

National Champs Had Something Special

1968

Reminiscences Of A Championship Season with Paul Hornung

So, the man said, what was so great about '68?

To adequately address that request within the inevitable constraints of news space would be akin to stuffing an elephant in the passenger seat of a compact car. First problem: How do you grab hold of such a package?

Well, in analyzing Ohio State football in 1968, you start with a recitation of ultimate achievements: 10 straight victories, a Big Ten championship, Rose Bowl triumph and undisputed national title.

Then, you generalize about the basic ingredients of that sweeping success:

(1) A coaching legend at his best, Woody Hayes, surrounded by a staff that included five future head coaches and two future athletic directors.

(2) A squad rich in natural talent and speed; a happy combination of desire, confidence, style and dash; a compatible blend of "super sophomores" and game-wise upperclassmen; a spirited, wholesome "camp" atmosphere.

And, though more beneficiaries than contributors, you could mention the fans. They were a little slow to espouse the young Buckeyes in 1968. Some observers blamed growing sophistication; others, the accumulative disappointment of six years without a championship.

But after the gigantic upset of number one Purdue in the third game, the old football mania came roaring back, the team was the toast of the state, the stadium again filled and rocking, frenzied hundreds swept onto the field after the drubbing of Michigan — for the Big Ten title — and Rose Bowl tickets became priority items.

IT WAS an exciting time to be a Buckeye, coach, player, follower or writer; a time of indelible memories.

Specifics of the "dream year" should begin with Woody, acclaimed by his peers as "Coach of the Year." He rounded up Ohio State's greatest freshman class in 1967, graduates of which became the heralded "Super Sophs" of 1968. He meshed them harmoniously with juniors and seniors who had reason to be resentful.

The 1967 Buckeyes finished with four straight wins, including the finale over Michigan, and 14 starters returned for 1968. But before the season was half over, 12 of the 22 first-team positions belonged to sophomores.

Yet, the overall squad morale and effort remained exceptionally unaffected, a tribute to the character of both groups. Hayes often suggested "our players genuinely liked each other. We (including the coaches) just liked to be together."

"We had great chemistry on that team," agreed Lou Holtz, OSU's defensive backfield coach that year.

"Woody did one of the greatest jobs of leading a group of young men I've ever seen," suggested defensive coordinator Lou McCullough. "He just did an outstanding job of coordinating the whole thing."

He had expert help.

Holtz, Earle Bruce, Bill Mallory, George Chaump and Rudy Hubbard of his staff later became college head coaches; McCullough, architect of the recruiting game plan, and Hugh Hindman became athletic directors.

And, finally, a full measure of the

glory of '68 belonged to the spirited young warriors who waged such a progressively brilliant 100-yard war.

Their 13-0 upset of heavily favored Purdue served as a catalyst. The winning late-minute TD march after Illinois rallied to a 24-24 tie proved their crisis mettle. The 50-14 romp over Michigan demonstrated their ultimate capabilities. The Rose Bowl comeback confirmed the polls and O.J. Simpson's postgame dressing room salute that "you are the greatest football team in the country."

FROM THE first, it seemed certain that the sophomores — on the basis of freshman scrimmages and one intercollegiate game, a romp over Indiana — would impact significantly from the outset of 1968. They did that, and more, on both sides of the football.

Rex Kern owned quarterback from the first and quickly became one of the Buckeyes' most popular players since another flashy redheaded rookie, Hop Cassidy in 1953.

Kern scrambled, ran on the option (641 yards), passed effectively (57.2 percent on 131 throws) and was such a ball-handling, faking magician that *Los Angeles Times* columnist Jim Murray suggested he may have passed up a promising career as a pickpocket.

His field savvy and leadership were superb. And daring, considering that he waded off Woody's punter in a fourth-and-10 situation in the opening game against SMU, then spun for 16 yards.

Ron Maciejowski, another sophomore adept at passing and running, earned the nickname "Super Sub" for his clutch play as a backup for the oft-injured Kern — most notably on the winning 74-yard drive against Illinois.

Senior incumbent Bill Long gave the position great depth.

Second leading rusher Dave Brungard returned, but three sophs soon dominated the halfback time.

John Brockington, a 216-pounder who ran with high knee action, paired with Brungard for the first two games. Against Purdue, Hayes switched him to left half and elevated Larry Zelina to right half.

