG | 5-11 | ★★★★ | Centerville, Ohio |
| Mya Perry | SG | 5-10 | N/A | Reynoldsburg, Ohio |

shot 5 of 17 and had three of Ohio State's six turnovers on the day.

"It was very rusty for me," she said. "I had been practicing, what, for like three days, fully contact and everything, so I didn't assume that it was going to be my best game ever, but obviously it was very disappointing for me, personally, and obviously, just as a team that we lost. After the game, I was trying to lock in and focus on the next game. I hadn't played a game in a month, so I was supposed to be rusty, but I've been in the gym a lot. I've been getting repetitions of the shots that I missed against Nebraska, just getting my conditioning back a little bit, just getting in shape. I think it's getting better, and mentally I'm totally fine with that game. At least I got it out of the way."

McGuff said he was not surprised with some of the rust from his All-Big Ten player and that getting back to full speed after going through the protocols is just another challenge of a season within a pandemic.

"That's just kind of what we're dealing with coming back from COVID with people coming and going and coming back in at different times," McGuff said. "It's great having her back, and it may take a while for her to be back to full speed though."

Juhasz had a stronger performance for Ohio State in the Buckeyes' 81-77 upset of previously undefeated Michigan. Despite playing just 26 minutes due to foul troubles, the 6-4 forward from Pecs, Hungary, finished with 14 points, seven rebounds and two blocks, hitting 5 of 9 from the field and all three of her free-throw attempts, an area where she had previously struggled.

There may not be a tournament to play for anymore, but Juhasz said she is simply focusing on becoming a better player, while also striving for the one major team goal that is still left on the table: a regular-season conference title.

"I have to revise my goals just because of this postseason ban," Juhasz said. Those goals kind of faded away with that, that I had for the team with getting to the Sweet 16 and the NCAA tournament and everything. Obviously that's not going to happen. Obviously the No. 1 is going to be all right, let's win the Big Ten conference, just regular season. And then for me, honestly, every game just get better. I think I showed that in my first four games just how every game got a little bit better, and hopefully I can do that right now.

"I just want to play to my potential and finally just get better at little things so at the end of the season I'm like, 'All right, we didn't go to the tournament, but hey, look at where you got since the beginning of the season.'"

Patty Day-To-Day With Shoulder Injury

Ohio State may be currently recovered from its COVID-19 issues that plagued the team in December, but the Buckeyes did play against Michigan without junior forward Aaliyah Patty, who was listed as unavailable.

Patty was seen with the team on the floor for warmups and on the bench during the 81-77 win over the Wolverines. An Ohio State spokesman described the reason for her absence as a shoulder injury, and McGuff labeled the forward as day-to-day moving forward into a Jan. 25 matchup against Maryland.

"Right now, she's day-to-day," McGuff said. "So hopefully she can (play). We'll see, but she's making great progress quickly, so I would just kind of term it day-to-day."

Patty has improved her production in year three with the Buckeyes, ranking fourth on the team with 11.9 points per game and second with 6.8 rebounds per game when BSB went to press. She is shooting 50.0 percent (39 of 78) from the field and 27.8 percent (5 of 18) from three. The 6-3 forward leads the team with seven blocks in eight games.

Buckeyes Survive To Take Down Undefeated Michigan

By WYATT CROSER
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

Ohio State had absolutely no answers for star forward Naz Hillmon, who broke a Michigan program record with 50 points in the game at Value City Arena Jan. 21, the most by any men's or women's basketball player in Michigan history.

It was a Herculean effort from the junior forward that led the Wolverines back from an 11-point early fourth-quarter deficit all the way to a lead with 3:07 to play, 69-67, on a Hillmon layup, their first lead since the first quarter.

It still wasn't enough in the eventual 81-77 Ohio State victory.

"She's an outstanding player," said Ohio State head coach Kevin McGuff. "One of the certainly best in the country and just really hard to deal with."

The Buckeyes kept battling back, tying the game at 69, 71 and 73 points apiece, the latter coming with 1:58 to play. Hillmon then split a pair from the free-throw line to take a 74-73 lead. It was time for an Ohio State player to become a hero.

That was sophomore guard Jacy Sheldon, who buried a three in transition on an assist from senior guard Braxtin Miller to put the Buckeyes back up two, 76-74, with 45 seconds to go.

Hillmon was then stripped by Miller, and sophomore guard Madison Greene hit her shots at the line to go up four.

"That play was started with defense, and that was a great pass, so that was obviously a huge play," Sheldon said of her key basket. "I think collectively, we made a lot of big plays leading up to that, that definitely led to the outcome tonight, and it's always good beating the team up north, so that's always fun."

Still, the game wasn't over. Hillmon converted an and-one to make it a one-point game, and after Miller split her

free throws, Ohio State led 79-77 with 10.4 to go.

But Michigan sophomore guard Maddie Nonal could not hold on to the following inbound pass, which was thrown cross-court by guard Akienreh Johnson, who was charged with the turnover.

From there, Sheldon hit both her free throws, and Ohio State escaped with the victory.

"We really just showed a lot of toughness there down the stretch," McGuff said. "We beat a great team today. They've been playing excellent basketball this year. They have a special player in Naz Hillmon obviously, but I'm really proud of our team with just how hard we played, just some really tough plays down the stretch and just some huge plays to come away with a great win."



Naz Hillmon

Early in the second half, Ohio State had started to pick up some momentum, going on a 10-0 run to take a 51-39 lead in the third quarter, but with 5:46 to go in the frame, junior forward Dorka Juhasz earned her fourth foul, taking her out of the game until 48 seconds into the fourth quarter.

While that gave the Wolverines a window to come back, the Buckeyes kept their foot on the gas, taking a 66-54 lead into the final frame.

But Michigan found some big momentum to start the fourth quarter thanks to Hillmon, who carried the Wolverines throughout the contest.

The 6-2 Hillmon, who also finished with 16 rebounds, made two layups and three free throws to help cut the Ohio State lead down to 66-65 as part of a Wolverine 11-0 run.

That 11-point swing also included a free throw made thanks to a technical foul on McGuff, who was arguing with an official.

Ohio State finally broke the shutout in the fourth quarter with a free throw by

Greene with 4:30 to go.

"We were just seeing different things," McGuff said on the technical. "It happens, and I'm actually just reacting to what I see, and the referee is just seeing something different. It's all good, part of the game."

In the first half, it was a back-and-forth battle that saw Ohio State take a 37-33 lead into halftime.

The Buckeyes went up by 14 points twice in the second quarter, but Michigan ended the half on a 12-2 run of its own to cut the deficit down to four.

The Wolverines came back in the first half thanks to Hillmon, who scored nine straight Michigan points in the final 3:16 of the first half.

She ended the half with 19 points and five rebounds.

Juhasz led Ohio State in the opening half with 10 points, five rebounds and a pair of blocks on 4-of-6 shooting.

For the game, the Buckeyes shot 26 of 60 (43.3 percent) from the field and 7 of 22 (31.8 percent) from three, while holding the Wolverines to 42.9-percent shooting (30 of 70) and just 10.0 percent (2 of 20) from three.

Only four Michigan players scored in the game, with Johnson (14 points), guard Amy Dilk (eight) and forward Hailey Brown (five) making up the other 27 points that Hillmon did not score.

The Buckeyes were without junior forward Aaliyah Patty, who had started all eight games this season and is fourth on the team with 11.9 points per game. She was out with a shoulder injury and is day-to-day, according to an Ohio State spokesman.

Starting in her place was fifth-year senior forward Tanaya Beacham, who finished with 10 points and four rebounds.

"It meant everything," Beacham said on the win. "It was most definitely a statement after the loss we just had (63-55 at Nebraska Jan. 16). We most definitely had to come in here and play with a chip on our shoulder, and I think we most definitely did that."

Ohio State 81, Michigan 77

| Jan. 21, 2021 Value City Arena • Columbus, Ohio | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|----------------------------------------------------|--------------------|------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------|--------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|-------------------------|--|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | F | | | | | | | |
| Michigan (10-1, 5-1) | 17 | 16 | 21 | 23 | 77 | | | | | | | |
| Ohio State (8-1, 4-1) | 22 | 15 | 29 | 15 | 81 | | | | | | | |
| Michigan | Total FG FT | | | | | Reb. | | | | | | |
| | Min. | M-A | M-A | O-D | A | PF | Pts. | | | | | |
| Hillmon | 39 | 20-30 | 10-14 | 10-6 | 0 | 2 | 50 | | | | | |
| Brown | 31 | 2-10 | 1-2 | 2-5 | 0 | 4 | 5 | | | | | |
| Dilk | 29 | 2-6 | 2-2 | 1-4 | 3 | 5 | 8 | | | | | |
| Nolan | 39 | 0-5 | 0-0 | 1-5 | 5 | 2 | 0 | | | | | |
| Johnson | 38 | 6-13 | 2-3 | 2-4 | 5 | 5 | 14 | | | | | |
| Rauch | 5 | 0-2 | 0-0 | 0-1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | | | | | |
| Kiser | 11 | 0-0 | 0-0 | 0-0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | | | | | |
| Stuck | 4 | 0-1 | 0-0 | 0-0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | | | | | |
| Sidor | 6 | 0-3 | 0-0 | 0-0 | 0 | 2 | 0 | | | | | |
| Totals | 200 | 30-70 | 15-21 | 19-25 | 13 | 21 | 77 | | | | | |
| Percentages: | FG: 42.9% | FT: 71.4% | Three-point field goals: 2-20 (Dilk 2-4, Brown 0-4, Nolan 0-4, Sidor 0-3, Johnson 0-2, Rauch 0-2, Stuck 0-1). | | Team rebounds: 3. | Blocked shots: 4 (Hillmon, Brown, Dilk, Johnson). | Turnovers: 14 (Hillmon 4, Dilk 3, Johnson 3, Brown, Nolan, Rauch, Stuck). | Steals: 3 (Dilk, Nolan, Johnson). | | | | |
| Ohio State | Total FG FT | | | | | Reb. | | | | | | |
| | Min. | M-A | M-A | O-D | A | PF | Pts. | | | | | |
| Juhasz | 27 | 5-9 | 3-3 | 2-5 | 0 | 4 | 14 | | | | | |
| Beacham | 19 | 4-9 | 2-2 | 2-2 | 1 | 3 | 10 | | | | | |
| Greene | 38 | 4-10 | 6-7 | 1-1 | 2 | 1 | 15 | | | | | |
| Sheldon | 32 | 7-11 | 3-3 | 1-4 | 0 | 4 | 20 | | | | | |
| Miller | 36 | 2-9 | 5-6 | 2-6 | 5 | 1 | 10 | | | | | |
| Mikulasikova | 30 | 3-9 | 2-2 | 1-3 | 2 | 5 | 9 | | | | | |
| Poole | 13 | 1-3 | 1-2 | 0-1 | 1 | 2 | 3 | | | | | |
| Hutcherson | 5 | 0-0 | 0-0 | 0-1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | | | | | |
| Harris | 2 | 0-0 | 0-0 | 0-0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | | | | | |
| Totals | 200 | 26-60 | 22-25 | 12-25 | 11 | 23 | 81 | | | | | |
| Percentages: | FG: 43.3% | FT: 88.0% | Three-point field goals: 7-22 (Sheldon 3-4, Miller 1-2, Greene 1-3, Juhasz 1-4, Mikulasikova 1-5, Beacham 0-2, Poole 0-2). | | Team rebounds: 5. | Blocked shots: 3 (Juhasz 2, Miller). | Turnovers: 12 (Juhasz 3, Greene 2, Sheldon 2, Poole 2, Beacham, Hutcherson, TEAM). | Steals: 10 (Sheldon 3, Greene 2, Miller 2, Poole 2, Beacham). | Technical Foul: McGuff. | Officials: Camy, Steratore, Berger. | Attendance: N/A. | |

Next up, Ohio State was scheduled to stay at home with another key ranked matchup, this time against No. 7 Maryland. That game took place at 7 p.m. on Jan. 25 but was not done by the time BSB went to press.

"This win is definitely very special to us, especially coming off a loss," Sheldon said of beating Michigan. "I think that motivated us a little more, and the team up north, that automatically gives you a little more motivation."

"It means a lot to us, and we'll take it and get ready for our next game because we have a big one coming up."

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Sasso Leads Title-Hunting Ohio State Grapplers

By PATRICK MAYHORN
Special To Buckeye Sports Bulletin

It's impossible to tell the story of the Ohio State wrestling program entering the 2021 season without looking at the path that the Buckeyes, led by head coach Tom Ryan, have taken to get to this point. After a strong campaign in the 2019-20 season, Ohio State entered the Big Ten championship with three true national title contenders and a lineup that had established itself as one of the conference's best. A third-place finish in the conference served as a minor disappointment, but in early March, Ohio State still sat with its eyes on securing as many as three individual national titles.

