

OHIO STATE VS. ALABAMA

Buckeyes Knock Off SEC Champions

By JEFF SVOBODA
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Editor

The irony, in many ways, was palpable.

The man who had almost single-handedly started the SEC dynasty helped destroy it, and he did it in the conference's own back yard against its marquee team.

Urban Meyer directed his fired-up Florida team to a 41-14 win against Ohio State in the 2006 BCS National Championship Game, kick-starting an era of SEC dominance that included seven consecutive national championships, and the belief that the league was the best in college football in that span was so strong that the conference once had both teams in the title game.

And that reputation was built on the back of Ohio State, which not only dropped that championship game to the Gators but lost the 2007 version as well to LSU. That contest cemented the narrative of the SEC as the dominant league in the sport and the Big Ten, represented by OSU, as the antiquated conference struggling to keep up.

The Jan. 1 Sugar Bowl turned all of that on its head, so it was notable that it was Meyer again rewriting the script. His Ohio State team turned aside an early 21-6 deficit against No. 1 Alabama in the Superdome, using an offense that combined speed with power and an opportunistic defense to post a 42-35 victory in a College Football Playoff semifinal.

That Ohio State advanced to the first-ever CFP National Championship by slaying Alabama – which had won three of the previous five national crowns – and the SEC was not lost on anyone in the aftermath of the game.

"We talk about that," OSU linebacker Joshua Perry said. "I think that we all take it to heart when other teams in the Big Ten get disrespected because of how much pride we take in our conference. This is a tradition-rich conference. A lot of great players come out of this conference. We have a lot of great players playing right now, so for people to say that one conference is head and shoulders way better than us, that stuff eats at us."

"There were times throughout the season when we were like, it would be cool to get a matchup against an SEC team as a benchmark to compare ourselves. These games make statements. We weren't given a ton of respect, we weren't given a big shot, and this is the Big Ten across the board. We were underdogs in every bowl matchup, right? But Big Ten teams were able to win games. I think it proves the perception isn't exactly what everybody thinks it is."

For Ohio State safety Vonn Bell, who grew up in Chattanooga, Tenn., and attended high school just across the border in Georgia, the rivalry hit home. A five-star safety in the class of 2013, Bell trimmed his list to Ohio State and SEC schools



SONNY BROCKWAY

KNOCKOUT – Ohio State sophomore tailback Ezekiel Elliott (15) races past Alabama's Nick Perry (27) en route to a game-sealing touchdown run, much to the delight of junior tight end Nick Vannett (81).

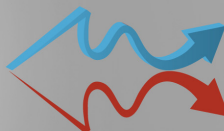
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OHIO STATE VS. ALABAMA

Alabama and Tennessee before picking the Buckeyes in part because Meyer told him that Ohio State would soon be challenging the Crimson Tide for a title so Bell might as well be on his side rather than Alabama's when that happened.

Meyer's vision came through on New Year's Day in New Orleans, and Bell helped OSU leave victorious with a crucial interception in the red zone. Afterward, he realized the performance, just as Meyer had predicted, had turned the SEC narrative on its head.

"It's very big," he said. "It shows that this conference, we're a powerhouse too now. We have teams that can compete with anybody."

That was proved throughout the day. Not only did Ohio State beat Alabama, but No. 8 Michigan State beat fifth-ranked Baylor – the first team out of the playoff in the final rankings – in the Cotton Bowl and Wisconsin came back to beat Auburn, a team that had hung with Alabama in the regular season, in the Outback Bowl.

Seeing those results, Ohio State went into the game with Alabama secure in the knowledge it would be able to compete against what safety Tyvis Powell jokingly called "the greatest team in the world" given the almost unilateral belief in media and coaching circles that Alabama would win.

"There's a perception out here," Meyer said. "I'll tell you I think the tide turned a little bit when Wisconsin beat Auburn. Everybody on our team knew that. I made sure they knew that. When Michigan State came back and beat an excellent Baylor team, (we said) maybe the Big Ten's not that bad. Maybe the Big Ten is pretty damned good."

