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49-28



52-24



COURTESY OF THE COLLEGE FOOTBALL PLAYOFF

A DISAPPOINTING END – Ohio State players walk off the field following a 52-24 loss to Alabama in the College Football Playoff national championship at Hard Rock Stadium in Miami Gardens, Fla., on Jan. 11.

Loss In National Championship To Fuel Ohio State This Offseason

By ANDREW LIND
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

As confetti fell from the canopy at Hard Rock Stadium in celebration of Alabama's 52-24 win over Ohio State in the 2021 College Football Playoff national championship on Jan. 11, several Buckeyes lingered on the field to watch the trophy presentation, marking a disappointing end to a season in which those players believed they would ultimately be the ones raising the 24-karat gold trophy at the end of the night.

"I'm proud of our team. I'm proud of the seniors. I'm proud of the year that we've had," Ohio State head coach Ryan Day said after the game. "But it was a tough night. There's a lot to unravel there. But when you look the team in the eye after the long season we've been through, it's hard to

start focusing on one or two plays or whatever it was because they've been through so much."

"I'm proud of the legacy the seniors have left behind. But you've got to give credit to Alabama. They are certainly a very good team, and they played really well tonight."

The Buckeyes overcame several obstacles this season on their journey to the national championship game, including the Big Ten postponing and reinstating a conference-only season, living in isolation in an attempt to avoid contracting coronavirus and having three games canceled, though only one was due to an outbreak within the Buckeyes' program. That also meant playing without key players for weeks at a time, most notably taking on the Crimson Tide without defensive linemen Tommy Togiai and Tyreke Smith as well as kicker Blake Haubeil, among others.

Still, Ohio State never flinched in the face of

adversity. The Buckeyes won all six games in Big Ten play, including a come-from-behind victory over Northwestern in the conference title game in which running back Trey Sermon rushed for a single-game school-record 331 yards and two touchdowns. They also avenged a controversial loss to Clemson in last year's Fiesta Bowl with a resounding 49-28 win over the Tigers in the Sugar Bowl behind a school record-tying six touchdown passes from quarterback Justin Fields.

Ohio State then ran into an Alabama team that featured several national award winners on offense, including wide receiver DeVonta Smith, who won the Heisman Trophy and Walter Camp Award as the nation's top player and the Biletnikoff Award as the country's best wide receiver; quarterback Mac Jones, who took home the Davey O'Brien Award as

Continued On Page 8

COVER STORY

Tigers Provided Bucks With Offseason Motivation

Continued From Page 1

the nation's top quarterback; running back Najee Harris, who won the Doak Walker Award as the country's best running back; and center Landon Dickerson, who won the Rimington Award as the nation's top center, though he did not play until the final snap of the national championship due to a torn ACL he suffered in the SEC Championship Game on Dec. 19.

Crimson Tide offensive coordinator Steve Sarkisian, who is now the head coach at Texas, also won the Broyles Award, which is given annually to the best assistant coach in college football.

"Having no fans, having no season and having games canceled, it was a challenge, but I wouldn't have it any other way," Day said. "This season has been crazy, disruptive, all of the above. What I tried not to do and what we tried not to do was focus on those things and have built-in excuses. We just kept pushing forward. I thought going into the semifinal game against Clemson, we hadn't played our best game yet, and we needed to play our best game tonight against Alabama, and we didn't."

"For us to continually work through all of that and get to this moment right here was an unbelievable success. The goal of the game was not to get here, the goal was to win the game. But all that being said, I couldn't be prouder of our culture, what our kids are made of and where the program is headed."

Now, the Buckeyes find themselves in



PHOTO COURTESY THE OHIO STATE DEPT. OF ATHLETICS

NEVER FORGET – Ohio State posted the score of the 2019 Fiesta Bowl defeat to Clemson all over the Woody Hayes Athletic Center as a motivational tool for the players, including quarterback Justin Fields, who threw an interception in the end zone in the final minute of the 29-23 loss.



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COVER STORY

the same position as last offseason, coming off a loss that will motivate them throughout workouts, spring practice, fall camp and into next season. There will surely be reminders throughout the Woody Hayes Athletic Center of the 52-24 defeat, too, just as the score of the 29-23 loss to Clemson in the 2019 Fiesta Bowl was plastered all over the weight room, as Ohio State looks to make a run at a fifth straight Big Ten title and a return trip to the College Football Playoff in 2021.

"For the guys who were in the locker room who are going to be coming back, they have something to motivate them in the offseason, that feeling of coming off the field," Day said. "We felt that way coming off the field last year against Clemson. Now we feel that way coming off the field against Alabama. We're going to use that as a motivation in the offseason."

This offseason will be especially critical, since the Buckeyes are set to lose all six team captains to the NFL, including Fields, center Josh Myers, offensive guard Wyatt Davis, defensive end Jonathon Cooper, cornerback Shaun Wade and linebacker Tuf Borland, who this season became just the second three-time team captain in school history, joining former quarterback J.T. Barrett.

Even so, they are confident that new leaders will emerge to make sure the team responds the right way.

"I feel like they're going to respond the same way that they felt last year with that Clemson loss, honestly," Cooper said after the loss to the Crimson Tide. "I am excited to watch and see what they do next year. I feel like this is just going to fuel them and motivate them to greater heights, to just achieve more. I feel like they got a taste of it and now they just need to go finish it."

Borland echoed those sentiments.

"I think the guys that come back next year will grow from it and be better from it," he said.

Fields, who declared for the 2021 NFL draft on Jan. 18 and is widely expected to be among the first quarterbacks selected in April, addressed the team after the loss in hopes that it would motivate them to accomplish what he and the other departees could not.

"I was just telling the young guys that they have a lot more years here left and

to remember what this feels like," Fields said. "To never let it happen to them again. I encouraged them to get back to work as quickly as possible and just remember this feeling of walking off the field with a loss. It doesn't really happen that much here at Ohio State, so I just told them to remember the feeling."

One of the players expected to step into a leadership role is rising junior right tackle Nicholas Petit-Frère, who – along with returning senior Thayer Munford – is assumed to anchor the offensive line, especially with the departure of Davis and Meyers.

"We try to use everything we can to play with a chip on our shoulder and fuel us for next season," Petit-Frère said. "After that loss to Clemson, we really left the field with a bitter taste in our mouth, saying how we left a lot of stuff on the field that could have brought us to the championship game like this year."

"When we went out to go play against Clemson, we remembered those feelings. We had a lot of those emotions when we were playing that game, but we knew to keep our poise and calm and do the job that we needed to do. So, same thing here. This is just another building block for our team to make us stronger, not only as a team, as the group we have coming back, but also for future Buckeyes."

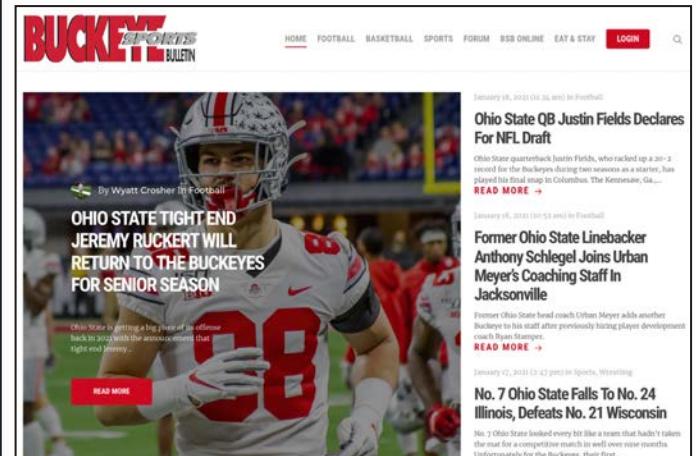
There's no denying this anxiety-filled season took a toll on Day and the rest of the Ohio State football program. The Buckeyes, who were clearly exhausted after the national championship, will now take a deep breath and look back fondly at all they've accomplished before diving headfirst into putting together a game plan for how to beat the Crimson Tide.

"We need a break," Day said. "We need to get away. These guys are missing their families and we all just need a break. We've already started to put together the schedule for the spring, but we all need to get away for a while. This has been a long, long road. Guys miss their families, and they deserve time to be with them."