Zelina, like Brockington a high school All-American, had a smooth, gliding style that made him especially effective on reverses and sweeps (8.7 yards-per-carry average) and he became the number two pass receiver.

An ankle sprain in the Purdue game idled Brockington for two games and continued to slow him when he subbed at both halves and fullback.

Leo Hayden, the third sophomore, an All-Ohio fullback with both power and speed, shared left half with Brungard for most of the season, but started the Rose Bowl and led Buckeye ground-gainers (90 yards) and scored a TD. Brungard transferred to Alabama the next year.

Junior Jim Otis, leading rusher in

1967, completed the first backfield. Otis, a 214-pounder with a quick start and driving power, delivered 985 rushing yards and 17 TDs, including four against Michigan, all school records at the time.

Hayes switched Bruce Jankowski, who scored 33 TDs as an All-New Jersey halfback, to split end and Jan White, an All-Pennsylvania split end and national caliber hurdler, to tight end. Both started immediately and excelled. Jankowski leading all receivers with 31 catches and White adding his skills as a receiver and a standout blocker.

The Buckeyes had an advantage of experience in the interior line, a definite factor early. Dave Foley at tackle and Alan Jack at guard were starting for the third year, John Muhlbach at center for the second. Hayes solved the vacancy at the other tackle by switching Rufus Mayes from tight end and the other guard by elevating backup Tom Backhus.

Championship teams are, by tradition, supposed to field big, powerful tackles, and the Buckeyes had them in Foley (6-5, 246) and Mayes (6-5, 250). Both deservedly made All-American and were each number one draft picks.

Sophomore Brian Donovan, an all-Ohioan, shared guard with Backhus most of the season and started the Rose Bowl.

The year's statistics were impressive enough: 323 points in 10 games, 4,402 total yards, 844 plays (668 in 1967), but the way Hayes' offense did it — the individual and team brilliance, the steady improvement and the crescendo of excitement — lingers even longer in memory.

The same could be said of McCullough's defense, from surviving an NCAA-record air barrage by SMU (76 passes) to shackling Purdue All-American Leroy Keyes to closing down O.J. Simpson in the Rose Bowl.

This platoon began with more battle-tested talent.

Dave Whitfield, a remarkably quick and tough 184-pound end; Nick Roman at the other flank; Paul Schmidlin and Brad Nielsen at tackle, Mark Stier and Dirk Worden at linebacker and Ted Provost at cornerback were all 1967 regulars, four of whom contributed improved performances in 1968.

Sophomores Jim Stillwagon at middle guard, Jack Tatum at rover, Tim Anderson at corner and Mike Sensibaugh at safety assumed first-team status from the start — and through the finish.

Roman's knee injury in preseason brought Mark Debevc into the lineup as the fifth sophomore and Worden's knee injury in the Purdue game promoted Doug Adams as the sixth. Both played up to, or maybe beyond, expectations.

Tatum and Stillwagon, like Kern, established themselves as all-time Buckeye favorites in a hurry.

Tatum's fullback speed, natural instincts and dynamic hits wowed even casual watchers and his presence created headaches for rival offensive coordinators — and ball carriers. He burst into national attention by wearing Purdue's Keyes like a second jersey on pass plays and helped hold him to 17 yards rushing. He did the same to Michigan's record-setting Ron Johnson.

Stillwagon's quickness and savvy made it possible for him to fill in as a

linebacker in the four-man line setup, or to create problems for opposition as a middle guard in other sets. He also qualified as a hitter. That he earned the Outland and Lombardi trophies, national awards for linemen, as a senior underscored his abilities.

Tatum, a converted fullback, Anderson, a converted halfback, Sensibaugh, a converted quarterback, and Provost, a converted quarterback, comprised an amazing secondary. Despite the position switches, each of the four became All-Americans in future seasons — but they played almost like it in 1968.

Sensibaugh, who did all the punting, still holds the OSU career interception record of 22. However, Provost had the most unforgettable steal of 1968 when he grabbed a pass by Purdue's Mike Phipps on the dead run and sped 34 yards untouched into the end zone for a 6-0 OSU lead that essentially won that pivotal game.

Truly, it was a great year to be a Buckeye, coach, player, fan or sports writer.

PERSONAL NOTE: After 55 years of association with Ohio State football, 43 of it as a Dispatch sports writer and later sports editor, I have assiduously avoided picking a "greatest" team or player. Too many great teams, too many great players; too many great young men, including on non-championship teams — even the few non-winning teams — to name a favorite.