The game was particularly special considering Ohio State's history against the SEC in bowl games. Officially, taking out the Buckeyes' Sugar Bowl win during the 2010 season against Arkansas that was vacated because of NCAA sanctions, Ohio State entered the game 0-10 all-time vs. the conference in the postseason.

Now, thanks to Urban Meyer, the man who bucks history and rewrites narrative, that mark has one on the left side of the ledger.

"It was a breakthrough game," Meyer said. "I think the career record vs. the SEC was 0-10. I just kept seeing that stuff rolling on TV the last week. It was a breakthrough win against an excellent team."

A Gutsy Win

Ohio State knew it would need some gumption to knock off Alabama, a team that entered at 12-1 and ranked No. 1 in the nation, while playing in the Superdome, a venue in which momentum rolls down from the upper reaches of the massive structure and comes through in waves.

That meant even with the team's third-string quarterback in the game in sophomore Cardale Jones, poise was going to be among the prized assets for the Buckeyes.

"We knew coming in it wasn't going to be like the Wisconsin game, 59-20, up and down the field," co-captain Jeff Heurman said. "We knew we were going to get stopped a few times and we had to overcome that, and we did."

Did they ever.

Ohio State trailed 21-6, and the Superdome – which was split close to 50-50 between Ohio State scarlet and Alabama crimson – was rocking. But the Buckeyes battled back, going on a 36-7 run and emphatically answering any questions about whether they were a championship outfit.

"We believed in the plan, we believed in each other," offensive coordinator Tom

Herman said. "We had an unquenchable belief in the mission and in the plan. It was real. It wasn't just coach-speak. These guys lived it and we were very confident."

"I felt confident that we were on track. That gave us some confidence, more so than maybe being down normally 21-6. We felt like we were moving the ball and making some plays. We just stubbed our toe in the red zone and had two turnovers. But we never lost confidence with that."

The win made a statement in a variety of ways. Not only did it redeem Ohio State and the Big Ten in terms of national perception, it showed that a Buckeye program that went through the speed bump that was the scandal that cost the team head coach Jim Tressel in May 2011 was without question among the elite in the sport.

Ohio State went 6-7 in 2011 before a quick turnaround under Meyer, but there were questions about just how good the Buckeyes were while running through the Big Ten and a questionable nonconference slate to a 24-0 start to the head coach's tenure. The doubters had plenty of ammunition after season-closing losses last year vs. Michigan State and Clemson, and the Sept. 6 loss this year to Virginia Tech at home made it three in four games for the Buckeyes, who looked more like pretenders than contenders at the time.

But as the team came together, buoyed in equal parts by an inspiring senior class and a precocious group of freshmen and sophomores recruited by Meyer, it showed it could compete with any team in the nation. Meyer didn't shy away from using Alabama as a measuring stick when he arrived at OSU, and the win showed exactly where the Buckeyes measured up – and where they need to keep getting better.

"I think after playing Alabama now, I think they have more depth in the defensive line," the coach said. "I think the talent level is pretty similar. I think they have more depth right now. They've been building the program. We're still at early stages of this program."

"I know it's year three, but we're going through that void right now. And we don't have the depth in certain positions, and they do. You're talking about the best – the last few years as good a program as there is. So that's the only difference."

Still, for one night in New Orleans, the Buckeyes were as good as – no, better than – the best. And it kept them alive for the ultimate prize that would eventually be won 11 days later.

"There's a little weight off your shoulders," Heurman said. "There are kind of a couple (weight) plates stacked up. You win the Big Ten and one comes off, you win this and another comes off. You still got one there though, you've still got one game to go."

"As a senior captain, this is how you want your team to be – a tight, close-knit group of guys who can overcome adversity. That's what we are and that's what we've shown this year. We've got one more to go."

Powell Wins Again

In November 2013, Powell caught a pass from Devin Gardner and in doing so sealed the Buckeyes' 11th win against rival Michigan in 13 chances.

When he arrived minutes after the game at the news conference, Powell still had the prolapse spheroid in his hands and seemed to be in no hurry to put it down.

