

BUCKEYE SPORTS BULLETIN

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Vol. 18, No. 24

"For The Buckeye Fan Who Needs To Know More"

March 27, 1999

Final Four!

OSU's Dream Season Continues In St. Pete After Regional Win

By JEFF RAPP
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

How do you like your sports drama? Do you like zero-to-hero stories with euphoric endings like "Rudy" and "Hoosiers"?

If so, the 1998-99 Ohio State men's basketball season, still going strong with a trip to the Final Four, no doubt has captivated you as well.

Do you like irony? Consider this: Ohio State freshman Boban Savovic didn't know what the NCAA Tournament was a few weeks ago.

Just last year, Scoonie Penn was sitting out as a transfer, Ken Johnson was being introduced to the cold, harsh Big Ten, Jason Singleton looked lost in OSU's new system, Brian Brown was in high school, George Reese was tucked away in a tiny Illinois junior college, and Michael Redd was languishing as the only standout player on an 8-22 team.

More ironic, OSU's unforeseen rise to national prominence has coincided with a dreadful year in Ann Arbor, another mediocre one in Bloomington, and a second-round exit from the NCAA Tournament by Cincinnati.

Do you like a tense mystery? No one seems to be able to figure out just how the Buckeyes could be sitting on a 27-8 record and a golden ticket to St. Petersburg, Fla. Penn and head coach Jim O'Brien appear to be the main culprits, but there are those who think the surprise ending could depend on Johnson or Singleton.

Do you like to be emotionally spent by a good tearjerker a la "Field of Dreams"? You would have loved the moments following OSU's upset victory over St. John's in the regional final, where the net-cutting ceremony was overtaken by a watery-eyed outpouring of love.

Do you instead like your drama straight from a cup like a Ken Burns documentary? Then you'd be interested to know the Buckeyes are in the Final Four for the first

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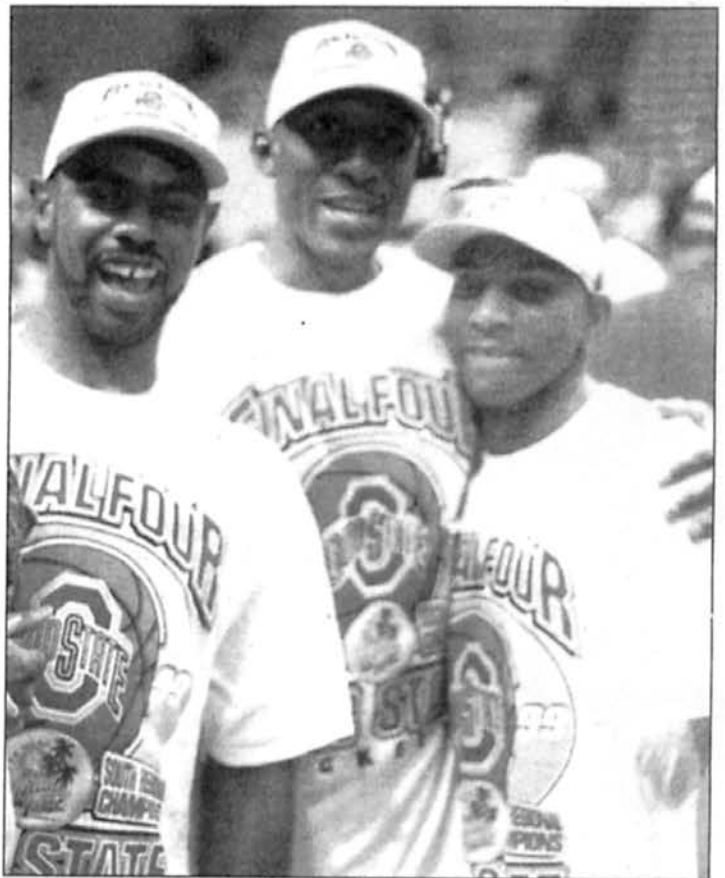
time in 31 years and the ninth time in school history. The Buckeyes lost in the finals of the first-ever NCAA Tournament some 60 years ago and have claimed the title just once in that span, that coming in the magical season of 1959-60.

Of course, if the answer to any of these questions is yes, then you have to adore the improbable cast of characters who won the NCAA's South region March 20 and claimed a spot in the Final Four next to superpowers Duke, Connecticut and Michigan State. If you were already an adamant fan of the Buckeyes, you probably don't even know what to do with yourself.

But don't feel bad. The Buckeyes are dealing with the newness of the whole thing themselves.

"It was really tough to suffer the way we did last year, and I can't tell you what it means to be where we are right now," said Redd, a 6-6 sophomore who already has put his stamp on this tournament by scoring 21.0 points per game. "I grew up watching these kind of games on TV and now I'm part of them. It's tremendous.

"I was just thinking about all the strug-



STEVE HELWAGEN

THE CAPTAINS — OSU basketball captains Neshaun Coleman (left), Jason Singleton (center) and Scoonie Penn bask in the spotlight of a Final Four berth after their team's 77-74 win over St. John's in the South Regional championship game.

gles we had last year, how the fans stayed with us and all the crying we did after games and just wondering when it would ever get better. I followed (the Buckeyes) when they had Jimmy Jackson and I've seen them suffer for five or six years. They used to be called the Suckeyes instead of the Buckeyes. I've seen it all."

Added O'Brien in a more raspy than normal voice, "It's the Final Four. You spend your entire career trying to get to

this place. There are players and coaches who have been involved in hundreds of games who never get the opportunity to get to this, and here we are.

"I'm just thankful to get this chance." After OSU held on to oust St. John's, thousands of Buckeye fans who had made the six-hour drive to Knoxville, Tenn., stayed in Thompson-Boling Arena to soak

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OPINION

So Many Memories From Knoxville

Sometimes it is difficult to put into words exactly how you feel, especially when you are just a few feet away when history is being made.

But as Ohio State's extremely improbable run to the Final Four was being played out right before the nation's eyes, a wave of emotions and memories came over me.

As someone who has literally been forced to watch and report on the decimation of the program over the last six years, I can tell you I've seen my share of despair. But this Final Four trip will make up for every one of those nights where the Buckeyes bumbled the ball off their leg against teams like Drexel or South Florida before 6,700 people at St. John Arena.

There were home losses to the likes of those schools as well as Miami (Ohio), Ohio U. and Bowling Green, road losses where they never figured, and enough players on the police blotter to make the Dallas Cowboys blush.

The Buckeyes averaged 9-1/2 wins over the last five years. They stand at 27-8 now, nearly tripling that figure.

While this Ohio State team enjoyed an easy ride to the Sweet 16 with wins over out-matched Murray State and Detroit, the Buckeyes took their game to a new level in Knoxville.

There, OSU pulled out a tight one against an Auburn team ranked in the top five all year and then dominated St. John's for 38 minutes before having to hold off a furious charge late in the game to win the regional title.

This will ramble a little bit, but I'm going to share some of what I saw, heard and felt as Ohio State continued one of the most remarkable turnarounds in college basketball history.

The postgame celebration was surreal. Ordinarily, these are things that happen on TV to other schools. But no, these were your Ohio State Buckeyes cavorting on the floor.

All I could think and mumble to myself was "They are cutting down the freaking nets."

Scoonie Penn was running around the court doing a victory lap. Michael Redd stood silently on one side of the court and just stared at the crowd. Jim O'Brien broke down and was doing the Dirty Bird at center court with his team.

At one point, O'Brien turned to Bill Hosket, a link to OSU's last Final Four team in 1968, and said, "Are you kidding me or what?"

You could just see the raw emotion as Mike Bordner, an OSU trainer for 32 years, cut his snippet of the net. Bords grabbed senior Neshawn Coleman and hugged him. For those two, it's been a long ride.

You also had to feel happy for Brice Westfall, the equipment manager for the Buckeyes since 1974.

It didn't take Penn long to leap into the crowd and find his mother, Allegra.

"She is the most important person in my life," Penn said. "I'm happy she was able to be here to experience this with me."

Penn, OSU's driving force, showed the world he is one of the nation's best with his play against both Auburn and St. John's.

Equally big were Redd's contributions. It was touching to see him and Penn share a long embrace just moments after the final buzzer.

"They are one of if not the best combination in the country," O'Brien said.

There was Kenny Johnson, a kid recruiting analysts said would never start at Ohio State, smiling from ear to ear after almost single-handedly rejecting St. John's.

As the final seconds of the game ticked down, I couldn't help but think back to the regional final with Michigan in 1992. If Erick Barkley had pulled the trigger on a three-pointer and hit it, it would have been a long off-season for the Buckeyes. OSU nearly blew a nine-point lead with 1:30 to play, but Barkley lost his dribble in the final seconds, ending SJU's hopes.

SJU coach Mike Jarvis just exudes class. Questioned by CBS Michelle Tafoya afterward, Jarvis said Penn did not foul Barkley on the turnover with seven seconds left. It would have been much easier for him to say the light contact caused the miscue.

Then, after meeting with the media, Jarvis

EDITOR'S NOTEBOOK

with
Steve Helwagen

congratulated several of the OSU players and O'Brien. One reporter overheard O'Brien tell Jarvis it was too bad either team had to lose.

Jarvis replied, "Don't worry about me. I'll be around. You guys just go down there and do the best you can."

Jarvis is right about the being around part — his team loses only center Tyrone Grant. He did say, though, "I need to go out and recruit some people to check Redd and Penn."

Seniors Coleman and Jason Singleton have to just be absolutely beside themselves. After winning 10, 10 and eight games the last three years, they can match that total with a win over UConn in the national semis.

I give these guys credit for surviving four years after all of their buddies got the boot.

Speaking of those people — and I don't mean this in a mean way — but it had to be hard for guys like Shaun Stonerook, Damon Stringer and Jermaine Tate to watch any of that game. That, very easily, could have been them dancing on national TV.

My thoughts also drifted to the likes of Charles "Program Killer" Macon, Greg Simpson, Gerald Eaker and the rest of the outlaws.

Ohio State has finally risen above all the pain those players and others had caused Randy Ayers, their school and the community with their behavior.

I hope, wherever they were, their TV reception was bad.

And what about Ayers? The former coach has been pilloried for all but killing the program. But those were at least seven of his recruits, including Redd, Singleton and Johnson, out there doing it. I hope he had his signature wry smile working somewhere watching that.

That brings me, logically, to O'Brien. He separated the wheat from the chaff, so to speak, after arriving on campus in April 1997. Those moves set the tone for this program.

With Penn as his floor leader, O'Brien has everybody associated with the program reading off the same page.

It was so touching to see him and the two daughters he has raised since his wife's death from Hodgkin's disease in 1991 hugging on the floor just seconds after the buzzer.

After 22 long years in the business — including a painful departure from his alma mater — O'Brien and his crack staff will be coaching on the game's largest stage.

As far as strategy goes, the move to start Brian Brown has been a stroke of genius. That allows Penn to drift over to the two, freeing him to catch and hit big shots when needed.

There was Andy Geiger, in his 35th year of athletic administration, getting his first trip to an NCAA men's Final Four — at least as a participant.

I've been to a lot of Final Fours, but I always wondered what it would be like to be a part of it," Geiger said, fighting back tears.

