

BUCKEYE SPORTS BULLETIN

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Vol. 18, No. 13

"For The Buckeye Fan Who Needs To Know More"

December 1998

Bucks Back To The Bayou

OSU To Face Texas A&M In Return To Sugar Bowl

By STEVE HELWAGEN
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Editor

Ever since a Nov. 7 defeat at the hands of Michigan State, the Ohio State football team had resigned itself to the fact it likely would not qualify for the national championship game in the Fiesta Bowl.

And despite upsets to previous unbeaten UCLA and Kansas State on Dec. 5, the Buckeyes came up short in their bid to make the first Bowl Championship Series title game.

While Tennessee and Florida State will play for most, if not all, of the marbles at the Fiesta Bowl, the Buckeyes (10-1) will tackle Big 12 champion Texas A&M (11-2) in the Sugar Bowl Jan. 1 in New Orleans.

"We're not unhappy to be playing Texas

A&M in the Sugar Bowl," said OSU coach John Cooper, whose Buckeyes will make a second consecutive Sugar Bowl trip. "Obviously we would love to be playing for the national championship, but we are happy to be in the Bowl Championship Series.

"You don't need any more motivation than playing on prime-time television in a major bowl like this."

Ohio State opened the year as the consensus No. 1 team and stayed there for nine weeks until the loss to Michigan State. Since that defeat, the Buckeyes have risen from as low as seventh in the polls to third as the bowl season approaches.

"We had our goals set early in the year to reach the Fiesta Bowl and win the national championship," Cooper said.

"You always set your goals real high, but sometimes you have to adjust your goals on the run. We tried to come back and win the Big Ten championship and we were able to do that.

"We bounced back and beat Iowa and then had a great victory over an outstanding Michigan football team."

OSU (10-1) shared the Big Ten title with Wisconsin and Michigan this year. But with the Badgers heading to the Rose Bowl because of the Big Ten's tiebreaking procedure, the Buckeyes had to sweat out their bowl assignment until all of the conference title games had been played.

"We kind of had a feeling this would be it," said OSU quarterback Joe Germaine. "There's been so much talk about us playing in the Sugar Bowl that that's what I had my heart set on. It's a great opportunity for us. We wanted to be in one of the big bowls, and we are, and playing Texas A&M will be a big challenge. Hopefully it will draw a lot of fanfare."

Few have questioned unbeaten Tennessee's position in the Fiesta Bowl. But the Buckeyes ended up behind not only Florida State (11-1) but also Kansas State (11-1) in the final BCS rankings (see page 19) used to determine the Fiesta Bowl match-up.

"I think it should probably be us and Florida State," said OSU tackle Tyson Walter. "Tennessee escaped some tough calls. You have to give them credit. They did get lucky, but they made their own breaks."

"I wanted to play Florida State, partially to redeem ourselves (OSU lost to the Seminoles 31-14 in last year's Sugar Bowl)



TERRY GILLIAM

BIG TEN CHAMPIONS— OSU coach John Cooper and his staff get a round of applause after receiving their Big Ten co-championship trophy at the school's Nov. 24 men's basketball game. Coaches pictured include, left to right, Fred Pagac, Mike Jacobs, Jim Heacock, Chuck Stobart, Tim Spencer and Tim Salem

and partially because they're the second-best team in the country behind us."

Germaine added, "We're disappointed that we didn't get to play in the Fiesta Bowl because (Florida State) has one loss and we have one loss. But, hey, we're still very proud to play in a top bowl game."

"We're not going to look at this negatively, like we're getting the lower end of the bowl. Of course we feel we have as good a shot as anybody to play against Tennessee. We're happy with where we are right now and as long as we go in there with a good attitude and play the best game we can and hopefully come out with a win, who knows what can happen then."

And Walter admits all the ratings points can be shoved aside because OSU missed its chance to cement its spot on the field.

"We can be upset with the writers and other people all we want, but we should be angry with ourselves because we were the ones that screwed up," he said. "If we do our job, we don't have to deal with this."

Political Favors

The scenario that landed Ohio State in the Sugar Bowl kept the Buckeyes and their fans on the edge of their seats for the full two weeks after the team ended its regular season by crushing rival Michigan 31-16 Nov. 21.

The suspense built with USC's 10-0 win over Notre Dame Nov. 28, a result that dropped the Irish (9-2) from BCS consideration.

A week later, it seemed as if the seas were parting and the Buckeyes could again be ticketed for the Fiesta Bowl. Miami (Fla.) knocked off UCLA 49-45 and Texas A&M shocked Kansas State 36-33 in double overtime in the Big 12 title game.

The UCLA loss was most important for

OSU because it dropped the Bruins from the Fiesta Bowl to the Rose Bowl, where Pac-10 runner-up Arizona was penciled in for one of the BCS at-large berths.

"When UCLA fell out, that opened up the at-large situation — unless A&M beat Kansas State," said OSU athletic director Andy Geiger. "Then A&M did beat Kansas State, so that kind of clouded the picture a little bit because Kansas State was out there as an at-large. But it turned out that Kansas State is not in the BCS."

With the Rose Bowl and Fiesta Bowl match-ups set, the Sugar and Orange bowls were left to select their teams. The Orange acted first by announcing it would take Big East champion Syracuse.

The Sugar Bowl then had the next choice, since it was losing Tennessee to the Fiesta. The Sugar selected OSU, technically an at-large team in the BCS structure.

"We wanted to see this match-up in particular," said Sugar Bowl executive director Paul Houlihan. "By me replacing Tennessee with Ohio State — and getting a pretty strong sense of what the Orange Bowl was going to do — I was able to effect it by doing that."

As expected, the Orange Bowl snubbed K-State by taking Florida (9-2) to replace Florida State. That left the Sugar to take A&M, which had earned an automatic BCS bid with its Big 12 win.

"I believe the issue was settled on the field," Houlihan said. "The Aggies did it in overtime. In my mind, they are deserving of an opportunity to be in our bowl game."

"When you can put together legitimate conference champions, like we've been able to do, from two great conferences, the Big



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SPECIAL NOTE: BSB will return with coverage of the Sugar Bowl in the Jan. 9 edition. That issue will be mailed on Tuesday, Jan. 5.

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OPINION

BCS Probably Got This One Right

If you had asked me in August or September if another Sugar Bowl berth would be acceptable for Ohio State this year, I would probably have said no.

This team, I and many others felt, should have been in the Fiesta Bowl, playing for the national championship.

That will have to wait until another year, I guess. Although it lost to Michigan State, this team more than redeemed itself with its win over Michigan.

And, in the final analysis because of that loss, I believe Ohio State is headed probably where it deserves for the holidays.

Much has been made and said of the first year of the Bowl Championship Series. But I think the new system actually did the one and only thing it was supposed to do — it matched the two rightful teams for the national championship.

Tennessee's spot is clear as the nation's only viable unbeaten. That leaves once-beaten like Florida State, Ohio State, Kansas State and UCLA to argue forever that they deserved the shot.

In my opinion, K-State and UCLA do not deserve serious consideration because they were both too one-dimensional. K-State depended too much on Michael Bishop, while UCLA leaned too heavily on Cade McNown.

On paper, Ohio State could make a strong case that it deserves the Fiesta bid over FSU. The Buckeyes can match FSU nearly position-for-position and stat-for-stat on offense and defense.

But I contend it was OSU's schedule that did in the Buckeyes.

Everybody wants to compare FSU's loss to N.C. State to OSU's loss to MSU. Yes, OSU lost by just four points, compared to FSU's 17-point defeat. But N.C. State proved to be a much better team than MSU and the Buckeyes lost at home.

Besides, that was just one game. I say you need to look at the quality of each team's wins. For FSU, that list included Florida, Texas A&M and Miami (Fla.), the latter two of whom registered monster upsets over K-State and UCLA, respectively.

Nobody Ohio State played all year won games that big. Try and name one for me, if you can. About the biggest thing I can come up with is Michigan's win over Wisconsin.

Maybe who you've played and how they've done is not much of a barometer for how good you are. But right now, that's about all we have to go on.

Having said all that, though, for OSU to be as low as sixth in two of the computer polls after posting 10 double-digit wins is patently absurd.

The K-State Snub

That brings us to the Kansas State debacle.

For all the bluster that "K-State travels well," the Wildcats did not have the kind of political clout (i.e. interested television households) to snag a BCS berth.