Yet after he caught Blake Sims' last-ditch Hail Mary on the final play of the Sugar Bowl to close out the win vs. Alabama, Powell sat in the team's locker room answering questions without the ball in his hand.

"Where is it?" a reporter enquired.

"Right here," Powell said, producing the football that was sitting under his folding chair. "It's not going anywhere. It's going right next to the Team Up North ball. Now I have two of them – two game-saving balls. It's a blessing."

At that, Powell turned his head down and gave the football a kiss.

It was somewhat fitting that he was the one to make the final play, as he represented the inner drive of the team. A three-star athlete who nearly quit football in high school, Powell woke up before dawn every morning for workouts to earn an Ohio State offer, and now he owned two of the more memorable pieces of memorabilia in recent Buckeye lore.

"When he rolled out that way, I'm like, 'He's really coming over here!' He threw it, and I'm like, 'This is money, baby!' I went up and snatched it," Powell said. "Doran (Grant) said he had a piece of it, but I took it from him because I'm selfish. Yes, I admit it, I'm selfish. As I caught it, I thought about taking a knee but then I looked up and saw all the green grass. I thought, 'Since I'm selfish, I'm going to go ahead and try to score!'"

Teammates joked that they thought about throwing their helmets at Powell to get him to stop and take a knee before he fumbled or a similar disaster took place, but the Buckeyes were safe. The ball wasn't going to leave his hands until the locker room – and even then he had plans to hold on to it for the rest of his life.

Buckeyes Best Tide

The Buckeyes (13-1) clinched a berth in the inaugural College Football Playoff National Championship vs. No. 2 Oregon, who blasted third-ranked Florida State by a 59-20 margin in the Rose Bowl, with the 42-35 win during which Ohio State outgained the Tide and forced three second-half turnovers to close out a furious Crimson Tide comeback.

"We're back. We're back," said OSU red-shirt freshman linebacker Darron Lee, who had seven tackles with two sacks and three stops for loss and was the game's defensive MVP. "Those that thought we were gone, we're back. Be afraid, be very afraid."

It was not an easy victory by any means. Ohio State overcame the 21-6 second-quarter deficit by scoring 28 consecutive points to take a 34-21 lead in the third quarter. The lead was extended to 42-28 on an Ezekiel Elliott 85-yard touchdown run with 3:24 remaining in the fourth quarter, but Alabama did not quit. The Tide scored a touchdown with 1:59 remaining and had one final possession to try to tie the game, but the OSU defense stood tall to seal the victory.

"I tell you, I love these players," Meyer said. "Man, this group of guys – we played awful at times. But this is one of the great team wins we've been a part of because we didn't play well but we found a way to win."

Elliott had a stellar performance in

leading the Buckeyes. The game's offensive MVP rushed for a pair of touchdowns and gained a Sugar Bowl-record 230 yards against an Alabama defense that came into the game averaging 88.6 yards allowed on the ground per game. Jones, making just his second career start, overcame a slow start and threw for 243 yards on 18-of-35 passing with a touchdown and an interception.

Seven receivers caught passes for the Buckeyes, led by sophomore Mike Thomas, who caught seven passes for 66 yards and a highlight reel-worthy TD grab that gave the Buckeyes momentum heading into halftime.

The Buckeyes outgained Alabama, 537-407, and got several big performances from their defenders. Fifth-year senior middle linebacker Curtis Grant led OSU with 10 tackles. Redshirt freshman Eli Apple broke up two passes and combined with senior Doran Grant in holding Heisman Trophy finalist Amari Cooper to 71 yards receiving on nine catches.

"You plan and you prepare, and when you play against great players, you better have thoughts and plans in order to deal with them," OSU cornerbacks coach Kerry Coombs said of defending Cooper. "He is a great player, and there was a lot of thought put into how we're going to manage to limit the damage that he can do. I don't know a lot of the numbers, but I felt like we did and I felt like our kids were really proud of that. I thought our kids rose to the challenge."