"You can't just go back into work here. You need some time to rest and reflect. We'll unwind for a little while, have an opportunity to reflect on what the season has been, and then get back into it."

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OHIO STATE VS. ALABAMA

Buckeyes Fail To Slow Down 'Bama's Weapons

Coming into the game against Alabama, the storyline was that this national title matchup was a battle between two of the best offenses in the country and that Ohio State would have to keep up with the scoring from the Crimson Tide if it wanted a chance to upset the team that was the No. 1 seed throughout this season's College Football Playoff rankings.

GAME NOTEBOOK

Wyatt Crosher

For the first 25 minutes of the game, the Buckeyes were up to the challenge, trailing by just four points, 21-17, following a field goal by true freshman Jake Seibert, who was playing in place of Blake Haubeil, who had tested positive with COVID-19. But from there, Alabama took over, scoring 31 of the final 38 points in the game for a 52-24 rout to earn head coach Nick Saban his seventh national title, the most for any coach in college football history.

"They're very good schematically, and they have really good personnel," Ohio State head coach Ryan Day said immediately following the game. "It's one thing to have a good play, it's another thing to execute it. We didn't do that well enough on either side of the ball tonight. I don't think there's one thing. I think it's several things. We didn't finish a couple of those drives, didn't get the fourth-down conversion, two of them, and they continued to make big plays. They got up, I think, four scores on us, and we couldn't quite keep up. It was just a combination of things."

On the night, the Crimson Tide finished with 621 yards of total offense, far surpassing the previous season high of 490 yards Ohio State had allowed against Indiana on Nov. 21. Like that game, where quarterback Michael Penix threw for 491



COURTESY OF THE ALABAMA DEPT. OF ATHLETICS

COULDN'T STOP HIM – Before he was injured on a hit in the third quarter of Alabama's 52-24 win over Ohio State, Heisman Trophy-winning wide receiver DeVonta Smith caught 12 passes for 215 yards and three touchdowns.

yards and five scores, the Buckeyes struggled stopping the pass attack, this time with fourth-year junior quarterback Mac Jones at the helm.

Jones completed 36 of 45 passes for a season-high 464 yards and five touchdowns, and he did much of that damage in the first half, throwing for 220 yards in the second quarter and 342 yards in the opening 30 minutes to help Alabama jump out to a 35-17 halftime lead.

As has been the case all season, Jones had a favorite target in senior wide receiver DeVonta Smith, the winner of this year's Heisman Trophy. Smith played in less than half of this game, but his presence was felt in a big way, finishing the game with 12 receptions for 215 yards and three touchdowns.

"I don't know if I've seen (a receiver) better than that," Day said of Smith. "He just seemed to create a lot of separation. He's obviously very fast. He plays stronger than he looks. He's not a very big guy, but his play strength is significant."

He just eats up ground down the field once he gets those strides going. He has tremendous ball skills, the Heisman Trophy winner and well deserved. He's a great player."

Smith had four catches of more than 20 yards, including two receptions of 44 and 42 yards late in the second quarter, the latter good for a score, that helped expand Alabama's lead from 21-17 to 35-17 in less than a four-minute span.

"They just gave him the ball in open space, and he made plays," said Ohio State fourth-year junior cornerback Shaun Wade. "He's a great player, and they had a great scheme. They just made plays. They just came and outplayed us today."

While Jones and Smith were Alabama's two Heisman finalists, with Jones finishing third, running back Najee Harris finished just outside the threshold to become a finalist and ranked fifth in voting. Compared to his quarterback and star wide receiver, Harris' performance was subdued, but he still had a strong

showing, finishing with 158 total yards and three touchdowns.

On the ground, Harris ran 22 times for 79 yards and a pair of touchdowns, while also adding 79 yards and a touchdown on seven catches in the receiving game, with the score coming on a 26-yard play that saw Harris beat fifth-year senior linebacker Tuf Borland in space to leap into the end zone.

On the whole, it was not a strong showing from an Ohio State defense that has struggled at points throughout the season. But Day said that the team was not looking to make any widespread changes to its scheme in the game against the Crimson Tide.

"We wanted to make sure we didn't change what we do, just fundamentally, but we also had to have some changes because if you just sit there, they're going to pick you apart," Day said. "It's one thing to have some ideas, it's another thing to execute them. We didn't do that well enough. There were just obviously

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OHIO STATE VS. ALABAMA

Game Analysis

What Worked Well

There were not all too many positives to take from Ohio State's 28-point loss to Alabama, but early on, the offense was able to get the ball moving. The Buckeyes countered Alabama's opening touchdown drive with an eight-play, 75-yard drive finished off with a touchdown by running back Master Teague.

"Our guys competed. They played all the way to the end. I wouldn't have any other group with me. They're a special group of men. We had some things that we did that we wanted to change it up. We also wanted to make sure we were doing the same things that got us to this point, but clearly it wasn't good enough."

Absences, Injuries Take Their Toll

Before Ohio State took the field, the team knew it had an uphill battle in the trenches on the defensive side of the ball without junior defensive tackle Tommy Togiai or junior defensive end Tyreke Smith in the lineup.

Still, even after a lackluster performance by the defense, fifth-year senior defensive end Jonathon Cooper was proud of all the players who stepped up in place of those two key cogs of the unit.

"Tommy and Tyreke are great players, but I have to give a lot of credit to the guys that stepped in their place," Cooper said. "Jerron Cage and Tyler Friday, Javontae (Jean-Baptiste) and Zach (Harrison) and Antwuan Jackson and Taron Vincent are all on the inside. They definitely stepped up to play. I'm very proud of them. Even with us missing a guy like Tommy and Tyreke, they stepped up and played really well in my opinion. I'm really excited to see what they all do next year."

The players who were unavailable impacted the play of the defense, but it was injuries that hampered Ohio State on the offensive side of the ball, both from prior games and from within the matchup against Alabama.

Coming into the game, the attention was on the health of junior quarterback Justin Fields, who suffered a rib injury against Clemson on a hit from linebacker James Skalski that got him ejected for targeting. Despite that injury, Fields threw for 385 yards and six touchdowns against the Tigers.

In this game, Fields made less of an impact, completing 17 of his 33 passes for 194 yards and a touchdown. He also ran the ball six times for a team-high 67 yards, including a long of 33 yards.

While he admitted that he was not 100 percent, Fields made no excuses for his performance following the defeat.

"At the end of the day I'm glad I was able to play, and we didn't get the job done," Fields said. "Of course, I could have been healthier, but I was healthy enough. I was able to be out there. We had a good game plan planned out, but they executed better than we did. 'Bama is a great team. You have to give them their respect, and we just have to be better."

The Ohio State offense was also not helped by the events of the first play of the game, where the Buckeyes lost running back Trey Sermon, who left the stadium and went to a hospital after just one carry for 2 yards.

Sermon, who had the best two-game rushing span in program history after rushing for 331 yards in the Big Ten Championship Game against Northwestern and 193 yards in the College Football Playoff Semifinal against Clemson, was a major reason the Buckeyes were even in the national title game and would have been implemented in a big way against the Crimson Tide.

What Didn't Work

Quarterback Justin Fields also had some moments, throwing for 194 yards and a touchdown while also rushing for 67 yards on six carries. He was the catalyst for a three-play, 75-yard touchdown drive in the third quarter that cut the deficit to 14 on a 20-yard touchdown connection with sophomore wide receiver Garrett Wilson in the third quarter.

What Didn't Work

Any success that Ohio State had on offense was completely overshadowed by how much the defense was completely dismantled by the Crimson Tide for the vast majority of the game. Alabama finished with 621 yards of total offense and 52 points after punting only one time through the first three quarters.

A whopping 464 of those yards came through the air, with quarterback Mac Jones completing 36 of his 45 passes and throwing five touchdowns. He was helped by Heisman Trophy winner DeVonta Smith, who had 12 receptions for 215 yards

and three touchdowns, all of which came in the first half before he dislocated his finger and left the game.

Running back Najee Harris was somewhat held in check on the ground, rushing 22 times for 79 yards and two touchdowns, but also played a major factor in the pass game, hauling in seven catches for 79 yards and another score.