It was, of course, his stellar hiring of O'Brien, perceived by many as a "second tier guy," that helped make it happen.

There were cryptic notes on the OSU locker room blackboard after both games in Knoxville.

After the Auburn game, the note read, "Coach of the Year, Jim O'Brien, Cancel Dinner." The references were to Auburn's Cliff Ellis getting the coach of the year honor over O'Brien and to several OSU players overhearing Auburn trying to make dinner reservations for the Friday off day. Boban Savovic was believed to be the writer.

Two days later, the same blackboard had these words, "One Shining Moment." Nobody knows who put that there.

"I walked in after the game and saw it," O'Brien said. "One of the kids must have written it. It speaks for itself."

The fan following for these Buckeyes was absolutely phenomenal. OSU had at least 15,000 fans, maybe more, at both Indianapolis and Knoxville.

With Tennessee on spring break, the OSU students and fans took over Knoxville, a city I would liken to Zanesville on steroids.

In one bar, they reveled as the DJ played "Hang On Sloopie" — also known now as "Hang On Scoonie." Then, as the DJ tried to "regain control" of the bar and show the Buckeyes they were still in Vols country by playing "Rocky Top," the OSU faithful drowned out the music by chanting "Let's Go Bucks! Let's Go Bucks!"

At Thompson-Boling Arena, the largest pop for the regional came on Singleton's two-hand slam off the behind-the-back pass from Brown. I'd say that play will make CBS' "One Shining Moment" video.

One astute OSU fan and BSB reader from Cincinnati spotted Kentucky's stately athletic director, C.M. Newton, head of the NCAA selection committee. The fan put his arm around him and said, "Hey, C.M., thanks for putting us in the South, brother."

Newton actually smiled. Now, that was a priceless moment.

I could not help but think that next year was supposed to be the year Ohio State would make the Final Four.

But Penn, Redd and their cohorts have jumped the gun on that and decided to crash the party a year early.

Forgive me for daydreaming, but I have to believe that if a certain Big Ten school wins its conference next year, it would get the No. 1 seed in the Midwest and could play its opening- and second-round games in Cleveland, its regional in Detroit and the Final Four in Indianapolis.

Final Thoughts

I've made it a habit during my five years here to pick the Final Four winners.

Without too much fanfare, I am taking Ohio State to upset UConn. Sure, the Huskies figure to control the boards, and Richard "Rip" Hamilton is among the nation's best.

But point guard Khalid El-Amin is overrated — I heard one OSU fan say, "Bring on UConn. I want the little fat guy" — and I'm not so sure Redd shouldn't be considered a match for Rip.

Moreover, paraphrasing Dan Aykroyd from the Blues Brothers, "These Buckeyes are on a mission from God."

In the other semifinal, I like Michigan State to give Duke a real run. It would be neat to see two Big Ten teams play for the championship. But Duke simply has too much.

Give the Dookies the nod over MSU and then OSU in the title game. I know O'Brien cringes at the thought of "settling for anything," but at least 62 other teams would like to say they had the chance to coronate Duke.

Then again, everybody keeps telling me, "Hey, anything can happen now."

I wonder if Nike will break out an Ohio State-themed "Madness" commercial for the Final Four. After all, that is their swoosh on Penn's uniform pants.

They keep running the North Carolina and Arizona ones, and they haven't been playing for several weeks.

I would be remiss in writing this column if I did not recognize the imminent departure of OSU's senior associate athletic director, Paul Krebs.

Krebs, headed to Bowling Green as the AD, has been one of the athletic department's key administrators as Geiger's right-hand man. The football and basketball programs are arguably as high as they've ever been, and the department's infrastructure and personnel are among (or will be among) the nation's best.

According to insiders, the Schottenstein Center would not have opened on time if Krebs had not shepherded the project literally every day over the final months. He also helped get the Bill Davis baseball stadium built.

Congratulations to Krebs on his new job. Ohio State, while it will certainly go on, will miss him.

COVER STORY: BUCKEYES IN THE FINAL FOUR

O'Brien: Don't Think Of Us As A Cinderella

Continued From Page 1

up the magnitude of the win and watch their heroes celebrate.

One of the most bubbly observers was athletic director Andy Geiger.

"We're going. This is unbelievable," said Geiger, who brought O'Brien to Columbus after firing Randy Ayers just two short years ago. "It is a dream come true. I've been going to Final Fours for a long time and I dreamed that someday my school would participate in one. I am happy about that."

Don't Call Them Cinderella

Geiger is so enthused by the progress of the program that he is prepared to sign O'Brien to a handsome contract extension (see Ohio State Insider, page 4).

"This team just kept getting better," Geiger said after the Buckeyes' victory over St. John's. "It is important to understand there is an element of rags-to-riches in this story."

"But this is a good basketball team. This isn't fluky. You don't win 27 games by accident. Tonight they faced down one of America's best basketball teams. This was just an awesome basketball game."

By dumping top-seeded Auburn in SEC country and upending one of the tournament's hottest teams in St. John's, OSU pulled off two eye-opening upsets in Knoxville and will be surrounded by the three remaining No. 1 seeds in St. Petersburg. That has caused reporters to use the hackneyed Cinderella phrase when referring to Ohio State, even though the Buckeyes are now 10-2 vs. ranked opponents.

"I don't think of us as a Cinderella team," O'Brien said. "I think that term typically applies to a team that keeps advancing through the tournament in an unlikely fashion."

"We've had a pretty good season. We did get a four seed, and we've played relatively well from beginning to end."

As far as the Buckeyes are concerned,



TERRY GILLIAM

WELCOME HOME — OSU head coach Jim O'Brien uses a bullhorn to address a crowd of about 1,000 people who greeted the Buckeyes after their NCAA South region win over St. John's March 20. The fans waited until 1 a.m. to see the Buckeyes at the Schottenstein Center.

they proved the best team won the South region.

"I think the great thing about this is we earned every win," Penn said. "There was no luck involved. We went out and out-executed all four teams and played winning basketball."

"We're a confident team right now. We feel like we can take on any challenge right now."

Redd, Penn Tear It Up

One thing is clear about OSU's success — Penn and Redd are the driving forces. The 5-10 Penn was named the most outstanding player of the region after averaging 17.5 points, 4.5 assists, 1.5 steals and an astonishing 7.3 rebounds in the four tourney games. In joining Penn on the all-region team, Redd shot 47.9 percent from the field, committed just six total turnovers

and pulled down 6.0 rebounds a game to go with his scoring.

And no statistic can measure what they did at key times in the four wins.

"They are one of if not the best combination in the country," O'Brien said of his guards. "They complement each other well, and they are two of the best kids you would ever want to coach."

St. John's coach Mike Jarvis faced OSU's Final Four opponent, UConn, three times this season and believes Penn and Redd match right up with the Huskies' vaunted pair of Khalid El-Amin and Richard Hamilton.

"I don't know if we played a better backcourt this year," Jarvis said of the OSU duo. "I don't think we have. I'm going to be at the game to find out. We're all going to be in for a treat next week when we see the backcourts play against one another."

As the Buckeyes continued to advance, the media crush grew for Penn, especially from Eastern-based reporters. It soon became clear even to those who don't cover the team on a regular basis that O'Brien has an affinity for his junior point guard just like everyone else.

"You hesitate to use the word love, but I do love this kid," O'Brien said. "He's been a very special player and person for all of these coaches — we've known him since he was a sophomore in high school. Obviously there's a very good bond between us."

But O'Brien is quick to point out the Buckeyes have two legitimate stars in Penn and Redd, the latter the top-scoring freshman in the country last season at 21.9 points per game.

"I think it's good to feel like no one can guard you," Redd said. "I know I take that attitude. Right now Scoonie and I are clicking and everyone is playing their roles."

'Other' Buckeyes Fill In Cracks

Most national analysts seem to be sold on Penn and Redd but often discount OSU's chances against UConn because of a perceived void inside.

"I really don't understand that," Redd said. "Those guys are playing great. Ken has been blocking shots and setting a tone for us, and Jason really helps us in all aspects. People should know by now what they mean to us."

The 6-11 Johnson, in fact, swatted seven shots in the win over the Red Storm, one shy of the South region record held by Wake Forest's Tim Duncan. He also added 12 points in the win on six impressive post-up hoops in a performance that was huge. With that clutch outing, he joined Penn and Redd on the all-region team.

His seven rejections upped his season total to 97, which tied the single-season record set by Brad Sellers in 1986.

Singleton, a 6-5 senior simply playing to extend his college career, helped hold down two of the most talented forwards in the nation in Auburn's Chris Porter and St. John's swingman Ron Artest.

Porter, the skywalking SEC player of the year, tallied 15 points and 11 rebounds but also committed five turnovers and fouled out with the game on the line. Artest, a chiseled sophomore who many believe has an NBA future, was held to nine points — six below his average — and also committed five turnovers.

When Singleton wasn't frustrating them on one end, he was hitting 9 of 11 field goals in the two games and helping the offense run smoothly. He also had a double-double in the first-round win over Murray State.

Marching Through The South

Even after the Buckeyes downed powerful Auburn, they were underdogs in the game with St. John's.

When asked if a loss to the Johnnies would leave a bad taste in his mouth, O'Brien replied, "There's nothing that can happen that can change my feeling about what we've done this year. I feel so good about the kids that we have that you just have to go ahead and let them play. I'm expecting them to give another great effort."

The Buckeyes' belief in each other began in a promising preconference and swelled with key wins in the Big Ten, especially at such places as Purdue, Indiana and Iowa. In fact, OSU found a building block in a close loss at Michigan State Jan. 27.

"I remember leaving there upset because I thought we had an opportunity," O'Brien said. "But our guys decided if we can play this way here, why can't we win

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COVER STORY: BUCKEYES IN THE FINAL FOUR

elsewhere?"

Since the lone meeting with MSU, OSU has won 12 of 14 and the two losses — at Penn State and to Illinois in the Big Ten tournament in Chicago — were close defeats with Penn bothered by a sore muscle in his back.

The semifinal loss to the Illini likely dropped OSU to a four seed, but the Buckeyes took care of 13th-seeded Murray State 72-48 on March 11 and shut down 12th-seeded Detroit 75-44 on March 13. That helped OSU raise its level of play in defeating the mighty Tigers and the red-hot Red Storm.

"When the season began, the concept of us getting in the NCAA Tournament was a big reach, we felt," O'Brien said. "Now that we're here, we've said, 'OK, you guys have had a really good season. Let's just not settle for this. Let's try to keep going.'"

"But having said that, our team continues to amaze me and surprise me, and I continue to be impressed by the way that they have conducted themselves. Just when I think that maybe there's nothing left, they come up with another great effort.

"I feel very fortunate that I've had the opportunity to coach this group of kids because I think it's a special group and I've really enjoyed being with them all year."

Addressing Strengths, Weaknesses

The Buckeyes will continue to trek south to St. Pete and will arrive with a squad that has shown great quickness, sparkling defense, consistency on offense and few careless stretches with the ball.

So far the Buckeyes have committed 38 turnovers to 56 by their opponents, and much of that has come through togetherness and focus.

"We've got a group of kids that are pretty well-grounded, and we've been able to celebrate the last couple of wins and yet

put it behind us and move on to the next game," O'Brien said.