Alabama was led by Sims, who completed 22 of 36 passes for 237 yards with two touchdowns and three interceptions. Derrick Henry led the Tide's rushing attack with 95 yards and a score on 13 carries. Cooper's nine catches led the team, and he scored two of his team's touchdowns.

"We're very disappointed in the outcome of the game, but you have to congratulate Ohio State, who played a really, really good game," Alabama head coach Nick Saban said. "And we probably didn't play our best game."

After the Ohio State defense forced a three-and-out on Alabama's first possession, a 54-yard run by Elliott that included a stiff arm of one Alabama defender and a hurdle of another set up the game's first score. The Buckeyes were stopped in the red zone, but the 80-yard drive ended with a 22-yard field goal by freshman Sean Nuernberger that made it 3-0 with 11:32 left in the first quarter.

Elliott fumbled on Ohio State's next possession, though, and it took Alabama just two plays to turn the miscue into points. On second-and-2, Henry rushed over left tackle 25 yards for a touchdown. Adam Griffith added the extra point, giving the Tide a 7-3 lead with 9:25 left in the opening quarter.

Jones used his legs – he converted a third-and-8 with a 20-yard rush – and his arm, lofting a 40-yard pass to Devin Smith to the 1-yard line, to get OSU on the board on its next possession. He fumbled the shotgun snap on

Continued On Page 38

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The Numbers Game

Ohio State 42, Alabama 35

Jan. 1, 2015 – Superdome; New Orleans

Score by Quarters	1	2	3	4	F
OHIO STATE	6	14	14	8	42
ALABAMA	14	7	7	7	35

First Quarter

OSU – Nuernberger, 22 yard field goal, 11:32; 10 plays, 80 yards, 2:26 TOP.

UA – Henry, 25 yard run (Griffith kick), 9:25; 2 plays, 33 yards, 0:28 TOP.

OSU – Nuernberger, 21 yard field goal, 5:17; 11 plays, 71 yards, 4:08 TOP.

UA – Cooper, 15 yard pass from B.Sims (Griffith kick), 2:06; 8 plays, 79 yards, 3:05 TOP.

Second Quarter

UA – Yeldon, 2 yard run (Griffith kick), 8:07; 5 plays, 15 yards, 2:02 TOP.

OSU – Elliott, 3 yard run (Nuernberger kick), 2:55; 12 plays, 71 yards, 5:07 TOP.

OSU – Thomas, 13 yard pass from Spencer (Nuernberger kick), 0:12; 6 plays, 77 yards, 1:20 TOP.

Third Quarter

OSU – D.Smith, 47 yard pass from Ca.Jones (Nuernberger kick), 12:44; 6 plays, 75 yards, 2:16 TOP.

OSU – S.Miller, 41 yard interception return (Nuernberger kick), 3:21.

UA – B.Sims, 5 yard run (Griffith kick), 1:01; 7 plays, 84 yards, 2:15 TOP.

Fourth Quarter

OSU – Elliott, 85 yard run (Thomas pass from Ca.Jones), 3:24; 4 plays, 95 yards, 2:00 TOP.

UA – Cooper, 6 yard pass from B.Sims (Griffith kick), 1:59; 6 plays, 65 yards, 1:17 TOP.

Att. – 74,682. Weather – 57 degrees, indoors.

Team Statistics

	OSU	UA
First Downs	23	21
Rushing	12	12
Passing	10	8
Penalty	1	1
Rushes-Yards	42-281	34-170
Passing Yards	256	237
Passes (Comp.-Att.-Int.)	19-36-1	22-36-3
Offensive Plays	78	70
Total Net Yards	537	407
Third Down Efficiency	10-18	2-13
Fourth Down Efficiency	0-0	2-2
Punts-Avg.	6-46.5	7-55.0
Fumbles-Lost	2-1	0-0
Penalties	4-24	4-36
Time of Possession	31:19	28:41

Individual Statistics

RUSHING (Att.-Net Yds.) – OSU: Elliott 20-230; Ca.Jones 17-43; Marshall 3-11; Samuel 1-1; N.Brown 1-(-4). UA: Henry 13-95; Yeldon 10-47; B.Sims 10-29; TEAM 1-(-1).