Offensively, after keeping pace with the Crimson Tide for much of the first half, the Buckeyes lost all momentum. Following a 23-yard field goal by freshman kicker Jake Seibert, Ohio State was outscored 31-7 the rest of the game on the way to a lopsided defeat.

Play Of The Game

Following that field goal by Seibert, Alabama went on a five-play, 75-yard touchdown drive in 2:02 to take a 28-17 lead with a little over three minutes to play in the first half. Ohio State had an opportunity to counter and make it a one-score game but could not get a first down and was forced to punt the ball back to the Crimson Tide.

Then, with 2:29 to play in the half, Jones immediately found Harris for a 14-yard gain and then found him again for 4 more yards before completing a 42-yard touchdown pass to Smith to put the Crimson Tide up 35-17.

That connection would be the final one of the night for Jones and Smith after the wide receiver's injury, and it might have been the completion that truly broke the backs of Ohio State's comeback efforts before the team even reached halftime.

– Wyatt Crosher

Day said the loss of Sermon, as well as other players who were unavailable, played a role in the 28-point defeat.

"To lose Trey on the first play of the game is one of those things," Day said. "Whenever you think what's going to happen in the game it's probably not going to happen that way, to lose Trey in the first play of the game. We certainly missed Tommy Togiai in the game and a few others. But you've got to overcome it. Like I told the guys, nobody feels sorry for you, so you've just got to keep pushing forward. It's kind of been the theme of the season."

Master Teague, who left the Northwestern game early and missed the Clemson game entirely, filled in for Sermon and rushed the ball 15 times for 65 yards and two touchdowns. Sophomore offensive tackle Nicholas Petit-Frère said the offensive strategy remained the same, even after Sermon was out of the equation.

"It was tough losing Trey," Petit-Frère said. "He's a brother to us. When I heard that he was out after that first drive, it was really heartbreaking for us, not only as an offensive line, but as an offense and as a team in general. But we didn't change anything. We still had the same game plan. We all trained hard through all the players and depth chart, so if someone went down, we knew someone needed to come up. It's not like we only played with Trey. We made sure everyone was accounted for and everyone was able to play and do their job."

Later in the game, Ohio State suffered another loss on offense when junior guard and unanimous All-American Wyatt Davis had to leave the game with a leg injury. He was seen on the sidelines on crutches later in the game.

"I just talked to him. He kind of reinjured that knee," Day said on the status of Davis. "He's sore right now. I'm not sure what the diagnosis is. We'll have to check with our doctors. But he's sore. He's certainly in pain."

On the night, Ohio State rushed 29 times for 147 yards to get the team's

total yards up to 341, nearly 300 short of Alabama's final game total. The total yardage was by far the lowest the Buckeyes put up this season, coming in under the 491 yards they finished with in the season opener against Nebraska.

"They played a good game," said junior wide receiver Chris Olave. "They had some really good defense. That's a really good team over there, but they just played better ball than us today. And they came out with the win."

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OHIO STATE VS. ALABAMA

Tide Rolls To 52-24 Win In Championship Game

By CRAIG MERZ
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

Led by Heisman Trophy winner DeVonta Smith, for a damaging first half at least, Alabama returned to glory in a dominating manner with a 52-24 win for the No. 1 Crimson Tide over third-ranked Ohio State in the College Football Playoff championship game before 14,926 fans at Hard Rock Stadium in Miami Gardens, Fla., on Jan. 11.

Alabama (13-0) scored on five of its first six possessions for a 35-17 halftime lead and was never threatened from there as former Ohio State assistant coach Nick Saban became the all-time leader in modern era national titles with seven (six at Alabama, one at LSU) to surpass Crimson Tide legend Paul "Bear" Bryant.

"We needed to play our best game tonight against Alabama, and we didn't," said Ohio State coach Ryan Day.

Smith had 12 catches for 215 yards and three touchdowns in the first half, Najee Harris had three scores and Mac Jones passed for a CFP title-game-record 464 yards and five TDs.

Smith left the game after sustaining a hand injury on the first drive of the third quarter without padding his stats.

"I don't know if I've seen anyone better than that," Day said. "He created separation and plays stronger than he looks. The Heisman Trophy winner and he deserves it."

Justin Fields was 17 of 33 for 194 yards and a touchdown to Garrett Wilson for the Buckeyes.

Alabama struck first after holding the Buckeyes to 3 yards on three plays and a punt to open the game. Trey Sermon was knocked out of the contest after gaining 2 yards on the first play.

Harris capped the 12-play, 78-yard, 5:32 drive with a 1-yard plunge on fourth down at the 8:07 mark. Jones had completions of 22 and 9 yards to Smith, a 15-yarder on third down to Jaylen Waddle to move the chains, and a 12-yard catch by Harris.

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COURTESY OF THE OHIO STATE DEPT. OF ATHLETICS

GAVE IT THEIR ALL – Senior linebacker Baron Browning forced and recovered a fumble in the second quarter of Ohio State's national championship loss to Alabama, which allowed the Buckeyes to tie the game at 14 just one play later.

Ohio State responded with an impressive eight-play, 75-yard drive to tie the score when Master Teague ran for an 8-yard TD with 4:55 left in the first to make it 7-7.

Chris Olave had a 20-yard catch to the Alabama 44, and two plays later Jeremy Ruckert made a one-handed catch for 36 to the 8. Teague on the next snap rolled around the left end for the score.

Alabama methodically marched 75 yards, using 11 plays and 4:58, to take a 14-7 lead seven seconds into the second quarter with Smith making a 5-yard TD reception. He gained 44 yards on two catches to open the drive, and Harris converted a fourth-and-1 from the 10 with a run of 3 yards. He had two carries totaling 2 yards before the score.

The only turnover of the game enabled the Buckeyes to even the score at 14 on a 4-yard rush from Teague with 11:43 remaining in the half. Linebacker Baron Browning strip-sacked Jones and recovered the fumble at the Alabama 19. A pass interference on the first play put the ball at the 4 to set up Teague.

Harris had a 26-yard catch-and-run for an easy six to make it 21-14 with 9:00 remaining. The Crimson Tide needed only five plays and 2:43 to go 75 yards. Smith had back-to-back receptions of 16 and 13 yards, and Harris added a 13-yard run.

Ohio State closed to 21-17 on a 23-yard field goal by freshman Jake Seibert – the first of his career in his second attempt – at 5:21, but the Buckeyes could have gotten more. Runs of 28 by Fields and 29 by Teague on consecutive plays got OSU to the 15, but the Buckeyes couldn't punch it in.

On third-and-11 from the 16, Alabama safety Jordan Battle was ejected for targeting on Ruckert to give the Buckeyes a first down at the 8. Two incomplete passes and a Teague run of 2 yards forced the three-pointer.

Jones shredded the defense, complet-

ing three passes for 65 yards including a 44-yarder to Smith, when Alabama made it four TDs in five series. Smith caught another 5-yarder for a 28-17 score with 3:19 left as the Tide went 75 yards in five plays and 2:02.

Smith started and ended the next scoring sequence for a 35-17 lead with 1:48 left before the intermission when he crafted a 19-yard punt return to the Alabama 40. Jones went to Harris for 14 and 4 before Smith flew past the defense for a 42-yard TD.

More Of The Same

Alabama extended the lead to 38-17 on its first drive of the third quarter, culminating in a 20-yard field goal by Will Reichard at 7:47.

Harris had a run for 13 and a catch for 10 and Waddle caught a ball for 13 among the 16 plays, but Smith went to the sideline with a finger injury after being hit by Pete Werner.

Fields used his arm and legs to cut the margin to 38-24 in rapid fashion. He hit Garrett Wilson for 17 to the OSU 42, and after an offside penalty on Alabama, Fields took off for 33 yards to the 20. He tossed a 20-yard TD to Wilson at 6:45 of the third for the three-play, 75-yard drive that used just 1:02.

But the Tide was undeterred, and Jones guided them 75 yards in eight plays and 3:53 as he spotted Slade Bolden for a 5-yard TD with 2:52 left in the quarter to make it 45-24. The big plays were a 22-yard pass to Jahleel Billingsley and a 21-yard run by Brian Robinson.