Then, on March 11, the coronavirus pandemic fully took hold in America. The NCAA canceled all of its spring championships, Ohio State shut down, and the Buckeyes' season ended. To call it jarring for Ohio State would be an understatement.

"It's been challenging," Ryan said. "March 11, we shut down, six days before the national championships. Kollin Moore and Luke Pletcher were ranked No. 1, Sammy Sasso was in a position to win (a title), (Kaleb) Romero, Ethan Smith, a bunch of guys were in position to place high. There are tougher things in life, but at that age, with the focus that these young people have, I would call it somewhat traumatic. We know there's a big difference between tragic and difficult, but it was difficult."

The time between the end of the season and a return to Ohio State for the Buckeyes was equally taxing. Because of COVID safety regulations and a desire to allow only essential personnel back on campus for as long as possible, Ryan's team didn't get the chance to make any sort of official contact with its coaching staff until September, six months later.

That meant six months away from Ohio State's top-notch training center and six months without formal guidance from Ryan, any of his assistants or Riley Ross, director of wrestling sport science and development. During that time, Ohio State's wrestlers, many of them underclassmen dealing with either their first or second full offseason in college, were left to train under their own supervision.

"From March 11 to Sept. 11, we had pretty much no training contact with them," Ryan said. "Of course, we could reach out to them, but we were not allowed to guide them in any way."

While the circumstances were obviously dire, Ryan – an eternal optimist – was quick to point out that situations like that can work in Ohio State's favor.

"We learn the most when we are under duress and in trauma," Ryan said. "That's when we learn the most about people. So these guys, the ones that dealt with the six months away from each other, out of this incredible environment, are likely going to perform better than the ones that didn't."

Once Ohio State's wrestlers were permitted to return to campus and receive formal training again, it was still slow going for Ohio State's return to something resembling normalcy.

"Since they returned, which was in September, we were allowed to start coaching them," Ryan explained. "We were not allowed to put any pressure on them, because of COVID, obviously a crazy coach is going to put somebody in harm's way. Preparedness is critical but not nearly as important as one's well-being. The school did a pretty good job with matters and all of this."

"And then they come back in September, we were not allowed back in our facility until Oct. 19. Typically from March to September

is very brutal. They're off, but it's an important time in building a base. They didn't have our staff overseeing their training, but some of them did a really good job. The elite, the really elite, the ones that are CEOs of their lives, they do a really good job of managing their minutes, and Sammy (Sasso) is one of them. He looks really good right now."

For Ryan specifically, that six-month break served as the longest amount of time that he had spent away from wrestling in more than four decades, by his own estimation.

"It was challenging as a staff, it was challenging for the student-athlete, but this has been a part of my life for the last 42 years," Ryan explained. "I've never not been at practice in the afternoon. Anybody that calls me between 2:30 and 4:00 is a moron. They don't know me. From 2:30 to 4:00, dude, I'm in the wrestling room, don't call me. That's been the last 40 years, so it was challenging for me as well. Just knowing that you don't want to lose ground, and these guys are used to be connected to each other. And that was taken from them. But they're all doing really well now. I think we're in a good place. We've been back practicing since October, and we're excited as heck about the season."

The makeup of this starting lineup is almost unlike any that Ryan has seen at Ohio State as he enters his 15th season at the helm in Columbus, thanks in large part to two departures from the 2019-20 team: Luke Pletcher and Kollin Moore.

The Buckeyes are significantly more experienced than they were last season, returning seven starters with an eighth waiting in the wings at heavyweight, but they still have pretty big shoes to fill at 141 pounds and 197 pounds, the old stomping grounds for Pletcher and Moore, respectively. It's a roster packed with talent from top to bottom and led by top-ranked Sasso at 149 pounds, but it's also a group looking to replace two of the best wrestlers in program history while searching for more star power to better complement Sasso atop the lineup. Ryan sees staples in his lineup but is seeking more in the way of depth and development across the board.

"The staples of our lineup right now are Sasso at 149, Ethan Smith at 165 and Romero at 174," Ryan said. "Rocky Jordan was really tough last year. We're looking for him to step up too."

"We know we have some horses. We have a couple of guys that are ranked pretty high that we think can win in the tournament. But that's not going to be enough for Ohio State to remain among the elite schools. It's the next-level guys that have to step up."

"In order for us to be challenging for a title, we had to develop at every weight class."

Ohio State is not, however, at a loss for leadership atop its lineup. Unlike the relatively inexperienced group that Pletcher and Moore led in 2019-20, this is a team that has several upperclassmen in the starting lineup whom Ryan trusts to serve as examples for their teammates.

"Through my 15 years here, we've lost some really special guys to graduation. That's what happens," he said. "You don't get them forever. So they leave, and losing Moore and Pletcher were huge losses for us. But we have guys like Kaleb Romero who's a blackshirt, he's a leader on and off the mat. Carson Kharchla unfortunately was injured, but he's a great leader. Sammy Sasso is a great leader. Ethan Smith is a great leader."

"We bring back a core of guys that really understand what it's like to compete in the Big Ten and what it's like to really compete. Because you can be a part of a sport your entire high school, junior high career and not really understand competition. You have to understand com-

petition to compete in the Big Ten, and those four guys are really some of our great leaders. They're all great in school, great students, great examples. You wouldn't know they wrestled if you met them outside of the wrestling room. They're gentlemen, and then they're assassins. Those are the guys we're looking for. Be a gentleman in the public and be an assassin after you shake hands. Those guys are really good leaders for us."

With a shortened, Big Ten-only slate ahead for the Buckeyes, there's less time than usual to work out the kinks of the lineup and find that second – or third – star. Battles at 141 pounds, 197 pounds and heavyweight will be more difficult to suss out with fewer matches in general and no warmup against lesser foes before jumping into the most difficult conference in wrestling.

The latter was already borne out in Ohio State's first trip to the mat this season, a tri-meet against No. 24 Illinois and No. 21 Wisconsin in Champaign, Ill., on Jan. 17. The Buckeyes knocked off the Badgers 25-9 but fell to Illinois, 18-15, starting the season at 1-1 with a performance that could be generously described as shaky, especially at some of the weights under question entering the year.

"We looked a little rusty today," said Ryan after that meet. "We lost a number of matches late today, and that's a sign of rust and weight cutting. This was the first time the guys were down to weight in nine months, and we looked sluggish. But I'm proud of the way we came back in the second match. I'm happy for Malik (Heinselman). Rocky also came back really strong. And Sammy wrestled really well today."

"Sometimes you learn some things when you deal with the pain of losing. Nobody likes to lose. We certainly didn't go up there wanting to lose. But this shows us where we need to get better. Where we need to improve. We get Rutgers next, and we have to be ready to go."

Some of that rust remained in Ohio State's third dual of the year against No. 17 Rutgers, a 19-14 victory that required a late comeback effort from the Buckeyes to survive.

With three matches under OSU's belt and six remaining on the schedule for the Big Ten championships, BSB breaks down the Buckeyes' season with a look at the lineup by weight class.

125 pounds – After being a significant problem area for the Buckeyes in 2019-20, Ryan and his staff are hoping for major improvements at the lightest weight in the lineup in 2021. Unlike last season, there really isn't a battle at this spot entering the year. Junior Malik Heinselman is the presumed man at 125, barring injury or a late surge from one of the Koontz brothers, Dylan or Brady.

"Malik Heinselman," Ryan said when asked if this weight class had an obvious starter. "Malik has an incredible work ethic. Malik is a great student. Malik is a lover of the sport. We need him to execute the whole match, which is basically like keeping your brain involved in what's happening out there and fighting the whole time. So Malik is someone that we're watching closely."

Ohio State has its eyes on Heinselman for good reason. While he seems to be the unquestioned starter in his third season with the program, he hasn't exactly dominated in his first two seasons in Columbus. He found the starting lineup early as a freshman after peeling his redshirt midseason, wrestling in seven duals and putting up a 3-4 record to go with a 24-11 record overall. He earned the No. 25 seed at the NCAA championships and knocked off No. 24 Rico Montoya from Northern Colorado, setting expectations high for his sophomore season in 2019.

Instead, the Buckeyes were met largely with regression at 125. Heinselman struggled significantly in the early stages of the season and

finished with a 5-7 dual record (2-5 in conference action) and an 18-15 mark overall. He came on strong at the end of the season and inspired some reason for excitement within the Buckeye staff, however. He rattled off several late-season conference wins and entered Big Ten championship competition with a lot of confidence.

"I've had a lot of good wins these last few weeks," Heinselman told BSB on March 5. "I think it helped with my confidence, and I truly believe that I'm going to be on the podium at the Big Ten."

Heinselman's confidence entering the tournament was not quite rewarded, but he did manage a seventh-place finish that would have sent him to the NCAA championships in any normal season. Now, with Ohio State desperately in need of consistency from veterans such as Heinselman, a continuation of that end-of-season form into 2021 could be critical for OSU's success.

"Just preparation in the wrestling room," Heinselman said when asked about where his newfound confidence comes from. "Over the summer I prepared a lot, was lifting a lot, running a lot, wrestling a lot and I just feel that I have myself to another level over the summer and I have prepared and now I feel like I can do what I should do."

That's especially true in what will be another tremendously tricky season for the Big Ten at 125 pounds. Iowa's Spencer Lee is still the cream of the crop and sits at No. 1 in the InterMat rankings, but Heinselman – ranked No. 14 – is behind Purdue's Devin Schroder (No. 3), Michigan State's Rayvon Foley (No. 6), Northwestern's Michael DeAugustino (No. 8), Michigan's Dylan Ragusin (No. 9), Nebraska's Liam Cronin (No. 11) and Minnesota's Patrick McKee (No. 12).

With that group in his way, a podium finish in the conference is quite the task for Heinselman, but if he can hold his own with the majority of that group – only four of whom Heinselman will have to square off against in the regular season – it could go a long way for the Buckeyes in some of their tighter bouts.

"I want to be one of the top contenders this year at 125 pounds," Heinselman said. "Of course, Spencer Lee is the big dog, but I want to do my best and I'll do what I came here to Ohio State to do."

As mentioned, there isn't much in the way of a serious threat behind Heinselman. Dylan, the elder of the Koontz brothers, found his way into two duals last season and is the first wrestler off the bench at 125, while Brady took an Olympic redshirt in 2019. Redshirt freshman Jacob Decatur and true freshman Alex Flerlage will likely duke it out for the future of this position in 2023, but neither looks to be a serious contender this early in their careers.

133 pounds – The 133-pound class was a problem without a solution for Ohio State in 2019. The Buckeyes entered the season without an obvious answer in the spot, turning to sophomore Quinn Kinner, who had to cut a considerable amount of weight to make do at 133. He won his first bout of the season last year against Stanford's Brandon Kiser and gained a decent amount of traction in the InterMat rankings, moving into the top 20, but the issues of the weight cut became quickly apparent.

Kinner dropped his next two bouts and departed from the starting lineup as the coaching staff decided to move him closer to his natural weight after the cut became too challenging, both physically and mentally.

"It's mentally taxing if you're trying to lose weight," Kinner explained to BSB in March. "Making 133 was brutal, even more so mentally than it was physically. Physically, it definitely

wasn't fun. But mentally it was just wearing on me every day. You're doing the math – 'I'm going to have to eat this much, lose this much' – and it's just constantly in your head. And if it's not going right then, it's just like everything spirals.

"I always had a problem with eating at all. I know some guys have a problem with eating too much. My big issue was that I didn't want to eat. I was scared to eat, because I knew I was going to have to lose it. I didn't know if I was going to be able to. It was just really scary for me. The coaches were always trying to tell me, 'Eat, and we'll help you get it off. It won't be a problem. Just eat. You need food.'"

Ultimately, Kinner followed that advice and moved up to 157 pounds by the end of the season, where he was expected to compete as a junior this season, though some personal issues that he's dealing with have led Kinner to take the semester off from Ohio State, according to Ryan.

"He has some things (going on)," Ryan said. "He was not removed from the team. He was not thrown off of the team. He's just having a hard time, and the best thing for him to do was to take a semester off."

Kinner's departure from 133 in 2019-20 left the Buckeyes in a tricky spot, and the lack of that depth in 2021 has created a similar situation. Last season, Ohio State turned to the elder Koontz as a stopgap solution before handing the job off to then-freshman Jordan Decatur on a full-time basis entering conference play. Despite lofty expectations as a highly thought of recruit, Decatur's opening stanza at Ohio State left a lot to be desired.