PASSING (Comp.-Att.-Int.-Yds.-TD) – OSU: Ca.Jones 18-35-1-243-1; Spencer 1-1-0-13-1. UA: B.Sims 22-36-3-237-2.

RECEIVING (Rec.-Yds.) – OSU: Thomas 7-66; Marshall 5-55; D.Smith 2-87; Vannett 2-23; Elliott 1-13; Spencer 1-7; C.Smith 1-5. UA: Cooper 9-71; White 3-65; Henry 2-54; Howard 2-14; Fowler 2-14; Black 2-10; Vogler 2-9.

PUNTING (No.-Avg.-Long) – OSU: Johnston 6-46.5-60. UA: JK Scott 7-55.0-73.

PUNT RETURNS (No.-Yds.) – OSU: Marshall 2-10. UA: Ch.Jones 2-10.

KICKOFF RETURNS (No.-Yds.) – OSU: Samuel 2-23. UA: Ch.Jones 7-102.

MISSED FIELD GOALS (Yds.) – OSU: None. UA: None.

FORCED FUMBLES – OSU: None. UA: Jackson.

FUMBLE RECOVERIES (No.-Yds.) – OSU: None. UA: Collins 1-4.

INTERCEPTIONS (No.-Yds.) – OSU: S.Miller 1-41; Powell 1-29; Bell 1-7. UA: Cy.Jones 1-32.

SACKS (No.-Yds.) – OSU: Da.Lee 2-0-8; Bennett 1-0-9. UA: Dickson 1-0-12; Pettway 1-0-5; Allen 1-0-4.

TACKLES FOR LOSS (No.-Yds.) – OSU: Da.Lee 3-0-11; Bennett 1-5-10; Washington 0-5-0. UA: Dickson 2-0-15; Allen 2-0-9; Ragland 2-0-5; N.Perry 1-0-11; Collins 1-0-8; Pettway 1-0-5; DePriest 1-0-1; Anderson 1-0-1.

TACKLES (Solo-Asst.-Tot.) – OSU: C.Grant 5-5-10; Bell 8-0-8; Da.Lee 7-0-7; D.Grant 6-1-7; J.Perry 4-1-5; Apple 4-1-5; Bennett 2-2-4; Bosa 3-0-3; Powell 2-1-3; Conley 2-0-2; C.Smith 2-0-2; A.Washington 1-1-2; Elliott 1-0-1; Booker 1-0-1; Samuel 1-0-1; C.Williams 1-0-1; E.Smith 1-0-1; Dunn 1-0-1. UA: Collins 9-3-12; Ragland 2-5-7; N.Perry 5-1-6; DePriest 4-2-6; G.Smith 4-2-6; Dickson 5-0-5; E.Jackson 4-0-4; Reed 3-0-3; Foster 2-0-2; Cy.Jones 2-0-2; J.Williams 2-0-2; Allen 2-0-2; A.Robinson 2-0-2; Devall 1-1-2; T.Brown 1-0-1; Fowler 1-0-1; Anderson 1-0-1; Nysewander 1-0-1; Howard 1-0-1; J.Washington 1-0-1; Pettway 1-0-1.

PLAYERS IN THE GAME – OHIO STATE: Offense: Decker, Price, Boren, Elflein, Baldwin, Heuerman, Ca.Jones, Elliott, Thomas, Spencer, D.Smith. Defense: Bosa, A.Washington, Bennett, S.Miller, Da.Lee, C.Grant, J.Perry, Apple, D.Grant, Powell, Bell, Johnston. Reserves: E.Smith, Samuel, Burrows, Marshall, Conley, Tanner, Dunn, Reeves, Ball, Booker, Worley, Fada, Clinton, Haynes, Burger, Munger, C.Williams, Farris, Lewis, N.Brown, Vannett, C.Smith, Baugh, Schutt. ALABAMA: Offense: C.Robinson, Kouandjio, Kelly, L.Brown, Shepherd, Vogler, Howard, B.Sims, Henry, Fowler, Cooper, Griffith. Defense: Allen, A.Robinson, Reed, Dickson, DePriest, Ragland, E.Jackson, Cy.Jones, Collins, N.Perry, G.Smith, JK Scott. Reserves: Black, T.Brown, White, Sylve, Yeldon, L.Jones, Anderson, Ro.Foster, Re.Foster, Hamilton, Cook, Stewart, Bateman, T.Jones, J.Williams, M.Smith, Ch.Jones, J.Washington, Di.Lee, Tenpenny, Devall, Evans, Nysewander, A.Taylor, Tomlinson, Mazza, Pettway, Barrineau, B.Greene, Ivory.