After stopping the Buckeyes on a fourth-and-1 at the OSU 45 when Teague lost 2 yards, the Tide removed all doubt about the outcome when Harris ran it in from the 1 with 13:15 remaining in the game for the final margin.

Later, Ohio State had a 17-play possession that ended with zero points midway through the fourth quarter after Fields

threw four incompletions on first-and-goal from the 6.

The teams exchanged possessions before the Crimson Tide got the ball with 4:53 left and ran eight plays to finish the game at the OSU 47.

Jones completed 36 of 45 passes as Alabama had 621 total yards to 341 for OSU.

Teague, playing for the injured Sermon, carried 15 times for 65 yards and the two scores. Sermon had 524 rushing yards in the previous two games.

The Buckeyes had 13 players unavailable for the game including starters Tommy Togiai at defensive tackle, defensive tackle Tyreke Smith and kicker Blake Haubeil. The school didn't give reasons for their absences as usual, but the program has been hit hard by COVID-19 issues during the latter half of the season.

The Buckeyes (7-1) were seeking their sixth recognized national title and first since winning the inaugural CFP title on Jan. 12, 2015, by beating Oregon 42-20 after downing Alabama 42-35 in the semifinal.

Alabama (13-0) claimed its 18th national title, although the NCAA recognizes 16. The most recent came when the Crimson Tide defeated Georgia 26-23 on Jan. 9, 2018.

Numbers

Smith's catch total was a record for Bowl Championship Series or CFP national title games back to 1998, and his yardage total ranked second. ... Alabama had four TD drives of 75 yards. The others went 78, 60 and 43 yards. They led in time of possession (37:26-22:34) and first downs (33-19). ... Fields topped the Buckeyes with 67 yards on the ground on six carries. ... Olave had eight catches for 69 yards, and Wilson had three for 50. ... Harris had 79 yards rushing and 79 receiving. ... OSU's Tuf Borland had a game-high 14 tackles (seven solo). Justin Hilliard and Werner each had four solo and four assisted tackles for the Buckeyes.

OHIO STATE VS. ALABAMA

Media Reacts To OSU's Blowout Defeat To Alabama

By WYATT CROSHER
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

Ohio State was not able to put up much of a fight against Alabama, falling 52-24 to the Crimson Tide in the College Football Playoff national championship game, with Alabama quarterback Mac Jones (464 passing yards, five touchdowns) and wide receiver DeVonta Smith (12 catches, 215 yards, three touchdowns) leading the way. Smith had all his production in the first half.

While the game was not as back and forth as the Buckeyes' battle against Clemson the season prior, there were still plenty of opinions shared from media members, both who cover the team and who cover college football nationally, on what exactly happened in the 28-point defeat.

"Alabama proved itself again to be a tier above the rest of college football in 2020 – especially with the way it dusted Ohio State in Monday's national championship game.

"So what does the Buckeye program take away from that experience?

"On one hand, Ohio State achieved much in 2019-20. It reached the playoffs twice. It emphatically avenged itself against nemesis Clemson. It reached the national championship game and took its shot at the premier program in the sport.

"Yet the Buckeyes still could leave Hard Rock Stadium with new perspectives. From a recruiting standpoint, Ohio State learned that even brief lulls at one or two positions can spell catastrophe against teams such as 2019 LSU and 2020 Alabama. Since one of those teams will always be out there, the Buckeyes may need to make defensive adjustments to better develop and utilize their talent."

– Nathan Baird,
Cleveland.com

"Ohio State was down 14 players, including two starters along the defensive line, due to COVID-19. Running back Trey Sermon left with an arm injury after his first carry, and All-American guard Wyatt Davis left the game in the second quarter.

"Ohio State still managed to run the ball effectively with Master Teague, but Justin Fields was limited to 6-of-15 passing for 90 yards in the first half. Fields played through an injury in the semifinal victory against Clemson, but the Buckeyes fell too far behind in the first half because of Alabama's offense. Fields finished 17-of-33 passing for 194 yards and a score, adding 67 rushing yards as well.

"Buckeyes coach Ryan Day has done a fantastic job in two seasons since taking over for Urban Meyer. Ohio State is 20-2 with back-to-back

Big Ten championships in that stretch. But on Monday, he was playing short-handed, and his defense couldn't stop Alabama's high-powered attack."

– Bill Bender,
Sporting News

"Ohio State is an elite football program. Over the past several years only Alabama and Clemson have consistently performed at an equal or better level than the Buckeyes. Unfortunately for the Buckeyes, they ran into a buzzsaw of an Alabama team on Monday night, losing in blowout fashion in the College Football Playoff.

"But Ohio State is not going anywhere and 2021 should again be quite promising. In the 247Sports early Top 25, I voted Ohio State No. 2; the highest of any analyst. I can see the argument for placing the Buckeyes anywhere within the top five, but as the high man, I was asked to explain the vote.

"A good bit of my ranking is based on my faith in the recruiting Ohio State has done under coach Ryan Day. Only Alabama and Georgia have recruited at an equal or better level during his tenure, as I explained in my Blue-Chip Ratio piece. Recruiting rankings are not a guarantee of success, but recruiting at this level is an extremely strong indicator."

– Bud Elliott,
247Sports

"The Sugar Bowl, in retrospect, was offensive perfection from Ohio State.

"Justin Fields threw six touchdown passes and just one interception. Trey Sermon galloped for 193 yards and a score. Chris Olave torched the Clemson secondary to the tune of 132 yards and a pair of touchdowns. The offensive line blasted holes for Sermon and largely kept Fields upright. Even the tight ends got in on the action, with Jeremy Ruckert and Luke Farrell scoring a combined 21 points.

"The problem with trying to replicate perfection is, well, trying to replicate perfection. It's incredibly difficult, especially when trying to do so on the stage of a national championship game against a talented Alabama defense with Nick Saban at the helm."

– Colin Hass-Hill,
Eleven Warriors

"DeVonta Smith was in the locker room, injured. Najee Harris was on the sideline, resting. Mac Jones was on the field, hobbling. Jaylen Waddle was there, too, hardly able to walk on his surgically repaired ankle.

"Alabama, for a few moments

anyway, actually looked a bit vulnerable.

"Then ... Touchdown, Crimson Tide.

"Ohio State's defense couldn't get a stop, not even then. And whatever slim chances the Buckeyes still had at coming back in Monday's national championship game died there, when wide receiver Slade Bolden won a footrace to the corner of the end zone on a late third-quarter scoring drive against a gassed defense just trying to hold on for dear life.

"OSU had no answer for this magical Alabama offense. No team has all season. The only hope for the Big Ten champs was that whatever number the Tide landed on, it wouldn't be so astronomical that the Buckeyes couldn't keep up.

"The final – Alabama 52, Ohio State 24 – will replace the losing margin from last year's College Football Playoff disappointment against Clemson as the target that fuels this coming offseason. But that loss last year felt like snatching defeat from the jaws of victory. Monday night was a clinic by one team that's built to contend on an annual basis and a stark reminder of the ground that Ohio State needs to make up if it wants to once again celebrate a national title."

– Bill Landis,
The Athletic

"Sometimes you get beat because the other guy is just that much better.

"Or in the case of Alabama, the other guys, plural – although for 30 minutes on Monday night in suburban Miami it appeared that Crimson Tide receiver DeVonta Smith might outscore Ohio State all by his lonesome.

"Regardless, the better team won. The much better team. Play 10 times and the Buckeyes maybe win two. Three, if things fall exactly right. The Tide showed it is a worthy champion by clocking OSU 52-24.

"There is no shame in Ohio State losing to Nick Saban – now with seven national titles overall – and an Alabama offense that ranks among the best ever. The Crimson Tide rolled up 389 yards in the first half alone (and 621 overall), more than OSU totaled for the game (341).

"Allowing 52 points is unacceptable, and for many scarlet and gray devotees depressingly unwatchable, but dropping chin to chest meant not seeing a performance as pretty in its perfection as it was painful for those on the wrong end of it."

– Rob Oller,
The Columbus Dispatch

"Ohio State's on-field log included the usual lopsided wins against inferior Big Ten competition. But the Buckeyes delivered their most complete and validating performance in the CFP semifinal against Clemson, the team that had ended Ohio State's 2019 season and many assumed would face Alabama.

