

My Thoughts: Expectations Finally Became Reality For OSU



Ohio State's 49-28 victory over Clemson in the Sugar Bowl on the first day of the new year was as surprising a college football result as I've seen in several years. The Buckeyes entered the game as a touchdown underdog across the board, facing off against a school that has done nothing but topple the Buckeyes at the highest stage every time they meet.

Even with the benefit of hindsight following that dominant performance, I'm still not entirely sure that the pregame discourse around this game was incorrect, at least not with the information that was available entering this matchup.

All signs pointed to Clemson being a deserved favorite against a Buckeye team that had shown flashes of greatness but never stretches of elite consistency through their shortened season.

Then the game started, and Ohio State became the team that it was expected to be entering the season. The offensive line dominated and moved the line of scrimmage 2 or 3 yards down the field before halfback Trey Sermon arrived to hit the hole on just about every run. It held up masterfully against Brent Venables and his unique blitz packages, essentially the first good showing in pass protection of the year for the Ohio State front.

Behind it, Sermon looked every bit like the newfound star who came out of nowhere to light up Northwestern in the Big Ten championship. Even more important, Ohio State's original star in the backfield, Justin Fields, played through what certainly looked to be an immense amount of pain to deliver his best performance as a Buckeye, thanks to help from a great game plan and strong showings from all three starting Buckeye wideouts and the top two tight ends, all of whom were involved in the passing game.

That performance was what this offense was *supposed to be*. It's what analysts and Ohio State fans expected to see with two of the best receivers in the country in Garrett Wilson and Chris Olave, in front

of a supremely talented wide receivers room, with help from three experienced tight ends. After a season of limiting himself to one of the two proven targets, Fields' performance against the Tigers felt like everything finally clicking into place for an offense that never felt on the same page through the shortened Big Ten campaign.

While moderately less dominant, the Buckeye defense made a strong appearance as well, looking, as the offense did, like a much closer representation of the expectations that this team had entering the season. The secondary still had its issues, namely in the form of All-American Shaun Wade, but Ohio State clamped down when it needed to, forcing Trevor Lawrence into tough spots by completely snuffing out the Clemson rushing attack with elite play in the trenches.

This was Ohio State taken to its logical peak - the realization of the potential that this roster always seemed to have but couldn't ever grasp through the stop-and-start season. Who knows if these Buckeyes would have been there the whole time had this season taken place under anything resembling normal circumstances? Who knows if this kind of performance is the new normal for this team and should paint the expectations for the upcoming national title? Both can and will be debated in the coming days in the case of the latter, and for years in the case of the former.

What isn't up for debate, however, is that Ohio State lived up to the hype against Clemson on Friday night. It did so in emphatic fashion, in a game that looked less like a budding rivalry between two powerhouses and more like a desperate Ohio State team exorcising the Clemson curse with haymaker after haymaker.