OHIO STATE VS. ALABAMA

OSU Overcomes Early Deficit, Turns Back Tide

Continued From Page 35

first-and-goal at the 1, though, and lost 8 yards after the recovery, and the drive ended with a 21-yard field goal by Nuernberger that made it 7-6 with 5:17 on the clock.

While the Buckeyes settled for a second field goal at the end of a promising drive, the Tide had little trouble reaching the end zone on its next possession. Alabama needed just 3:05 to march 79 yards over eight plays, and Cooper caught a 15-yard touchdown pass on an out pattern from Sims that, following a Griffith PAT, gave the Tide a 14-6 lead with 2:06 left in the opening quarter.

Ohio State committed its second turnover of the game early in the second quarter, giving the Tide another short field. Miscommunication between Jones and Smith, who never looked back for a pass that was picked off by Cyrus Jones, led to an interception that was caught at the OSU 47 and returned to the 15. T.J. Yeldon found the end zone five plays later on a 2-yard TD run, and Griffith's PAT made it 21-6 with 8:07 remaining before halftime.

The Buckeyes got back in the game on their next possession. Two 26-yard passes from Jones to Jalin Marshall put the ball in the Alabama red zone, and Ohio State converted on third-and-goal at the 3 as Elliott ran up the middle and plunged in for a touchdown. The PAT by Nuernberger made it 21-13 with 2:55 left before the half.

The OSU defense forced a three-and-out after the touchdown, giving Jones and the offense one more possession before halftime. The Buckeyes took momentum into the break thanks to an impressive six-play, 77-yard drive – and an unbelievable touchdown throw and catch. Jones helped the cause with a key 27-yard scramble to the Alabama 13, and after an incompleteness, the Buckeyes used a trick play to reach the end zone.

With 19 seconds on the clock and the Buckeyes facing second-and-10, Jones took a shotgun snap and handed the ball off to Marshall, who was running right. He then pitched the ball to Evan Spencer, who threw the ball to a leaping Thomas, who made an acrobatic catch and got his left foot down in the end zone before falling out of bounds.

"I knew when it would get called I had a great chance to make it happen," Spencer said. "When I saw it coming it started to look pretty good. I just hoped that he would get the ball and get his feet in bounds."

Nuernberger added the extra point with 12 seconds left on the clock, cutting the Alabama lead to 21-20 at halftime.

The momentum Ohio State took into the break continued into the third quarter.

The Buckeyes took their second lead of the game on the first possession of the second half. Facing a third-and-8 at the UA 47, Jones heaved a deep pass down the right sideline toward Smith. Alabama cornerback Eddie Jackson fell as the ball reached Smith, allowing the senior to walk into the end zone with a 47-yard touchdown strike – Smith's 30th and final TD grab as a Buckeye.

Nuernberger's PAT gave Ohio State a 27-21 lead with 12:44 on the third quarter clock.

Later in the third, Sims dropped back to pass on third-and-7 and threw the ball directly to senior defensive lineman Steve Miller, who had positioned himself in front of Cooper on a zone blitz. Miller picked up

some blocks and returned the pick 41 yards for a touchdown, sending the OSU supporters at the Superdome into a frenzy as Ohio State's lead grew to 34-21 with 3:21 left in the third quarter.

Alabama answered when the Tide went back on offense. Sims led a seven-play, 84-yard drive that lasted just 2:15. A 52-yard gain on a screen pass to Henry put the Tide in the red zone, and Sims later called his own number on a 5-yard rush up the middle for a touchdown. A Griffith PAT made it 34-28 with 1:01 remaining before the fourth quarter.