That much was clear when OSU and Florida merited the at-large spots ahead of K-State, which had to settle for a meaningless Alamo Bowl game with Purdue (good luck, Boilers).

This has led to much debate that a playoff is needed to recognize and determine the nation's top team.

While I agree in theory, the execution leaves something to be desired. Who would pick the teams and would you incorporate the bowls?

The bowl system has proven incredibly lucrative for the six major conferences that hold the cards. They would be risking a sure thing for a neat concept.

There is also the idea of participation. Today, as many as 40 schools play in 20 bowl games. If there were a playoff, just eight, 12 or 16 schools would eventually end up in postseason play. The other bowls would like-

EDITOR'S NOTEBOOK with Steve Helwagen

ly wither and die due to apathy (see the NTT, although it's not dead yet).

John Cooper advocates a return to the traditional bowl tie-ins with a two- or four-team playoff after the bowls. I think a two-team playoff after the bowls might work. Anything more than that would severely devalue the bowls.

Moreover, anything that involves teams playing multiple games at neutral sites could be deadly. Nobody is making travel plans for the bowls now with three weeks of lead time. Just imagine how few people would try to do it on a one-week basis more than once.

This is not as simple as the NCAA Tournament, which needs only 12,000-15,000 people to fill some of its tournament sites. Yes, there are some die-hards who follow their team from coast to coast. But most of those people you see on CBS are locals.

Locals will not fill a 72,000-seat football stadium (see last year's Sugar Bowl).

Perhaps home sites for higher seeded teams with the final at a neutral site is a thought — it sure works nicely for the NFL playoffs. But then you have weather concerns for the Northern states in December.

We can continue to chew on this one for the next nine months, and really, the next three years because the BCS deal is going to make at least one pass through the big four bowls before the system changes.

So Long, Fellas

I don't know about you, but I'm going to enjoy the Sugar Bowl.

It's the last chance I'll have to see so many of the best people I've come to know wear the Scarlet and Gray.

I am finishing my fourth season as the BSB editor, a time period coinciding with these players' careers. Here are some of my feelings regarding several of the guys who

will be playing their final game for the Buckeyes.

• **Joe Germaine** — We did a recruiting video when he signed in 1995. He seemed to just throw looping, perfectly timed spirals for his JUCO team. I wondered how he'd have the arm strength to play in the Big Ten.

Then, Walt Harris comes in as the quarterbacks coach and recruits his own guy, Mark Garcia. The deck looked stacked against Germaine. But all he did was end up the Big Ten MVP, wowing us every step of the way.

• **Kevin Griffin** — He didn't try to be Archie Griffin; he just tried to be the best Kevin Griffin he could be. Just a great kid to be around.

• **John Lumpkin** — Lumpkin always had time to meet with the media and, earlier in his career, to play basketball. OSU more than got its money's worth from this guy.

• **Dee Miller** — Miller is one of the most honest players I've ever met. He should have received All-Big Ten honors as a junior and made the league pay this time around for not giving them to him.

• **Joe Montgomery** — If Miller was honest, Montgomery was always brutally honest. When you hear the tale of his plight at first, the journalist in you thinks this has the makings of a good story. But then you're forced to stop and say, "No, this is real life."

• **Damon Moore** — No truth to the rumor they are naming a roller coaster for him at Cedar Point. But, seriously, when things of value were on the line, this guy usually came up big.

• **Jerry Rudzinski** — Articulate and accommodating to a fault, Rud will succeed at whatever he decides to do — including football — after the Sugar Bowl.

• **Antoine Winfield** — He looks like a teddy bear, but the look and his infectious grin are misleading: Winfield is an incredible competitor.

In the four years I've been covering recruiting, I've lost track of how many kids have revealed to me they are coming to Ohio State.

I'll never forget, though, that this guy was the first.

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BOWL CHAMPIONSHIP SERIES

BCS' First Effort Leaves K-State Out In Cold

By STEVE HELWAGEN
 Buckeye Sports Bulletin Editor

For a first effort, the Bowl Championship Series was, well, controversial.

Backed by millions of dollars from ABC, the college game's top four bowls issued their pairings Dec. 6, one day after previous unbeaten UCLA and Kansas State suffered upsets.

As a result, Florida State (11-1) moved into the No. 2 spot in the BCS rankings to face top-ranked Tennessee (12-0) in the designated national championship game Jan. 4 at the Fiesta Bowl.

That seemed reasonable to most observers, unless:

• You follow Ohio State (10-1). The Buckeyes jumped up to No. 3 in both the AP and coaches polls, but only up to No. 4 in the

BCS rankings. Instead of potentially moving into the Fiesta Bowl opposite Tennessee, the Buckeyes were tapped for the Sugar Bowl.

• You follow Kansas State (11-1). The Wildcats' overtime loss to Texas A&M in the Big 12 championship game dropped KSU out of BCS consideration, through its own league tie-ins with the Cotton and Holiday bowls, and into an Alamo Bowl match-up with Purdue.

KSU's grief was only exacerbated when the Orange Bowl opted for Florida, ranked eighth in the BCS rankings, as an at-large team to face Big East champion Syracuse (8-3). The Orangemen finished a distant 15th in the BCS rankings.

• Or, you follow Arizona (11-1). These Wildcats were ticketed for the Rose Bowl. That is, until Pac-10 champion UCLA lost to Miami (Fla.) and fell out of the Fiesta to the Rose. Instead, Arizona will play in the

Holiday Bowl.

SEC commissioner Roy Kramer, who coordinated the BCS and helped develop the criteria, defended the system.

"I feel we have arrived at two tremendously qualified teams to play in our first BCS championship game," Kramer said. "That's all we were trying to do — establish the 1-2 game. From there on down, we have freedom for the bowls to make their selections within certain criteria."

Ohio State landed on its feet with the Sugar Bowl berth against Texas A&M (11-2) — that's a far cry better than one more Citrus Bowl trip.

But even if Tennessee had fallen to Mississippi State in the SEC title game — the Vols trailed late before pulling out a 24-14 win — Kansas State likely would have made the Fiesta Bowl ahead of OSU.

"I thought there was a chance for us to get back up to the top," said OSU athletic director Andy Geiger. "As it turned out, it was not. Kansas State would have still been up there because they finished ahead of us in the BCS."

Geiger and coach John Cooper were left scratching their heads after seeing their Buckeyes ranked as low as sixth by two of the computer rankings, part of the four-tier BCS system (see graphic).

"Those newspaper polls and statistical things don't like us," Geiger said.

Cooper added, "I don't know much about those computers, but I think that's one of the complaints people have had this year in the inconsistency in those ratings."

"I did notice a couple had us sixth. That's

absolutely ridiculous."

Geiger said the computer rankings should go deeper and develop more accurate averages.

"I was on the NCAA men's basketball tournament committee when we developed our own RPI and we didn't use those guys," he said. "We developed our own power system, and I would like to think we could do that. The recommendation I would make is to get rid of those guys and let's build our own computer models."

Conference Tie-Ins Defended

Most agree something is wrong with the system when Syracuse is in and Kansas State is not.

"Syracuse is my alma mater and I'd never want to get disowned by them, but I think conference champions need to finish at a certain level in order for that conference to continue to get an automatic in this sort of thing," Geiger said.

"I felt after the Michigan game that we were never going to sink lower than five, and I think if you're in the top five that you ought to be in it."

But Kramer said rewarding major conference champions is a way to keep the emphasis on the regular season.

"I think we'll continue to look at a lot of alternatives," he said. "To win a conference championship, that needs to be rewarded. One of our major goals was to protect the success of regular-season football. One of the ways we do that is to protect the excitement and success of winning your conference championship."



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BOWL CHAMPIONSHIP SERIES

And from the bowls' perspective, they feel they need latitude to take a school like the Orange Bowl did with Florida to boost ticket sales.

"The BCS puts the focus on the 1-2 game, but it also helps the rest of us survive in the years when we don't have that game," said Sugar Bowl assistant director Jeff Hundley.

Playoff Next Step?

ABC, the major conferences and the top four bowls have three years remaining on their initial BCS contract, a lucrative deal that provides payouts between \$11-13 million for each team in a BCS bowl.

But, money aside, pressures to include deserving teams like Kansas State and to truly decide the national championship — the polls could still be split this year if Florida State defeats Tennessee and as many as six major conference teams finish with one loss — could lead to some type of playoff.