"Day called the Clemson win 'a landmark game' in program history. There were more obstacles heading into the title game.

"Fields was still recovering from a massive hit to his side in the Clemson win. Between positive cases and contact tracing, COVID-19 issues began impacting the roster in November and limited position groups, like offensive line, wide receiver and linebacker. There have also been issues in recent weeks with the defensive line.

"Ohio State had three starters sidelined against Alabama, including defensive tackle Tommy Togiai, who Big Ten coaches considered the team's most disruptive defensive lineman. At one point last week, there were rumblings of potentially postponing the title game.

"Day made it clear throughout the week his team wasn't just happy to make the title game. Any minute not focused on Alabama was a minute wasted. Yet he continued to be asked, and continued to acknowledge, the difficult and draining path to South Florida.

"Ohio State will likely win more titles and play in more national championship games, but it will never have an odyssey quite like this one."

– Adam Rittenberg,
ESPN

"Waiting in the final chapter of what was supposed to be a fairytale for the Buckeyes was a monster, and they simply couldn't slay it.

"The offense couldn't find its top gear. The defense was absolutely picked apart. And injuries and positive tests that Ohio State had mostly shrugged off during this unprecedented season finally caught up with it in key spots as Alabama dominated the national-title matchup in a 52-24 decision on Monday night at Hard Rock Stadium.

"Make no mistake: The Buckeyes didn't make any excuses, and the Crimson Tide was clearly the better team. But Ohio State had a handful of chances that showed it belonged on the championship field before the missed opportunities and blown coverages caught up with them."

– Austin Ward,
Lettermen Row

OHIO STATE VS. ALABAMA

BSB Quotebook: Alabama 52, Ohio State 24

Ohio State junior quarterback Justin Fields when asked how much losing senior tailback Trey Sermon to injury in the first quarter impacted what Ohio State wanted to do offensively: "Of course he was hot these last few weeks, but we have the mentality of competitive excellence. And when one man goes down, we have to bring up the next man. But we would have liked to have Trey out there. He's a baller, he's a warrior, but he wasn't able to play with us. But with or without him, we've still got to execute."

Ohio State junior wide receiver Chris Olave when asked what was in his head after having such high expectations and not having the offensive production the team wanted: "It was tough. I mean, we have high standards for ourselves, high standards for each other. We worked so hard all season to get to this point. And we didn't play our best game today. It's tough. And it's a down moment. But we just have to soak it in and bounce back."

Ohio State head coach Ryan Day on Fields playing through injury: "Justin has been unbelievable. He's as tough a player as I've been around. For him to go out there and play today really shows his toughness and how much he loves his brothers. He still took some shots on that hip. He was not 100 percent tonight. He was working through it and made some really good throws, made some gutsy plays, kept us in the game there for a while. He's an unbelievable player, and I'm going to miss him."

Ohio State junior tight end Jeremy Ruckert on his relationship with Fields: "Other than as a football player, you can tell just how much of a competitor he is and how truly great he is. He always puts us in a great position. And he's one of the toughest players I've ever been around. One of my toughest teammates I've ever seen. He showed that last game and coming back this game, behind the scenes, just 24/7 in our training room, getting his body right and doing everything he can to make sure he's out here. And I feel he didn't even give it away that he was hurt at all. It looked like he was standing in there strong and doing whatever he could to help us win. He's a great person, an unbelievable football player and I'm excited to watch his future."

Fields on what his two years at Ohio State meant to him: "The last few years have been great. I've made a lot of friendships and made a lot of brothers. We definitely wanted a different outcome, but I'm definitely going to miss everybody."

Fields on how the loss will motivate him in the offseason: "It's going to motivate me a lot. We didn't get the turnout that we wanted to, didn't get the result that we wanted. But that's just going to make us work harder. This team deals with adversity very well. We've been through a lot of adversity this past year. We're just going to use it to get back and just work our butts off."

Ohio State fifth-year senior defensive end Jonathon Cooper when asked about facing an offense like Alabama's and how the defense felt in practice with its preparation: "A lot of credit to Alabama. They're a great team. We knew that coming in. They're coached very well, and they have good players. We felt like we did a good job preparing all week. There's not much I can say hon-

estly. You guys saw the game. They're a good team. I feel like we didn't execute and didn't tackle as well as we should have, as a whole defense. We just had to be better. Unfortunately, we were not. They took advantage of that."

Ohio State fourth-year junior cornerback Shaun Wade when asked if returning for the season was worth it for him despite the loss in the national championship: "Oh, yeah, definitely it was worth it. I see myself growing as a man and as a team, and all the young guys growing as men, all the things that we went through, the adversity. I'm happy I came back, and I'm just glad we got here. I'm upset we didn't get the win, but I'm definitely happy I came back and accomplished some big things with this team. I'm proud of them. I'm proud of everybody."

Wade on if he will return again or enter the NFL draft: "I really can't say. You know, I do want to come back and everything. I have to talk to my parents. It is upsetting that we got here, and we just didn't accomplish the goal. And that's just been my goal, winning a national championship and just winning big games like this. I'll just go back with my parents, go talk to them and just go from there."

Alabama senior wide receiver DeVonta Smith when asked what he thought about Wade wanting to cover him and how he felt the matchup went after his 12-catch, 215-yard, three-touchdown first half: "Well, I mean, I just practiced hard all week, just worked, came to do my job. It just worked out well for me and the team."

Alabama head coach Nick Saban when asked how tough it was to see Smith get hurt after the season he had: "Well, he really dislocated his finger. I told Smitty after the game, I said, 'You're the only player that I know that missed a whole half because of your finger.' It was dislocated and they couldn't get it back in. If they'd have got it back in, he would have been fine. He actually wanted to play, we just didn't allow him to. He's a great competitor. I heard somebody say he set some kind of record in the first half of the game. Heavens knows what he would have done if he played the whole game. But you're talking about the ultimate warrior, ultimate competitor. I'm so happy for him that he was recognized as the best player in college football because I don't think anybody has done more for their team than he has for our team."

Ohio State fifth-year senior linebacker Tuf Borland on his vantage point when Alabama's Heisman Trophy-winning receiver in Smith beat him on a route for a touchdown: "Just three deep down. We know one of the issues is protecting the seams, so it kind of just happened. He's a Heisman Trophy winner, so give him credit. He's a good player. So I'll work to get it fixed."

Day on facing the offensive firepower of the Crimson Tide: "They're very good schematically, and they have really good personnel. And so, it's one thing to have a good play, it's another thing to execute it. We didn't do that well enough on either side of the ball tonight."

Day when asked if he needs to change his defensive scheme for future matchups with teams that have the kind of talent that Alabama

had on the national title stage: "We did do some different things. We changed up some of the looks and played some two high, which is not something we typically do a lot of. We pressured some more the last couple games. So I thought we did mix it up a decent amount. But again, it's another thing to actually execute it. When you're playing against elite players, and this is probably one of the better offenses in college football in a long time, the margin for error is tiny. I think it's probably more the execution. I thought at least in the first half we did a decent job against the run game, which was a huge emphasis point was we had to stop the run. And they're very well-balanced, so that's a challenge when you go against a team like this. But clearly, we didn't hold up well enough in the pass game."

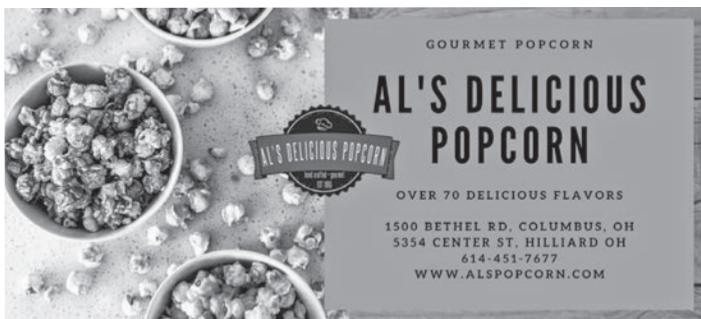
Fields when asked what his message was to the younger players whom he spoke to on the field following the loss: "I was just telling the young guys that they have a lot more years left, and I was just telling them to remember what this feels like, never let it happen to them again. Of course, they were down. They have time left, so I encouraged them to get back to work as quickly as possible and just remember this feeling of walking off the field with a loss. I just told them to remember the feeling."