Alabama had a prime opportunity to retake the lead in the early portion of the fourth quarter when a Cameron Johnston punt took an inopportune bounce back toward the OSU end zone and was downed at the OSU 23. But the Tide quickly squandered the opportunity when Sims' first-down pass was picked off by Bell at the 1. Bell returned the pick to the 8 with 9:44 left on the clock.

The teams traded punts from there, and Ohio State took over at its own 5 with 5:24 to play and the six-point lead still on the board. The Buckeyes turned to their run game, gaining 4 on an Elliott carry on first down and 5 more on a Jones keeper. On third-and-1, Jones kept on an option run and ran through All-America safety Landon Collins to barely gain the yard necessary for a much-needed first down.

Then, on the ensuing first-down play, Elliott took a handoff and got a crucial block from Spencer that allowed the running back to race for an 85-yard touchdown. Elliott broke a tackle attempt by Xavier Dickson near the line of scrimmage and went the rest of the way untouched.

Jones completed a two-point conversion pass to Thomas to make it 42-28 with 3:24 on the clock.

Alabama did not quit, however, marching down the field thanks in large part to a 51-yard pass from Sims to DeAndrew White, who broke wide open on a double move. On fourth-and-2, Sims found Cooper for a 6-yard touchdown pass on a crossing pattern to cap a quick-strike drive that lasted just 1:17. Griffith's PAT cut the OSU lead to 42-35 with 1:59 remaining.

Alabama attempted an onside kick after the TD, and for a brief second, everyone in the Superdome held their breath as Spencer outjumped Ardarius Stewart for the bouncing ball. Ohio State couldn't get a first down, though, and had to punt to Alabama, which took over at its own 18 with 1:33 on the clock and no timeouts left.

The drive never got close to the end zone, though, as Sims' first two passes were caught both in bounds and short of the line to gain, keeping the clock moving. A pass to White and a Sims scramble moved the ball to the 50, and Sims hit O.J. Howard on the next play for 8 yards to get into OSU territory with 15 seconds left.

Sims' first Hail Mary was batted down by Eli Apple near the goal line, and on the final play, the Alabama senior threw to a scramble of bodies in the front right corner of the end zone. Powell outjumped everyone for the ball then raced to the OSU 29 before falling to the turf with the win literally in hand.

"There was going to be no way in the world I was going to let them score a touchdown," Powell said with his trademark smile afterward.

OHIO STATE VS. ALABAMA

Buckeye Toughness Trumps Tide Rushing

By RYAN GINN
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

To understand how Ohio State defensive tackles Michael Bennett and Adolphus Washington ended up walking off the Superdome field together, victorious, it's important to understand where they came from earlier in the season.

Although they were bookended with solid performances against Illinois and Michigan, the three mid-November games were not exactly a glowing endorsement of the Ohio State rushing defense.

Against Michigan State, the Buckeyes allowed 178 yards. That was followed up by a 218-yard showing from Minnesota. Things got even worse the following week when Indiana hit the Buckeyes for 281 yards on the ground. In that one, Tevin Coleman broke off runs of 90 and 52 yards. In each of those three games, opponents scored three touchdowns on the ground.

For those reasons, the Big Ten title game performance against Wisconsin couldn't have come at a better time. Facing an eventual Heisman Trophy finalist in Melvin Gordon, Ohio State held him to 76 yards on 26 carries. He didn't find the end zone – and neither did any of his teammates. After the game, he admitted that his chances of taking home the Heisman were likely nonexistent.

That win put the Buckeyes into the first College Football Playoff, and No. 1 Alabama awaited them in the Sugar Bowl. No team in recent history has done a better job of bullying opposing defensive fronts than the Tide. Wave after wave after wave of big, physical running backs cascade in the fourth quarter, when opposing defenses are too fatigued to do anything about it.

