

# BUCKEYE SPORTS BULLETIN

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Vol. 44, No. 13

"For The Buckeye Fan Who Needs To Know More"

Dec. 21, 2024



SONNY BROCKWAY

**EYES ON THE PRIZE** — Unlike many seasons when a loss to Michigan meant the end of national championship aspirations, the new College Football Playoff format allows for second chances, such as Ohio State hosting Tennessee in a first-round matchup on Dec. 21.

**By GREG WILSON**

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Associate Editor

Ohio State's losses to Michigan in the 2021 and 2023 seasons were enough to keep the Buckeyes out of the four-team College Football Playoff, forcing the Buckeyes into the Rose Bowl against Utah three years ago and the Cotton Bowl against Missouri last season.

Even though they suffered yet another loss to the Wolverines this year — to many the worst of the four straight — the Buckeyes will still have a chance at the national championship due to it being the first year the CFP expanded to 12 teams.

The loss on Nov. 30 was hard, and

losing four times in a row knowing you will never get another chance to win The Game — a reality for many senior 2024 Buckeyes — is even harder. The emotions that come with that reality were on full display when punches were thrown on the Block O at midfield and tears were shed in the postgame press conference.

Even though the players and coaches knew that they were locked into a playoff spot despite the loss, the question of moving forward after such a crushing blow was a hard one for the players to grapple with immediately after.

"I'm not really sure right now," fifth-year

linebacker Cody Simon said when asked how the Buckeyes can come back from the loss. "It's frustrating for all the seniors, all the older guys. We're just going to have to lick our wounds and regroup, but I don't think anything has hurt more than this."

Now the Buckeyes have no choice but to move on, something that became a little easier when they had something real to look forward to rather than just the idea that they would have a playoff game somewhere, against someone.

On Dec. 8, Ohio State was seeded No. 8 in the College Football Playoff and was matched up against No. 9 Tennessee, allowing the Buckeyes to play in the first-ever postseason game in Ohio Stadium. From that point on, it was all about the Volunteers.

"It was a mixed bag of identifying the things that didn't go well, working through that," OSU head coach Ryan Day said just hours after the 12-team bracket was announced. "You don't just move on after a day or two. We know that, but now that we have a target, we said, 'Listen, we're going to flush that.' We got back on the field, we got into the

weekend and said, 'OK, we've got to learn from it. We've got to fix the problems.' But it's not going to do us any good looking back on that. We've got to learn from it and move on."

Howard added on Dec. 16 that they can't be mentally hampered going forward because of the Michigan loss.

"It sucked. It was terrible for all of us," he said. "But we can't let them beat us twice. I've learned that it's better to use that as motivation, come back from it and challenge myself to be better and not listen to what everyone else is saying."

There's no pretending that the loss to Michigan didn't happen, which seems to be understood as well, but at this point, Day sees no reason to look back at that game other than to make corrections and figure out how they can become a better version of themselves. The Buckeyes feel comfortable with the draw they had and understand that none of the teams in the bracket is perfect, each with their own problems that likely need to be fixed to

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## OPINION

# One Final Chance For Redemption

Redemption. Merriam-Webster loosely defines it as “serving to offset or compensate for a defect or defeat.”

Seldom does one get a chance at said redemption. We absorb the defeat, reluctantly accept the consequences, and somehow move on. Every once in a while, however, a chance comes for us to make up for what previously went wrong and compensate for that defeat.

The 2024 Ohio State football team, once thought of as equal parts invincible and the best college team NIL money could buy, enters the expanded College Football Playoff with its second chance for redemption in a matter of weeks. The Buckeyes blew their first chance by failing to get the job done against the weakest Michigan team since the Rich Rodriguez era, but they now get an opportunity to bring out that torn and tattered “Natty or Bust” banner and make a run at the national championship.

Through the years, Ohio State teams have had little opportunity for redemption following a loss to Michigan. Since the rivalry game was moved in 1935 to the final game of the regular season, the Buckeyes have gone home to stay 18 times after losses to the Wolverines.

Since the mid-1970s, when the Big Ten began to allow its member programs to play in postseason games other than the Rose Bowl, Ohio State has had 20 shots at redemption following a defeat at the hands of its archrival and has emerged victorious only eight times.

The first came in 1976 when the Buckeyes followed a 22-0 loss to Michigan with a 27-10 win against Colorado in the Orange Bowl. The victory served as the final bowl win for Woody Hayes during his 28-year run as Ohio State head coach. His final two bowl appearances – a 35-6 loss to Alabama in the Sugar Bowl following the 1977 season and a 17-15 defeat against Clemson in the 1978 Gator Bowl – each came after losses to Michigan.

It has always been a difficult task for any Ohio State team to regroup after a loss in the rivalry game. Perhaps the biggest piece of redemption the Buckeyes have earned in program history was the 20-17 win against fourth-ranked Arizona State in the 1997 Rose Bowl. That came after a 13-9 upset loss to Michigan that cost Ohio State the 1996 national championship.

One year before that last-second Rose Bowl victory – arguably the biggest win during the 13-year John Cooper era – the Buckeyes were coming off another upset loss to Michigan, this one a 31-23 decision that included 313 rushing yards from little-known running back Tim Biakabutuka.