"I think there are some things with this thing that need to be worked on," Geiger said. "I'm not sure I agree with a playoff. I thought we had elements of the playoffs with what we had (Dec. 5) in the way the thing played out."

Texas A&M coach R.C. Slocum noted the changing culture of college football.

"In the last couple of years, we've gotten into something where everybody wants (the national title) worked out," he said. "The bowls were never designed to determine

who the national champion was.

"The bowls have historically been a reward for teams that have played well. They tried to match up two teams for a good competition.

"There now seems to be a growing desire with the media and fans to have a national playoff, and I don't doubt that we will have one of those eventually."

Cooper, a longtime proponent of a one-game playoff after the bowls, added his two cents' worth to the debate.

"I don't want to do anything to disrupt the bowl people because the bowls have been great for college football," he said. "It wouldn't bother me to see a one-game playoff or maybe even a two-game playoff after the bowls."

"Take the top eight teams and let them play in these four bowls we have now and then play a couple of games after that's over."

"I think it's only a matter of time until we see some type of playoff in college football."

Final Bowl Championship Series Rankings

Here is a look at the final rankings for the Bowl Championship Series:

School	USA		Poll Avg.	Seattle Times	Sagarin	NY Times	Comp. Avg.	Schedule Strength	Quartile Rank	Losses	Total
	Today/ AP	ESPN									
1. Tennessee	1	1	1.0	1	2	2	1.87	20	0.80	0	3.47
2. Florida St.	2	2	2.0	2	2.25	1	1.75	4	0.16	1	4.91
3. Kansas St.	4	4	4.0	4	1	4.00	3.00	49	1.96	1	9.96
4. Ohio State	3	3	3.0	6.75	6	3	5.25	28	1.12	1	10.37
5. UCLA	6	5	5.5	3	4	5.25	4.08	8	0.32	1	10.90
6. Texas A&M	8	9	8.5	6	5	4	5.00	5	0.20	2	15.70
7. Arizona	5	6	5.5	5	9	9	7.67	58	2.32	1	16.49
8. Florida	7	7	7.0	10	8	11	9.67	32	1.28	2	19.95
9. Wisconsin	9	8	8.5	9	10	10	9.67	61	2.44	1	21.61
10. Tulane	9	10	9.5	8	14	16.5	12.83	96	3.84	0	26.67

BCS Explanation: Poll Average — Average of standing in USA Today/ESPN coaches poll and Associated Press media poll; Computer Average — Average of standing in Seattle Times, Jeff Sagarin/USA Today and New York Times computer rankings; Quartile Rank — Rank of schedule strength as compared to other Division I-A schools, divided by 25; Losses — One point for each loss during the season.

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COVER STORY: BUCKS BACK TO THE BAYOU

Buckeyes Miss Fiesta, Settle For Sugar Bowl

Continued From Page 1

Ten and the Big 12, I just look forward to a great game.

"I know ABC is absolutely beside themselves with this match-up."

According to Geiger, he and Big Ten commissioner Jim Delaney stayed on top of the bowl situation. He said he and Houlihan talked several times in the week leading up to the Dec. 6 announcement.

"Paul and I go back as friends for a long time," Geiger said. "He was the athletic director at Vanderbilt for a spell and was a fellow Tar Heel with Jim Delany as an undergraduate."

"I think that ABC was as helpful as anybody, in terms of saying that they thought Ohio State would be a ratings driver. We're a national program and the Big Ten representatives always turn on a lot of television sets. You can go back and look at the ratings and it's a factor."

Houlihan agreed it was regrettable that K-State did not get a BCS berth.

"That's unfortunate," he said. "Nobody has claimed the BCS is perfect. But it obviously represents a big improvement over the alliance. We have closed the loop by bringing the Big Ten, Pac-10 and Rose Bowl into the mix."

"There are still going to be people left at home. But I feel good that we have two conference champions in our bowl. We don't have an at-large team in our game."

Cooper added, "This is certainly not per-

fect, but this is the best system we've had up until this time."

The Quest For No. 1

Sitting third in both major polls, the Buckeyes are hoping they can somehow leapfrog Tennessee and FSU to claim at least a piece of the national title.

"The coaches poll has agreed to give the winner of the Fiesta Bowl its national title, but the writers have not done that," said Sugar Bowl assistant director Jeff Hundley. "It's still not out of the realm of possibility that Ohio State could establish a claim to the national championship."

Cooper believes there is a remote possibility it could happen.

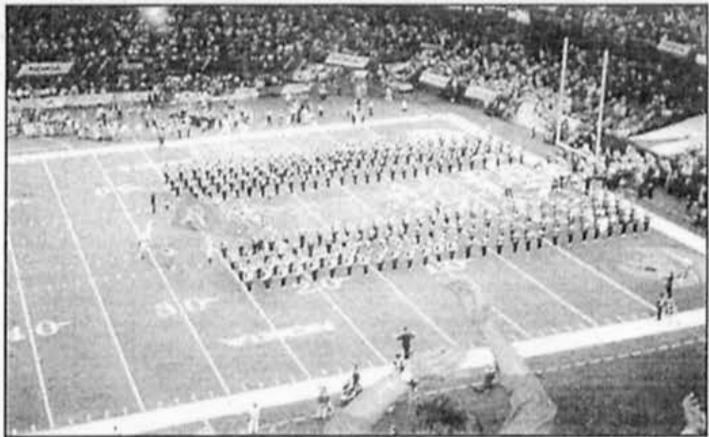
"If Florida State beats Tennessee and we're fortunate enough to beat this A&M team, there may be some argument that maybe we deserve a share of the championship," he said.

"The last couple of years, we've had co-champs. Last year Michigan and Nebraska shared it. We would have to be fortunate."

"Obviously, Florida State would have to beat Tennessee and not look real impressive doing it and, of course, we would have to have an impressive win over A&M. Anything is possible. We've talked to our football team about that. We don't think the door has been completely shut on us yet."

The players believe they deserve, with a win over A&M, at least some consideration for the top spot.

"We're the same team when we were



BRIAN REINHART

RETURN TRIP TO NEW ORLEANS — Ohio State, pictured taking the field at the Sugar Bowl last year, will make its third appearance in the New Year's Day bowl. The Buckeyes fell to Alabama in 1978 and lost to Florida State last year.

ranked No. 1 for most of the season," Germaine said. "We had a slip-up, no question about it. But that doesn't take away from any of our talent and our notoriety around the nation."

"You have to think that, have to keep all options open," said cornerback Ahmed Plummer. "You never know what's going to happen. We're all human, so we're going in there enthusiastic and playing to win. Whatever happens after that happens."

Getting a piece of the title — specifically the AP poll — could take some more pol-

iticking by the Buckeyes.

"That's what happened last year," Walter said. "Michigan won the Rose Bowl and everyone said they would win it outright. Then Nebraska goes and beats Tennessee by a decent margin. The leaders of their team called out and asked for the voters to give them a fair shot, and (the coaches) did."

"Hopefully, if that situation arises, the people who can make things happen will make the right decision."

Germaine was asked whether he

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thought OSU should be playing for the national championship.

"We have that caliber of team, no question," he replied. "But this is what happens when you lose and when you have these rankings."

Facing The Aggies

The Buckeyes know they will have their hands full with a more-than-competitive A&M team, ranked eighth nationally after upsetting Big 12 favorites Nebraska and K-State in the same year.

"The first time I really saw them play was (against K-State)," Germaine said. "They play very hard, their motors run the whole game. And Dat Nguyen is one of the best linebackers in the country, so it's going to be a great game. I don't care what people say about it."

The highlight of this game figures to be OSU's high-powered offense, which averaged 503.5 yards and 36.9 points per game, against A&M's stellar defense. The Aggies allowed foes just 289.3 yards and 14.6 points per game this year. Those numbers were skewed by K-State's 519 yards and 33 points in the double-overtime game.

"They're a great defense and they're going to be ready to play us," said OSU tailback Joe Montgomery. "Like I say for everybody, we respect everyone but fear no one. We're looking forward to playing them."

"They are very physical, very aggressive. They have a great linebacker in Nguyen, and another guy I came on my visit here with, Warrick Holdman. They're quick to the ball, they'll do a lot of stunts. We're looking forward to that."