He notched a 14-10 record overall and grabbed a crucial victory in Ohio State's win over Arizona State, but he finished the year with a 3-7 dual record, with the Arizona State match serving as his lone nonconference dual experience. The struggles were certainly frustrating for both the Akron native and the Buckeyes at large, but Ryan was quick to identify the serious challenge that Decatur faced, being tossed into the best conference in wrestling, at one of its top weight classes, as a true freshman.

"(At) 133 we have Decatur, and we get to see Decatur a year older. We threw him in the gauntlet last year as a true freshman in the Big Ten. Welcome to the Big Ten! Everybody in the weight was in the top 15 in the country, so there was no easy weekend, so I'm looking forward to seeing Jordan back in there with a year under his belt and a better understanding of how competitive the Big Ten is," Ryan said.

Unfortunately for Decatur, the road as a sophomore doesn't look a whole lot easier, and it's a road that he'll likely have to walk alone without any true backup at the weight. The Big Ten is home to five wrestlers within the InterMat top 20 at 133 pounds – a decrease from last season, but a group that claims four of the top six spots. Decatur is not included in that group and certainly didn't make an especially strong bid for consideration in his first bouts of the season. He fell to Illinois' Lucas Byrd 1-0 in his opening performance, though he did bounce back with a 6-4 victory against Wisconsin's Kyle Burwick.

141 pounds – At his season-opening availability with the media, Ryan singled out three weights as continuing, open battles entering the year: heavyweight, 197 and 141 pounds, where a pair of youngsters are battling to take over for Pletcher in Dylan D'Emilio and Anthony Echemendia.

"D'Emilio is a new face at 141," Ryan said. "He's being challenged by Echemendia."

Of the three weight-class battles, none is more intriguing than the fight that D'Emilio and Echemendia find themselves in, especially after the tri-meet to open the season.

D'Emilio, a redshirt freshman and former four-time Ohio state champion, knocked off the Cuban freshman 6-4 in wrestle-offs to earn the starting nod in Ohio State's first bout of the season with the Fighting Illini. Still, the decision was

far from easy for what seems like a still conflicted Buckeye staff.

"It would be like if you were a jury and you watched this, they shared the information with you about the case, you'd be a hung jury," Ryan said of the battle at 141. "You'd say, 'Well I think he's guilty, but I can't hang my hat on that.' These wrestle-offs were so close, and the biggest difference in two of the weights was mat wrestling. D'Emilio is a stud, he's a four-time state champion out of Ohio. His work ethic is incredible, and we brought in this big recruit from Cuba – the first Cuban student-athlete that I've coached, maybe in Ohio State history, and he's a stud – and Dylan did a really good job tactically, technically. He did a really good job holding up physically, and the difference was that he rode him. He was able to steal some of the match."

However, a tough loss to Illinois freshman Danny Paccino in the final minute seemed to sour the Buckeye staff on the Curtice (Ohio) Genoa product, because Echemendia took the mat for the second leg of the tri-meet against Wisconsin's Trey Escobar and secured a victory, only increasing questions about the battle at 141 pounds moving forward.

"Dylan is incredibly fit," Ryan said. "He works incredibly hard. His issue – first mat, first weigh-in, the stresses of competition – and late in the match, he didn't finish the way he needed to and it hurt the team."

As of print, it appears that D'Emilio is still the starter at 141. He took the mat against Rutgers on Jan. 24 and fell 11-2 to No. 1 Sebastian Rivera, but expect a battle here throughout the season as the Buckeyes seek their best possible option entering conference and national competition.

149 pounds – If there's a heart of this lineup that drives everything else, it's at 149 pounds. Sasso, a third-year sophomore from Nazareth, Pa., is considered to be one of the best pound-for-pound wrestlers in the NCAA this season, and he will look to buoy the Buckeyes throughout Big Ten action, as he did in the opening tri-meet.

There, he began his second season in the starting lineup with a pin of No. 7 Mike Carr of Illinois, followed by a 12-5 decision over Drew Scharenbrock, where he was largely unchallenged throughout the bout. Ohio State will likely look to lean heavily on Sasso – as it did with Pletcher and Moore – as not just a steady winner, but as a piece of the lineup who can be relied on for bonus team points, be it from major decisions, tech falls or pins.

The Buckeyes are also relying on Sasso to bounce back from the sudden end to the 2020 season, which was especially devastating for him. After putting together a 13-1 mark in duals and a 24-3 record overall, Sasso was set to enter the NCAA championships with a serious shot at a national title, which would have opened the door for him to claim the ultra-rare four-title career after claiming one as a redshirt freshman. He fell just short in the Big Ten title race, finishing in second place at 149 pounds, but never got the chance to redeem himself.

Without a way to travel back in time or prevent the pandemic, Sasso instead is focusing entirely on the present, despite the trials and tribulations that he faced.

"Everybody is excited to compete and do what we love," Sasso said. "You can't dwell too much on what happened last year. That's in the past. I try to focus on what's in front of me. We're excited. We're eager to get on the mat."

In fact, he mentioned specifically to the media on Jan. 15 that the missed chance just serves as extra motivation, which will be important in one of the best weight classes in America. Sasso is battling primarily with North Carolina's Austin O'Connor for supremacy atop the 149-pound rankings, but his in-conference slate is certainly not without its heavy-hitters. Michigan's Kanen Storr (No. 6); Iowa's Max Murin (No. 8), Illinois' Carr (No. 9); Penn State's Jarod Verkleeren (No. 10); Purdue's Griffin Parriott (No. 18) and

2020-21 Ohio State Wrestling Roster

| Name | Wt. | Yr. | Hometown/Previous School |
|--------------------|-----|---------|-------------------------------------------|
| Gavin Bell | 184 | Fr. | Beavercreek, Ohio/Beavercreek |
| Nicholas Boykin | HWT | R-Fr. | Murfreesboro, Tenn./Riverdale |
| Elijah Cleary | 157 | 5th-Sr. | Winter Park, Fla./Lake Highland Prep |
| Dylan D'Emilio | 141 | R-Fr. | Curtice, Ohio/Genoa |
| Jacob Decatur | 125 | R-Fr. | Akron, Ohio/Cuyahoga Valley Christian |
| Jordan Decatur | 133 | So. | Akron, Ohio/Cuyahoga Valley Christian |
| Anthony Echemendia | 141 | Fr. | Cabaiguan, Cuba/Sunnyside (Ariz.) |
| Alex Flerlage | 125 | Fr. | St. Louis, Mo./Christian Brothers College |
| Kevon Freeman | 165 | So. | Mentor, Ohio/Lake Catholic |
| Trey Grenier | 149 | Jr. | Powell, Ohio/Ohio University |
| Malik Heinselmann | 125 | Jr. | Castle Rock, Colo./Castle View |
| Bryce Hepner | 157 | Fr. | Avon, Ohio/St. Edward |
| Cade Hepner | 165 | Jr. | Avon, Ohio/Old Dominion University |
| Gavin Hoffman | 197 | So. | Montoursville, Pa./Montoursville |
| Jaimen Hood | 133 | Sr. | Mason, Ohio/Mason |
| Jashon Hubbard | 165 | So. | Steubenville, Ohio/Steubenville |
| Rocky Jordan | 184 | So. | St. Paris, Ohio/St. Paris Graham |
| Carson Kharchla | 165 | R-Fr. | Powell, Ohio/Olentangy Liberty |
| Brady Koontz | 125 | So. | Plover, Wis./Stevens Point Area Sr. |
| Dylan Koontz | 125 | Jr. | Plover, Wis./Stevens Point Area Sr. |
| Phillip Kue | 141 | R-Fr. | Gresham, Ore./Centennial |
| Tate Orndorff | HWT | Jr. | Spokane, Wash./Utah Valley University |
| Klay Reeves | 149 | R-Fr. | Alexandria, Ohio/Northridge |
| Kaleb Romero | 174 | Jr. | Mechanicsburg, Ohio/Mechanicsburg |
| Sammy Sasso | 149 | So. | Nazareth, Pa./Nazareth |
| Fritz Schierl | 174 | 5th-Sr. | Stevens Point, Wis./Stevens Point Area |
| Chase Singletary | 197 | Jr. | Naples, Fla./Blair Academy (N.J.) |
| Ethan Smith | 165 | Jr. | Latrobe, Pa./Sparrows Point (Md.) |
| Tyler Stein | 197 | R-Fr. | Canfield, Ohio/Canfield |
| Zach Steiner | 184 | Jr. | Creston, Ohio/Norwayne |
| J.D. Stickley | 149 | So. | Urbana, Ohio/St. Paris Graham |
| Gary Traub | HWT | 5th-Sr. | Cincinnati, Ohio/Sycamore |
| Isaac Wilcox | 157 | Fr. | Holladay, Utah/Olympus |

Head Coach – Tom Ryan (Iowa, 1993). **Associate Head Coach** – J Jagers (Ohio State, 2009). **Assistant Coach** – Tervel Dlagnev (Nebraska-Kearney). **Director of Recruiting and Operations** – Anthony Ralph (Kent State, 2002). **Volunteer Assistant Coach** – Bo Jordan (Ohio State, 2018). **Director of Wrestling Sport Science and Development** – Riley Ross (Nebraska-Kearney).

Northwestern's Yahya Thomas (No. 20) will all look to stand between Sasso and his first conference crown.

For Sasso, the strong competition of the Big Ten plays little to no role in his approach to how he plans to wrestle. Target on his back as the top seed or not, he plans to wrestle within himself and play to his style with the kind of controlled chaos that he thrives on.

"I'm not focused on anybody else," Sasso said. "I know the guys at the weight, but I'm focused on myself. When I'm being Sammy Sasso and wrestling my best, good things are going to happen."

"You make it as simple as it can be. It's another season, another chance to go wrestle. Every time I step out there to compete, whether there's fans there or not, it's the same thing: There's two guys going out there and they want to get their hand raised, and I'm going to do everything in my power to get my hand raised."

Ohio State is certainly hoping to see Sasso's hand raised every single time he takes the mat this season. If for whatever reason he's unable to compete, the first wrestler onto the mat in his place is likely sophomore J.D. Stickley, who put up a 7-3 record last season and won a high school title as a junior before arriving at Ohio State.

157 pounds – Ohio State enters this season at 157 pounds with a defined starter – a returning starter, even – with little in the way of a serious challenge mounted against that starter in the lead-up to the season and essentially blind faith in the development of Elijah Cleary as the sole path to improvement at the weight.

Cleary, who spent almost all of his junior campaign as the man at 157 pounds for the Buckeyes, has been searching for that development for five years now. The fifth-year senior arrived at Ohio State for the 2016-17 season and redshirted, wrestling unattached and notching a 13-6 record. He competed in just one event, the

Edinboro Open, as a redshirt freshman, posting a 4-2 record. He broke into the starting lineup twice as a third-year wrestler, claiming a 1-1 record with an 11-4 mark overall, before finally jumping in full time at 157 pounds in 2019, hoping to fill a weight that has given the Buckeyes problems for several years now. He couldn't. He struggled both with slow starts and with finishing his fights, coming up short in almost every dual on the way to a 3-8 record, with a 2-4 showing in conference action.

"That weight class is still in flux a little bit," assistant coach J Jagers said of 157 last season. "We're still looking for consistency at the weight class. Cleary has been pretty consistent, but he's lost a few tight ones that we've got to see him jump levels and get those wins. That's still a question."

Had Kinner returned to Columbus this semester, he likely would have challenged for and potentially even claimed the spot at 157 pounds, where he had started to catch on at the end of the season after his bulk. His absence has left Cleary with a straight path to another year as a starter. Freshman Isaac Wilcox looked to test him in wrestle-offs, but Cleary showed off his experience advantage with a resounding 8-1 decision.

Now, focused not on defending his spot but purely on improvement – perhaps into a top-25 or even top-20 level – Cleary is looking to pick up where he left off last season, with a focus on improving the little things and wrestling with more aggression.

"It's been an ongoing process of trying to get my practice to look a lot like my matches," Cleary said. "I know that I'm making daily gains, but it was taking a minute to come out and show. The coaches have been pushing shooting a lot. The more I'm getting the legs the better. Going to the top, that's the main mission."

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Kharchla Will Miss Season With Undisclosed Injury

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Through his first two matches, Cleary did not live up to the expectations that Ryan and his staff have for him. He won his first match 3-2 but dropped his second by the same score. Offense has long been an issue for the Buckeye, and Ryan did not hold back when asked about the need for improvement in that regard.

"Elijah just hasn't trusted his offense," Ryan said. "He's been here for a long time, and we really haven't seen any adjustment of any kind to what we're preaching. He struggles to let go in a match. Now his defense is good and he's strong, he's fit, but until he says (that he) cares enough to make this change, there's nothing that we can do."