Alabama sophomore wide receiver John Metchie III on being a Canadian and playing on a big stage like the national championship: "It feels great. I do it for all my people back home who continue to support me. I remember watching these national championship games when I was a kid in Canada and dreaming of playing in it. So being able to finally play in one and win one, as a matter of fact, is surreal. It's something that's kind of hard to put words to describe."

Smith on the toughness of junior wide receiver Jaylen Waddle to play through injury: "It just shows the commitment, how much he loves his team. Him just wanting to be out there, just doing what he can, give us everything he's got. That was just the message. Give us what you got, we'll take anything."

Alabama fourth-year junior quarterback Mac Jones when asked if Nick Saban is the greatest college football coach of all time: "C'mon, man. Of course, he is. How could he not be? He does it the right way. He recruits well, but more importantly develops great players and young men. I'm just so blessed that he gave me a chance to come here along with all my teammates. I wouldn't trade it for anything. He's the greatest to ever do it. He'll be the greatest for a long time."

Alabama senior tailback Najee Harris when asked how he was able to expose holes in Ohio State's really good front so effortlessly: "Effortlessly? You didn't see what they were doing? They were blowing my ass up. What are you talking about? It wasn't effortlessly. I'll tell you what. They did their thing, to be honest with you. It was just, you know, what they did is every time we did a play-action, they just shot the gaps. The linebackers, we had a couple of them to play a lot of fakes. That's why we were able to throw so many bubbles and slants and all that. But bro, they were blowing my ass out. You're tripping. It was not easy. I am hurting."



The Numbers Game

Alabama 52, Ohio State 24

Jan. 11, 2021 – Hard Rock Stadium, Miami Gardens, Fla.

Score by Quarters	1	2	3	4	F
OHIO STATE	7	10	7	0	24
ALABAMA	7	28	10	7	52

First Quarter

UA – Harris, 1-yard run (Reichard kick), 8:07; 12 plays, 78 yards, 5:32 TOP.

OSU – Teague, 8-yard run (Seibert kick), 4:55; 8 plays, 75 yards, 3:12 TOP.

Second Quarter

UA – Smith, 5-yard pass from Jones (Reichard kick), 14:53; 11 plays, 75 yards, 4:58 TOP.

OSU – Teague, 4-yard run (Seibert kick), 11:43; 1 plays, 19 yards, 0:11 TOP.

UA – Harris, 26-yard run (Reichard kick), 9:00; 5 plays, 75 yards, 2:43 TOP.

OSU – Seibert, 23-yard field goal, 5:21; 9 plays, 69 yards, 3:39 TOP.

UA – Smith, 5-yard pass from Jones (Reichard kick), 3:19; 5 plays, 75 yards, 2:02 TOP.

UA – Smith, 42-yard pass from Jones (Reichard kick), 1:48; 3 plays, 60 yards, 0:41 TOP.

Third Quarter

UA – Reichard, 20-yard field goal, 7:47; 16 plays, 75 yards, 7:08 TOP.

OSU – Wilson, 20-yard pass from Fields (Seibert kick), 6:45; 3 plays, 75 yards, 1:02 TOP.

UA – Bolden, 5-yard pass from Jones (Reichard kick), 2:52; 8 plays, 75 yards, 3:53 TOP.

Att. – 14,926

Weather – 69 degrees, fair, wind 3 mph SW

Team Statistics

	OSU	UA
First Downs	19	33
Rushing	5	10
Passing	11	22
Penalty	3	1
Rushes-Yards	29-147	38-157
Passing Yards	194	464
Passes (Comp.-Att.-Int.)	17-33-0	36-45-0
Offensive Plays	62	83
Total Net Yards	341	621
Third Down Efficiency	6-14	6-11
Punts-Avg.	5-42.8	2-38.0
Fumbles-Lost	0-0	1-1
Penalties	4-29	6-44
Time of Possession	22:34	37:26

Individual Statistics

RUSHING (Att.-Net Yds.) – OSU: Fields 6-67; Teague 15-65; Crowley 6-14; Sermon 1-2; TEAM 1-(-). UA: Harris 22-79; Robinson 10-69; Jones 4-11; TEAM 2-(-).

PASSING (Comp.-Att.-Int.-Yds.-TD) – OSU: Fields 17-33-0-194-1. UA: Jones 36-45-0-464-5.

RECEIVING (Rec.-Yds.) – OSU: Olave 8-69; Wilson 3-50; Smith-Njigba 2-20; Ruckert 1-36; Williams 1-14; Crowley 1-4; Teague 1-1. UA: Smith 12-215; Metchie 8-81; Harris 7-79; Waddle 3-34; Bolden 3-16; Billingsley 2-27; Williams 1-12.

PUNTING (No.-Avg.) – OSU: Chrismen 5-42.8. UA: Scott 2-38.0.

PUNT RETURNS (No.-Avg.) – OSU: Wilson 1-3.0. UA: Smith 2-9.0.

KICKOFF RETURNS (No.-Avg.) OSU: None. UA: Billingsley 1-7.0; Smith 1-6.0.

MISSSED FIELD GOALS – OSU: None. UA: None.

FORCED FUMBLES – OSU: Browning. UA: None.

FUMBLE RECOVERIES – OSU: Browning 1-0. UA: None.

INTERCEPTIONS – OSU: None. UA: None.

SACKS – OSU: Browning 1-0-6; Jackson 1.0-1. UA: Barmore 1.0-6.

TACKLES FOR LOSS – OSU: Hilliard 2.0-3; Browning 1.0-6; Wade 1.0-2; Jackson 1.0-1. UA: Barmore 2.0-8; Allen 1.0-4; Surtain 1.0-3.

TACKLES (Solo-Asst.-Tot.) – OSU: Borland 7-7-14; Werner 4-4-8; Banks 6-1-7; Proctor 4-1-5; Browning 4-1-5; Jackson 4-1-5; Wade 2-3-5; Gant 3-0-3; Williamson 2-0-2; Cooper 1-1-2; Harrison 1-1-2; Friday 1-1-2; Garrett 1-1-2; Vincent 0-2-2; Ransom 1-0-1; Simon 1-0-1; Williams 1-0-1. UA: Harris 3-3-6; Moses 2-4-6; Barmore 3-2-5; Branch 3-1-4; Hellams 3-1-4; Allen 2-2-4; Battle 3-0-3; Jobe 3-0-3; Surtain 2-1-3; Anderson 2-1-3; Wright 2-0-2; Davis 1-0-1; Moody 1-0-1; Ray 0-1-1.

Players In The Game

OSU – Fields, Sermon, Williams, Olave, Wilson, Farrell, Munford, Jones, Myers, Davis, Petit-Frere, Cooper, Cage, Garrett, Jean-Baptiste, Werner, Borland, Hilliard, Proctor, Banks, Wade, Williamson, Ransom, McCall, Mitchell, Fleming, Robinson, Brock, Jackson, Browning, Vincent, Booker, Harrison, Smith-Njigba, Scott, Stover, Shaw, Babb, Gant, Chambers, Hooker, Crowley, Johnson, Teague, Rossi, Pope, Simon, Friday, Cupp, Vimahi, Wray, Miller, Johnson, Hausmann, Hamilton, Ruckert, McKenzie, Chrismen, Potter, Seibert.

UA – Leatherwood, Brown, Owens, Ekiyor, Neal, Scott, Jones, Harris, Metchie, Smith, Billingsley, Robinson, Dale, Barmore, Moses, Harris, Anderson, Surtain, Jobe, Hellams, Battle, Branch, Kaho, Davis, Bolden, Williams, Wright, Allen, Baker, Young, Moore, Reichard, Waddle, Ray, Sanders, McClellan, Banks, McMillon, Moody, Fletcher, Young, Mathis, Smith, Dickerson, Brown, Latu, Forristall, Tennison, Eboigbe.