With the coaches, the choice is easy: Woody Hayes and Paul Brown.

If forced to choose, under threat of losing my press box pass, I would have to consider the teams of 1942 (first national champions), 1954 (unbeaten including Rose Bowl), 1969-70, the Archie Griffin teams of 1973 and 1975, and 1979, along with 1968.

But 1968 would have to be given first consideration. After all, they won everything!

(Paul Hornung has been covering Ohio State football since 1937 and followed the team as sports editor of *The Columbus Dispatch* from 1958 until his retirement in 1981. BSB is honored that three of his stories grace our 1968 commemorative yearbook. Ed.)

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MEET THE 1968 NAT

Woody Hayes — Head Coach

In his 18th year as head coach of the Buckeyes, Hayes assembled what many believe was the finest group of talent in Ohio State's football history. The undefeated season in 1968 was the school's seventh and the third since Hayes took over the program in 1951. In addition, the Rose Bowl victory over Southern Cal was OSU's fourth straight win in Pasadena and the crowd of 102,063 was a record turnout. Perhaps the most remarkable thing about Hayes' 1968 team was that 12 starters were first-year players.



Rex Kern — Quarterback

From Lancaster, Ohio, Kern led the Buckeyes to the national championship as an excellent runner, accurate passer, deceptive ball handler and exceptional leader. He led the team in total offense with 1,506 yards and 15 touchdowns. Kern completed 75 of 131 passes (57.2 percent) for 972 yards and seven TDs and rushed for 534 yards and eight scores. He accomplished all of that despite undergoing surgery the previous June on a spinal disk. Kern was a three-sport All-Ohio star in high school.



Rufus Mayes — Offensive Tackle



A rock-solid performer along the offensive line for the Buckeyes, Mayes earned All-American honors in 1968. It was no wonder, especially since Ohio State ran behind its talented right tackle to average more than 32 points and 300 rushing yards per game. His 273½ minutes were the most of any OSU lineman in '68. He was a first-round NFL draft choice in 1969 and played professionally for 11 seasons, spending the bulk of that time (1970-78) with the Cincinnati Bengals. He died Jan. 9, 1990.

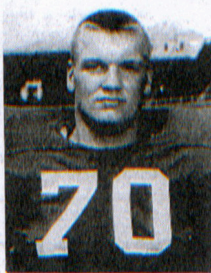
Ray Gillian — Halfback



He spent most of his 1968 season as a reserve halfback behind Larry Zelina, but took advantage of an injury to Zelina in the Rose Bowl to have an outstanding game. Against Southern California, Gillian caught four passes, one for a touchdown, and another which set up a score. He was a valuable backup all season, accounting for 125 yards on just 19 carries, averaging 6.6 yards per tote. The 5-11, 194-pounder from Uniontown, Pa., saw action in all 10 games during the 1968 season for the Buckeyes.

Dave Foley — Offensive Tackle

One of the co-captains in 1968, Foley took his job as a leader very seriously. He also took his job as starting left offensive tackle very seriously, blowing huge holes in opposing defenses so that his teammates could pile up huge chunks of yardage. Foley earned All-American honors after the season, was a first-round AFL draft choice, and played six seasons for the Buffalo Bills, becoming a member of "The Electric Company," the offensive line which opened holes for his old Rose Bowl nemesis — O.J. Simpson.



Tim Anderson — Defensive Back

Because he played on the same defense with Jack Tatum, Anderson never really got the recognition he deserved as a hard hitter. But ask any opposing player who dared come into his area. Anderson could make bone-crushing stops with the best of them. He gained over 2,000 yards as a running back while in high school in his native Follansbee, W.Va., but was converted to a defensive back at OSU. He responded in 1968 by starting as the closed side halfback and had an interception in the Rose Bowl.



Bruce Jankowski — Split End



The leading receiver for the Buckeyes in 1968, Jankowski got loose for 31 receptions and 328 yards for a team that prided itself on scoring touchdowns on the ground. In addition to his receptions, he also scored three times through the air. One of his finest games came against Michigan State when he caught eight passes in a close game. He caught passes in nine of OSU's 10 games during the 1968 season. The Fair Lawn, N.J., native possessed deceptive speed that made him difficult to cover one on one.