But OSU has a few concerns in facing a 32-2 Connecticut team that was No. 1 for a good chunk of the season and is on a high of its own, having made the Final Four for the first time in school history.

Foul trouble has dogged OSU at times, especially in the narrow escape against Auburn when three players, including Penn, had to play with four fouls for much of the second half.

Also, when the Buckeyes draw fouls on their opponents, they often fail to capitalize. They shot just over 60 percent from the free-throw line during the regular season and are at 60.9 for the tournament.

O'Brien has tried to address that shortcoming all year, even having the team come in and shoot free throws in bunches as early as 7 a.m.

"When we do that, our percentages are really high," he said. "It makes me think that it's not mechanical. We have a couple of guys who are not real good shooters, but I think for the most part it's between the ears sometimes.

"We've made some very big free throws at the end of these games, but something happens before we get to that point. Maybe it's a lack of concentration, but it has perplexed me for the last couple of years and it's something I continue to be very concerned about."

Rebounding could be yet another obstacle. The Buckeyes brought only a slight edge into the St. John's game and then were out-boarded 45-28 by the athletic Johnnies.

But the deficiency that will dog O'Brien all week is the fact he is 3-20 as a head coach against UConn. O'Brien beat the hoopla to the punch in Knoxville by saying he had lost 17 straight times against Jim Calhoun only to have a reporter quickly yell out, "Actually, Jim, it's 18."



STEVE HELWAGEN

AND THEN THERE WERE FOUR — OSU forward Jason Singleton holds up four fingers to illustrate that he, reserve center Shamar Herron (right) and the rest of his team are headed to the NCAA's Final Four. OSU clinched its berth with a regional win over St. John's.

He was reminded of that again during a March 22 appearance on "The Fabulous Sports Babe" national radio program.

"It was an uncanny thing where all the games would be close and then there would be a funny bounce or a crazy shot or a missed free throw at the end," he said of his misfortune against UConn, where, ironically enough, he took his first college job as an assistant coach. "We played as well and as competitively during that time

against them as we did anyone in the Big East."

But you have to wonder if any of that even applies to this OSU team, which has overcome a mountain of adversity to reach the Final Four.

"You have to maximize your opportunities when you get in this kind of situation," O'Brien said. "We're not one of these programs yet where we can count on doing this on a regular basis."

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OHIO STATE VS. MURRAY STATE

Redd Helps Make Racers' NCAA Stay A Short One

By JEFF RAPP

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

When the Ohio State men's basketball team was unceremoniously dumped from the Big Ten tournament by 11th-seeded Illinois, players spoke of the hard lesson that was learned: Lose one and you're done.

Holding nothing back on defense and making an adjustment to their starting lineup for their NCAA first-round game, the fourth-seeded Buckeyes played with renewed intensity and upended 13th-seeded Murray State, 72-58, in a South region match-up at the RCA Dome in Indianapolis March 11.

"We have to be very happy to be able to move on," said OSU coach Jim O'Brien. "The main objective of every one of these games is to just move on. Defensively is where we won this game."

The Buckeyes, playing in the NCAA Tournament for the first time in seven years, earned few style points in grinding out the win before a crowd of 27,959. They simply dug in and harassed Murray State, which finished its season at 27-6.

The Ohio Valley Conference champion Racers fell to 1-10 all-time in the NCAAAs and have woeful shooting to blame this time. In fact, OSU (24-8) held Murray State to a season-low point total and to 27.3 percent (18 of 66) shooting from the field. That percentage is the fourth worst in the history of the NCAA's South region.

Among the afflicted was forward Rod Murray, who was 0-for-9 from the field. The starting backcourt of Aubrey Reese and Marlon Towns was a combined 9 of 24.

Soon after fielding questions from reporters, O'Brien and his assistants headed back out to courtside seats to watch Detroit upset UCLA in the nightcap, setting up OSU's March 13 tussle with the 12th-seeded Titans.

O'Brien would later admit his team

matched up better with Detroit, especially after freshman Brian Brown had proved himself worthy in his first start of the season.

Given the assignment to slow down Reese and help point guard Scoonie Penn distribute the ball, Brown did his job. Reese finished with 26 points but committed seven turnovers, many of them while OSU was building a first-half lead.

"It was an honor for me," Brown said. "Once I heard I was starting, I wanted to make sure I didn't play any different or try to do anything different."

Forward Jon Sanderson, who gave way to Brown in the starting lineup, ended up being a spark off the bench. His steal and hoop opened up a 26-15 OSU advantage, and after a pair of free throws by OSU's Michael Redd, Sanderson scored again when he took a lob feed from Brown and threw down a two-handed dunk.

Redd tallied the first hoop of the second half and the Racers never got within nine points the rest of the way, although they made a few mild runs to keep matters interesting.

"We felt like we were in control, but we didn't want to feel like the game is over because this is tournament time," OSU

Ohio State 72, Murray State 58

March 11, 1999 RCA Dome; Indianapolis, Ind.										
Murray State	min	m-a	ft	rb	a	pf	tp			
Murray	34	0-9	2-2	1-6	3	3	2			
Spencer	19	3-8	1-2	1-3	0	2	7			
Virgil	35	4-10	0-0	3-11	0	5	8			
Reese	35	6-15	11-14	3-3	1	4	26			
Towns	23	3-9	0-0	2-6	0	3	8			
Floyd	17	0-2	0-0	2-4	1	3	0			
Gay	9	0-1	2-4	2-4	1	1	2			
Cunningham	17	2-9	1-3	3-10	0	3	5			
Page	9	0-3	0-0	2-2	1	1	0			
Burdine	2	0-0	0-0	0-0	0	0	0			
TOTALS	200	18-66	17-25	21-53	7	25	58			
Percentages: FG: .273, FT: .680, 3-point goals: 5-20, .250 (Murray 0-4, Reese 3-7, Towns 2-6, Cunningham 0-1, Page 0-2). Team rebounds: 4. Blocked shots: 2 (Virgil, Cunningham). Turnovers: 17 (Reese 7, Spencer 2, Virgil 2, Murray, Towns, Floyd, Gay, Cunningham, Burdine). Steals: 4 (Reese 2, Towns, Floyd).										
Ohio State	min	m-a	ft	rb	a	pf	tp			
Singleton	29	3-7	4-6	2-10	0	4	10			
Redd	35	10-20	7-12	3-5	4	3	27			
Johnson	32	2-6	4-6	1-5	0	2	8			
Penn	36	2-12	2-4	0-6	4	2	7			
Brown	28	0-1	4-6	0-3	3	3	4			
Reese	13	2-5	0-0	1-5	0	3	4			
Savovic	21	2-3	0-0	0-3	0	2	6			
Sanderson	6	3-3	0-1	1-1	0	3	6			
TOTALS	200	24-57	21-35	9-42	11	22	72			
Percentages: FG: .421, FT: .600, 3-point goals: 3-11, .273 (Redd 0-1, Penn 1-8, Savovic 2-2). Team rebounds: 4. Blocked shots: 5 (Johnson 5). Turnovers: 10 (Penn 3, Brown 3, Singleton, Johnson, Reese, Sanderson). Steals: 8 (Redd 3, Singleton 2, Brown, Savovic, Sanderson). Halftime: Ohio State 32, Murray State 21. Technical Fouls: None. Officials: Cahill, Haney, Harrington. A: 27,959.										



STEVE HELWAGEN

REDD IN REVERSE — OSU guard Michael Redd goes up for a reverse layup in his team's NCAA Tournament opening-round win over Murray State. Redd scored 27 points in OSU's 72-58 win.

forward George Reese said. "We weren't dancing around in the locker room or anything. We just wanted to survive."

With Penn still struggling to regain his shooting form since an injury in the final regular-season game, Redd put together a monstrous night with a game-high 27 points, five rebounds, four assists, three steals and no turnovers.

"I've been trying to play like this the last couple of games," said Redd, who averaged 25.5 points per game in OSU's two Big Ten tournament games. "Scoonie has not been on, so I just had to step it up to another level. Coach has said it is tournament time and we all have to step it up."

Penn looked to have his old quickness back and claimed a muscle in his backside was no longer sore, but his shooting remained out of whack. He finished 2 of 12 from the field, including 1 of 8 on three-pointers, and scored just seven points.

"I felt pretty good physically," Penn said. "Everything was fine. I can't tell you what the problem was. I just have to keep shooting the ball."

"I guess I was so hot the last seven or eight games of the regular season and I was scoring a lot of points, it must be time for a cold stretch. My confidence is still there and sooner or later they are going to go in."

Forward Jason Singleton added 10 points and 10 rebounds for OSU. Center Ken Johnson also came up big, scoring eight points, grabbing five rebounds and blocking five shots, his last one a rejection he sent all the way out to midcourt with 30 seconds to play. Johnson had been fighting foul trouble of late but managed 32 minutes and was an intimidating presence throughout.

"I just tried to stay positive, play hard

and play smart," Johnson said. "Coach always says stay out of foul trouble and stay on the floor. I wanted to play aggressive and still block shots."

As OSU ran out the remaining time, O'Brien stepped three feet onto the floor, hugged Johnson and told him he appreciated his efforts.

"He was basically saying that was a terrific play," Johnson said of his last swat, which he outran a Racer to corral himself. "That was one of the best plays I've made all year and I should be proud of myself."

The Buckeyes actually trailed 10-7 at the second mandatory timeout with 11:57 left in the first half. But they embarked on a 23-5 run over the next 10 minutes to take control of the game. Redd scored eight of the points in the run, which was capped by Sanderson's jam with 2:19 left in the half.

"That run was big," Redd said. "We knew we were in for a dogfight, so we just turned up our defense."

OSU led 32-21 at halftime and twice built the lead to 17. A hook by Johnson gave the Buckeyes a 38-21 lead with 18:52 left, and a pair of Singleton free throws provided a 50-33 lead with 11:58 left.

But Murray State stayed in the game thanks to OSU's 21-of-35 free-throw shooting and by controlling the boards (53-42) and getting several second chances at the hoop. Center Duane Virgil led everyone with 11 caroms, but he fouled out with 2:14 to play.

Forward Isaac Spencer, the Racers' leading scorer and rebounder throughout the season, left the game with a back injury and finished with just seven points and three rebounds in 19 minutes.

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OHIO STATE VS. DETROIT

Detroit Victimized By A Titanic Buckeye Assault

By JEFF RAPP

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

The Ohio State men's basketball team entered its second-round NCAA Tournament game in Indianapolis hoping simply to advance past upstart Detroit and into the Sweet 16.

But every once in a while there are those magical evenings when you get even more than you ever hoped for.

In their 75-44 dusting of the Midwest Collegiate Conference champs March 13, the Buckeyes put on a defensive clinic in the first half then appeased the 17,000 or so OSU fans in an RCA Dome crowd of 32,758 with a bench-clearing offensive barrage.

That gave the Buckeyes (25-8) a jolt of confidence as they headed off to their March 18 date with top-seeded Auburn in the South Regional semifinals in Knoxville, Tenn.

"This is definitely a bonus," OSU point guard Scoonie Penn said in the team's euphoric locker room after dumping Detroit. "We would have been happy to win by one point. It was great to see guys like Shamar (Herron) playing against his old buddies. That's what you love to see. Everybody got a chance to play in the NCAAs tonight, and now we get to move on."