Season Statistics

2020-21 Game-By-Game					
Date	Opponent	Result/Time	Crowd		
Oct. 24	(5) NEBRASKA	W, 52-17	1,344	Jack Miller	1
Oct. 31	(3) Penn State (18)	W, 38-25	1,500	Haskell Garrett	1
Nov. 7	(3) RUTGERS	W, 49-27	1,275	Luke Farrell	1
Nov. 14	(3) Maryland	Canceled	N/A	C.J. Stroud	1
Nov. 21	(3) INDIANA (10)	W, 42-35	635	Jaxon Smith-Njigba	1
Nov. 28	(3) Illinois	Canceled	N/A	Shaun Wade	1
Dec. 5	(3) Michigan State	W, 52-12	0	Sevn Banks	1
Dec. 12	(3) MICHIGAN	Canceled	N/A	OSU Totals	44 43-43
Dec. 19	(3) Northwestern (15)	W, 22-10	3,178	OPP Totals	27 21-21
Jan. 1	(3) Clemson (2)	W, 49-28	3,000	FG Distance	0-29
Jan. 11	(3) Alabama (1)	L, 52-24	14,926	30-39	40-49
				50+	Total
				Blake Haubeil	2-3
				Dominic DiMaggio	1-2
				Jake Seibert	1-1
				OSU Totals	4-6
				OPP Totals	2-2
				Punting	No. Yds. Avg. Bk Long
				Drue Chrisman	27 1216 45.0 0 74
				Zach Hoover	3 118 39.3 0 43
				OSU Totals	30 1334 44.5 0 74
				OPP Totals	41 1828 44.6 0 57
				Interceptions	No. Yds. Avg. TD Long
				Shaun Wade	2 36 18.0 1 36
				Sevn Banks	1 38 38.0 0 38
				Marcus Hooker	1 31 31.0 0 31
				Josh Proctor	1 0 0.0 0 0
				Justin Hilliard	1 0 0.0 0 0
				Haskell Garrett	1 0 0.0 1 0
				OSU Totals	7 105 15.0 2 38
				OPP Totals	6 57 9.5 0 33
				Punt Returns	No. Yds. Avg. TD Long
				Garrett Wilson	7 51 7.3 0 22
				Jaxon Smith-Njigba	3 11 3.7 0 7
				OSU Totals	10 62 6.2 0 22
				OPP Totals	5 98 19.6 1 58
				Kickoff Returns	No. Yds. Avg. TD Long
				Demario McCall	5 78 15.6 0 29
				Xavier Johnson	1 11 11.0 0 11
				Garrett Wilson	1 4 4.0 0 4
				OSU Totals	7 93 13.3 0 29
				OPP Totals	19 337 17.7 0 39
				Def. Leaders	Solo Ast. Tot. TFL-Yds. Sacks
				Pete Werner	28 26 54 2.5-10 1.0-5
				Tuf Borland	22 26 48 3.5-16 1.5-12
				Shaun Wade	24 11 35 1.0-2
				Justin Hilliard	20 13 33 5.0-16
				Baron Browning	20 10 30 3.0-13 1.0-6
				Marcus Williamson	20 7 27
				Jonathon Cooper	12 12 24 3.5-29 3.5-29
				Sevn Banks	19 4 23 0.5-1
				Tommy Togiai	12 11 23 4.5-17 3.0-13
				Josh Proctor	16 4 20 1.0-5
				Haskell Garrett	12 8 20 4.0-13 2.0-9
				Dallas Gant	10 7 17 0.5-0
				Marcus Hooker	13 2 15
				Zach Harrison	6 8 14 4.5-12 2.0-3
				Antwan Jackson	5 6 11 1.0-1
				Taron Vincent	1 8 9 2.0-5 0.5-4
				Tyreek Smith	6 2 8 2.0-22 2.0-22
				Terada Mitchell	4 3 7 0.5-2
				Tyler Friday	2 5 7
				Jerron Cage	1 5 6 0.5-1 0.5-1
				Javontae Jean-Baptiste	3 3 6 2.0-12 1.0-8
				Lathan Ransom	6 0 6
				Ronnie Hickman	2 3 5
				Craig Young	5 0 5
				Tyreek Johnson	2 3 5
				Ryan Watts	4 0 4
				Cade Stover	3 1 4
				Cody Simon	3 1 4
				Corntae Hamilton	2 1 3 2.0-17 1.0-12
				TEAM	1 1 2
				Chris Olave	2 0 2
				K'Vaughan Pope	1 1 2
				Tommy Eichenberg	0 2 2
				Dominic DiMaggio	2 0 2
				Darrion Henry-Young	1 0 1 1.0-4 1.0-4
				OSU Totals	299 198 497 46-205 21-129
				OPP Totals	331 214 545 51-209 21-133
				Fumbles Forced:	11 – Werner (2), Browning (2), Stover, Gant, Hilliard, Fleming, Cooper, Togiai, Smith.
				Fumbles Recovered:	12 – Hilliard (3), Browning (2), Jean-Baptiste, Hooker, Banks, Proctor, Gant, Harrison, Munford.

OPINION

Little Solace For OSU In Losing To Better Team

THE VIEW FROM 15TH & HIGH

Frank Moskowitz, Publisher

You cover enough Ohio State football over 40-plus years and games start to remind you of other games. Such was the case for me as the Buckeyes played in the College Football Playoff.

After the Buckeyes thoroughly dominated 40-plus year nemesis Clemson, 49-28, for one of my more satisfying wins watching Ohio State, I thought back to 2014. When the Buckeyes scored a convincing win over Alabama in the CFP semifinals, I remember thinking that even if OSU lost to Oregon in the final I would be happy, because the Buckeyes had proved they belonged on the big stage with their victory over the Crimson Tide, the crème de la crème then, as they are still now.

I never got to find out if I would really feel that way, because the Buckeyes easily dispatched the Ducks, 42-20, to win the 2014 national championship.

When the Buckeyes knocked off the Tigers on Jan. 1, I felt the same way. They had finally gotten the Clemson monkey off their backs, and I felt like I could live with it if they went on to lose to the Tide.

As it turned out, I didn't do so well when Alabama ended up crushing the Buckeyes, 52-24. Maybe if Ohio State had played the Crimson Tide a little tougher, I would not have felt so bad about the loss. But I felt pretty bad.

My thought as I watched the championship game unfold was, "where did that defense that defeated Clemson come from" and "where did it go in the 10 days between the semifinal victory and the game with Alabama?"

I had been worried about the defense all season. In fairness to the Buckeye stop troops, their development had been stunted by the fits and starts of the season caused by the pandemic. I figured that if Ohio State were to finally defeat the Tigers, it would be by matching them in an offensive shootout. The Buckeyes upheld their end of that bargain by posting 49 points, but the Ohio State defense came out of seemingly nowhere to hold the mighty Tigers to just 28.

True, Clemson's "generational" quarterback Trevor Lawrence passed for 400 yards, but the Buckeyes defense kept the plays in front of them and it took Lawrence 48 passes to reach that number, with a long of only 29. Meanwhile, the Buckeyes were holding the Tiger ground game to just 44 yards, Lawrence being credited with a net of negative-8.

On the other hand, Lawrence's counterpart, Justin Fields, was having a game for the ages despite playing through a painful injury that would have surely sidelined mere mortals. Fields was 22 of 28 for 385 yards and six TD passes, two to Chris Olave as that duo made up for their miscommunication at the end of the game with Clemson the previous year that had doomed the Buckeyes.

The OSU passing attack was complemented by Trey Sermon, who kept up his postseason run with 193 yards on 31 carries, easily outdueling Clemson's Travis Etienne, who gained only 32 yards on 10 tries. Both backs helped their teams' passing attack, with Sermon grabbing four Fields' passes for 61 yards and Etienne catching four from Lawrence for 64.

Unfortunately, Sermon was knocked out of the national championship game after gaining 2 yards on the first play from scrimmage.

After Alabama demolished the Buckeyes, many asked me if I thought the game would have been different if Ohio State had the services of Sermon.

"I'm not so sure," I would tell them. "Sermon can't play or coach defense."

And there's the rub. The defense that magically appeared against Clemson vanished just as quickly in the game against the Tide.