Dave Whitfield — Defensive End



Whitfield was one of only a handful of juniors who managed to keep his starting job in 1968. However, the Buckeyes would have needed a bulldozer to keep him off the field. He started all 10 games for the team in '68, logging a total of 241 minutes, tying him for fourth on the defense. OSU did not keep tackle statistics that season, but Whitfield was in on his share. He was known as being especially adept at shedding blockers, using quickness to get to opposing ball carriers. He is a native of Massillon, Ohio.

NATIONAL CHAMPIONS

Jim Stillwagon — Nose Guard

The 1969 Ohio State media guide said of Stillwagon's performance, "Gave Ohio State the finest middle guard play in many years in 1968." That was a gross understatement. Stillwagon reshaped the middle guard position for the Buckeyes, especially after a stellar rookie season in 1968. He logged 189 minutes of playing time and wound up as one of the team's leading tacklers. His agility and ability were so great that when OSU occasionally switched to a four-man line, Stillwagon moved to a linebacker spot.



Jim Otis — Fullback

Running the fullback in between the tackles was always a staple of Woody Hayes-coached teams, but Otis took that philosophy to new heights in 1968. He rushed 219 times for 985 yards and 17 touchdowns. Both the yardage and TD numbers established new school records. He scored at least one touchdown in nine of the team's 10 games that season, including four during a 50-14 whipping of archrival Michigan. He was also remarkably durable. His 283 minutes was tops on the team in '68.



Ted Provost — Defensive Back



A native of Navarre, Ohio, Provost was described in the OSU media guide as "one of the finest pass defenders in recent Ohio State history." He had four interceptions in 1968, none bigger than the one he returned 34 yards for a touchdown in the Buckeyes' 13-0 win over Purdue. An excellent athlete, Provost was a high school star in basketball as well as football. His teammates nicknamed him "Teddy the Tree" because of the numerous Buckeye leaves adorning his helmet, symbolic of great plays he had made.

Jack Tatum — Rover Back



Although many people remember Tatum as a hard-hitting defensive back for the Oakland Raiders, he first earned that reputation as a linebacker at Ohio State. He wasn't overly big as LBs go (6-0, 204 pounds), but he possessed tremendous speed and a knack for exploding into an opponent at just the right time. A native of Passaic, N.J., Tatum was converted from a high school fullback. His play against the likes of Leroy Keyes, Ed Podolak, Ron Johnson and O.J. Simpson in 1968 only adds to his considerable legend.

Mike Sensibaugh — Safety

Sensibaugh had five interceptions in his first season as a starter in 1968 and went on to set the OSU career record with 22 picks. He was also the team's punter for three seasons. But what some may not remember is Sensibaugh's performance in the Rose Bowl. He twice stopped O.J. Simpson on goal-line situations and helped the Buckeyes preserve their 27-16 victory and the national title. A product of Cincinnati Lockland, he once had TD runs of 80, 40 and 50 yards in the first quarter of a prep game.



Jan White — Tight End

Perhaps not the prototypical tight end as far as today's standards, White certainly fit the mold for the 1968 team. At 6-2 and 216 pounds, the native of Harrisburg, Pa., blew out opposing linebackers and defensive backs with ease. He was also an excellent receiver as evidenced by 21 catches for 283 yards as a sophomore. An excellent athlete, White was a prep All-American hurdler and had the physical tools to play wide receiver for the Buckeyes. He was just too valuable as a blocking tight end to move him outside.



Doug Adams — Linebacker



Believe it or not, on a team with Jack Tatum and Tim Anderson, Adams was the guy the OSU media guide described as "the hardest hitter on the squad." Only 6-0 and 214 pounds, Adams wasn't even slated to start in 1968, but was forced into action when co-captain Dirk Worden went down with an injury. Adams responded by playing in all 10 games for a total of 224½ minutes and had a pair of interceptions. He did such a remarkable job for the Buckeyes that he often called the defensive signals in the huddle.

Alan Jack — Offensive Guard



A durable athlete who would eventually become a three-year starter for the Buckeyes, Jack was responsible for helping the OSU running game stay on track. Despite being only 6-0 and 218 pounds, he more than held his own beside bigger teammates and against larger opponents. He used his quickness to his advantage, many times being the guard who pulled out in front of ball carriers on sweeps and option plays. A native of Wintersville, Ohio, Jack consistently scored well in OSU's grading system.