Remembering Last Year

The Buckeyes want to right the wrong they created last year in New Orleans, where nearly everything went against them in the rout at the hands of the

College Bowl Schedule

Bowl	Teams	Payout	Site	Date/Time	TV
Las Vegas	San Diego State (7-4) vs. North Carolina (6-5)	\$800,000	Las Vegas, Nev.	Dec. 19/6:30 p.m.	ESPN
Motor City	Marshall (11-1) vs. Louisville (7-4)	\$750,000	Detroit, Mich.	Dec. 23/8 p.m.	ESPN2
Jeep Aloha	Colorado (7-4) vs. Oregon (8-3)	\$750,000	Honolulu, Hawaii	Dec. 25/3:30 p.m.	ABC
Oahu	Air Force (11-1) vs. Washington (6-5)	\$750,000	Honolulu, Hawaii	Dec. 25/8:30 p.m.	ESPN
Insight.com	West Virginia (8-3) vs. Missouri (7-4)	\$750,000	Honolulu, Hawaii	Dec. 26/7 p.m.	ESPN
Music City	Alabama (7-4) vs. Virginia Tech (8-3)	\$750,000	Nashville, Tenn.	Dec. 29/5 p.m.	ESPN
Micron PC	N.C. State (7-4) vs. Miami (Fla.) (8-3)	\$750,000	Miami, Fla.	Dec. 29/7:30 p.m.	TBS
Builders Square Alamo	Kansas State (11-1) vs. Purdue (8-4)	\$1.1 million	San Antonio, Texas	Dec. 29/8:30 p.m.	ESPN
Humanitarian	Idaho (8-3) vs. Southern Miss (7-4)	\$750,000	Boise, Idaho	Dec. 29/8:30 p.m.	ESPN2
Culligan Holiday	Arizona (11-1) vs. Nebraska (9-3)	\$1.4 million	San Diego, Calif.	Dec. 30/8 p.m.	ESPN
AXA/Equitable Liberty	Tulane (11-0) vs. Brigham Young (9-3)	\$1.1 million	Memphis, Tenn.	Dec. 31/1:30 p.m.	ESPN
Norwest Sun	Southern California (8-4) vs. Texas Christian (6-5)	\$1 million	El Paso, Texas	Dec. 31/2 p.m.	CBS
Chick-fil-A Peach	Virginia (9-2) vs. Georgia (8-3)	\$1.5 million	Atlanta, Ga.	Dec. 31/5 p.m.	ESPN
Sanford Independence	Texas (8-3) vs. Texas Tech (7-4)	\$1 million	Shreveport, La.	Dec. 31/8:30 p.m.	ESPN
Outback	Penn State (8-3) vs. Kentucky (7-4)	\$1.8 million	Tampa, Fla.	Jan. 1/11 a.m.	ESPN
Southwestern Bell Cotton	Texas (8-3) vs. Mississippi State (7-4)	\$2.5 million	Dallas, Texas	Jan. 1/11 a.m.	FOX
Toyota Gator	Notre Dame (9-2) vs. Georgia Tech (9-2)	\$1.4 million	Jacksonville, Fla.	Jan. 1/12:30 p.m.	NBC
CompUSA Florida Citrus	Michigan (9-3) vs. Arkansas (9-2)	\$3.75 million	Orlando, Fla.	Jan. 1/1 p.m.	ABC
Rose	Wisconsin (10-1) vs. UCLA (10-1)	\$11-13 million	Pasadena, Calif.	Jan. 1/5 p.m.	ABC
Nokia Sugar	Ohio State (10-1) vs. Texas A&M (11-2)	\$11-13 million	New Orleans, La.	Jan. 1/8:30 p.m.	ABC
Fed Ex Orange	Syracuse (8-3) vs. Florida (9-2)	\$11-13 million	Miami, Fla.	Jan. 2/8 p.m.	ABC
Fiesta	Tennessee (12-0) vs. Florida State (11-1)	\$11-13 million	Tempe, Ariz.	Jan. 4/8 p.m.	ABC

Seminoles.

"We were sickened by the way we played last year, so we're going to go back and try to work out the kinks and make a much better showing than a year ago," Walter said.

Germaine and fellow quarterback Stanley Jackson bore the brunt of the FSU defense, which logged three interceptions, six sacks and an incredible 19 tackles-for-loss.

"The Sugar Bowl from last year was a lot of our motivation for this year," Germaine said. "It left us with a real bad taste in our mouths. We came back with a new determination, a great work ethic to try not to let that happen. Hopefully we can go back and play better than we did last year."

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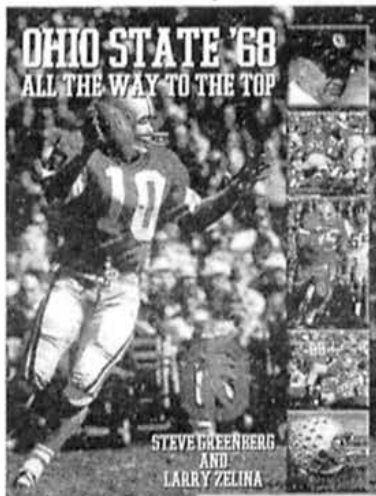
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OHIO STATE VS. TEXAS A&M

Upstart A&M Coming Off First Big 12 Title

By STEVE HELWAGEN
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Editor

After years of being one of the dominant programs in the Southwest Conference, Texas A&M claimed its first Big 12 conference title with its stunning 36-33 overtime win over Kansas State on Dec. 5.

The win clinched a Bowl Championship Series berth for the eighth-ranked Aggies (11-2), who will play Ohio State in the Sugar Bowl Jan. 1.

"We're all as excited as we can be to come to the Sugar Bowl," said Texas A&M coach R.C. Slocum. "It's a place we've long wanted to go. We've never quite gotten there. We've had a time or two when we were headed that way but didn't quite get there."

"I think our fans will enjoy the hospitality

and the experience in New Orleans."

Just getting to the Big Easy, though, was no easy feat. The Aggies had clinched the Big 12 South Division title despite a 26-24 loss to rival Texas. Texas A&M shrugged off that defeat and a 27-12 deficit to K-State to force an overtime.

That's when Slocum tried to inspire his troops.

"Just before the overtime, I was telling our team on the sidelines, 'Just think Sugar, baby,'" Slocum said. "Our guys were actually passing that around on the field in hopes that we would get a chance to go to the Sugar Bowl."

Quarterback Brannndon Stewart, playing in place of injured starter Randy McCown, threw a pair of fourth-quarter touchdown passes to knot the score at 27-27.

After the teams traded field goals in the

first overtime, K-State inched ahead 33-30 with a field goal to open the second overtime. Things looked dire for A&M, which quickly found itself in a third-and-17 predicament at the KSU 32.

But Stewart found Surr Parker on a quick slant and he veered to the right pylon for the touchdown and the win.

"The thing about our team is we didn't give up," said Parker, moments after the Aggies matched the largest comeback in school history. "We never gave up. We just beat the No. 1 team in the country."

For a program that has won exactly one national championship — the Aggies topped the final Associated Press poll in 1939 — the win capped an improbable year that also featured an upset of powerhouse Nebraska.

"Our team has grown throughout the year," Slocum said. "The team was at an emotional high for the championship game. They were just elated last night to win the game."

"I've seen it written and said that we couldn't win the big game. From my own personal standpoint, I'm going to call this a big win."

The win was one more step toward Slocum's ultimate goal: national respect.

"I've always said that respect is something you earn," Slocum said. "I've never really had a problem with our situation. There are a lot of teams that have a more storied history. But if you look at the graph, we're getting better and better."

"After this win, I think people would say that A&M can play with anybody



LOMBARDI AWARD WINNER — Texas A&M linebacker Dat Nguyen claimed the Lombardi Award for his efforts this season. The 5-11, 216-pound Nguyen tallied 147 tackles this year.

Continued On Page 35



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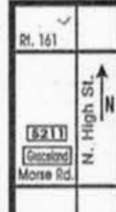




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OHIO STATE VS. TEXAS A&M

With McCown Down, Stewart's Been Doin' It

Brandon Stewart could have thrown in the towel on his quarterback career.

The Texas A&M senior had lost his starting job to Randy McCown in early October and, except for spot action, it looked like Stewart would end his career with a whimper.

But looks can be deceiving. When McCown suffered a broken collarbone in A&M's regular-season finale against Texas, Stewart returned to the starter's role against Kansas State in the Big 12 championship game.

Stewart rose to the challenge, completing 15 of 31 passes for 324 yards and three touchdowns in leading A&M to a 36-33 upset of K-State in double overtime.