165 pounds – It's no surprise that junior Smith finds himself back in the Ohio State starting lineup for the third straight season after claiming a spot as a redshirt freshman at 174 pounds and cutting down to 165 last season to make room for Romero.

It is a surprise, however, that he finds himself as a starter again at 165 pounds, despite his experience in the position.

That wasn't originally in the plans for Ohio State this season. Smith was originally expected to move back up to 174 pounds, much closer to his natural weight, where he would look to challenge Romero for a starting spot. The move was considered both to provide some relief for Smith, who has to undergo a pretty significant cut to make weight consistently at 165 pounds, and to introduce former all-world recruit Carson Kharchla.

Kharchla, now a redshirt freshman, came to Ohio State as the reigning National Wrestler of the Year according to InterMat, and he was expected to contribute almost immediately for the Buckeyes. However, Ryan decided to redshirt the Powell (Ohio) Olentangy Liberty product and utilize him unattached, so that he could gain experience without burning a year of eligibility. After a 16-0 record as a true freshman wrestling unattached, Kharchla was expected to make the move into the starting lineup at 165 pounds this season, where he, like Sasso in 2019-20, would immediately serve as a lineup staple and a title contender.

Then, just prior to Ohio State's wrestle-offs, Kharchla suffered an injury in practice. While the details of the injury are not known, an Ohio State spokesperson confirmed to BSB on Jan. 20 that Kharchla will miss the entire 2020-21 season.

That injury meant a quick return to 165 pounds for Smith, who has made the jump back down but looked every bit like a wrestler fresh off a rapid cut against Illinois and Wisconsin. He dropped his first bout of the year against No. 8 Danny Braunagel of Illinois but did manage to knock off Josh Otto to claim a victory against the Badgers.

While that first showing was especially sluggish because of the cut, expectations around Smith this season are roughly in tune with his week-one performance. He rarely lost to lower-ranked wrestlers in 2019 but rarely toppled those above him in the standings, and in a solid but not excellent Big Ten, Smith could be in for another similar season. Iowa's Alex Marinelli is a strong favorite in the conference, but Smith will look to compete with Joe Lee of Penn State, Braunagel, Cameron Amine of Michigan, Minnesota's Andrew Sparks, Michigan State's Jake Tucker and Nebraska's Peyton Robb for a podium spot after coming up just short (fourth in the Big Ten) last year.

174 pounds – Outside of Sasso at 149 pounds, Romero is Ohio State's biggest title contender on this roster in 2021, barring rapid

improvement from Heinselman or one of the two grapplers at 141 pounds. He entered the season at No. 4 in the InterMat rankings after a 9-3 duals campaign in 2020 that earned him the No. 6 seed for the NCAA championships.

After a pair of dominant wins against Illinois' D.J. Shannon and Wisconsin's Jared Krattinger, Romero moved up another spot to No. 3 and now sits behind only Iowa's Michael Kemerer and Logan Massa of Michigan, while checking in ahead of Nebraska's Mikey Labroila and Penn State's Carter Starocci.

To compete with that row of talent within his own conference, Romero will look to continue the form that he found as a sophomore in 2019-20, brought on largely by an increase in confidence.

"I think this year I've just really kind of had a boost of confidence," Romero said in 2020, "just going out there and opening up and wrestling. Last year I lost confidence in myself. I didn't really believe in myself so I struggled a little bit. This year, I'm just going out with nothing to lose, just going out and wrestling, trying to make things happen. So far, it's doing me pretty well. I'm going to try to keep working hard to keep that up."

A slate like this one isn't new for Romero, either. He faced off against 12 top-25 opponents in 13 bouts at one point last season and managed to finish the year with 10 ranked victories (he put up a 19-7 record overall). To prepare to face that type of challenge, the key lies, according to Romero, in staying focused on one thing at a time.

"I try not to think about the big picture of a lot of things, because I kind of overwhelm myself," Romero said. "I get too caught up in the moment so I try not to think about that stuff too much."

Behind Romero at 174 is do-it-all senior Fritz Schierl, who won't likely see the mat in a dual barring injury but has been a steadying force in tournament play for his entire career, tallying a 54-19 record.

184 pounds – The job at 184 pounds is Rocky Jordan's to lose after he took the spot and defended it from Gavin Hoffman in 2019. Hoffman is up at 197 pounds now, leaving junior Zach Steiner and freshman Gavin Bell as the reserves at 184 pounds, though neither seriously contended with Jordan for the spot. He defeated Bell in the wrestle-offs with a pin and is eyeing a jump this season from solid Big Ten wrestler to title contender.

It isn't too difficult a jump to envision, according to Ryan, given Jordan's redshirt freshman campaign, background and weight class. The brother of Bo and Micah, both Buckeye wrestling royalty under Ryan's tutelage, Jordan put up a 5-5 record in duals and a 29-9 record overall a year ago, with a fifth-place finish at the Big Ten championships that qualified him for a national berth.

"Absolutely," Ryan said when asked if the expectation for Jordan is to finish on the podium in the Big Ten this year.

Another top-five finish looks well within Jordan's grasp again as a sophomore, though as mentioned, it would take a jump. Michigan's Myles Amine sits atop the weight class, with Aaron Brooks of Penn State, Nelson Brands of Iowa and Nebraska's Taylor Venz ahead of Jordan, who checks in at No. 11.

He fell in his first bout of the season against Illinois' standout No. 13 Zac Braunagel but bounced back against No. 12 Chris Weiler in the second leg of the tri-meet.

"His first match, he wrestled a tough guy who he beat last year close," Ryan said. "He was in the position to win the match and tried to turn him, and in the process of trying to score extra points, the guy got away and that was the differ-

ence in the match. That was not a great match for him. Now the second match, he (looked better). We were just flat the first match."

If he's able to take two of the remaining matches he has against wrestlers ranked ahead of him (Amine, Brooks and Brands), he could be in for the long haul of both conference and national title contention.

Even if Jordan remains outside of the podium but within the top half of the conference at 184 pounds, Ohio State will look to rely on him to snag more decisions than he loses and to avoid surrendering bonus points. With questions at the back end of this lineup, stability from Jordan would go a long way for the Buckeyes against the better teams in the Big Ten.

197 pounds – It's a new day at 197 pounds for Ohio State, and not in a good way. Much like at 141, Ohio State is tasked with replacing a national title-caliber wrestler in Moore at 197, though unlike at 141, this is the first time that Ohio State has placed a new starter in this weight class since Moore took hold of it in 2016 as a redshirt freshman, and while the cupboard is not bare, it has a number of brand-new faces looking to fill the void.

Hoffman and Chase Singletary are the main two names to know and are expected to battle for the starting spot throughout the season. As mentioned, Hoffman is finally settling in at his natural weight of 197 after being around from 184 to heavyweight, to serve as a backup whenever he was needed.

A former top recruit who dominated Pennsylvania, he was named an Amateur Wrestling News first-team All-American and came to Ohio State as a top-12 prospect in the class of 2018. The hope at Ohio State is that the move to a more natural weight will allow Hoffman to return to his prep form that earned him such high praise.

He never looked especially comfortable elsewhere, backing up Myles Martin at 184 pounds in 2018-19 while putting up a 22-3 record but struggling with the move to heavyweight last season on his way to a 26-10 overall mark but an 0-3 record in duals. He won the wrestle-off at 197 pounds against Singletary in overtime and got the first crack at the starting lineup because of it.

"Gavin Hoffman, he's paid his dues here," Ryan said. "He's been here a while. He's been a backup to Myles Martin and then really couldn't make 184. He was a backup to Kollin Moore, and now is his chance, and he scored a takedown in overtime to win," Ryan said.

It was not the start that Hoffman was looking for, with a loss to Illinois' Matt Wroblewski but, like so many of his teammates, he was able to bounce back and claim a victory against the Badgers. He isn't yet ranked in the InterMat considerations – though Singletary is, at No. 17 – but a .500 record the remainder of the way would be a solid showing for Hoffman, with five of his conference mates ranked within the top 13 – three of whom remain on the schedule for the Buckeyes.

Singletary, meanwhile, made a similar move to 197 pounds for this season. Unlike Hoffman, however, the question for Singletary is not about reaching lofty potential; it's about returning to form. Singletary took the starting job at heavyweight in 2018-19 as another former top recruit and handled it well, recording an 8-3 dual record and a 21-9 record overall while earning the No. 16 seed to the NCAA championships.

However, struggles with maintaining his weight and an early season-ending injury left the position to fan favorite "Gas Tank" Gary Traub, and rather than attempt to bulk back up to heavyweight to challenge there again, Singletary decided instead to cut down to 197. It's a new position for him that brings with it a requirement

for greater stamina, but expect Singletary to catch on and find time in the lineup down the road, even if Hoffman continues to perform well, so that Ohio State can keep both fresh.

Regardless of the starter, Ohio State will be looking for more offense at 197 than it has seen so far.

"Neither one is scoring enough points," Ryan said. "Wrestling as a spectator is extremely boring when you're not aggressive and scoring points, and that's something that we believe in deeply as a staff. That aggression and initiative develops. Fear and passivity never develop, or not at the rate quick enough to be successful at this level.

"We need more guys taking intelligent risks, being more aggressive, and that starts in practice. That starts in believing that that actually is a piece of the equation. We don't get better in the things that we don't try. We've got to help them to unlock their minds to trusting this truth that if you start getting more aggressive, your brain will figure out, when you're in positions, how to progress to a score. Neither one of those guys are wrestling at the level that we need them to be wrestling at, but we've got some time. Hope isn't a plan, but we pushed them really hard this week and we just need to see progress between now and March."

Heavyweight – The original plan, as Ryan told it back in June, was to bring Utah State transfer Tate Orndorff in as security at heavyweight and as the replacement for Traub in 2022, as he's a fifth-year senior in 2021 and set to graduate and depart from Ohio State. Orndorff, like Traub, was an NCAA qualifier in 2019-20, but he did so as much more of a traditional heavyweight, winning with powerful sustained wrestling rather than the late bursts of energy that Traub became famous for during his stunning breakout campaign last season.

Then, however, Orndorff impressed in practice and managed to topple Traub in the wrestle-off between the two with highly technical skill.

In truth, the story of the battle at heavyweight is very similar to those at 141 and 197.

"Same thing at heavyweight. Tate and Gas Tank Gary (Traub), who was maybe the most beloved Buckeye wrestler that I've ever coached, despite the fact that we've had some real phenoms – Gary got ridden," Ryan said. "Tate did a really good job tactically and picking up that bonus point."

Because of that it was Orndorff, not Traub, who took the mat against Illinois and Wisconsin, and it was Orndorff who suffered two defeats, falling 3-2 to Luke Luffman of Illinois and failing late against Trent Hillger on a takedown try that opened Orndorff up for Hillger to successfully force a fall and claim six team points.

Meanwhile in extra matches, Traub did as Traub does, defeating Wisconsin's Peter Christensen with a late takedown to secure a 5-4 decision. Like in those other battle spots, this weight looks to still be up for grabs, especially after Orndorff's struggles opening the season.

Against the Scarlet Knights, Orndorff was again given the nod and notched his first victory of the season in a match-clinching 4-2 decision over Christian Colucci.

In all, Ohio State's season will, in Ryan's estimation, be determined by controlled anger and by his team's willingness to show just how ready they are to return to the mat after having their season ended prematurely by forces outside of their control.

"You should be a reflection of what was taken from you," Ryan said. "You said you missed it. Well gosh darn it, you better show that you missed it. That's the only way to assess how bad someone missed it is by showing it."

Hockey Takes Fadyeyev From Kiev To Columbus

At an age when some kids only have to cross a street to get to school, Eugene Fadyeyev flew about 10 hours from Russia to the United States to get an education and advance his hockey career.

He was 12 years old and away from his parents.

"I still remember it was really hard," said the Ohio State senior forward of relocating to Scranton, Pa. "My parents brought me and they stayed for a little bit to make sure – I was living with host families during that time – that I'm with good people.

IN THE CREASE Craig Merz

"Obviously, they couldn't stay for the whole while so they had to go home, but probably the hardest part was just knowing that I'm not going back with them and I had to just stay here and try to go to school and play hockey.

"It was a big transition for me because I didn't know any English. I went to a middle school. I was with a couple of my Russian buddies who went to the same school as me.

"The teachers were super nice. They understood where we were coming from. We tried to Google Translate on our phones and stuff all the time but it took some time to learn the language."

The journey for Fadyeyev, 23, began a year before when he left his home in Kiev, Ukraine, to play for a sports academy in Russia when he was 11. His Russian coach had a friend in America who was looking at players for his youth teams who were willing to experience this country. Fadyeyev was recommended.