Everybody except senior Neshawn Coleman, who missed his second straight tournament game because of strep throat. But the rest of the team picked him up.

Herron, who played in just his 10th game this season, helped punctuate the win with a couple of late baskets, including a dunk that had the OSU bench hopping with delight. Fellow Detroit natives Jason Singleton (seven points, five rebounds) and Ken Johnson (eight points, five blocks) also contributed to the cause.

Penn and Michael Redd tied for team scoring honors with 15 points apiece, George Reese led an inspired effort from the corps of reserves with five points and 15 rebounds, and freshman Brian Brown started for the second straight game, hitting all three of his three-point attempts and dishing out four assists.

But the team effort offensively still didn't match the mastery OSU displayed on defense. The Buckeyes held the Titans (25-6) scoreless for the first 9:49 of the game in building a 12-0 lead and took a 25-12 advantage to the locker room at halftime.

The dozen points easily is one of the all-time lowest outputs in a half of an NCAA tourney game in the shot-clock era and tied for the lowest this year. OSU's

Ohio State 75, Detroit 44

March 13, 1999
RCA Dome; Indianapolis, Ind.

	min	m-a	m-a	o-t	a	pf	tp
Detroit							
Ferguson	34	2-12	0-0	0-3	0	3	6
Alexander	32	3-8	0-0	1-4	0	2	6
Craft	11	1-4	0-0	2-3	0	1	2
Phillips	33	4-10	0-0	0-0	3	3	9
Jackson	36	5-12	6-10	0-4	1	2	18
Belin	16	0-1	0-1	0-1	0	2	0
Whye	26	1-4	0-0	1-4	1	2	3
Van Dyke	10	0-0	0-1	1-2	1	0	0
Austin	1	0-1	0-0	0-0	0	0	0
Howard	1	0-0	0-0	0-0	0	0	0
TOTALS	200	16-52	6-12	8-25	6	15	44

Percentages: FG: .308, FT: .500, 3-point goals: 6-25, .240 (Ferguson 2-10, Phillips 1-4, Jackson 2-6, Belin 0-1, Whye 1-3, Austin 0-1). Team rebounds: 4. Blocked shots: 0. Turnovers: 8 (Phillips 3, Jackson 3, Alexander 2). Steals: 5 (Alexander 2, Belin 2, Jackson).

	min	m-a	m-a	o-t	a	pf	tp
Ohio State							
Singleton	28	3-3	1-2	3-5	1	3	7
Redd	26	7-15	0-0	2-3	2	2	15
Johnson	28	2-4	4-4	0-3	0	1	8
Penn	30	5-15	2-2	0-12	2	4	15
Brown	30	3-4	0-0	1-3	4	2	9
Savovic	24	2-7	0-0	1-4	2	2	6
Sanderson	13	1-5	3-6	4-5	0	2	6
Reese	17	2-6	1-2	7-15	0	1	5
Herron	2	2-2	0-0	0-0	0	0	4
Smith	1	0-0	0-0	1-1	1	0	0
Steele	1	0-0	0-0	0-0	1	0	0
TOTALS	200	27-61	11-18	18-51	13	17	75

Percentages: FG: .443, FT: .688, 3-point goals: 10-21, .476 (Redd 1-3, Penn 3-8, Brown 3-3, Savovic 2-6, Sanderson 1-1). Team Rebounds: 0. Blocked Shots: 6 (Johnson 5, Singleton). Turnovers: 7 (Redd 2, Johnson, Penn, Brown, Savovic, Reese). Steals: 4 (Singleton 2, Penn, Reese).
Halftime: Ohio State 25, Detroit 12. Technical Fouls: none. Officials: Cahill, Lopes, Harrington. A: 32,758.

Big Ten brethren, the Wisconsin Badgers, scored just 12 first-half points in their 43-32 loss to Southwest Missouri State a day earlier.

The Titans' field goals in the first 20 minutes could be counted on one hand. Point guard Rashad Phillips ended the 0-for-17 embarrassment with a runner at the 10:11 mark, and Detroit actually tallied twice in a row moments later when Bacari Alexander scored inside and guard Jermaine Jackson stole a Reese pass and coasted for a layup that cut the OSU lead to 13-6. It took Detroit about five minutes to connect again, this time Phillips hitting a three to bring the score to 21-9.

Detroit threatened to end the half in single digits until Daniel Whye hit a three with four seconds left, a hoop that actually annoyed OSU coach Jim O'Brien at halftime.

"My staff was on me a little bit because I was upset we allowed them to get a three right before the end of the half,"



STEVE HELWAGEN

THE LITTLE BIG MAN — OSU guard Scoonie Penn goes up for one of his career-high 12 rebounds during the Buckeyes' 75-44 win over Detroit in an NCAA second-round game. Teammates Boban Savovic and Jason Singleton (left) are also pictured.

O'Brien said. "We still held them to 12 points, but we could have been up 16 at the break and they cut it to 13."

But O'Brien eventually would have no worries. The Buckeyes pulled away by shooting 58.8 percent — including 8 of 12 from three-point land — in a 50-point second half. They also continued to confound Detroit with a variety of defenses, forcing the Titans into 30.8 percent shooting for the night.

"They were definitely frustrated, and you have to give the credit to our defense," Redd said. "I don't think they got many open looks tonight."

But despite being shut down, the Titans, who hit big shots down the stretch in a first-round upset of UCLA, didn't offer much credit to OSU.

"We got good looks and good shots, but we just didn't knock them down," said Jackson, the only Detroit player in double figures with 18 points. "We wanted to come back and play strong defense in the second half, but it's hard to come back against a great team like that."

The Titans pulled to 29-18 when Desmond Ferguson nailed a three, but that only triggered a crowd-pleasing 11-0 run by the Buckeyes that began with a

fastbreak basket by Redd and continued when OSU hit three consecutive treyballs to up the advantage to 40-18. Penn hit one from the corner, Brown added one from the exact same spot and, after a timeout by Detroit coach Perry Watson, Brown canned another from the side off a feed by Redd.

Freshman Boban Savovic also got in the act by hitting a couple of threes of his own.

"This has been a gradual process with their development," O'Brien said, "but I think they have been getting some good shots throughout the course of the year, and I really think throughout the last couple of weeks Brian and Boban have gotten their second wind."

The contributions also were mighty on the boards as OSU enjoyed a 51-25 rebounding advantage. Penn had a career-high 12, all on the defensive end, and Reese's 15 boards came in just 17 minutes.

"They're not as big as most teams in the Big Ten, so I didn't have to use my quickness as much," Reese said. "I kind of have to give credit to the basketball because it was bouncing my way."

The final minutes of the game were a smile-fest for the Buckeyes with the entire roster playing a part. O'Brien and players pumped their hands in the air and slapped high fives with fans while leaving the court, and the hoopla continued well after the game.

"This game was not just about being happy we won," O'Brien said. "We played very well and I think we were terrific defensively."

"I was just happy to see our kids as happy as they are. The feeling in the locker room after the game I won't soon forget. This is a happy group of kids, and all I kept telling them is they deserve it because they have been consistent guys from the beginning to right now."

"There have been very few lows and a couple of highs and we've been very consistent, and that's a credit to our kids because they have stayed focused the entire season."

Added Redd, "This is awesome. I really can't put it into words right now. My voice is kind of hoarse from all the yelling going on in the locker room. I've never been this far in high school or anything, so I'm overjoyed right now."

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OHIO STATE VS. AUBURN

Big Finish Helps Bucks Knock Off Auburn 72-64

By STEVE HELWAGEN
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Editor

Ohio State's season of destiny came down to the final three minutes of its South Regional semifinal game against top-seeded Auburn.

And the Buckeyes, overcoming huge odds, made all of the key plays down the stretch to pull off a 72-64 win over the Tigers before 23,898 March 18 in Knoxville, Tenn.

The Buckeyes (26-8) rallied from a six-point deficit in the second half, overcoming deep foul trouble and a marked rebounding disadvantage, to send the fourth-ranked Tigers down to just their fourth defeat in 33 games.

"I think the thing that keeps hitting me right between the eyes is the way these guys have constantly come back to try and accomplish a little bit more," said OSU coach Jim O'Brien after his team was the first to knock off a No. 1 seed in this year's tournament.

"They are surprising me a little bit. Just when I ask myself if they are capable of doing more, they surprise me and do even more. Tonight they did it in difficult circumstances."

Three OSU starters — Scoonie Penn, Jason Singleton and Ken Johnson — played most of the second half with four fouls. But none fouled out.

In fact, Penn returned to the game with four fouls with 10:14 left and the Buckeyes trailing 52-46.

"I wasn't going to lose the game with my best player on the bench," O'Brien said.

Penn, hobbled in recent games by an injury suffered in OSU's regular-season finale, broke out of his slump. He hit 9 of 16 shots from the floor — including 4 of 7 on three-pointers — to post a game-high 26 points. Michael Redd added 22 points and 10 rebounds for the Buckeyes.

Penn returned to the game and served notice the Buckeyes would be in it for the long haul, burying a three from the top of the key and then hitting a one-hand runner as he fell out of bounds to trim the lead to 52-51 with 8:48 left.

The game was tied at 61 after Auburn's Scott Pohlman connected on a three-point shot with 3:01 left. But the Buckeyes used their defense to fuel an 11-3 run to close the game and advance to the Elite Eight for the first time in seven years and just

the second time since the tournament field expanded to 64 teams in 1985.

"This was one of those games where whoever had the run at the end of the game was going to win," Penn said. "We played good defense and hit our shots when it counted."

"It came down to a three-minute game because it had basically been even the whole time."

OSU's Brian Brown opened the run by making one of two free throws to give OSU a 62-61 lead with 2:41 left. After Pohlman missed a three at the other end, Redd was fouled by Auburn's Chris Porter while rebounding his own miss.

The foul was costly as Porter, the SEC player of the year, fouled out with a team-high 15 points and 11 rebounds.

Redd made both free throws for a 64-61 lead with 1:57 left. Auburn's Doc Robinson then missed a three at the other end, and Redd rebounded.

Penn then stuck a baseline jumper to push the lead to 66-61 with 1:10 left.

Auburn's Bryant Smith attempted a three-point shot, but Brown converged and blocked the shot from behind. He started out on the fastbreak, dishing behind the back to Singleton, who finished the play — and effectively the Tigers — with a two-hand slam to make it 68-61 with 58.4 seconds left.

"Brian's man (Robinson) brought the ball up and threw it to the man I was guarding," Singleton said. "He tried a three-point shot, but Brown switched over and blocked the shot."

"We had a two-on-one break, and he threw it behind the back to me for the dunk. That was probably the key turning point in the game."

Auburn coach Cliff Ellis, who edged OSU's O'Brien for a number of national coach of the year awards, then called a full timeout to try to devise a strategy for the final minute.

But Auburn's Daymeon Fishback missed a shot and Brown rebounded. He was fouled and made one of two free throws to make it 69-61 with 39.9 seconds left. After another Auburn miss, Singleton hit one of two free throws to make it 70-61. Robinson made a three with 6.5 seconds left, but Penn closed the scoring with two free throws with 5.5 seconds left.