"I couldn't wait till Saturday," Stewart said afterward. "I was so excited that I was going to get out and compete again. To be honest, I didn't think I would ever get to play again because Randy was doing such a good job."

Stewart was especially effective at crunch time. He completed 11 of 20 passes for 235 yards — including the 32-yard game-winning touchdown to Sirr Parker in the second overtime — in the fourth quarter and overtimes to rally A&M from a 27-12 deficit.

Now it seems that Stewart will close his college career as the starter against Ohio State in the Sugar Bowl.

"Things look very doubtful for Randy," said Texas A&M coach R.C. Slocum, noting McCown could be out through at least Jan. 1. "That eliminates him from any practice time before the bowl. We'll go on with Brannon."

Stewart's collegiate career began at Tennessee in 1994, where he was beaten out by eventual All-American Peyton Manning. A year later he transferred to A&M. He started

TEXAS A&M NOTES with Steve Helwagen

all 12 games for the Aggies in 1996 and '97 before giving way to McCown early this year.

"Last year we won the Big 12 South Division championship with Brannon as our quarterback," Slocum said. "This year we won two or three early games with him."

"At one point there, I put Randy McCown ahead of him. Randy was injured in the Oklahoma State game. Brannon came in and won that game for us and then played the entire Oklahoma game before Randy came back."

"Brannon is a guy with experience. I was not surprised with his performance (against Kansas State). I was very happy for him because he has had an up-and-down career."

"He was focused in practice. I thought he would have a good ball game."

OSU coach John Cooper took note of Stewart's courageous performance in the Big 12 title game.

"That's what the game is all about," Cooper said. "If you can find a player like Brannon to come off the bench and lead the Aggies to a victory like that, that makes it all worthwhile."

"We've got a couple players like that here at our place. Joe Montgomery is a guy we weren't even sure would ever play again and bounced back and helped us win a lot of big games this year."

*Brooks Burris is an offensive lineman



COURTESY OF TEXAS A&M SPORTS INFORMATION

BACK IN THE SADDLE — When an injury forced Randy McCown to the sidelines, Brandon Stewart regained his role as Texas A&M's starting quarterback. Stewart was one of the heroes in A&M's Big 12 title game win.

who has been through some hard times. But he came back and started every game at right tackle for us this year, and he's a much improved football player."

A&M Tackles Ranked Foes

Besides K-State, Texas A&M played three other ranked opponents. Here's a look at how those games went.

• **Florida State** — The Aggies led 14-10 at halftime before falling to the No. 2-ranked Seminoles 23-14 in the Kickoff Classic Aug. 31. FSU receiver Peter Warrick had a career-high nine catches to key the win.

• **Nebraska** — A&M avenged its blowout 54-14 defeat to the No. 2-ranked Huskers in last year's Big 12 title game and defeated Nebraska for just the second time in eight tries with this 28-21 decision Oct. 10 in College Station. Running backs Dante Hall and Ja'Mar Toombs each went over 100 yards rushing for the Aggies, who also got a late interception from Sedrick Curry.

• **Missouri** — Russell Bynum kicked a 39-yard field goal with 1:30 left to lift the Aggies over No. 13 Missouri 17-14.

Texas A&M's other loss was at unranked Texas, 26-24, on Nov. 27. That game was memorable for Texas running back and eventual Heisman Trophy winner Ricky Williams carrying 44 times for 259 yards and a score. Williams broke the Division I-A career rushing mark in that game.

Slocum Carves Out Niche

The 54-year-old Slocum is finishing his 10th year as A&M's head coach. Except for one year where he served as the defensive coordinator at USC, Slocum has spent 27 of

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OHIO STATE VS. TEXAS A&M

the last 28 years on the A&M staff. Since replacing Jackie Sherrill as the head coach in 1989, Slocum has compiled a 94-27-2 mark, making him the school's all-time winningest coach. That is high praise considering the likes of Paul "Bear" Bryant, Gene Stallings and Sherrill all have coached at the school.



R.C. Slocum

Slocum's teams have won four league titles. Perhaps his best triumph, though, came in 1994 when he led A&M to a 10-0-1 mark. The school was saddled with NCAA probation stemming from conduct by several players unrelated to the coaching staff, costing A&M another league crown.

Slocum has seen A&M rally from turmoil during the Vietnam War era to national prominence.

"This school was known as a military school," he said. "That was a tumultuous time when the country was torn apart by an unpopular war. The military was under siege."

Improved facilities and diversity of programs helped A&M move into the future.

In terms of football, Sherrill, upon taking the head job in 1982, acted quickly to bring Slocum back from USC. Seven years later, Sherrill was gone and Slocum moved into the head coaching position.

Today he stands fifth among all active coaches in winning percentage at .772, just ahead of Florida State's Bobby Bowden and behind Tennessee's Phillip Fulmer, Penn State's Joe Paterno and Florida's Steve Spurrier (OSU's Cooper ranks seventh at .700).

"If you look at us in the previous decades, however you want, you see we are in the process of completing the best decade in the history of Texas A&M football," Slocum said. "For that, I'm proud."

Part of Slocum's success can be traced to his assistant coaches. That list has included

the likes of Bob Davis, Bob Toledo and Tommy Tuberville. Cooper praised Slocum and his current staff for the job they've done this year.

"I saw enough of the game with Kansas State to know they had to make some changes in the middle of the year," Cooper said.

"They had to go back to Stewart, for example. I thought he played pretty good the other night when the game was on the line. It's not like we're playing a team without a veteran quarterback."

Miscellaneous Notes

- Texas A&M's win over Kansas State marked the school's first win ever over a No. 1-ranked team. The Wildcats were No. 1 in the USA Today/ESPN coaches poll.

- The Big 12 title was A&M's first conference crown since 1993, when the Aggies won the Southwest Conference.

- This will mark the fourth time Ohio State and Texas A&M have collided on the gridiron.

Ohio State is a perfect 3-0 against the Aggies, winning 17-0 in 1963 in Columbus, 56-13 in 1970 in Columbus, and 28-12 in the 1987 Cotton Bowl.

In that Cotton Bowl win, OSU victimized Texas A&M quarterback Kevin Murray for five interceptions. Linebackers Chris Spielman and Michael Kee returned picks 24 yards and 49 yards, respectively, for touchdowns in the win. Quarterback Jim Karsatos and tailback Vince Workman added rushing touchdowns in the win as coach Earle Bruce's Buckeyes finished 10-3.

- A&M is 12-11 in bowl competition, including 2-5 under Slocum.

The Aggies have appeared in one Sugar

Bowl previously, winning the 1940 game over host Tulane 14-13 to wrap up the school's only national championship.

Last year the Aggies dropped a 29-23 decision to UCLA in the Cotton Bowl.

- Texas A&M was established in 1876 as the first public college in the Lone Star State. Set in College Station, A&M is centrally located between Houston, Dallas and San Antonio.

The school was once an all-male military school. It remained essentially that way until 1963, when the first women were admitted. Today it stands as one of the country's most diverse universities. Its enrollment of 41,461 ranks sixth nationally.

Participation in the Corps of Cadets is voluntary. The corps includes 2,100 men and women, making it the largest uniformed body on any U.S. college campus.

- Besides the coaches mentioned

above, A&M boasts a strong list of former All-American players, headed by 1957 Heisman Trophy winner John David Crow. Other notables include fullback Jack Pardee, safety Lester Hayes, kicker Tony Franklin, cornerback Aaron Glenn and running back Leeland McElroy.

- The tradition-laden A&M program is known for its "12th Man." That story dates to the 1922 Cotton Bowl when coach Dana Bible asked a former player, E. King Gill, attending the game and sitting in the press box to come to the sideline and suit up in case he was needed because of injuries.

Gill, a member of the A&M basketball team, changed into a uniform under the stands. He stood on the sideline the remainder of the game but did not play.

Today A&M students stand throughout games in the spirit of Gill, ever ready to do their part to help A&M win.