"Me and my dad decided it's a good opportunity to come to the U.S. and try to play here," he said. "I came for a tryout and they liked me and they invited me over to start playing here, but it was a big decision between me and my parents.

"Obviously at a young age they wanted me to be safe, and for them it's not easy, and I'm an only child as well."

His father, Nikolay, a police officer, and his mother, Svetlana, who works in the furniture business, gave their blessings for the move.

"It took some time to get used to it, but now I don't miss home as much because I'm used to being on my own," Fadyeyev told BSB. "But I miss my family a lot, and I love going home."

He usually spends summers in Kiev, but because of the COVID-19 pandemic he stayed in Columbus this past offseason and roomed with former teammate Tanner Laczynski, who is now in the Philadelphia Flyers organization.

"I haven't been home in a while, but every time I go home I love seeing my family and seeing old buddies I haven't seen in a while," Fadyeyev said. "Most of them are done playing hockey, but we're still trying to stay in contact with each other.

"I love going home to recharge, I would say, as well because school and playing hockey all the time can be a lot

at some point. That's the perfect time for me to regroup and come back and start school again and start hockey again."

From Kicks To Sticks

Fadyeyev wants to stay involved in hockey through coaching when his playing days are over and he has taken experiences, good and bad, to heart. If not for the brusque approach by a coach, he might have made his mark on the pitch instead of the ice.

"My dad took me to soccer first to try out, but I didn't like the coach," Fadyeyev said. "I remember him screaming at kids, and I'm like, 'No.'

"I told my dad I don't want to do this because I don't like the coach. I was maybe 4 years old, and even to this day I remember it, how the coach screamed at kids and how it sounded. My dad took me to hockey and I loved the coach because he was super nice to the kids.

"Even now when I'm home we'll meet up in the summer. He was another reason that I started playing hockey."

He began skating when he was 5 and was instantly drawn to the sport.

"My dad loved hockey," Fadyeyev said. "He was never a hockey player, but my grandma was always telling when it's winter he would always go out on the pond and play with his friends. My grandma says he always loved it.

"He watched any type of hockey games. There's always hockey on at home. I'd say that he was the one who pushed me towards hockey, but both of my parents really wanted me to play in all sports."

Fadyeyev played in the Wilke-Barre/Scranton area for three seasons before moving to Madison, Wis., for junior hockey. He also represented Ukraine in the World Junior U-18 tournament in 2015.

He was with the Madison Capitals for parts of three seasons from 2014-17. That's where he started buckling down in the classroom and graduated from Abundant Life Christian School in 2016.

"When I came to the U.S. I didn't know much about college hockey," Fadyeyev

said. "Then people start telling me about how school's important and you have to do good at school in order to get to college hockey.

"I started looking more into it. When I went to juniors, I was looking more at college hockey, obviously."

He chose Ohio State but found the competition a step up from what he had known. He played only five games as a freshman in 2017-18 and scored once. He had another goal in 17 games the next season, and as a junior last season he had five assists in 32 games when he earned the team's Unsung Player and Most Improved Player awards.

"Gene comes in, works hard and earns his spot every day," OSU coach Steve Rohlik said.

Fadyeyev has no points in 12 games this season and for his career has seven points in 66 games through Jan. 24.

Splitsville

The Buckeyes (5-10-1, 5-9-0-0-1, 16 points Big Ten) had another unsatisfying weekend.

After going to Michigan State and defeating the Spartans 5-1 on Jan. 23 to end a three-game losing streak, the Buckeyes were shut out the next night at Munn Arena for the second time in three games and fourth time this season. The Buckeyes fell, 2-0, in a matchup of the bottom teams in the conference.

OSU had broken a 1-1 tie in the third period of the opener with three goals in a

2:05 span beginning at the 3:27 mark with scoring from unexpected sources.

Sophomore defenseman C.J. Regula scored his first career goal to make it 2-1. Then sophomore forward Tate Singleton extended the lead with his fourth goal of the season, and freshman forward Patrick Guzzo netted his first collegiate goal before senior forward Collin Peters made it 5-1 at 15:07 with his second tally on the season.

The Buckeyes were tied going into the third because freshman Travis Treloar scored his team-best sixth goal at 10:59 of the second to make it 1-1.

Senior Tommy Nappier made 21 saves while MSU's Drew DeRidder stopped 51 of 56 shots.

"This was one of our better all-around games," Rohlik said. "Napes made some big saves when we needed him."

The Spartans (6-8-2, 5-8-1-2-1, 15 points) rebounded in the second game with goals by Tommy Apap in the first and Brody Stevens in the third to back the 28 saves for DeRidder. Nappier stopped 33 shots.

Ohio State starts a four-game homestand with games Jan. 29 and 30 vs. first-place Minnesota. Notre Dame visits Feb. 5 and 6. All four will be on the Big Ten Network.

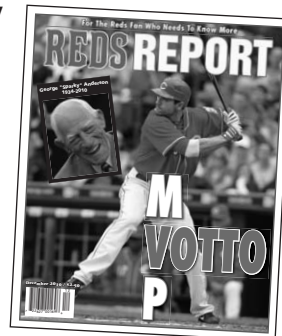
For a complete recap of Ohio State's series at Michigan State, go to BSB's BuckeyeSports.com website, free to all Buckeye Sports Bulletin subscribers.

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U-M Athletics On Pause After Variant Outbreak

Michigan's entire athletic department is shutting down for two weeks due to confirmed cases of the B.1.1.7 COVID-19 variant, as first reported by the student journalists at the Michigan Daily Jan. 23.

"It is our understanding the state did not recommend changes beyond athletics," university spokesman Rick Fitzgerald said.

There are currently five cases confirmed with B.1.1.7, which is the highly contagious COVID-19 variant, in Washtenaw County, where Ann Arbor is located.

BIG TEN NOTES Joe Dempsey

"Canceling competitions is never something we want to do, but with so many unknowns about this variant of COVID-19, we must do everything we can to minimize the spread among student-athletes, coaches, staff, and to the student-athletes at other schools," said Michigan athletic director Warde Manuel in a release.

University public health officials are working closely with the Washtenaw County Health Department and Michigan Department of Human Health Services on additional mitigation strategies, according to the athletic department's release.

"The university will be carefully considering additional mitigation measures. There are many unknowns that remain under investigation by U-M, local and state public health officials," the university's release said. "No determination has been made on how the pause may impact scheduled games beyond Feb. 7."

The new coronavirus variant transmits more easily and can lead to more positive cases, according to the health department.

"We are watching this situation as closely as possible," said Dr. Juan Luis Marquez, medical director of the Washtenaw County Health Department. "And we ask everyone to continue to do everything they can to prevent transmission – mask, distance, avoid crowds or gatherings, clean your hands frequently, and follow isolation or quarantine guidance carefully."

The B.1.1.7 variant is not more deadly and is not likely to make people more severely sick than other variants of coronavirus. But it is 1½ times more transmissible, meaning it spreads approximately 50 percent faster than other strains of the virus circulating in Michigan.

The athletic department reported it had 22 COVID-19-positive cases during the week of Jan. 16-22.

South Carolina QB Hilinski Transfers To Northwestern

Former South Carolina quarterback Ryan Hilinski announced he will be transferring to Northwestern. After starting 11 games as a true freshman in 2019, Hilinski did not start any of the Gamecocks' 10 games in 2020. He played in two games and threw for 34 yards on 4-of-6 passing.

Hilinski lost a starting quarterback battle in preseason camp to graduate transfer Collin Hill. When Hill was benched in the second half of South Carolina's eighth game against Missouri, interim head coach, offensive coordinator and quarter-

backs coach Mike Bobo turned to freshman Luke Doty over Hilinski. Doty started the final two games of the campaign.

Hilinski, an Orange (Calif.) Lutheran product, was the No. 2 pro-style quarterback and No. 64 overall recruit in the country in 2019. Hilinski committed to South Carolina over numerous schools, including Georgia, Oregon and Texas A&M. He remained committed after receiving offers from Ohio State, childhood dream school Stanford and hometown schools USC and UCLA following his pledge.

U-M QB McCaffrey Enters Transfer Portal

Michigan senior quarterback Dylan McCaffrey officially entered the transfer portal. McCaffrey, who was the No. 5 pro-style quarterback in the 2017 class, opted out of the 2020 season. The Littleton (Colo.) Valor Christian product lost a quarterback competition with junior Joe Milton in the offseason. The former four-star prospect has two years of eligibility left.

McCaffrey's brother, Carolina Panthers running back Christian McCaffrey, said Dylan wanted to finish his undergraduate degree before leaving Ann Arbor.

"I think he's got to finish school first before he does the portal deal and goes through the whole recruiting process again," Christian McCaffrey said in December. "But I'm really not 100 percent sure."

The 6-5, 220-pound quarterback played in 13 games during three seasons for the Wolverines, completing 18 of 35 passes for 242 yards and three touchdowns and adding 23 rushes for 166 yards and two touchdowns.

Penn State Hires Yurcich As Offensive Coordinator

Penn State hired Mike Yurcich as its new offensive coordinator and quarterbacks coach, replacing Kirk Ciarrocca after only one season with the Nittany Lions.

Yurcich had been the offensive coordinator at Texas in 2020 after one season at Ohio State in 2019 and six seasons as offensive coordinator at Oklahoma State.

"First, I would like to thank Kirk for his contributions to our program last year," head coach James Franklin said in a statement. "This was a difficult decision, but we felt it was best for our program to make a change. We wish him and his family all the best in their future endeavors."

"We are excited to have Mike join our staff. He is an impressive offensive mind and talented play caller who has set records everywhere he has been as an offensive coordinator. I look forward to seeing what he can do with all of the offensive weapons we have here at Penn State."

The Nittany Lions finished 4-5 in 2020 while averaging 430.3 yards per game on offense, which was No. 2 in the Big Ten behind Ohio State. Penn State's offense scored 34 total touchdowns in nine games, ranking second in the conference as well.

Yurcich led Texas' offense to an average of 475.4 yards per game and a total of 52 offensive touchdowns in 10 games.

Michigan Hires Macdonald As Defensive Coordinator

Michigan hired Mike Macdonald as defensive coordinator, replacing Don Brown.

"Mike is an excellent defensive mind

who is highly respected across the NFL," Michigan head coach Jim Harbaugh said in a release. "He has been a valuable member of the Baltimore Ravens staff and shown a passion for teaching, coaching and developing his players. We are excited about everything that Mike brings to our defense, team and university, and look forward to welcoming him and his fiancé Stephanie to our Michigan football family."

Macdonald, 33, was previously the linebackers coach for the NFL's Ravens, where he coached under John Harbaugh, Jim's brother.

"It is an honor to join Coach Harbaugh's staff at the University of Michigan," Macdonald said in a statement. "I firmly believe in his vision and am excited to get to work. Our staff will work tirelessly to develop our young men both on and off the field. I cannot wait to meet and develop relationships with our players, staff, and community. Stephanie and I are excited to join the Michigan family, and we are very thankful for this opportunity."

Macdonald spent seven seasons with the Ravens, most recently coaching linebackers from 2018-20 and the defensive backs in 2017. He was a defensive assistant from 2015-16 after serving as an intern in his first season in Baltimore in 2014.

Prior to coaching the Ravens, Macdonald was a safeties and defensive quality control coach at Georgia from 2011-13. He started in Athens, Ga., as a grad assistant in 2010.

Macdonald accepted the job once the Ravens were eliminated from the playoffs, which happened Jan. 16 when they lost to the Bills.

Wolverines Hire New Safeties, TE/WR Coaches

Michigan hired George Helow, who served as inside linebackers and special teams coordinator at Maryland in 2020, to coach safeties. After just one season in College Park, Helow will work on Macdonald's staff.

As special teams coordinator for the Terrapins, they ranked 13th in the Big Ten in kickoff returns, 14th in punt returns, sixth in kickoff average, 13th in field-goal percentage and ninth in punting average.

Michigan also hired former Wolverine wide receiver Ron Bellamy as its new tight ends and wide receivers coach.

With offensive line coach Ed Warinner leaving Michigan, the Wolverines filled the void on the staff with Bellamy. Sherrone Moore will step into the co-offensive coordinator role and as offensive line coach.

Bellamy, who played at Michigan from 1999-2002, was a high school coach at Bloomfield High School prior to joining Harbaugh's staff.

Warinner's contract expired in January, but the news of his departure came as a surprise.

Northwestern Hires O'Neil As Defensive Coordinator

Northwestern hired Las Vegas Raiders defensive backs coach Jim O'Neil as its new defensive coordinator. O'Neil, 42, is the successor to Mike Hankwitz, who retired at the end of a solid 2020 season after 13 seasons in Evanston and 51 in college football.