"We showed a lot of heart tonight," Redd said. "Nobody had us here, but we came out and did it."

Penn threw the ball in the air at the final buzzer.

"It was just a sigh of relief," he said. "That was just a hard-fought game. This is the biggest victory of my whole life. It felt so good to hear that buzzer."

The teams traded the lead five times in the first half, and neither team led by more than five points. Penn closed the half with a three-pointer from the top of the key with 17 seconds left to give the Buckeyes a 31-26 lead.

"That shot put me over the hump," he said.

The Buckeyes held their halftime lead despite being whistled for 10 fouls to Auburn's two and being outrebounded 23-14 in the first half.

Things appeared to go from bad to worse for OSU when Penn was whistled for a reach-in foul, his fourth, with OSU nursing a 44-41 lead with 13:23 left.

O'Brien went to a two-three zone and tried to stretch the game as best he could. But the Tigers went on an 11-2 run, keyed by four points each from Pohlman and Robinson, to seize a 52-46 lead with 10:14 left.

Out of options, O'Brien called a timeout and sent Penn back into the game.

"Scoonie is an intelligent player, and he knew what he had to do," O'Brien said.

Penn said the Buckeyes were primed to pull off the upset.

"We had been in this situation with a tight game a number of times," Penn said. "We looked at their statistics and saw they had won 26 of their 29 games by double digits. We knew if we could just keep the game in single digits we would have a chance down the stretch."

"We were able to execute at the end."

Auburn had averaged 19 offensive rebounds a game during the season. But the Buckeyes were successful in keeping the Tigers off the boards, allowing just three offensive rebounds in the second half and locking down the win in the first game ever between the two schools.

"We went into the game knowing Ohio State was a very good team," Ellis said. "Ohio State played excellent defense. Our guys put a lot of heart into this game, but give Ohio State credit."

"They played hard, played well and are well-coached."

Added Porter, "We take pride in our rebounding, but we just couldn't pull them down tonight the way we did all year."

Robinson added 14 points and Smith had 10 for Auburn. Pohlman, a sharpshooter who scored 27 points in Auburn's previous tournament win over Oklahoma State, finished with just seven points on 2-of-8 shooting.



STEVE HELWAGEN

THE CLINCHER — OSU forward Jason Singleton puts the exclamation point on his team's South Regional win over Auburn. Singleton's two-hand dunk, after a blocked shot and behind-the-back pass by Brian Brown, came with a minute left in OSU's 72-64 win.

Ohio State 72, Auburn 64

March 18, 1999
Thompson-Boling Arena, Knoxville, Tenn.

Ohio State	min	fg	ft	rb	a	pf	tp
Singleton	21	3-4	1-3	1-2	1	4	7
Redd	36	9-19	3-4	3-10	2	2	22
Johnson	25	2-4	0-2	1-2	0	4	4
Brown	33	2-9	4-6	1-6	4	0	9
Penn	36	9-16	4-4	0-3	4	4	26
Savovic	12	1-3	0-0	0-0	0	1	2
Reese	27	1-4	0-3	1-3	0	0	2
Sanderson	6	0-2	0-1	2-2	0	1	0
Coleman	4	0-1	0-0	1-3	0	0	0
TOTALS	200	27-62	12-23	14-37	11	16	72

Percentages: FG: .435, FT: .522, 3-point goals: 6-17, .353 (Redd 1-3, Brown 1-4, Penn 4-7, Savovic 0-2, Coleman 0-1). Team rebounds: 6. Blocked shots: 3 (Johnson, Brown, Penn). Turnovers: 9 (Redd 2, Reese 2, Singleton, Johnson, Brown, Savovic, Sanderson). Steals: 7 (Penn 3, Singleton, Redd, Brown, Reese).

Auburn	min	fg	ft	rb	a	pf	tp
Porter	32	6-10	1-2	3-11	2	5	15
B.Smith	33	4-9	2-2	2-2	1	1	10
N'diaye	34	1-3	1-2	3-11	1	3	3
Pohlman	24	2-8	2-2	0-2	3	2	7
Robinson	33	5-13	2-3	0-0	6	3	14
Fishback	23	4-10	1-2	4-9	1	1	12
McGadney	6	1-3	0-0	0-1	0	1	2
Heard	9	0-3	1-2	0-1	0	1	1
Chilliest	2	0-0	0-0	0-0	0	0	0
Sharp	3	0-0	0-0	0-0	0	0	0
A.Smith	1	0-0	0-0	0-0	0	0	0
TOTALS	200	23-59	10-15	14-41	14	17	64

Percentages: FG: .390, FT: .667, 3-point goals: 8-22, .364 (Porter 2-3, B.Smith 0-3, Pohlman 1-5, Robinson 2-3, Fishback 3-6, Heard 0-2). Team rebounds: 4. Blocked shots: 3 (N'diaye 3). Turnovers: 18 (Porter 5, N'diaye 4, Robinson 3, B.Smith 2, Pohlman 2, Fishback, Chilliest). Steals: 5 (B.Smith 2, N'diaye, McGadney, Heard).

Halftime: Ohio State 31, Auburn 26. Technical Fouls: None. Officials: Higgins, Dixon, Cartmell. A: 23,898.

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- Option 7: OSU Olympic Sports report (a look at OSU's non-revenue sports)
- Option 8: Commitment List (regular updates of OSU's verbal commitment list)

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OHIO STATE VS. ST. JOHN'S

Regional Champions

OSU Holds Off St. John's, Earns First Final Four Berth In 31 Years

By JEFF RAPP
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

Much was made of the glaring lack of NCAA Tournament experience the Ohio State men's basketball team took into March Madness. With every game growing in importance, certainly the Buckeyes would win under the pressure, the experts said.

Instead, with the ultimate NCAA party — the Final Four — on the line, the Buckeyes looked like the more veteran and calm outfit in taking command of St. John's in the South Regional final in Knoxville, Tenn., March 20.

Then came the gut-wrenching final minute and a half.

Allowing a late nine-point lead to dip all the way to a single point, the fourth-seeded Buckeyes hung on for an epic 77-74 win over the third-seeded Red Storm before an Ohio State-partisan crowd of 24,248 in Thompson-Boling Arena.

In the wild scene that followed, players, coaches and their family members embraced and danced on the court, many weeping openly.

"It's hard to imagine we're going to this thing," OSU head coach Jim O'Brien told reporters on the court. "It's such a nice feeling, but I don't know if it's going to sink in. I'm just emotionally spent right now."

In just his second year at the helm and one year after a dreadful 8-22 campaign, O'Brien led the Buckeyes (27-8) to the Final Four for the first time since 1968.

The Buckeyes advanced to play first-time semifinalist Connecticut in a March 27 game with a scheduled tip-off of 5:42 p.m. Eastern at Tropicana Field in St. Petersburg, Fla. The Huskies earned the top seed in the West region and slipped by surprising Gonzaga to continue their postseason trek. The other semifinal will pit two more top-seeded powers as Duke takes on Michigan State at approximately 8 p.m.

St. John's (28-9) played as well as any team to miss out. The Johnnies dusted off Samford, Indiana and Maryland to reach the Elite Eight and nearly pulled off a comeback against Ohio State.

Trailing 73-64 after an acrobatic Jason Singleton layup off a Scoonie Penn pass with 2:47 to play, SJU mounted a last-ditch 10-2 charge.

It began as Bootsie Thornton ended a frantic exchange with a three-point play. The lefty guard scored a rare goal over OSU center Ken Johnson, drew a foul and sank the free throw to trim the lead to 73-67.

OSU still seemed to be in control even after a Boban Savovic travel since the Red Storm's Reggie Jessie returned the favor with a walking violation with 1:20 to play. But another OSU frosh, Brian Brown, turned the ball over trying to drive down the lane, and SJU took advantage when Ron Artest talked at the other end.

"We were hanging on and I thought played very well until the last couple of minutes," O'Brien said. "But we're playing young kids, and this is to get to the Final Four. To think that's not going to affect people is crazy."

"They had so many fouls to give and we knew that they were going to play aggressive and try to get away with all the bumps and all the bangs and get some steal opportunities. All we just kept telling our guys is, 'They're going to foul you. You need to be good with the ball.'"

OSU managed to inbound the ball to Penn, who opened the OSU lead back to six at 75-69 with two free throws with just 44.4 seconds left. But the Buckeyes later missed two consecutive front ends of one-and-ones at the

line and SJU countered with another strong Artest scoring drive down the lane and a drive by Chudney Gray that drew a foul on OSU's George Reese with 12.2 seconds on the clock.

With a chance to tie the score, Gray missed the first free throw and made the second, but OSU wasn't home just yet. Penn split his pair of free throws and St. John's point guard Erick Barkley steamed up court with SJU trailing just 76-74. As Penn hustled back to catch up to him, Barkley lost the ball off his knee and OSU's Michael Redd scooped it up, raced down the sideline and drew a foul with 0.7 of a second to play.

St. John's fans screamed for a foul on Penn, but Barkley and SJU coach Mike Jarvis dispelled any possible controversy, saying Barkley simply lost the ball off his knee trying to make a play.

"Barkley will want to blame himself, but I won't let him," Jarvis said. "This wasn't a bad start to his career, making it this far as a freshman."

Redd, who had missed at the line moments earlier, hit the first for a three-point lead and Barkley could only fling the missed second shot the length of the floor in a desperation heave.

It was wide, and the Buckeyes, last-place finishers in the Big Ten a season ago, had earned the right to cut down the nets and begin making plans for the Final Four.

"It means a lot to help get this program to where it hasn't been in a long time," said Penn, who finished with 22 points, eight rebounds, eight assists and was named the most outstanding player of the South region. "I'm happy for the people of Ohio and at Ohio State University for getting a chance to experience this along with us."

Approximately 15,000 OSU fans headed south for a chance to see history, and a majority of them hung around long after the Buckeyes provided it.

"It really helped us, but I wasn't too surprised to see all of them," said Redd, who strongly supported Penn with 20 points, six rebounds and five assists. "They followed us to Indianapolis, and it was a great showing again tonight."

O'Brien, who hugged his assistants and even danced with his players after the win, was just grateful the clock finally ran out with OSU still on top.

"I thought we were on E the last two minutes, but I think that's a credit to St. John's," said the Big Ten coach of the year. "St. John's refused to just go away quietly. They really turned up the heat, and I thought we got a little scatterity."

"We missed a few free throws, had some turnovers, but St. John's is not one of the best teams in the country for nothing."

Jarvis took the loss in stride despite his team's near-comeback.

"There just happened to be a couple of players named Redd and Penn that were determined to keep the momentum on the side of Ohio State," he said, actually managing a smile. "Great players make big plays when they have to. I'll be seeing those two guys a lot in my sleep the next couple of weeks."

"I'll have to try to recruit a couple of guys to stop them next year is all."

But Singleton and Johnson both provided other scoring options with 13 and 12 points, respectively. Johnson also added seven blocks, two of them on the game's first possession, and altered several more shots as St. John's was held to 39.4 percent from the field.

"I wanted to go out there and be a presence," said the 6-11 Johnson, who hit 6 of 9 field goal attempts against the smaller Johnnies. "I knew I had to step it up and be a

factor today. I have the ability to do that. It was just a matter of me getting a lot of touches. I was just hungry today."