Again, I was reminded of a Buckeye game from the past. This time it was the 40-35 Orange Bowl loss to – you guessed it – Clemson to cap off the 2013 season. As you may recall, in that game Tiger receiver Sammy Watkins set Orange Bowl records with 16 receptions for 227 yards.

Fast-forward to this season, and here is Heisman Trophy winner DeVonta Smith running virtually unfettered through the Buckeye defense for 12 catches, 215 yards and three touchdowns in one half! As I watched him cut through the Buckeyes like the proverbial warm knife through butter, I couldn't help but recall words that I knew I had written in this space about Watkins, seven years previously.

A quick check of the BSB archives found my recollection to be accurate.

"As he continued to rip through the Ohio State defense," I wrote in the Jan. 18, 2014, BSB, "I wished that the Buckeyes would just sell out to stop Watkins and make somebody else beat them."

Smith was finally stopped, but not by the Buckeyes. He was knocked out of the game for the bulk of the second half with a hand injury. Who knows how bad the carnage might have been if he had played the whole game? I'm not sure selling out to stop Smith would have made a difference in the game's outcome. John Metchie and Najee Harris, out of the backfield, both had success receiving against the Buckeye defense, as did a gimpy Jaylen Waddle.

Tide quarterback Mac Jones was 11 of 15 in the second half for 122 yards and a score without Smith. Alabama, which took a 35-17 lead into the locker room at the intermission, was perfectly willing to eat up clock in the second half. The Tide ran 25 of their 38 rushing plays in the second half, good for 110 of their 157 rushing yards.

In fact, I think one of the key sequences of the game came when Alabama took the second-half kickoff and mounted a 16-play drive that burned just shy of half the third-quarter clock. The march resulted in only a field goal but left the Buckeyes down three touchdowns with that much less time to make up the difference.

And let's face it. The Buckeye offensive triumvirate of coaches Ryan Day and Kevin Wilson and quarterback Fields weren't having their best of days.

Fields was just 17 of 33 for 194 yards, though he added 67 yards on six carries. After watching the Day/Wilson combo dazzle us on offense for the last two seasons, it was Alabama offense coordinator Steve Sarkisian who was doing the dazzling this time around. The Crimson Tide outgained the Buckeyes 621-341, with 69 of those Buckeye yards coming on a 17-play OSU drive in the fourth quarter that resulted in no points when Ohio State, trailing 52-24, needed to strike quickly if it had any vague hope of winning the game.

Someone suggested on our BuckeyeSports.com Forum that the Ohio State staff seemed lost after losing Sermon. That notion, again, harkened back to a past game, this time the national championship game during the 2006 season, when the Buckeyes lost Ted Ginn Jr. on the opening kickoff, which he had returned for a touchdown. With Ginn out of the lineup, the high-powered Buckeyes gained just 82 total yards as they fell to Urban Meyer's Florida, 41-14.

To put the blame for the loss on the absence of Sermon is a little unfair to Master Teague, who gained 65 yards rushing on 15 carries (4.3 average) and scored a pair of touchdowns with a long of 29. He actually did as well or better on the ground than Harris, who gained 79 yards on 22 tries for just a 3.6-yard average and two scores with a long of 13.

Where Sermon might have made a difference and where Harris excelled was in the passing game. Harris caught seven passes for 79 yards and a score, while Teague had one catch for 1 yard.

I work on Saturdays, obviously, so I hadn't seen Alabama play this season. After watching Nick Saban's group dismantle the Buckeyes, I can honestly say that they were the better team. I'm not saying Ohio State couldn't beat Alabama. But they would have had to have brought their "A" game. Maybe even "A+," especially on defense. You know, like they brought against Clemson.

With the Buckeyes not beating Alabama, we don't have to go through that whole thing about having an asterisk attached to their national championship. I go back and forth on whether the 2020 crown would have made this team the Roger Maris of college football.

On the one hand, it would have been hard to recognize an Ohio State team that played only five regular-season games and did not face its archrival Michigan, the traditional gateway to the postseason, as national champions.

On the other hand, if a team had closed out the season by defeating Clemson and Alabama, back-to-back, it would have been hard not to.

A Tough Playoff

One person who did not have a good playoff was erstwhile Buckeye and ESPN broadcaster Kirk Herbstreit. First, he tested positive for COVID right before the playoffs and had to call the Ohio State-Clemson game from his home.

We're getting used to things like calling a big game from home in this COVID world and Herbstreit did fine, but I must ask: If you were a football fan who dropped down from another planet and heard Herbstreit call a Clemson game, who would you think was head coach of the Tigers – Dabo Swinney or Brent Venables? In the two playoff games with Clemson that I have heard Herby call in the past two seasons, it's "Venables, Venables, Venables," with rarely a mention of Swinney.

For the record, in those two playoff games, Venables' defenses have given up 516 and 639 yards to the Buckeyes. That's a 577.5-yard average. To put that figure into perspective, it would have ranked last in the nation this season by more than 50 yards.

Am I missing something? Even Kerry Coombs gave up only 444 against Clemson.

And speaking of Coombs, Herbstreit continually mispronounced his name during OSU's victory over Clemson and had a funky pronunciation of Haskell Garrett's first name. In the Alabama game, with injured All-America Buckeye lineman Wyatt Davis down on the ground for an extended period, Herby continually referred to the downed player as Antwan Jackson, who wears the same number on defense but was obviously not the All-American who plays offense. Herbstreit had plenty of time to make the correction and surely was being told in his ear that it wasn't Jackson, but just went on his merry way. A poster on our

BuckeyeSports.com live game thread insisted that Herbstreit also called Tommy Togiai "Tony."

Everyone makes mistakes, me at the top of the list. But for someone at the pinnacle of his profession, Herbstreit should do better than that. Maybe he was feeling the effects of the virus. Seriously.

OSU Wins National Title!

Sadly, Ohio State did not win the title this season, but they were national champions in our 40th Anniversary season. We cap off this series, which chronicled the biggest games of each corresponding week or corresponding type of game in our previous 39 years of publishing looking at national titles of the BSB era. There were only two, 2002 and 2014, and we chose 2002 because it was OSU's first title in 34 years and because of the exciting nature of the entire season.

"We have always had the best damn band in the land," head coach Jim Tressel said after his Buckeyes upset Miami (Fla.), the Alabama of its day, 31-24 in double overtime. "Now we've got the best damn team in the land."

The Buckeye players understood the significance of the victory.

"I think we would have been remembered even if we had lost the national championship game," tight end Ben Hartsock said. "But we hung in and got the win here. I think we'll be one of the teams that people will always talk about. It is a new era of greatness at Ohio State. To be part of that is overwhelming."

Hartsock was right. Not only do people still talk about the 2002 Buckeyes, but the team kicked off an era of Buckeye greatness that continues today.

Letter-Writing Legend

It is with sadness that I report the passing on Jan. 10 of prolific and controversial BSB letter writer Gary Gerken. Gary was legendary for his negativity and his absolute hatred of John Cooper. But boy, he cranked out the letters. If Ohio State won a game 42-0, Gary wondered why they didn't win 52-0. And there was absolutely nothing that Coop could do right, especially when it came to beating Michigan.

In Gary's heyday, when I would go out to speak to alumni groups around the country and it came time for questions, invariably the first query was whether Gerken was real or I had just made him up. Let me say for the 100th time, I am not creative enough to make up someone like Gary, nor did I have time to write all those letters.

In recent years, he started having problems with his hands. For a while, he dictated letters to his son Fred, and then he stopped doing even that and then we stopped hearing from him. We presumed he had fallen into ill health (by his own admission he had suffered numerous concussions through the years), and we finally learned through a reader of his passing.

I spoke to Gary many times through the years and argued with him to the point of having to hang up on several occasions, and for those who still think he didn't exist, I actually met him a couple of times. The last time I saw him, we were amid a disagreement over a scrapbook that someone had put together for him with all his BSB letters. He had given the scrapbook to me as a gift and then, a few years later, he wanted it back. I accused him of being politically incorrect, which is ironic because one thing Gary was not was politically correct. I begrudgingly gave the scrapbook back, and that's the last I saw of him.

In his honor, we are reprinting one of his letters to the editor in our Fan Forum section.