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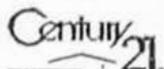
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Game 12: Ohio State vs. Texas A&M

Sugar Bowl Data

- **Date, Time:** Fri., Jan. 1, 1999; 8:30 p.m.
- **Location:** Louisiana Superdome; New Orleans
- **TV:** ABC (National)



About Texas A&M

- **1998 record:** 11-2 overall, 7-1 Big 12, first in South Division; **1997 record:** 9-4 overall, 6-2 Big 12, first in South Division. **Associated Press Ranking:** 9th.
- **Squad Information: Offensive Formation — Pro Set; Defensive Formation — 3-4; Starters Returning —** Offense 8, Defense 6, Kickers 1.
- **Top Players:** Tailback Dante Hall (243 carries, 1,024 yards, eight TDs); split end Chris Cole (38 catches, 667 yards, five TDs); quarterback Brannon Stewart (68-131, 1,002 yards, seven TDs, two INTs); defensive end Rocky Bernard (66 tackles, eight for loss, two sacks); linebacker Dat Nguyen (147 tackles, 22 for loss, four sacks, four forced fumbles, one INT); linebacker Warrick Holdman (97 tackles, 17 for loss, eight sacks).
- **Head Coach:** R.C. Slocum, 10th year at Texas A&M, 95-27-2; 10th year overall.
- **Series History:** OSU leads series 3-0; OSU coach John Cooper vs. Texas A&M, first meeting; Slocum vs. OSU, first meeting.
- **Texas A&M Schedule:** Aug. 31, vs. Florida State (Kickoff Classic), L 23-14; Sept. 12, Louisiana Tech, W 28-7; Sept. 19, at S. Mississippi, W 24-6; Sept. 26, North Texas, W 28-9; Oct. 3, at Kansas, W 24-21; Oct. 10, Nebraska W 28-21; Oct. 17, at Baylor, W 35-14; Oct. 24, Texas Tech, W 17-10; Oct. 31, at Oklahoma State, W 17-6; Nov. 7, Oklahoma, W 29-0; Nov. 14, Missouri, W 17-14; Nov. 27, at Texas, L 26-24; Dec. 5, vs. Kansas State (Big 12 Championship), W 36-33 (2 OT).
- **School Facts: Location —** College Station, Texas; **Enrollment —** 43,093; **Nickname —** Aggies; **Colors —** Maroon and White; **Conference —** Big 12; **Stadium —** Kyle Field (Surface, grass; Capacity, 58,000).

Projected Depth Charts

OHIO STATE OFFENSE		TEXAS A&M DEFENSE	
15 DEE MILLER, 6-1, 200, SR.	FL	95 ROCKY BERNARD, 6-3, 289, SO.	LE
4 Ken'Yon Rambo, 6-1, 190, SO.		97 Lonnie Madison, 6-3, 250, R.Fr.	
77 TYSON WALTER, 6-5, 305, SO.	LT	96 RON EDWARDS, 6-3, 262, SO.	NG
68 LeCharles Bentley, 6-3, 265, Fr.		90 Stephen Young, 6-0, 268, SO.	
58 ROB MURPHY, 6-5, 300, JR.	LG	99 RONALD FLEMONS, 6-5, 247, SO.	RE
65 Mike Gurr, 6-7, 270, SO.		55 Terry Nichols, 6-0, 253, R.Fr.	
63 KURT MURPHY, 6-4, 290, JR.	C	43 WARRICK HOLDMAN, 6-1, 230, SR.	OLB
78 Drew Elford, 6-4, 300, Jr.		23 Jason Glenn, 6-0, 220, SO.	
64 BEN GILBERT, 6-5, 295, JR.	RG	46 CORNELIUS ANTHONY, 6-0, 224, SO.	ILB
55 Tam Hopkins, 6-5, 295, SO.		44 Sean Coryatt, 6-0, 215, Jr.	
87 BROOKS BURRIS, 6-7, 290, SR.	RT	9 DAT NGUYEN, 6-0, 216, SR.	ILB
75 Henry Fleming, 6-7, 305, So.		59 Chad Frantzen, 6-2, 210, Jr.	
85 JOHN LUMPKIN, 6-8, 260, SR.	TE	40 ROYLYN BRADLEY, 6-1, 221, SO.	OLB
37 Kevin Houser, 6-3, 250, Jr.		2 Christian Rodriguez, 6-2, 233, R.Fr.	
7 JOE GERMAINE, 6-2, 205, SR.	QB	39 JASON WEBSTER, 5-10, 178, Jr.	CB
16 Mark Garcia, 6-4, 215, Sr.		21 Shun Horn, 5-9, 190, Sr.	
23 MATT KELLER, 6-0, 238, JR.	FB	48 RICH COADY, 6-1, 210, SR.	SS
30 Jamar Marron, 6-1, 235, Fr.		1 Michael Jameson, 5-10, 179, So.	
5 MICHAEL WILEY, 6-0, 195, JR.	TB	30 BRANDON JENNINGS, 6-1, 191, JR.	FS
33 Joe Montgomery, 5-11, 218, Sr.		5 Toye Jones, 6-2, 204, Sr.	
9 DAVID BOSTON, 6-3, 215, JR.	SE	18 SEDRICK CURRY, 6-2, 192, JR.	CB
80 Reggie Germany, 6-2, 195, So.		26 Jay Brooks, 5-9, 180, R.Fr.	
47 DAN STULTZ, 6-0, 198, SO.	PK	8 SHANE LECHLER, 6-2, 220, JR.	P
OHIO STATE DEFENSE		TEXAS A&M OFFENSE	
60 BRENT JOHNSON, 6-4, 265, SO.	DE	90 CHRIS COLE, 6-0, 186, JR.	SE
53 James Cotton, 6-4, 245, Jr.		16 Aaron Oliver, 6-0, 198, Sr.	
73 JOE BROWN, 6-6, 285, SO.	DT	53 REX TUCKER, 6-5, 230, SR.	LT
98 Mike Collins, 6-3, 290, Fr.		74 Tango McCauley, 6-4, 290, R.Fr.	
79 RYAN PICKETT, 6-3, 290, FR.	DT	73 CAMERON SPIKES, 6-3, 310, SR.	LG
90 Clinton Wayne, 6-3, 275, So.		70 Moses Wavahai, 6-5, 307, R.Fr.	LG
84 RODNEY BAILEY, 6-5, 255, SO.	DE	77 SETH MCKINNEY, 6-3, 293, R-Fr.	R
48 Matt Lavin, 6-3, 240, Jr.		56 Toyy McCarthy, 6-2, 283, So.	
32 NAIL DIGGS, 6-4, 235, SO.	MLB	62 SENSI HEIMULI, 6-2, 303, JR.	RG
10 Joe Cooper, 6-2, 213, So.		71 Chris Valletta, 6-2, 306, So.	
45 ANDY KATZENMOYER, 6-4, 255, JR.	MLB	75 ANDY VINCENT, 6-3, 302, JR.	RT
30 Jason Ott, 6-4, 240, R.Fr.		79 Shea Holder, 6-5, 304, Jr.	
35 JERRY RUZINSKI, 6-2, 225, SR.	WLB	88 LEROY HODGE, 6-2, 204, JR.	FL
49 Tim Chestwood, 6-4, 215, R.Fr.		42 Chris Taylor, 5-10, 176, So.	
11 ANTOINE WINFIELD, 5-9, 180, SR.	CB	89 DAN CAMPBELL, 6-5, 262, SR.	TE
3 David Mitchell, 6-1, 195, So.		87 Derrick Spiller, 6-3, 257, Sr.	
13 DAMON MOORE, 5-11, 200, SR.	SS	7 BRANNON STEWART, 6-2, 221, SR.	QB
20 Central McClellan, 5-11, 190, Sr.		6 Shane Lechler, 6-2, 220, Jr.	
1 GARY BERRY, 6-0, 195, JR.	FS	34 DANTE HALL, 6-8, 190, JR.	RB
17 Percy King, 6-4, 210, Jr.		8 Sirr Parker, 5-11, 190, So.	
19 AHMED PLUMMER, 6-0, 190, JR.	CB	28 JA'MAR TOOMBS, 6-1, 235, Fr.	FB
18 Nate Clemens, 6-0, 185, Fr.		39 Will Simpson, 5-11, 240, Sr.	
41 BRENT BARTHOLOMEW, 6-2, 210, SR.	P	37 RUSSELL BYNUM, 5-9, 176, SO.	PK

How We See It

OSU RUSH OFFENSE vs. TEXAS A&M RUSH DEFENSE

The Buckeyes did a superb job sealing off Michigan in the regular-season finale, and Michael Wiley came up big and provided a spark with a game-breaking touchdown run. Look for the springy Superdome turf to help Wiley break a couple of big runs. A&M's 3-4 set isn't conducive to stopping the run, though linebackers Dat Nguyen, the best in the nation, and Cornelius Anthony are great at plugging the gaps. This one comes down to attitude, and both teams should have plenty of that. **EDGE: EVEN**