During the regular season, O'Brien often referred to Johnson as a "man" following a big game. But with the Final Four on the line, he said, "Ken was that and more. I thought that they couldn't guard him in spots around the basket because he's so much bigger and his defensive ability in blocking shots and altering a lot, he came up big again."

Added Jarvis, "Mr. Johnson was the difference. He set the tone of the game on the first possession. He is a great shot blocker, and when you have somebody like that, you have to take the ball at them. We didn't do that."

"He contributed 12 points on offense. They don't win the game without him."

Artest was held to just nine points, but fellow forward Lavar Postell led all scorers with 24 points. He hit four threes and helped St. John's to a 45-28 advantage on the backboards with nine caroms. Thornton finished with 18 points and Barkley tallied 13 points, seven assists and just one turnover, albeit a big one.

St. John's played from behind all night thanks to an impressive 9-2 OSU start that consisted of a breakaway Redd dunk off a Penn feed and three- and four-point plays by Penn. After Barkley canned a trey, OSU's front line got involved as Johnson threw down an alley-oop pass from Singleton.

"I think it was important to get out to not so much a big lead, but just show that we were going to be able to play with these guys and have our kids feel very confident about ourselves," O'Brien said. "And the way the game started out, we felt we were going to score some points against them."

OSU led 41-33 at halftime after Redd splashed a three-pointer from the top of the key with 0.5 of a second left. The sophomore lefty finished the half with three treys and 17 points.

OSU held leads as high as 13 points on three different occasions in the second half before SJU's late rally.

The Buckeyes managed to hit 29 of 53 shots (54.7 percent) despite the Red Storm's much-publicized zone defense.

"I felt we were going to be able to play against their zone and that it would just come down to making some shots," O'Brien said.

But in the end, OSU's task was to handle the ball and hang on for dear life.

Mission accomplished, the Buckeyes will head to the Tampa/St. Pete area. Ironically for Reese, South Florida, where he played as a freshman, will serve as the NCAA host school.

"I remember looking up at a sign my freshman year that said, 'Final Four Coming in 1999' and I remember thinking, 'Man, if I could only go there.' Now I'm going there," he said.

OSU improved to 5-2 all-time against SJU, avenging season-ending losses in the 1989 NIT and an NCAA regional semifinal loss in 1991.



STEVE HELWAGEN

THE SKY HOOK — OSU center Ken Johnson goes with his patented sky hook over St. John's forward Ron Artest. Johnson hit 6 of 9 shots for 12 points in the win over the Red Storm.

Ohio State 77, St. John's 74

March 20, 1999 Thompson-Boling Arena; Knoxville, Tenn.												
	fg	ft	rb									
Ohio State	min	m-a	m-a	o-t	a	pf	tp					
Singleton	21	6-7	1-1	0-2	2	4	13					
Redd	38	8-17	1-3	1-6	5	0	20					
Johnson	37	6-9	0-0	1-4	0	3	12					
Brown	28	0-1	0-1	0-1	2	4	0					
Penn	38	7-13	5-6	1-8	8	2	22					
Reese	19	1-3	1-2	0-2	1	3	3					
Savovic	15	1-2	4-5	0-3	3	1	7					
Coleman	2	0-1	0-0	0-0	0	0	0					
Sanderson	2	0-0	0-0	0-0	0	1	0					
TOTALS	200	29-53	15-23	3-28	21	18	77					
Percentages: FG: .547, FT: .667, 3-point goals: 7-14, .500 (Redd 3-4, Brown 0-1, Penn 3-6, Savovic 1-2, Coleman 0-1). Team rebounds: 2. Blocked shots: 9 (Johnson 2, Redd, Reese). Turnovers: 12 (Penn 3, Redd 2, Brown 2, Savovic 2, Singleton, Johnson, Reese). Steals: 5 (Penn 2, Reese 2, Singleton).												
	fg	ft	rb									
St. John's	min	m-a	m-a	o-t	a	pf	tp					
Artest	31	4-10	0-0	3-9	2	4	9					
Postell	38	8-19	4-6	3-9	2	2	24					
Grant	19	1-5	1-2	3-7	1	3	3					
Barkley	37	4-15	4-7	6-7	7	4	13					
Thornton	37	7-12	3-4	2-3	1	1	18					
Jessie	24	1-4	0-0	1-5	1	2	2					
Gray	7	1-1	1-2	0-0	0	4	3					
Emanuel	6	0-0	2-2	0-1	0	1	0					
Richardson	1	0-0	0-0	0-0	0	0	0					
TOTALS	200	26-66	15-23	20-45	14	21	74					
Percentages: FG: .394, FT: .652, 3-point goals: 7-18, .389 (Artest 1-5, Postell 4-7, Barkley 1-3, Thornton 1-3). Team rebounds: 4. Blocked shots: 0. Turnovers: 13 (Artest 5, Thornton 3, Postell, Barkley, Jessie, Gray, Emanuel). Steals: 7 (Artest 2, Thornton 2, Grant, Jessie, Emanuel).												
Halftime: Ohio State 41, St. John's 33.												
Technical Fouls: None. Officials: Libbey, Monje, Whitehead. A: 24,248.												

THE FINAL FOUR

Three No. 1s Make It Through Their Draws

By STEVE HELWAGEN
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Editor

When the pairings for the NCAA Tournament were announced on March 7, many observers hypothesized that as many as three of the top seeds would make it to the Final Four.

It just seemed that the nation's top three teams — Duke, Michigan State and Connecticut — had separated themselves from the rest of the country by wrapping up both the regular-season and tournament titles in their respective conferences.

And that is, in fact, what happened as those three teams played true to their seeding and advanced to the Final Four, slated for March 27 and 29 at Tropicana Field in St. Petersburg, Fla.

But who would come out of the South region and fill out the field for the Final Four? Top-seeded Auburn was carrying some baggage from an SEC tournament loss to Kentucky, while the next two seeds, Maryland and St. John's, seemed to be playing some of their best basketball at season's end.

Ohio State, seeded fourth, was an afterthought. But after the Buckeyes upset Auburn and St. John's to win the South region title, OSU is headed for its first Final Four in 31 seasons.

"I don't know if we're the party crashers or not," OSU coach Jim O'Brien said of his upset Buckeyes (27-8).

Ohio State will face UConn (32-2) in the first national semifinal March 27 at 5:42 p.m., while Duke (36-1) and Michigan State (33-4) meet in the 8 p.m. nightcap. The winners will come back two days later and play for the national championship in a game slated to start at 9:18 p.m.

Just minutes after his team's win over St. John's, O'Brien was asked about the prospect of playing Connecticut, which qualified for its first-ever Final Four after 20 previous NCAA appearances.

The idea was not a pleasant one for O'Brien, whose Boston College teams lost the last 18 games they played with their Big East rival Huskies before he left for OSU two years ago.

"I have quite a history with Coach (Jim)

Calhoun and Connecticut," O'Brien said. "I've lost 18 games in a row to Connecticut. He has to be pretty happy to see us coming there."

"Even though this is a different group, he will be somewhat familiar with what we do."

O'Brien knows none of that history will matter when his team takes the floor to face Calhoun's. Rather, he is happy that Calhoun finally has the Final Four monkey off his back. Plus, he holds a soft spot in his heart for UConn, having started his collegiate coaching career there with a five-year stint as an assistant under Dom Perino beginning in 1977.

"I'm happy for Connecticut," O'Brien said. "I've known Jim a long time and I respect him. Plus, my first assistant coaching job was at Connecticut."

Something will have to give in the other national semifinal: Duke has won 33 straight games, while MSU has taken its last 22 in a row.

Here is a look at the three top seeds who expected to end the year in St. Petersburg.

Connecticut

The Huskies have won nine straight, including three in the Big East tournament and four in the NCAA. That string includes an 82-63 win over St. John's in the Big East tournament final — at New York's Madison Square Garden, no less — and the West Regional final, a 67-62 win over Gonzaga.

"I'm not sure we had to work any harder for a victory all year," Calhoun said after the Huskies disposed of the pesky, 10th-seeded Bulldogs.

Calhoun had led three of his previous teams as far as the regional finals, but he finally gained redemption by making this year's Final Four.

Small forward Richard Hamilton, a 6-6 junior All-American, leads the Huskies. He

averaged nearly 21 points and five rebounds a game this year.

Flashy but bulky point guard Khalid El-Amin, a 5-10 sophomore generously listed at 205 pounds, is also a big key. He averaged 14 points and 3.5 assists this year but missed all 12 of his shots against Gonzaga.

"I didn't score a bucket from the field, and we still won," said El-Amin, whose two free throws with 34.4 seconds left helped seal the win. "That just shows the kind of character we have."

The Huskies won their first 19 games this year and were ranked No. 1 for 10 consecutive weeks after Duke suffered an early season loss.

But things nearly turned disastrous in late January when Hamilton suffered a deep thigh bruise and integral center Jake Voskuhl, a 6-11 junior, was diagnosed with a stress fracture in his foot. Without that pair, the Huskies dropped a 59-42 decision at Syracuse Feb. 1.

But Calhoun regrouped the team and they gutted out a 70-59 win at top-five-ranked Stanford five days later. Only a 73-71 loss to Miami (Fla.), where the Huskies blew a double-digit first-half lead, has marred the team's 13-1 finish.

Voskuhl (6.0 points, 6.8 rebounds) and 6-7 power forward Kevin Freeman (12.4 points, 7.1 rebounds) round out the frontcourt. Freeman could be a load for an OSU team that was outrebounded by both Auburn and St. John's. He had 13 points and 15 rebounds — 10 on the offensive end — against Gonzaga.

Ricky Moore, a 6-2 senior, starts at shooting guard, averaging 6.9 points per game. Sophomore Albert Mouring, a 6-3 guard, provides eight points a game off the bench.

The Huskies have built their year on uptempo basketball, forcing turnovers and converting them in open-court situations. They have routinely put together quick runs to put games away.

Pressuring El-Amin and taking care of the basketball may be the only way to beat these Huskies, who have been on a mission to validate their coach.

"I wanted him to go to the Hall of Fame the right way," El-Amin said of Calhoun, who is 302-120 in just 13 years in Storrs. "Not as the best coach never to get to the Final Four, but as one of the best coaches in history."

Ohio State and Connecticut have met four times, with OSU winning non-conference games in the 1983-84 seasons, UConn stopping OSU 72-62 in the 1988 NIT championship game, and the Buckeyes prevailing 78-55 in an NCAA second-round game in 1992. Before a second-half explosion, OSU held a narrow 31-30 halftime lead over the Huskies, who featured Donyell Marshall.

Duke

USA Today's Danny Sheridan has installed Duke as a 1-10 favorite to win the NCAA title, and it's hard not to see why.

Coach Mike Krzyzewski's Blue Devils are riding high, winning their three ACC tourney and four NCAA games by a combined average of 29.3 points. Only regional semifinal foe Southwest Missouri State, a 78-61 loser, has played Duke within 20 points since early February.

National player of the year Elton Brand, a 6-8 sophomore forward, responded nicely to his benching for two games early in the



season. He averaged team highs in points (17.7) and rebounds (9.9) this season.