O'Neil spent 11 seasons in the NFL, with the last three being with the Raiders. He was the Cleveland Browns' defensive coordinator from 2014-15 and the San

Francisco 49ers' coordinator in 2016, and he previously was a defensive assistant with the Bills (2013) and New York Jets (2009-12).

Familiar with Evanston, O'Neil spent two years at Northwestern as a graduate assistant working with the defensive backs in 2003-04 while earning a master's degree in liberal arts. At that time, current Wildcats head coach Pat Fitzgerald was the linebackers coach under Randy Walker.

O'Neil played defensive line at Towson and also coached at Albany, Penn, Towson and Eastern Michigan.

Northwestern's defense was one of the best in college football under Hankwitz, ranking No. 5 in the country in 2020 in scoring defense (15.9 points per game), No. 6 in red-zone defense (70.4 percent) and No. 22 in total defense (341.2 yards per game).

Indiana Hires Warren As Defensive Coordinator

Indiana hired Georgia defensive backs coach Charlton Warren as its new defensive coordinator. Warren replaced Kane Wommack, who left in December to become South Alabama's head coach.

Warren, 44, spent the past two seasons coaching the Bulldogs' secondary. He was the defensive coordinator at his alma mater, Air Force, from 2008-13. In addition to Georgia, Warren has coached defensive backs at Nebraska, North Carolina, Tennessee and Florida.

The Atlanta native played defensive back at Air Force from 1996-98 before spending seven years of active service with the U.S. Air Force. Warren started his coaching career at Air Force in 2005.

Indiana finished No. 12 in the final AP poll after a 6-2 record in 2020. Wommack left big shoes to fill after helping the Hoosier defense become a formidable unit under head coach Tom Allen in recent years.

Purdue Hires Lambert As Co-Defensive Coordinator

Purdue hired Marshall defensive coordinator Brad Lambert as co-defensive coordinator and linebackers coach. Lambert, who was the head coach at Charlotte from 2011-18, will run the Boilermakers' defense alongside current co-defensive coordinator Anthony Poindexter. In December, Purdue fired Bob Diaco after one season as the team's primary defensive coordinator.

Sources said Lambert was a candidate for the Marshall head-coaching vacancy, which went to Alabama assistant Charles Huff.

Marshall's defense led the country in points allowed (13.0 points per game), ranked No. 2 in yards per game allowed (279.4) and No. 3 in yards per play allowed (4.4).

Lambert, 56, also served as Wake Forest's defensive coordinator from 2008-10 after coaching linebackers for the Demon Deacons from 2001-07. Prior to that, he coached defensive backs at Georgia.

Purdue revamped its defensive staff this offseason, hiring Mark Hagen for the defensive line and Ron English to help coach defensive backs with Poindexter.

Illinois Adds DB Smith Via Transfer Portal

Illinois added former Alabama defen-

BUCKEYE SCOREBOARD

2021 FOOTBALL

Sept. 2 Minnesota; 11 OREGON; 18 TULSA; 25 AKRON.

Oct. 2 Nebraska; 9 PURDUE; 23 Rutgers; 30 MICHIGAN STATE.

Nov. 6 Indiana; 13 MARYLAND; 20 PENN STATE; 27 Michigan.

Dec. 4 Big Ten Championship Game at Indianapolis.

WOMEN'S BASKETBALL (12-4, 6-4)

Nov. 25 ILLINOIS STATE, W 94-67; 29 UMASS LOWELL, 74-64.

Dec. 2 MOREHEAD STATE, W 77-44; 5 ALABAMA A&M, Canceled; 8 Notre Dame, W 90-85; 13 CLEVELAND STATE, W 67-61; 16 Purdue, L 67-60; 19 vs. UCLA at Cleveland, W 77-70; 23 RUTGERS, W 80-68; 26 Northwestern, L 71-70; 30 NEBRASKA, W 90-54.

Jan. 3 Minnesota, L 77-60; 9 Rutgers, W 79-68; 13 NORTHWESTERN, W 81-71; 16 Illinois, W 87-81; 19 PURDUE 67-65; 23 Wisconsin, 74-62; 27 PENN STATE, 7 p.m.; 31 MICHIGAN STATE, 1 p.m.

Feb. 4 Iowa, 7 p.m.; 8 Maryland; 13 Indiana 18 Penn State; 21 MICHIGAN; 25 Michigan State; 28 IOWA.

March 6 ILLINOIS; 10-13 Big Ten Tournament at Chicago.

WOMEN'S BASKETBALL (8-1, 4-1)

Nov. 25 AKRON, Canceled; 29 DUQUESNE, W 82-47.

Dec. 2 KENT STATE, W 103-47; 6 NORTHERN KENTUCKY, W 96-63; 10 MIAMI (OHIO), W 104-65; 15 SAINT MARY'S, Canceled; 19 IOWA, Postponed; 23 Maryland, Postponed; 31 PENN STATE, W 82-69.

Jan. 4 Illinois, W 78-55; 10 RUTGERS, Postponed; 13 Iowa, W 84-82 (OT); 16 Nebraska, L 63-55; 21 MICHIGAN, W 81-77; 25 MARYLAND, 7 p.m.

Feb. 1 Northwestern; 4 Indiana; 7 MINNESOTA; 10 Wisconsin; 14 NORTHWESTERN; 18 PURDUE; 21 Michigan, 2 p.m.; 24 Penn State; 27 INDIANA.

March 5 Rutgers.

MEN'S GOLF

Feb. 5-6 Big Ten Match Play at Palm Coast, Fla.; 14-16 Kiawah Classic at Kiawah Island Resort, S.C.

March 8-9 Spartan Collegiate at Sea Island, Ga.; 15-16 Valspar Collegiate Invitational at Palm City, Fla.

April 10-11 Boilermaker Invitational at West Lafayette, Ind.; 16-17 ASU Thunderbird Invitational at Phoenix, Ariz.; 24-25 ROBERT KEPLER INTERCOLLEGIATE; 30 Big Ten Championship at Carmel, Ind.

May 1-2 Big Ten Championship at Carmel, Ind.; 17-19 NCAA Regional; 28-31 NCAA Championship at Scottsdale, Ariz.

June 1-2 NCAA Championship at Scottsdale, Ariz.

WOMEN'S GOLF (1-1)

Jan. 16 vs. Northwestern at Jupiter, Fla., L 4-1-1; 18 Florida Atlantic, W 301-300.

Feb. 8-9 FAU Paradise Invitational at Boca Raton, Fla.; 21-23 Gators Invitational; 26-28 Florida State Match Up at Tallahassee, Fla.

March 15-16 Briar's Creek Invitational at John's Island, S.C.; 26-28 Clemson Invitational at Lake Keowee, S.C.

April 17-19 Indiana Invitational at Bloomington, Ind.

MEN'S GYMNASTICS (0-1)

Jan. 23 Illinois, L 402.550-396.250; 31 Michigan, 1 p.m.

Feb. 7 MINNESOTA, 7:30 p.m.; 14 PENN STATE, 1 p.m.; 26 Winter Cup at Indianapolis; 28 Winter Cup at Indianapolis.

March 6 Nebraska, 7 p.m.; 13 IOWA, 1 p.m.; 21 VIRTUAL MEET.

WOMEN'S GYMNASTICS (0-2)

Jan. 16 Michigan, L 197.225-196.000; 23 Iowa, L 196.550-193.800; 30 MICHIGAN, 2 p.m.

Feb. 7 MICHIGAN STATE, 4 p.m.; 14 Rutgers, 1 p.m.; 21 Penn State, 2 p.m.; 26 Big Five Meet at College Park, Md., 5 p.m.

March 7 PENN STATE, 2 p.m.; 12 MICHIGAN STATE, 6 p.m.

MEN'S ICE HOCKEY (5-10-1, 5-9)

Nov. 23 Minnesota, L 4-1; 24 Minnesota,

L 2-0; 28 MICHIGAN STATE, L 3-2 (OT); 29 MICHIGAN STATE, W 4-2.

Dec. 3 WISCONSIN, W 4-2; 4 WISCONSIN, L 3-1; 12 Notre Dame, L 3-0; 13 Notre Dame, W 3-2; 17 ARIZONA STATE, T 4-4 (OT); 18 ARIZONA STATE, L 3-2.

Jan. 8 PENN STATE, W 6-3; 9 PENN STATE, L 5-2; 15 Michigan, L 4-2; 16 Michigan, L 5-0; 23 Michigan State, W 5-1; 24 Michigan State, L 2-0; 29 MINNESOTA, 6 p.m.; 30 MINNESOTA, 5 p.m.

Feb. 5 NOTRE DAME, 4:30 p.m.; 6 NOTRE DAME, 1:30 p.m.; 12 Penn State; 13 Penn State, 2 p.m.; 19 MICHIGAN, 5:30 p.m.; 20 MICHIGAN, 5:30 p.m.; 26 Wisconsin, 8 p.m.; 27 Wisconsin.

March 4 ARIZONA STATE, 5:30 p.m.; 5 ARIZONA STATE, 5:30 p.m.

WOMEN'S ICE HOCKEY (8-4, 8-4)

Nov. 21 Minnesota, L 4-0; 22 Minnesota, W 2-1; 27 WISCONSIN, W 3-2; 28 WISCONSIN, L 5-0.

Dec. 11 MINNESOTA, Postponed; 12 MINNESOTA, Postponed; 18 Wisconsin, Postponed; 19 Wisconsin, Postponed.

Jan. 1 BEMIDJI STATE, W 4-1; 2 BEMIDJI STATE, 7-1; 8 Wisconsin, L 2-1; 9 Wisconsin, W 2-1 (OT); 15 Minnesota Duluth, L 2-0; 16 Minnesota Duluth, W 1-0; 22 MINNESOTA STATE, W 3-0; 23 MINNESOTA STATE, W 7-2; 29 MINNESOTA, 6:07 p.m.; 30 MINNESOTA, 3:07 p.m.

Feb. 12 Minnesota, 7:07 p.m.; 13 Minnesota, 4:07 p.m.; 19 ST. CLOUD STATE, 6:07 p.m.; 20 ST. CLOUD STATE, 3:07 p.m.

SWIMMING & DIVING

Jan. 16 PENN STATE/RUTGERS, Men W 163.5-134.5, Women W 157-141; 22-23 Indiana, Men L 185-115, Women L 166-134.

Feb. 5-6 Michigan.

March 17-20 Women's NCAA Championship at Greensboro, N.C.; 24-27 Men's NCAA Championship at Greensboro, N.C.

MEN'S TENNIS (1-0)

Jan. 15-18 Ohio State Invitational; 22 MIDDLE TENNESSEE STATE, W 4-0; 22 Iowa vs Virginia at Columbus; 23 ITA Kickoff Weekend Championship Match at Columbus, 3:30 p.m.;

23 ITA Kickoff Weekend Consolation Match at Columbus, 6:30 p.m.

WOMEN'S TENNIS (1-0)

Jan. 16-18 Michigan Invitational at Ann Arbor, Mich.; 23 SYRACUSE, W 4-0; 23 Virginia vs Tennessee at Columbus; 23 ITA Kickoff Weekend Consolation Match at Columbus, 10 a.m.; 24 ITA Kickoff Weekend Championship Match at Columbus, 1 p.m.

INDOOR TRACK & FIELD

Jan. 16 Simmons-Harvey Big Ten Invite, NTS; 23 Penn State Invite, NTS.

MEN'S VOLLEYBALL (1-1)

Jan. 22 PENN STATE, L 3-0; 23 PENN STATE, W 3-0; 29 Penn State, 7 p.m.; 30 Penn State, 7 p.m.

Feb. 5 LEWIS, 1 p.m.; 6 LEWIS, 1 p.m.; 12 McKendree, 8:30 p.m.; 13 McKendree, 8 p.m.; 20 LOYOLA CHICAGO, 4 p.m.; 21 LOYOLA CHICAGO, 4 p.m.; 27 Ball State, 7:30 p.m.

March 11 BALL STATE, 6 p.m.; 19 Purdue Fort Wayne, 6 p.m.; 20 Purdue Fort Wayne, 3 p.m.; 26 LINDENWOOD, 7 p.m.; 27 LINDENWOOD, 7 p.m.

April 2 Quincy, 8 p.m.; 3 Quincy, 8 p.m.

WOMEN'S VOLLEYBALL (2-0)

Jan. 22 MARYLAND, W 3-2; 23 MARYLAND, W 3-2; 26 Penn State, 7 p.m.; 31 PENN STATE, 4:30 p.m.

Feb. 5 Michigan State, 7 p.m.; 6 Michigan State, 6 p.m.; 12 IOWA, 6 p.m.; 13 IOWA, 6 p.m.; 19 Illinois, 6 p.m.; 20 Illinois, 4 p.m.; 26 Rutgers, 5 p.m.; 27 Rutgers, 5 p.m.