TEXAS A&M RUSH OFFENSE vs. OSU RUSH DEFENSE

The Aggies did a solid job toting the pig against Kansas State in the Big 12 title game and have really hung their hat on the ground game most of the year. Dante Hall has gone over 1,000 yards, though he won't do anything flashy. More of a workhorse, Hall gets better as the game goes on. Fullback Ja'Mar Toombs has been used more and more, and Sirr Parker emerged big time against K-State, scoring the tying and winning touchdowns. A&M backs are also solid receivers out of the backfield, so OSU linebackers will have to be on guard. No one's run against the Buckeyes all year, and it won't start here. **EDGE: OHIO STATE**

OSU PASS OFFENSE vs. TEXAS A&M PASS DEFENSE

Though very opportunistic, A&M's secondary really isn't much to brag about. Safety Brandon Jennings is a big hitter and the team leader with four interceptions, but corners Jason Webster and Sedrick Curry gamble way too much and are often out of position. It's doubtful they've seen a pair of receivers as good as David Boston and Dee Miller, and if OSU's line holds up its end of the bargain — unlike its last trip to the Big Easy — Joe Germaine should have plenty of time to pick the Aggies apart. LB Warrick Holdman is solid in coverage, so swing passes may be out. A&M's sophomore front has been hit-and-miss, a promising note for Ohio State. **EDGE: OHIO STATE**

TEXAS A&M PASS OFFENSE vs. OSU PASS DEFENSE

Even if he did reclaim his starting spot because of injury, Brannon Stewart made the most of it, strafing Kansas State for over 300 yards. Though not blessed with a terribly strong arm, Stewart makes good decisions and can get out of trouble with his feet. Chris Cole is A&M's big-play receiver, averaging over 17 yards per grab, but the Aggies' pass routes are downright pedestrian, though A&M has been going to the pass more lately. Tight end Derrick Spiller is a pro prospect with speed to go down the middle, so he can't be overlooked. It's questionable how well OSU can get to Stewart with A&M's big, physical line. **EDGE: EVEN**

SPECIAL TEAMS

A&M's Shane Lechler is one of the nation's best punters, getting great hang time and averaging nearly 44 yards per boot. He's clutch, too, hitting 12 punts of 50 yards or more this season. A&M's return games are average, with Hall and Chris Taylor causing fear on kickoffs but doing little on punts. Kicker Russell Bynum is accurate but doesn't have much distance, so he won't be called on to win a game late. Lechler gets rid of the ball in a hurry, so it may be tough for OSU to change the game here. **EDGE: TEXAS A&M**

INTANGIBLES

The Aggies won't be awed by their surroundings, and they seem to come up big in bowl games — just ask UCLA, a newly a victim in last year's Cotton Bowl. Two neutral-site games yielded solid results, with a narrow loss to Florida State at the Kickoff Classic and the narrow win over Kansas State in the Big 12 Championship. The fact A&M wasn't even supposed to be in this game could work in its favor, but the Buckeyes feel they have some redemption in store for last year's poor showing against the Seminoles. A&M is 4-27 against teams ranked fifth or higher and has never tasted victory against the Buckeyes in three tries, including the 1987 Cotton Bowl. Despite comments to the contrary, you have to wonder if OSU won't be wondering about what could have been with the Fiesta Bowl. **EDGE: EVEN**

OUR PREDICTIONS

Steve Helwagen (10-1): This was supposed to be Ohio State's year. A loss at midseason basically spoiled that notion. But there is a flicker of hope left on that national championship candle, providing Florida State goes on and beats Tennessee in the Fiesta Bowl. OSU needs an inspired showing in this bowl game to finish the year on a high note, and I think — just like it responded against Michigan — it will deliver. Texas A&M is by no means an easy mark, but the Buckeyes should control this one from the outset. **Ohio State 40-20**

Jeff Rapp (10-1): If OSU fans don't embrace irony, they sure should be used to it by now. Consider that in this year of alphabet soup known as the BCS, the Buckeyes could have started the whole manic season by playing in the Kickoff Classic but turned down the offer. The team waiting in the wings was Texas A&M of all people. The team that jumped into OSU's vacant spot — Florida State — is now set to play in the Fiesta Bowl (aka the Fiesta) thanks largely to the extra win over the Aggies and the subsequent computer points. Even more irony: The Buckeyes are back to the very building where they vowed to change their losing bowl ways exactly a year ago. If they do it, it will indeed be a very memorable season. Here's guessing OSU will prevail by unleashing Boston and Miller, although A&M's gritty offensive line and penchant for big plays in the clutch are major causes for concern. Strap yourself in. **Ohio State 34-20**

Mike Wachsman (10-1): The last time Texas A&M opened the season with a preseason game (1996), it lost to BYU in the Pigskin Classic and tumbled downhill from there, going 6-6. R.C. Slocum blamed the extra game, but this year's team didn't seem too down after the Florida State loss in the Kickoff Classic. Nguyen is the heart and soul of the outfit and won't stop fighting until the final whistle. The Aggies haven't been blown out by anyone and don't figure to be here, either. A&M will use the lack-of-respect card as motivation while the Buckeyes are fighting for a share of the national title, media style. It will be interesting to see if OSU can beat Michigan and win a bowl game in the same year for the first time since 1982. **Ohio State 26-16**



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OHIO STATE VS. TEXAS A&M

LB Nguyen Leader Of The Wrecking Crew

Continued From Page 31

playing the game."

Defense Leads The Way

While Texas A&M's offense came to the forefront in the second half of the K-State game, it is the Aggies' defense that will likely keep the OSU coaching staff up late at night over the next several weeks.

"We know they are going to be a tough defensive football team," OSU coach John Cooper said of A&M's defense, known nationally as 'The Wrecking Crew.' "They have that reputation year in and year out."

Leading the way for A&M's 3-4 defense was Lombardi Award winner Dat Nguyen at inside linebacker. Just 6-0, 216 pounds, Nguyen does not cast a big shadow — that is until they put the ball in play.

Going into the bowl game, this four-year starter has 517 career tackles. He logged 17 of them and an interception in the win over Kansas State.

Nguyen's inspirational story began before his birth when his family fled war-torn Vietnam. His parents relocated to the U.S., first in Arkansas — where Nguyen was born — and later to Rockport, Texas. There, the family overcame social and financial hardships to create a pair of successful businesses.

Likewise, the undersized Nguyen has overcome a lot.

"Dat's been the leader of that defense," Slocum said. "We play with a lot of enthusiasm, and I think our defense draws that from Dat Nguyen. He's a fierce competitor. He inspires the rest of the defense."

"He's played when he's banged up. He's played with great effort. We've never had a game where we came out and said, 'Well, Dat didn't really play hard or he didn't give us good effort.'"

Nguyen keys a unit that allowed opposing teams just 14.6 points and 289.3 yards per game.

"They've played well as a unit. I don't think we're a greatly talented defensive unit," Slocum said. "We don't have players who just line up and physically dominate people."

"But as a unit, we've got good speed. We've been able to contain people."

The Aggies have maintained the Wrecking Crew moniker this season despite starting the year with just four other returning starters besides Nguyen: outside linebacker Warrick Holdman, cornerback Jason Webster and safeties Brandon Jennings and Rich Coady.

Holdman, a 6-1, 230-pound junior, led A&M with seven sacks this season. Sophomore Roylin Bradley excelled at the other outside spot, notching six sacks. Sophomore Cornelius Anthony stepped into an opening at inside linebacker, finishing second to Nguyen in tackles with 93.

In the secondary, safeties Coady and Jennings excel at stopping the run, both ending up with over 70 tackles.

Most of the rebuilding was done up front, where a trio of sophomores have stepped up. Size could be a concern with this group, though. Nose guard Ron Edwards goes 262 pounds, while end Rocky Bernard is 269 and his counterpart Ronald Flemmons is 247.

A&M Firmly Grounded

Stewart's heroics in the Big 12 title game (see Texas A&M Notes, pages 32-33) belied A&M's true calling card on offense — the running game.

But don't be confused. The Aggies aren't a team that simply lines up and tries to run over its opponents.