The rest of the starting lineup would also be considered for all-star status, including point guard William Avery (14.6 points, 40 percent three-point shooter), shooting guard Trajan Langdon (17.4 points, 43 percent on threes), small forward Chris Carrawell (9.7 points, 5.0 rebounds), and center Shane Battier (9.2 points, 4.8 rebounds).

Freshman Corey Maggette, a 6-6 forward, comes off the bench as the star-in-waiting. He averages 10.7 points and four rebounds per game. Sophomore Chris Burgess, a 6-10 center, also provides help off the bench.

Duke's only blemish was a 77-75 loss to Cincinnati in the Great Alaskan Shootout back on Nov. 28, a time when Coach K felt his team was sleepwalking despite its No. 1 ranking.

The Blue Devils' main ACC foes had no luck. North Carolina played Duke to first-half stalemates twice only to get blown away in the second half. Maryland, the league's No. 2 team, lost to Duke twice by 18-point margins.

And, in the rarest of occurrences, the Blue Devils have done well in nail-biters, winning tight ones at St. John's and Georgia Tech. Duke already has a 73-67 win over Michigan State at the Great Eight to its credit.

The Blue Devils cruised to an 85-64 East region final win, shooting 60 percent from the floor against Temple's usually stingy match-up zone.

This is Duke's 12th Final Four appearance, including eight under Krzyzewski. Duke won titles in 1991 and '92 and has been the runner-up five times.

If it happens in the finals, this would be the fifth meeting between OSU and Duke. The series is tied 2-2, although OSU won the last meeting — a 90-84 overtime win over the top-ranked Blue Devils on Dec. 29, 1978, at the ECAC Holiday Tournament.

Michigan State

Ohio State is well-acquainted with Michigan State, losing to the Spartans in their only meeting 76-71 on Jan. 27 in East Lansing.

Point guard Mateen Cleaves, who shared Big Ten player of the year honors with OSU's Soonie Penn, scored 10 of his 16 points in the final 2:09 to help lift the Spartans to the victory.

Cleaves, a 6-2 junior, averaged 12 points and 7.2 assists this year. MSU coach Tom Izzo uses junior Morris Peterson, a 6-6 forward, as his sixth man, but he leads the team in scoring at 14.6 points per game.

Forward Jason Klem, a 6-7 senior, is next at 10.7 points per game. Shooting guard Charlie Bell (8.4), center Andre Hutson (8.3) and power forward Antonio Smith (6.4 points, 7.8 rebounds) round out the lineup.

Besides Duke, MSU also ventured to UConn for a non-conference game, an 82-68 loss. Wisconsin, playing at home, was the only Big Ten team to beat MSU in 19 games, including the conference tournament. MSU, behind 19 points and 10 rebounds from Peterson, gutted out a 73-66 Midwest Regional final win over defending NCAA champion Kentucky.

Michigan State returns to the Final Four after a 20-year absence, dating to the 1979 title team led by Magic Johnson and Greg Kelsey. This is MSU's third Final Four appearance.

If OSU and MSU meet in the final, it would be the schools' 94th meeting with MSU holding a 50-43 advantage, including the last 10 dating to 1992.



Jim Calhoun

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OHIO STATE'S FINAL FOUR MEMORIES

Buckeyes To End 31-Year Absence From Final Four

By **JEFF RAPP**
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

As Ohio State players, coaches, trainers, managers and administrators celebrated the Buckeyes' clinching of a Final Four berth, the pre-eminent link to the program's last Final Four showing was beaming as well.

Bill Hosket, OSU's captain and MVP in 1968, was in Knoxville's Thompson-Boling Arena soaking in the euphoria and hearkening back, just a bit, to OSU's tournament run of 31 years ago.

"I'm sure every year it becomes a bigger event, so it obviously means more today than it did then," said Hosket, who led the Buckeyes in scoring (20.1) and rebounding (11.4) in 1968, guiding the Buckeyes to a mark of 21-8. "But it was a great, great memory for all of us who were part of it."

"About the only similarities I see is we both had great chemistry on our team, we both exceeded some expectations, and obviously we were both extremely well-coached. Fred Taylor did a great job with us, and Jim O'Brien, as far as I'm concerned, should be everyone's coach of the year this year."

In '68 Hosket lined up with a starting lineup that also included front-liners Steve Howell and Dave Sorenson and guards Denny Meadors and Jody Finney. The Buckeyes won their first five before losing two of three in a Hawaii tournament but pulled it back together in time to post a 10-4 mark in Big Ten play.

That tied for the title and forced an unprecedented Big Ten playoff game, which OSU won, 85-81 over Iowa. Next was the Big Dance.

OSU was one of nine teams with a

first-round bye in the oddly formatted field of 23 NCAA participants and needed just two wins to make the Final Four. The first one came with a 79-72 defeat of East Tennessee State. Then the Buckeyes claimed the Mideast Regional in grand style by tripping the Kentucky Wildcats on their home floor, 82-81.

The Buckeyes advanced to Los Angeles and lost 80-66 to North Carolina, which fell in the title game to Lew Alcindor and mighty UCLA. OSU, however, ended the season on a high note by dumping an Elvin Hayes-led Houston team in the consolation game.

To Hosket, it was the ultimate way to end his sensational career, even if the tournament wasn't the hyped entertainment vehicle it is these days.

"It's much more publicized now and more people know about March Madness," he said. "Back then, the basketball world knew how important it was, but I don't know if the general public recognized what a big event it was. These guys have just given themselves a lot of great memories for life, and it's not over yet."

OSU's wild ride has meant a lot to Hosket, a successful Columbus businessman as well as a longtime OSU and Big Ten color analyst.

"These kids have just done a great job all year," he said. "It's been said many times we all would have been happy with a winning year and a break-even season in the Big Ten, and now they've blown the roof off all expectations."

Hosket has faith that O'Brien and staff will keep things in perspective for the players, but his advice is still to have a levelheaded approach.

"You're going to hear from relatives you didn't even know you had this



COURTESY: OSU SPORTS INFORMATION

THE COACH — Fred Taylor led Ohio State to four of its eight previous Final Four appearances, guiding the Buckeyes to the school's lone national championship in 1960.

week," he quipped. "There's going to be a lot going on, but I would just tell them to keep their heads screwed on right, keep on playing ball and see what happens."

Including the '68 appearance, the Buckeyes have played in eight Final Fours. This year's team stretches the number to nine and will try to make the championship game for the fifth time.

OSU lost in the final of the very first NCAA Tournament in 1939, came in third in '46 and finished in fourth place in both 1944 and '45.

OSU then suffered a Final Four drought until 1960, when Taylor's renowned group of Jerry Lucas, John Havlicek, Mel Nowell and company blew through the tournament and claimed the program's only national championship after a 75-55 win over California. The core of that team helped OSU advance all the way to the title game the next two seasons as well only to lose to Cincinnati both times.

No OSU team has ever won more than four games in an NCAA tourney run, meaning the current Buckeyes can make a bit of history even without winning the title.

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OPINION

Tournament Has Been All About 'Representing'

Attending NCAA Tournament games and being able to soak up March Madness firsthand is a memorable experience, but to witness events that encapsulate the whole thing, now that's truly special.

So there I was in the euphoric Ohio State locker room after the men's basketball team dumped Detroit to advance to the Sweet 16. Smiles were all around. Coach Jim O'Brien was trying to explain the program's resurgence to befuddled reporters from around the country.

Neshaun Coleman was sitting alone, thanking the gods he still had the opportunity to play in his first NCAA tourney game, since he missed the first two because of strep throat.

Scoonie Penn and Michael Redd were heaping praise on their teammates; their teammates in return were talking about the luxury of having stars like Penn and Redd.

I'm noticing all this as I have my recorder raised to the lips of 6-5 forward Jason Singleton, who is talking about facing the end of his career if the Bucks are ousted.

Then it happened. Detroit senior forward Bacari Alexander — who did just have his career end — came into the locker room to wish the Buckeyes success in the next round. He embraced Singleton, a Detroit native, and said one word, repeating it — "Represent."

It was an obvious class move by Alexander, who was banging into Singleton like a bumper car just a half-hour earlier, so much so that some of Singleton's responses were a bit short of breath.

Then it hit me — this is what the NCAA Tournament is all about. It's competition and passion and fun and excitement all rolled into one. And it's the kind of experience that suddenly and unequivocally makes up for all the long practices, bouncy bus rides, bench presses and sit-ups.

It's also about survival and moving on, and that's exactly what the Buckeyes did in their two games in Indianapolis and, amazingly, did again in Knoxville, defying the odds with seemingly every possession.

In fact, the Buckeyes decided to "represent" so well and play so hard that they wound up cutting down the nets and earning a magic carpet ride to St. Petersburg.

I've witnessed a lot of things on this beat and covering Ohio State athletics throughout the decade, but I can guarantee you the only thing that comes close to this is the football team's come-from-behind win in the Rose Bowl a couple of years ago.

I felt the Buckeyes were going to be a "tough out" going into the tournament and they proved me right all the way through — and they may not be done. But no matter what happens here, the Buckeyes will always have the fulfillment of March 20, 1999, the day a collection of downtrodden hoopsters rose up and grabbed the brass ring in front of a stunned national television audience.

It was at that moment — I'm talking seconds after the final buzzer — that I got to witness maybe the best part of March Madness — unbridled emotion.

Tears were flowing more than cham-

RAPP AROUND

Jeff Rapp

pagne ever did in the Yankees clubhouse. Ken Johnson sobbed like a baby. Penn ran around like he was taking a marathon victory lap, locked in embrace with Redd, did the same with his parents in the stands and then had to sit down and withdraw by putting a towel over his head for a full three minutes.

Mike Bordner, OSU's 32-year trainer, soaked in the celebration from his usual seat on the bench but absolutely broke down like a father greeting his son from the war when Coleman came over to offer his heartfelt thanks and a hug. The usually stoic Bordner has seen it all in his tenure, even OSU's last Final Four, but he never saw a more monumental moment on a basketball court in his life and could not contain himself.

There was hugging, screaming, laughing, dancing. There was pure, unadulterated joy.

There's no telling what this astounding but true odyssey can do for the program's immediate future, but, as O'Brien pointed out, it's a good bet the players will work their hind ends off just to do it again next year.

I wouldn't mind doing it again myself.

Other Sights, Sounds

Here are a few things I felt were noteworthy from OSU's memorable NCAA run.

- As engraving as the games were, both the RCA Dome in Indianapolis and the Thompson-Boling Arena left no doubt in my mind that OSU's Jerome Schottenstein Center would be an even better venue for tournament games.

- In Indy especially, the rims were tight, the background was deep and the atmosphere was a bit sterile. Tennessee's arena, naturally, had a better college feel, but the concourse was ridiculously cramped at halftime of games.

- The NCAA even insists on rolling out its own new basketballs, which were not broken in and felt slick to the players.

- "Sometimes I think we forget this whole thing is about the players," said O'Brien, who noted that OSU usually breaks in its game balls before using them.

- At times, the excitement appeared to be a bit too much for the players, who clanged open jumpers and free throws and were guilty of lots of reach-ins and over-the-back fouls.