March 5 MINNESOTA, 6 p.m.; 6 MINNESOTA, 6 p.m.; 12 Nebraska; 13 Nebraska; 19 MICHIGAN, 6 p.m.; 20 MICHIGAN, 6 p.m.; 26 PURDUE, 2 p.m.; 27 PURDUE, 2 p.m.

April 2 Indiana, 4 p.m.; 3 Indiana, 4 p.m.

WRESTLING (2-1, 2-1)

Jan. 17 Illinois, L 18-15; 17 vs. Wisconsin at Champaign, Ill., W 25-9; 24 RUTGERS, W 19-14; 29 MICHIGAN STATE; 31 Maryland.

Feb. 7 vs. Iowa at West Lafayette, Ind.; 7 Purdue; 12 Michigan; 19 PENN STATE.

March 6-7 Big Ten Championships; 18-20 NCAA Championships.

sive back Eddie Smith through the transfer portal. Smith, a third-year sophomore, could have up to three years of eligibility remaining if he is allowed to play immediately. He played 10 games for the Crimson Tide.

Illini defensive coordinator Ryan Walters led the Illini's pursuit of Smith, who was recruited by Walters when he was the defensive coordinator at Missouri. Smith was the No. 42 cornerback and No. 435 overall prospect in 2018 with more than 25 scholarship offers, including Alabama, Georgia, and Missouri.

Since entering the transfer portal in January, Smith said he had heard from Iowa State, Texas Tech, Syracuse, Missouri, Mississippi State, Northwestern and "many more," but Illinois became his focus.

"Me and Coach Walters already have a strong bond," Smith said. "He recruited me hard in high school. I just think he's a great recruiter overall. Since the day I met him, I can tell he cared about more than football. He cared about developing his players into great men one day."

"The whole staff has just been showing love expressing how bad they want me. I just think if I were to go there that Coach Walters and Coach (Aaron) Henry can prepare me for the NFL. I also think they're going to change that program around."

Smith's most extensive playing time for the Crimson Tide came in 2018 as a freshman when he carved out a role on special teams.

As a prospect from Slidell, La., Smith

was rated a four-star recruit by 247Sports and its No. 27-rated cornerback.

Purdue Adds Auburn LB Brothers Via Transfer Portal

Purdue added former Auburn linebacker Octavius "O.C." Brothers via the transfer portal. Brothers submitted his name into the NCAA transfer portal in early December.

The 6-1, 236-pound outside linebacker appeared in one game last season as a redshirt freshman, making one tackle. Brothers played in two games during the 2019 season, recording one tackle each against Kent State and Samford.

The Boilermakers lost linebacker Derrick Barnes, who is preparing for the 2021 NFL draft. Jaylan Alexander, who ranked second on the team in tackles in 2020, and DaMarcus Mitchell are expected to return for the 2021 season.

Brothers, a Southwest Brevard County (Fla.) Rockledge product, picked Auburn over Mississippi and Tennessee as three-star prospect. He was ranked the No. 59 outside linebacker and No. 811 overall recruit in 2019.

In addition to Brothers, Western Kentucky offensive lineman Tyler Witt announced his move to Purdue as a graduate transfer.

Penn State QB Bowens Transfers To Oklahoma

Former Penn State quarterback Micah Bowens announced his transfer to

Oklahoma after just one season in Happy Valley.

Bowens signed with the Nittany Lions as a three-star recruit out of Las Vegas Bishop Gorman in 2020. In Oklahoma, he will be behind both Heisman-hopeful Spencer Rattler and incoming five-star signee Caleb Williams, who was the No. 1 quarterback in the country for 2021.

OUI Insider reporter Collin Kennedy provided context for why there was mutual interest for Bowens and Oklahoma head coach Lincoln Riley.

"Oklahoma gets a needed number at the quarterback position," Kennedy wrote. "With the transfer of 2020 QB and true freshman Chandler Morris, the Sooners were set to have just Spencer Rattler and Caleb Williams as scholarship signal callers. Now, Bowens enters the group as someone with Power Five experience and solid talent. He'll provide a valuable backup quarterback option for Lincoln Riley as the incoming five-star Williams gets acclimated to the Division I level."

Penn State will still have four scholarship quarterbacks for Yurcich to work with in Sean Clifford, Will Levis, Taquan Roberson and Christian Veilleux.

MSU's Mike Tressel Becomes Cincy's D-Coordinator

Michigan State's Mike Tressel was hired as Cincinnati's new defensive coordinator.

Tressel, a former defensive coordinator for the Spartans, coached safeties in 2020

in head coach Mel Tucker's first season. Tressel's salary last year was \$667,385, which is the same he made as former head coach Mark Dantonio's highest-paid assistant while serving as defensive coordinator in 2019.

Tressel, 47, followed Dantonio from Ohio State to Cincinnati as linebackers and special teams coach for the Bearcats from 2004-06. He was a graduate assistant linebackers coach with the Buckeyes from 2002-03.

When Dantonio went to Michigan State, Tressel followed him as linebackers and special teams coach before being named co-defensive coordinator with Harlon Barnett in 2015 after Pat Narduzzi became Pitt's head coach. Tressel and Barnett helped lead the Spartans to the College Football Playoff in 2015, and the duo led one of the nation's top defenses in 2017.

Tressel became the sole defensive coordinator in 2018 when Barnett left to run Florida State's defense. The Green and White were No. 1 in the nation in run defense in 2018 at 77.9 yards allowed per game and finished in the top 10 in numerous categories.

Tucker retained Tressel on his staff but demoted him from coordinator, bringing in Kansas State's Scottie Hazelton to call the defense.

At Cincinnati, Tressel will rejoin head coach Luke Fickell. They worked together under Dantonio at Ohio State, where Fickell was special teams coach in 2002-03 under Tressel's uncle, Jim Tressel.

Finding Replacements Paramount For Ohio State

It couldn't have been more than two hours after the conclusion of the CFP national title game when the texts started rolling in, wondering how high was the mountain Ohio State would have to climb to get to where Alabama is, wondering if the Buckeyes really belonged on that stage and, maybe most importantly, what would the team look like next year?

Would OSU have a real shot at making another appearance with a pretty good chunk of roster turnover?

THE FACTS MAN Mike Wachsman

We're at a point now where there are a few certainties in college football – Texas will never truly be “back,” Nick Saban is the greatest coach of all time, and Alabama, Clemson and Ohio State are the closest things to lead-pipe locks that you can have.

At least one of those three has made every CFP field, and all three have won it at least once.

They have distanced themselves from their pursuers and are recruiting at such a high level that it could be some time before another team joins them in the sport's top stratosphere.

All of that said, there is no guarantee that the Buckeyes will be one of the four teams vying for the championship next January, even though they should once again be prohibitive Big Ten favorites. That is usually enough to have a seat at the conversation table, but not always enough to make the coveted quartet.

There are a few ingredients needed to really make a run, and those were seen in all four of this year's CFP teams.

A veteran quarterback is a huge factor, and each team had that. A physical, experienced offensive line is a prerequisite,

and all four teams checked that box, too.

A defense that can create pressure is also a must, especially in today's game of pitch and catch and creating mismatches with playmakers.

Affecting the quarterback is the primary task of opposing defenses, and all but Notre Dame entered the playoff with the ability to make quarterbacks uncomfortable.

Those factors should have Ohio State fans just a tad worried heading into the 2021 season, as two of the three are pretty big question marks.

We'll start where the success starts – at quarterback. If you don't have one, you aren't going to win. It's that simple. Take a look at the teams that made the NFL final four – all of them had quarterbacks playing at a high level, and in the NFC are a pair of certain Hall of Famers in Green Bay's Aaron Rodgers and Tampa Bay's Tom Brady.

Brady will have a chance to add to his legacy but will be challenged by a guy who has the look of a future all-timer in Kansas City's Patrick Mahomes, who outdueled an up-and-comer in Buffalo's Josh Allen.

All four have been the driving force behind their teams' success, just as Justin Fields was to Ohio State's.

Fields' decision to enter the NFL draft was about as surprising as violence in a Tarantino film, and even though there are some fans who feel he isn't ready, the guy is almost certain to be a top-five selection.

There won't be much room to move higher next year, so he's striking while the iron is hot.

There should be a spirited battle to replace him – assuming spring football returns and has close to the look that it typically does.

C.J. Stroud and Jack Miller each had a rushing touchdown in 2020, but neither one threw a pass.

There is a thought that the Buckeyes offense could feature a bit less running than this year's as both guys were ranked highly as Pro Style signal-callers coming out of high school.

Stroud was the No. 2 prospect at his position for 2020, Miller No. 13. So both have the credentials. Whether they can live up to them will be known after spring ball.

Both have reputations for being live-armed, so the real test will be how quickly they can get through progressions and get the ball out to OSU's myriad playmaking weapons.

Muddying the picture a bit is incoming freshman Kyle McCord, the third-rated signal caller in the class of 2021 and someone who looks to be ticketed for stardom.

Whoever wins the battle will have a lot on his shoulders, and it will be intriguing to see if someone so young can handle all of that spotlight.

The Buckeyes will have to do some shuffling along the offensive line, though there is quite a bit of experience returning. OSU was thrilled when left tackle Thayer Munford decided to come back for his final season, and teamed with Nicholas Petit-Frere, they could form the best set of tackles in college football next season.

Center Josh Myers has departed for the NFL, but that appears to be a pretty easy fix with left guard Harry Miller slid-

ing over to the position most felt would be his best in college. His one shot at center in 2020 didn't go well as he was routinely high and off-target with the ball in OSU's win over Michigan State, but he had had very little work at the position leading up to the game. He'll be fine.

That leaves the guard position, and there is no shortage of candidates. Matt Jones played on the left side when Miller was out and could have the inside track there. Massive (360 pounds) Dawand Jones will also be in the mix, and Paris Johnson Jr. will have to be on the field as he is an absolute mauler. Guard appears to be the easiest path, at least until he kicks out to tackle in 2022. Don't forget about Enokk Vimahi, a four-star talent from the 2019 class, as he could be ready to show what he has.

Experience could be an issue up front, but talent shouldn't be.

The last vital spot is along the defensive front, and that's another area where the Buckeyes simply reload. Sure, the departure of Tommy Togiai inside will hurt, but it is salvaged a bit by the return of Haskell Garrett. A game wrecker in 2020, Garrett could be one of the best interior defenders in college football next season. He could be joined by oft-injured Taron Vincent, Antwan Jackson, Jerron Cage, Ty Hamilton or incoming frosh Tyliel Williams.

Zach Harrison looks ready to take his place as the next great rush end from Ohio State, but don't forget about Tyreke Smith, who surprised some by announcing his return for 2021. Incoming recruit Jack Sawyer was the nation's fourth-ranked prospect and will be difficult to keep off the field, and depth is added with Javontae Jean-Baptiste, Tyler Friday and Noah Potter.

Positions that are necessary but easier to replace are running back and linebacker, and the Buckeyes will be young but talented in both areas.

The first-play injury to Trey Sermon in the national title game was one of the big “what-if” moments for Ohio State. Losing him meant more of Master Teague, who really is more of a complementary guy than a lead dog. Fortunately for Ohio State, TreVeyon Henderson is coming to town, and all he's bringing with him is size (5-11, 195), impressive cutback ability and the title of nation's top running back recruit. If he can quickly pick up pass protection, he will be difficult to remove from the lineup.

Don't be surprised if he has a freshman season that stacks up favorably to those of 2016 Mike Weber (1,096 yards, nine TDs) and 2017 J.K. Dobbins (1,403, seven). Teague will still be used quite a bit and is the veteran in a backfield which also includes Steele Chambers, Marcus Crowley and Miyan Williams. And in a normal year, Evan Pryor would be the touted freshman (second-ranked all-purpose back nationally). He just happens to be entering the same year as Henderson.

Things aren't quite as rosy at linebacker, a spot where OSU used to churn out All-Americans the way Detroit produced automobiles. Oh sure, there are bodies – but none proven.

Dallas Gant is the leader in terms of returning production (17 tackles) and could be the replacement for versatile and underappreciated Pete Werner on the

weak side. Don't be shocked if Tommy Eichenberg shows well and pushes Gant, though. The strong side should be a battle between Cody Simon, K'Vaughan Pope and Craig Young, and it's hard to really handicap that one right now as none of the group has done anything appreciable on the field.

Fans (and yours truly) have been touting Teradja Mitchell since the moment he arrived in Columbus, and 2021 could finally be his year. He may have the inside track to the starting spot in the middle but will have to hold off the bid of incoming frosh Reid Carrico, the fifth-ranked linebacker prospect in America.