"We try to get the ball into open spaces to players that can do exciting things with the football after the handoff or catch," said A&M offensive coordinator Steve Kragthorpe. "We want to attack our opponent from all angles."

Junior Dante Hall (5-8, 190) is the leading weapon in the rushing game, totaling 1,024

yards on the year. He came up big in the Big 12 title game with 113 yards on 27 carries.

Hall splits carries with Parker (5-11, 190), the heroic pass catcher against K-State, and freshman fullback Ja'Mar Toombs (6-1, 235).

When A&M attempts a pass, junior Chris Cole (6-0, 186) is the primary weapon. He had 38 catches for 667 yards and five touchdowns this season. Sophomore flanker Chris Taylor had four catches for 99 yards against K-State after logging just 11 catches during the regular season.

Seniors Dan Campbell and Derrick Spiller form one of the nation's top tight end tandems.

The offensive line has come together nicely, although opponents have averaged over three sacks a game. The key names are junior Semisi Heimuli (6-2, 303) at right guard and senior Cameron Spikes (6-3, 310) at left guard.

On special teams, kicker Russell Bynum has nailed his last 10 field goal attempts, while Shane Lechler — who will serve as Stewart's backup at quarterback — is an All-American-caliber punter with a 44-yard average.

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THE VIEW FROM 15TH AND HIGH

Buckeyes Land On Their Feet In Sugar Bowl

After all the waiting and speculating, we finally know who's going where in the college bowl picture. Given the fact that the Fiesta Bowl and Rose Bowl were pretty much out, Ohio State did fairly well for itself with a berth in the Sugar Bowl.

The Buckeyes are in one of the BCS bowls and will be playing in prime time with no other bowl opposition. It should be great exposure for the program, especially if the Bucks can defeat Texas A&M.

About the only concern I have with the Buckeyes' match-up is how playing an Aggie team with two losses might affect OSU's slim chances at a share of the national championship. Drawing formerly top-ranked Kansas State would have given OSU a better shot at staking a title claim if Tennessee should stumble against Florida State in the Fiesta Bowl.

Of course, this championship speculation all assumes that Ohio State will beat A&M, not an easy assumption when you consider the Aggies have already defeated Nebraska and K-State this season. The Buckeyes should have their hands full.

Leading up to the bowl selections, there was much hand-wringing in Buckeyeland, as OSU followers feared that the 10-1 Bucks would end up in the Citrus Bowl. That would have been a tropical vacation when compared to the plight of Kansas State, which, with the same one loss, plummeted all the way to the Alamo Bowl against an 8-4 Purdue.

When you chart the bowl paths of teams like FSU, Ohio State and Kansas State, you realize there's some truth in the old adage that if you're going to lose, lose early. The Seminoles were the first of those teams to lose and they rallied all the way back into the championship game. Then came the Buckeyes, who lost but ended up in the Sugar Bowl. And then there's the Wildcats, who remained undefeated all the way until Dec. 5.

Enjoy San Antonio, guys.

While all of this bowl jockeying has left most clamoring for a championship playoff, count me as one of the few who long for the old days, when the big bowls had tie-ins for league champions and worked independently to create the best match-ups they could. I miss seeing numerous bowl reps in the press box at Ohio State as the season moved into November, shaking hands and passing out lapel pins as they hoped that if the Buckeyes didn't go to the Rose Bowl, they would bring their legions of fans to Jacksonville, San Diego, Tempe or Memphis.

While under the old system all of the major bowls had some meaning and the Rose Bowl was perhaps the most prestigious bowl of all, the BCS seems to have rendered all but the championship game fairly meaningless. And what was so wrong about spending the off-season arguing about who the real champion was? Usually there wasn't that much of an argument.

There's still plenty of arguing. Now it's generally about who should be playing for the championship. And this season, with a bunch of good teams with just one loss, has proven that even an attempt at crowning a champion on the field isn't foolproof. Open it up to four teams and there will be arguments about who those teams should be. Open it up to eight

THE VIEW FROM 15TH AND HIGH

Frank Moskowitz, Publisher

teams and you'll hear from teams 9, 10 and 11.

Give me the days when Big Ten teams knew that the only goal was to get to the Rose Bowl, a destination that only 21 teams in the country had the opportunity to reach. After spending my entire adult life in Big Ten country, it's hard for me to be too enthused about a system that makes Pasadena a secondary destination.

But whatever the powers that be do, please come up with a system that allows schools to know their holiday destination before Dec. 5. December is not the time to be trying to make travel plans on three weeks' notice. A lot of those bowl seats are empty for a reason.

Meaningless bowl match-ups announced at the last minute hardly spin the turnstiles.

Finally, The Contest Prize

After weeks of waiting, we can finally announce details of the Buckeye Bowl Bonanza prize. But first, a reminder that our two-for-one gift offer is still available and has proved very popular among Buckeye gift givers. Buy one subscription to BSB and get another one absolutely free. As the shopping days diminish, this is a great idea for those Buckeye fans still on your list.

People taking advantage of this two-for-one offer will automatically be entered in the contest, with its grand prize of a trip for two to the Sugar Bowl in New Orleans. The trip includes charter air from Columbus, four nights at the New Orleans Marriott located at the base of the French Quarter near the Riverwalk district, a New Year's Eve dinner/dance, airport and game transfers in New Orleans and, of course, tickets to see the Buckeyes take on Texas A&M.

For more information on the contest and the special gift offer, see our ad on page 19 or call (614) 486-2202.

Cotton Bowl Recalled

One of the favorite pictures in my office is one of Cris Carter skydiving between two Texas A&M defenders to catch a pass in OSU's 28-12 victory over the Aggies at the Cotton Bowl after the 1986 season. Carter appears to be well over three feet off the ground and there, in the background, is Ohio State coach Earle Bruce, in charcoal gray suit and fedora, surveying the action.

In 18 years at the helm of BSB, I've seen a lot of football games and not all of them stand out anymore. But I still clearly remember the last time the Buckeyes played Sugar Bowl opponent Texas A&M.

Ohio State had started that 1986 season with a loss to Alabama in the Kickoff Classic and an embarrassing 40-7 defeat at Washington and the heat was on "Ol' 9-3 Earle." The Buckeyes bounced back, however, to reel off nine straight wins before a heartbreaking loss to Michigan that left them as Big Ten co-champions and headed to the Cotton Bowl, which at the time was a more prestigious bowl than it is today.

One thing he was good at was helping

his teams rebound after slow starts — 1982 and this 1986 season for example — and another was leading his teams to dynamic victories over quality opponents such as the 1985 win over Iowa or this 1986 win over A&M.

The Buckeyes, with the normally drab Bruce surprising the football world by appearing in the now famous suit and hat, went into the Aggies' backyard and just dominated the Jackie Sherrill-led squad. The Buckeyes, sporting new red shoes, picked off five passes on the way to the victory.

Bruce parlayed the Cotton Bowl win into a five-year offer from Arizona for the then hefty amount of \$300,000 per year to take over the helm of the Wildcats. Ohio State president Ed Jennings refused to offer Bruce a contract extension, but the Buckeye coach still went with his heart and stayed in Columbus.

A few months later, Carter was ruled ineligible for dealings with an agent, starting a chain of events that eventually led to Bruce's ouster the week of the 1987 Michigan game, less than a year after his triumph in Dallas.

But the picture in my office continues

to serve as a reminder of one of Ohio State's finer moments. Hopefully, this year's Buckeyes will also write a lasting chapter in the school's history at the expense of Texas A&M.

The End Of A Big Ten Era

The recent resignation of Hayden Fry as football coach at Iowa marked the end of an era in the Big Ten. While Fry may not have had the type of impact on the football field in the conference that a Woody Hayes or a Bo Schembechler did, he was certainly one of the more colorful coaches in Big Ten history.

But don't underestimate Fry's success on the field. In his 20 seasons at the Hawkeye helm, he took his teams to three Rose Bowls. Only Michigan, with eight trips to Pasadena since 1979, has been more than Iowa in that time. Ohio State has also made three trips, Wisconsin two (counting this year) and Illinois, Michigan State, Penn State and Northwestern one each.

Fry did this with a team that had not previously been to the Rose Bowl since the 1958 season and had finished as high as fourth in the conference only once in the 18 years prior to this arrival, including six last-place finishes.

But more than for bringing success back to Iowa football with 14 bowl appearances in 20 years, Fry will be remembered as one of the league's true gentlemen.

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