- The players on the bench weren't immune, either. As the tension built in the Auburn-Oklahoma State game, burly senior Tiger forward Adrian Chilliest — yes, that's his real name — popped up off the bench after a timeout was called and whacked freshman teammate Mack McGadney square in the jaw and lower lip with the back of his hand. McGadney, who didn't return to the floor, iced his mouth the rest of the game.

- Penn, Redd, Auburn's Chris Porter, UCLA's Baron Davis and Syracuse

coach Jim Boeheim weren't the only big-name participants in Indianapolis. Oh, no.

Murray State, OSU's first-round opponent, brought a guy in off the bench named Marvin Gay. You can imagine the reaction when he was announced to the crowd. But not to be outdone, Detroit featured a pseudo-singing star of its own in Jermaine Jackson. The Titans also have a roster graced with a guy named Michael Jordan.

- Of course, his real Airness was nowhere to be found, but there were NBA stars in attendance in Indianapolis just the same. In fact, the exchanges between Indiana Pacers teammates Reggie Miller and Jalen Rose during the UCLA-Detroit game were priceless.

- Sitting on the south side at midcourt, Miller rooted on UCLA, his alma mater. Rose sat among the rowdy Titans fans on the north end and directly behind the wife of Detroit coach Perry Watson, his coach in high school and a former Michigan assistant.

- Despite their distance and all the noise, Miller and Rose maintained a competitive dialogue throughout the game.

- Much more quiet but also recognizable was Charles Barkley, who was in an aisle seat at Thompson-Boling to watch and root on Auburn, his alma mater. Barkley never left his seat during the two-game session, but he made a quick exit when the Buckeyes secured the victory over his Tigers.

- The fans provided some memorable moments, like when the OSU faithful exploded as the Buckeyes

popped up to get dressed for the Detroit nightclub game.

Apparently OSU's Boban Savovic has a few groupies, too, as evidenced by the many banners proclaiming his excellence. One particular enthusiast, wearing a "Boban Wannabe" T-shirt and covered with face paint, got a handshake from his hero after the Detroit win and in his glee leaned over and bear-hugged the startled freshman, leaving his neck and shoulders covered with gunk.

But the fans were terrific. They enjoyed every second of the postgame happiness in the win over the Titans, and the place rocked during timeouts. In fact, prominent board of trustees members Alex Shumate and Ted Celeste shamelessly bounced and screamed to "Hang On Sloopy" at one point.

They also showed up in surprising droves in Knoxville, and the players took notice.

"This is incredible," Jon Sanderson said from the court while looking around at the mass of Buckeye backers. "This is as many people as we ever had in St. John (Arena)."

Fans were vocal throughout the win over St. John's, breaking into the O-H-I-O chant during several timeouts and reacting to every possession.

But the best cheer came while OSU was enjoying a 12-0 lead over Detroit nearly 10 minutes into the game in Indianapolis. An OSU fan began clapping in rhythm (clap, clap, clap-clap-clap) and blurted, "You've got zero."

What Ohio State has got right now can't even be counted.

From The Pages Of BSB

TEN YEARS AGO — 1989

OSU football coach John Cooper told BSB that he planned to take a more hardened approach with his team come spring practice.

"I'm tired of being a nice guy," he said. "Last year we took the attitude that we were going to work with everybody and give everybody an equal chance. Those days are over."

"We're not going to work with five quarterbacks like we did last year," Cooper said. "If you work with five, none of them are any good."

OSU men's basketball coach Gary Williams also was in a chippy mood as reports kept surfacing listing him as a candidate for openings at Arizona State and Maryland. Williams denied any contact with ASU, which eventually hired Bill Frieder from Michigan, and shot down the Maryland talk as well.

"I'd like to know who makes the phone calls that get these things started," he said. "It seems like people want to cover rumors more than games."

The men's season ended with an 83-80 loss to St. John's in the NIT. The women, meanwhile, bowed out in the second round of the NAAs with an 89-83 loss to Long Beach State.

FIVE YEARS AGO — 1994

BSB reported that basketball player Nate Wilbourne had decided to transfer from OSU and fellow sophomore Charles Macon was placed on a one-year suspension by coach Randy Ayers after being picked up by police in his home state of Indiana. Macon was charged with felony theft for not paying for gasoline at a service station as well as drunken driving

and speeding. He was not charged with drug possession, although less than 30 grams of marijuana were found in his car.

"It's best that he steps back from basketball right now," Ayers said.

The Buckeyes signed just one player — 6-3 guard Robert Shelton of Virginia — and were hoping to add another in the April signing period. OSU was still working on McDonald's All-American Jerod Ward, but Columbus Eastmoo's Carlos Davis told BSB, "I'm not looking at Ohio State. I feel like they didn't make a strong effort to recruit me."

ONE YEAR AGO — 1998

OSU hockey coach John Markell was named the CCHA coach of the year after leading the Buckeyes to a 24-11-2 regular season.

"It's a great compliment to our entire staff," he said. "It's not an individual award, and I'm not accepting it any other way."

Markell, who was presented the award March 19 in Detroit, was already having a good week. His Buckeyes swept past Lake Superior in the CCHA quarterfinals and dumped Michigan in Joe Louis Arena to make the tourney finals. OSU lost 3-2 to Michigan State in double overtime to come up just short of the title, but the win over the rival Wolverines carried great meaning — it ended an eight-year, 34-game span of futility vs. UM.

Meanwhile, the OSU wrestling team finished 23rd at the NCAA Championships, with OSU's Mitch Clark winning the national title at 177 pounds. Clark routed West Virginia's Vertus Jones 18-0.

THE VIEW FROM 15TH AND HIGH

Big Ten Wars Certainly Helped These Bucks

What can I say about the Ohio State basketball team and the season it's had that you haven't already thought or hasn't already been said? This has really been fun, hasn't it?

Making it to the Final Four is always special. But when you think where the basketball Buckeyes have been the last few years — as recently as last season, in fact — it becomes that much more special. Can making it to St. Petersburg be as special for the fans at Duke, where the Final Four is almost expected, or even Connecticut, an annual cage contender, as it is for long-suffering Buckeye fans who in their wildest dreams couldn't have envisioned making it to college basketball's pinnacle?

The fact that the Buckeyes have done so well in the tournament shouldn't come as a complete surprise, however. The Bucks finished second in the Big Ten, which, as has been noted all season, was a very strong conference this year. Only fellow Final Four participant Michigan State posted a better conference record.

The Buckeyes were facing — and often thrashing — teams like Auburn and St. John's week in and week out during the conference season. And with all due respect to Murray State and Detroit, those teams would have headed up the rear in the Big Ten this season if they had been in the conference.

Maybe the Buckeyes are stepping up in class in the Final Four. But the bottom line is getting there. And once you're there, anything can happen. That's why they play the games.

Win or lose, all of Ohio State's success couldn't have happened to a better bunch of guys — players and coaches alike. That — and the depths the Buckeyes had reached — is what makes this all so very special and so much fun. Good luck in St. Petersburg, guys!

You Win As A Team

Scosmie Penn's reputation grows game by

THE VIEW FROM 15TH AND HIGH Frank Moskowitz, Publisher

game. Each time you think you appreciate how good he is, he does you one better. His performance against Auburn — with four fouls, no less — was what turned the game for the Buckeyes. Penn is the epitome of a money ballplayer.

In all the hubbub over Penn, however, I sometimes worry that the play of Michael Redd might go underappreciated. He, too, has been sensational and is also a money player. I'm not familiar with every team in the country, but I'm hard-pressed to believe there's a club with a better backcourt pair than Penn and Redd. And if a better pair exists, I'm hard-pressed to believe the two share the ball and the limelight as well as Penn and Redd do.

If you look at the great teams, most of them have more than one or two great players, though. You can't overlook the contributions of Ken Johnson during the Buckeyes' tournament run. Here's a guy who many thought would never contribute on the major college level and he's out there excelling on college basketball's biggest stage.

And Jason Singleton has turned in a workmanlike tournament. I thought one of the reasons the Buckeyes struggled at the end of the regular season and in the conference tourney was that Singleton wasn't playing at the same surprising level he had been for most of the year. But when the Buckeyes have needed key defense, a clutch bucket or rebound, Singleton has been there in the tournament.

And Boban Savovic? Here's another player who hit the skids during the season. But he has looked like a veteran in the tournament, as has

fellow freshman Brian Brown.

It's been the same tune all season for the Buckeyes. There has always been some player (or players) to step up and support Penn and Redd. If everyone's on their game come St. Petersburg — who knows?

One thing I don't want to underestimate in evaluating the success of the Buckeyes and their rapid turnaround from last season is the importing of Jim O'Brien and his entire staff from Boston College.

O'Brien receives much of the credit, and rightfully so. But the way his staff works together has also been critical. There seems to be very little wasted time or motion among O'Brien and his staff. Each seems to know what he and the others are supposed to do. This organization is critical in tournament settings, where there is little preparation time.

I always felt one of the reasons Randy Ayers had so many problems at Ohio State was he could never put together a strong coaching staff. O'Brien not only has put a solid staff together but seems committed to keeping it together.

Penn Vs. Cleaves

If you watched Penn all season like I did, you were probably a little biased toward him with regard to Big Ten player of the year honors. But Buckeye bias aside, it's hard to really argue with Mateen Cleaves getting a share of the hardware. He's a pretty good ballplayer, too.

The thing that surprised me was that the media voted for Penn and the coaches for Cleaves. I would have guessed that the coaches

would have been more likely to appreciate Penn's play, while the media would have voted for Cleaves, with whom they were more familiar and who was a safer choice.

The only thing I can figure is that the coaches penalized Penn for being a newcomer, taking care of "their own" first.

Regardless, it's no coincidence that Penn's Buckeyes and Cleaves' Spartans are both in the Final Four.

The Best Conditioned Buckeye

While football strength and conditioning coach Dave Kennedy is notoriously tight-lipped about the weights and times of his charges, his basketball counterpart, Sean Sheppard, actually went so far as to list the results of the "Buckeye Heptathlon," a conditioning competition among the basketball Buckeyes, in the media guide.

The competition, designed to provide motivation for the off-season conditioning program, was made up of eight "events" — bench press max, clean max, leg sled max, 20-yard shuttle run, vertical jump, box jump reps (60 seconds), 94-foot dash, and dips. The competition must have helped provide the necessary motivation because the Buckeyes haven't looked tired in the NCAA Tournament.

And the best-conditioned Buckeye? Penn. Neshawn Coleman and Singleton tied for second, with Jon Sanderson fourth.

Among events, walk-on Devon Smith had the best bench press at 290, followed by Penn and Singleton at 280 each. Coleman and Penn tied for vertical jump at 35 inches, followed by Singleton at 34 and Sanderson at 33. Redd was fifth at 31-1/2.

Singleton posted the fastest time for 94 feet, being clocked at 3.72 seconds. Coleman and Penn followed at 3.78, followed by Sanderson at 3.93. Shamar Herron was a surprising fifth at 4.03.

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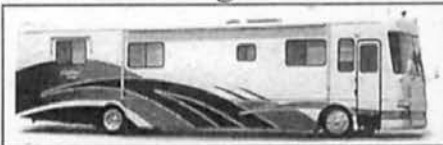


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