It's a recipe that Crimson Tide head coach Nick Saban rode to three national championships in a four-year span in Tuscaloosa. With running backs such as Mark Ingram (the school's first Heisman winner), Trent Richardson and Eddie Lacy, Alabama often has suffocated opposing teams by putting them in a run-heavy stranglehold that killed clocks and spirits.

It wouldn't be a stretch to say that the 2014 edition of Alabama was built in the mold of its predecessors. As was often the case, the Tide boasted a pair of running backs so close in talent that fans often clamored for the backup to see more playing time. When it came time to win games, first-year offensive coordinator Lane Kiffin knew how to pour it on against broken teams. With both games close late in the third quarter, Alabama scored four straight touchdowns to defeat Auburn in the Iron Bowl and three straight touchdowns against Missouri one week later to claim the SEC Championship Game.

Film sessions did nothing to diminish Alabama's talent, but Bennett still knew how the war would be won. A couple of days before OSU's semifinal against the Tide, he was asked about how to stop the fourth-quarter onslaught that had punished so many other squads. He pinned OSU's chances on toughness and discipline. In those areas, he figured, the Buckeyes would shine.

"Stopping Alabama comes with toughness," Bennett said. "That comes with not letting them do that. That has nothing to do with game plan or anything. That's just them deciding to run the clock out and the other team not being able to stop them. I



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WELL-EARNED PRAISE – Ohio State defensive linemen Michael Bennett (53) and Adolphus Washington (92) walk off the field together after helping the OSU defense limit Alabama's rushing attack.

don't think we're in that situation, and I don't predict that will happen."

He was right. It didn't happen.

Ohio State won the Sugar Bowl, and it did so by bottling up the Alabama running backs who had terrorized so many defenses this season. Sure, junior T.J. Yeldon and sophomore Derrick Henry both had their moments and collected a touchdown apiece. But both of those scores came in the first half as the Tide raced out to a 21-6 advantage. In the rushing battle, it was all OSU from that point on.

Ezekiel Elliott ran all over the SEC champs, racking up 230 yards. Meanwhile, neither 'Bama back hit the century mark. Henry finished with a team-high 95 yards on 13 carries and Yeldon managed just 10 carries for 47 yards.

"Their front did a really good job," Saban said. "We didn't handle them well in running the football like we thought we might be able to when we spread them out, and they did a good job on our perimeter screens and smokes. We made the blocks but they made the plays, and you've got to

give their players a lot of credit for the way they executed."

When the stakes were highest, Alabama couldn't crack the Ohio State defensive front. The Tide outscored opponents by a 102-55 margin in the final frame this season but could muster only nine carries for 32 yards in the fourth quarter against OSU. Bennett and Washington gave Alabama fits all night long but got better as the time got shorter.

The same could be said for their entire season. Although it didn't show immediately, something clicked in the Michigan State game, which was right about the time the two switched spots in the OSU defense. As the Buckeyes powered full-steam ahead toward the postseason, Washington and Bennett became a two-headed monster in the trenches. The duo proved inseparable the night of the Sugar Bowl, speaking together to reporters in the locker room after the win.

"That's why we're doing all these interviews together," Bennett said. "All year, we've been getting closer and closer. We personally feel like we have a big hand in these games. I think Alabama respected us. They knew they couldn't run it up the middle that much. My teammates bailed us out because I think a couple of times today they did get up the middle. This is my dude, and we shut down the middle as much we could."

Bennett credited the success to defensive line coach Larry Johnson Sr., the first-year Buckeye assistant whom he called the best coach at his position in the country. He also said OSU benefited from the group of guys on the line, none of whom lost hope when the game looked like it might be slipping away.

"I think the biggest thing is believing in your guys and believing in what your coaches tell you," Bennett said. "When we were down 21-6, a lot of teams would be like, 'Dang, this is over. This is Alabama we're playing and they're crushing us.' We all talked on the sideline and said, 'You know what? The score doesn't matter. You go win your individual battle every time.' That's what we did for the rest of the half, and that's what we did for the rest of the game."

What happened earlier was finished and erased from memory. In the late stages of the game and the season, Bennett and Washington were at their best.

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