The last lingering question is the secondary – not so much the talent, but the scheme.

It was obvious to pretty much everyone but the coaching staff that their 4-4 approach wasn't working against Alabama. There wasn't enough speed or coverage ability on the field, and you have to wonder if Kerry Coombs was simply reluctant to move to a 4-2-5 look, or whether he simply didn't trust his personnel.

Shaun Wade is gone, and whether or not he should be is a debate for another day.

That leaves Sevyn Banks at one corner spot, and he was playing as well as anyone by season's end. Another year of experience can only help him. If Banks can't hack it, Cam Brown is waiting in the wings. The other outside spot is wide open and could linger past the end of spring football. Tyreke Johnson is the known name, but he could be pushed by newcomer Jakailin Johnson and veteran Ronnie Hickman.

The slot corner at the moment appears to be Marcus Williamson, but Lathan Ransom could make a real push there after he showed potential late in the season.

The lone safety – at least as the defense is currently configured – is Josh Proctor, and he has it until he turns pro. A fifth defensive back would provide the Buckeyes with options – coverage in the form of Ransom or physical play from Kourt Williams or Marcus Hooker.

Given how young the linebackers will be, and the fact teams are passing more and more, Coombs would be foolish to stay locked in to the single-high look he favors. There were some occasions late where he added another safety, but if you're serious about getting your best athletes/cover guys on the field, then a switch to a 4-2-5 base might be the answer.

I didn't talk much about the receiving corps, because everyone knows how good that group is. Getting Chris Olave back for another year was huge, but let us not forget about returnees Garrett Wilson, Jameson Williams, Julian Fleming and Jaxon Smith-Njigba. Throw in recruits Emeka Egbuka, Jayden Ballard and Marvin Harrison (merely top-100 recruits and top-15 at their position) – as well as tight end Jeremy Ruckert, who decided to give it another go – and it's easy to see that the Buckeyes have an embarrassment of pass-catching riches.

It will be an eventful offseason and spring on the practice field, that's for sure. I just hope there is much less activity on my phone.



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Pardon Me, But 2020 Season One To Forget

THE VIEW FROM 15TH & HIGH Frank Moskowitz, Publisher

I'll be honest: This season just never really felt right for me. There were lots of college football games that I enjoyed, including a few Ohio State games, but in general this whole season just didn't feel like college football to me. No fans, players going through tons of hoops every single week and the stop-and-start nature of everything made it very hard for me to enjoy a lot of the action on the field, because it often felt as though no one involved in that action was enjoying themselves either. I'm sure that Ohio State's players (along with quite a few other teams, obviously) were grateful to get the chance to play, but it seemed as though the nature of this season really started to weigh on just about everybody pretty quickly, myself included. I'm glad we got to see some football, but it feels very shallow under such dire circumstances.

I didn't write the above paragraph.

It was written by BSB staffer Patrick Mayhorn, and I cut and pasted it from our BuckeyeSports.com Fan Forum.

Why, you ask? Because I was glad to see someone else feels the same way that I do about the pandemic-ravaged season.

I've been a little reluctant to bring this up, verbally or in print, because I was afraid I would be deemed un-American or, at the least, anti-Buckeye football. But I can't lie. Buckeye football just wasn't a lot of fun for me in 2020.

Sure, football season can be a grind for those of us at BSB, but I have survived 40 seasons now and, like all of you, I love Buckeye football. And this comes from a transplant who grew up in Washington, D.C., and did not arrive in Columbus until 1976 at the ripe old age of 24.

While my contemporaries in Ohio were growing up idolizing Rex Kern, I was idolizing Sonny Jurgensen and Bobby Mitchell, and my only connection with Ohio State sports was watching the moon shots hit off the bat of Buckeye Frank Howard, the only star in the history of what were then known as the "new" Washington Senators.

It doesn't take long, however, for someone who moved to Columbus to get hooked on Ohio State football.

But this season wasn't fun for me. There was no interesting nonconference match-up. The Big Ten season started successfully enough. But then the COVID cases started popping up. Then the worrying started. Would they play the next game? Who would be able to play? If the Buckeyes did make it to the playoffs, would teams from other conferences play by the same COVID rules as Ohio State and the Big Ten?

"Everyone associated with the Big Ten should be very proud of the groundbreaking steps that are now being taken to better protect the health and safety of the student-athletes and surrounding communities," said Ohio State team physician Dr. Jim Borchers, who helped spearhead the drive to reinstate some sort of Big Ten football season.

It wasn't long into the scheduled eight-game conference season, however, that the pandemic was striking the Big Ten seemingly as hard as any conference. By the back end of the regular season, Ohio State played just two games in five weeks, hardly allowing for any excitement to build up for the Michigan game. Oh, what Michigan game? Those weeks of stops and starts weren't a lot of fun for me and I missed watching the steady improvement we are used to seeing in an Ohio State football team as the calendar turns to November.

We were promised that the Buckeye football team would be in a virtually impenetrable bubble, a much safer situation than in the

student body at large. But by the end of the season, it seemed like Ohio State was having as much problem with the virus as anybody, and there is no denying that the loss of a couple of key players – among the many who missed time in the waning weeks because of the virus – for the national championship game with Alabama had an impact.

At least the Buckeyes made it to the championship game. That was the whole reason Buckeye Nation was so adamant about pushing for a season. This team had a great chance to make it to Miami. We couldn't let this chance pass.

That leaves me wondering if this had been a rebuilding year, would Dr. Borchers, athletic director Gene Smith, coach Ryan Day and the parents of the players have been so adamant about playing a season? Of course, the players wanted to play. But there must be an adult in the room. Were schools like Illinois or Rutgers as gung-ho to play the season as Ohio State?

The pandemic even ravaged what I thought to be one of the novel concepts conceived by the Big Ten. I thought the idea of having all conference teams playing the week of the Big Ten championship, with teams from each division playing their standings counterpart, was a great one. COVID tipped that plan on its ear.

Could I have lived without an Ohio State football season in 2020? Probably. There are a lot of things I have lived without in the last nine or 10 months. I would have survived. Would Buckeye Sports Bulletin have survived? I don't know the answer to that. Thank you to all the readers who have stayed loyal to us throughout all of this. I certainly know how the hard-hit restaurant and bar owners feel as they battle to keep the doors open. And thanks to advertisers in those industries who have stayed with us in these challenging times.

And thank you to the Buckeyes for giving their all. Defeating Clemson – and defeating them convincingly – was one of the few highlights that I will take from this season, and it will be up there among my all-time highlights.

Day and his staff deserve credit for holding things together during these trying times.

"We need a break," Day said after the season closed with the loss to the Crimson Tide. "We need to get away. These guys are missing their families, and we all just need a break. We've already started to put together the schedule for the spring, but we all need to get away for a while. This has been a long, long road. Guys miss their families, and they deserve time to be with them."

Hey, sometimes you have to be careful what you wish for.

Unique Top Stories

The pandemic has affected many things, not the least of which is our look back at the top stories of the previous year, a staple of BSB that has run each January for as long as I can remember.

The process starts with the staff putting together a list of the top stories of the previous year. Then each staff member votes on their top 10 stories from that list, and voila, we have our top 10 stories of the year and the staff member who draws the short straw gets to write them up.

A funny thing happened when we attempted to put together the ballot for the top 10 stories of 2020. Virtually every story listed had

something to do with COVID. Its impact was so overwhelming that the virus was deemed "The Story of the Year" and is chronicled on the cover of this issue. We have also included a top 10 from among the rest of the stories, which you can find on pages 10-11.

Personally, I even considered Larry Johnson coaching the Buckeyes for the Michigan State game, which finished No. 6 among the other top stories, COVID-related as well, because he got the nod after Day tested positive. I lost that argument. However, I am happy for any chance we get to recognize Johnson, as he is as important a part of Ohio State's football success as anyone. What an addition he was to the staff back in 2014, and I hope he continues to coach here for a long, long time.

Tight Ends Watch

Space limitations kept me from posting my tight ends watch for the Clemson and Alabama games. It was a big playoff for the unsung heroes of the Ohio State offense, especially Jeremy Ruckert.

Before I review the final two games, however, some trivia. Since 1995, how many times has a Buckeye tight end caught 30 or more passes, and who are those tight ends? The answer will follow.

In the 49-28 beatdown of Clemson, Ruckert and Luke Farrell combined for five catches for 66 yards and three touchdowns. Ruckert was one of the few bright spots on the Buckeye offense against the Tide. He caught only one pass, but it was an electrifying 36-yard, one-handed catch down to the Alabama 8. On the next play, Master Teague ran in for the score to tie the game at 7 with 4:55 left in the first quarter.

Ruckert showed over the course of the shortened season that he is the receiving threat as advertised when he was recruited out of Lindenhurst, N.Y., in advance of the 2018 season.

When you consider that tight ends coach Kevin Wilson is also the offensive coordinator, perhaps the Buckeyes will answer the long-standing prayers of Buckeye fans everywhere and make the tight end an integral part of the passing game. Can you imagine opposing defenses having to account for Chris Olave, Garrett Wilson and Jeremy Ruckert? Having that many options might just make an inexperienced quarterback's job that much easier if he is skilled enough to survey all his options.

I know this is a silly exercise, but if you took Ruckert's two-game playoff totals and project them over a 14-game season, he would only have 28 catches, but those would be for 637 yards (a 22.8-yard average) and 14 touchdowns. And that's against two playoff-caliber defenses. Think what his numbers would look like if you factored in playing against some of the bottom-feeder defenses.

The Urban Meyer/Ryan Day regime has generally used the tight end more than Jim Tressel had previously, though Tressel would have surprised you in at least one season.

In Meyer's championship year of 2014, Nick Vannett (19) and Jeff Heurman (17) combined for 36 receptions from the tight end spot, with Marcus Baugh adding another catch. In 2017, Baugh had the best total since 2012 with 28 catches, and Rashod Berry added six and Farrell two for 36. On the low end, in 2015 Vannett paced the Buckeyes with 19

receptions, and Baugh added just two.

Tressel had many seasons when the tight ends caught fewer than 20 passes combined. In 2008, Rory Nicol led the group with six catches and Jake Ballard added five.

Surprisingly, however, Tressel's 2003 team completed 51 passes to the tight end with Ben Hartssock grabbing 33 – that makes him one of the Buckeye tight ends to have 30 or more catches since 1995 – and Ryan Hamby pulling down 18.

In one of John Cooper's last seasons, 1999, his tight ends, led by Steve Wisniewski and Kevin Houser with six each, had just 13 receptions.

But Cooper also produced the other tight end who caught more than 30 passes in Rickey Dudley, who grabbed 37 in 1995, when the team had 42 completions to tight ends.

Here's something to consider.

Dudley averaged 15.5 yards on his 37 catches in '95. Hartssock, on the other hand, averaged just 8.8 yards a catch on his 33 in 2003. I think Ruckert, who averaged 11.6 on his 13 receptions in 2020, would be more likely to approach Dudley's number than fall to Hartssock's.

Now if they will just throw the ball to him.

Letter Challenge

I noted in this space the passing of prolific letter writer Gary Gerken in the last issue. You may have noticed that in our Fan Forum section we ran a letter from Gerken published some 25 years ago in his memory. In looking for a suitable letter to run, I found that in those past issues of BSB we would run one, two and sometimes as many four pages of letters to the editor.

I am frequently asked why we don't run letters to the editor anymore. Well, because we rarely get them. Some of that has to do with the success of the Buckeyes. Lightning rod John Cooper, and because of him Gerken, were the cause of many of those past letters. When the football team is doing well, we traditionally do not receive a lot of letters.

Some of it is also the internet. People tend to share their beefs online these days, and I encourage you to participate on our BuckeyeSports.com Forum, where the debate can get lively.

But I believe some of it has to do with the old notion of "out of sight, out of mind." Readers don't see letters, so they don't write letters.

I am throwing down the challenge to our readers to revive this lost feature of BSB. I noted in looking for my Gerken letter that many of the people who used to write letters are still subscribers. Break out an envelope and stamp and write us at P.O. Box 12453, Columbus, Ohio, 43212 or now, with said Internet, it is even easier. Just email us at bsb@buckeyesports.com.

I'll even give you a topic. Is publisher Frank Moskowitz crazy for not enjoying the 2020 football season? And some of you might even want to share your recollections of Gerken.

I look forward to your letters.

Scheduling Note

Now that the playoffs are over, we will officially be moving to our traditional biweekly publishing schedule. The next issue of BSB, our popular Football Recruiting Wrap-Up, will be mailed on Tuesday, Feb. 9.

Remember, the publishing schedule can always be found on page 3 of each issue of BSB, and don't forget to check the electronic BuckeyeSports.com for any breaking news and additional features between print issues.

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