That outcome sent Ohio State to a Citrus Bowl matchup against Tennessee and star quarterback Peyton Manning. Manning didn't do much – just 182 yards and a touchdown through the air – but the Buckeyes fumbled the ball away three times in the fourth quarter on their way to a 20-14 loss.

That was a microcosm of the Cooper years. The Buckeyes would lose to Michigan in some inexplicable way and then commit just enough mistakes to make the bowl game go south as well.

In each of the last two years, that ugly blueprint has begun to reappear. A failure to get closer at the end of the 2022 CFP semifinal against Georgia resulted in Noah Ruggles missing a 50-yard field goal and the eventual national champion Bulldogs escaping with a 42-41 win.

Last year, injuries and player defections conspired for the most lackluster, why-are-we-even-here bowl performance by the Buckeyes since a 23-11 loss to Air Force in the 1990 Liberty Bowl. That embarrassment also came on the heels of

a loss to Michigan, a 16-13 defeat achieved by the Wolverines after Ohio State (most definitely not an option team) tried a quarterback option on fourth-and-1 at its own 29-yard line with 1:38 remaining in the game. The play was stuffed for

Day were each born in March, just 10 days away from being exactly a year apart. Each played quarterback at the college level, and each is considered an innovative offensive coach.

Day is completing his fifth full season in Columbus; Heupel is finishing season No. 4 in Knoxville. Day has a better record against ranked teams (20-9 vs. 12-9 for Heupel) and an 11-8 mark against top-10 opposition to 4-4 for Heupel. Whittle that down to top-five opponents, and the coaches are nearly even. Heupel is 3-4; Day is 4-6.

In four years at Tennessee, Heupel has posted a pair of two-loss seasons (including 2024), one season with four defeats, and one with six. For Day's five full years at Ohio State, the Buckeyes (so far) have never lost more than two games in a single season. Day has won two Big Ten championships; Heupel has no SEC titles. Day has a 4-4 record in the postseason, while Heupel is 2-1 with Tennessee and 3-3 lifetime counting his three seasons at UCF.

One could make the case on numbers alone that Day has enjoyed more success than Heupel. Yet, the two fan bases could not be more polar opposite. While Day is the subject of conjecture on how much longer he can hold onto his job, Heupel is seen by most Tennessee fans as the best thing to happen to the program at least since 1998 when the Volunteers won their most recent national championship.

Why the difference in perception between the two coaches? It's fairly simple, really.

For years, Ohio State and Tennessee shared college football's longest streak of avoiding back-to-back losing seasons. The Buckeyes are still going strong with 2024 marking the 100th season since the program last experienced consecutive losing seasons.

The Volunteers matched that streak year for year until they fired longtime head coach Phillip Fulmer late in the 2008 season. Fulmer, a College Football Hall of Fame member whose 151 career wins place him second in Tennessee history only to the legendary Robert Neyland – the guy for whom the school named its stadium – finished with a 5-7 record during his final season in Knoxville.

Throwing Fulmer overboard allowed the Volunteers to chase the shiniest new penny in the coaching profession, and they hired 33-year-old wunderkind Lane Kiffin as head coach. Kiffin was just beginning a hopscotching career that has already included nine different stops, and his tenure at Tennessee lasted only one season.

Jettisoning Fulmer and the quick defection of Kiffin ushered in an era during which the Volunteers burned through six head coaches, suffered seven losing seasons between 2010 and 2020, and had to vacate several victories due to recruiting violations.

I asked a friend, who just happens to be a Tennessee alum, what the fan base thought of Heupel, and he replied, “Are you kidding? They love the guy. Considering where the program was when he got here, he's been a godsend. He could probably run for governor if he wanted to, but to be honest, we need him much more in Knoxville than they do in Nashville.”

I know I've written about this before, but it bears repeating. There was an old saying my parents used to throw out every once in a while when I was contemplating something stupid: “Fool around and find out.”

That pertains to college football programs as well. Tennessee fooled around in 2008, and its football program is just now returning to prominence. Here's hoping Ohio State learns from its first-round opponent's mistake.

## EDITOR'S NOTEBOOK Mark Rea

no gain, and five plays later Michigan kicker J.D. Carlson booted a game-winning 37-yard field goal on the final play.

All of the aforementioned wins and losses prove only one thing. Redemption is achievable, but only if your head is in the right space. I wrote in the last issue of BSB that I thought the coaching staff had developed something of a mental block against Michigan, a game it wanted to win so badly that it hamstrung itself trying to be something it was not.

Woody Hayes is dead, and Ohio State is no longer a power team. Those are just facts. The Buckeyes are not recruited as a power team and therefore should never let pride get in the way of the bottom line. Three years ago, after it was pretty well manhandled by Michigan during a 42-27 loss, the team went to Pasadena and put on an offensive fireworks show for the ages.

OSU shattered the Rose Bowl record book during a 48-45 victory against Utah with C.J. Stroud throwing for 573 yards and six touchdowns, Jaxon Smith-Njigba grabbing 15 receptions for 347 yards and three TDs, and Marvin Harrison Jr. totaling six catches for 71 yards and three scores. There was even enough offense left over for TreVeyon Henderson to rush for 83 yards on 17 carries.

Most fans have forgotten the Buckeyes trailed the Utes by 10 points midway through the third quarter before stepping on the gas pedal for 20 points in the final 18 minutes of that game. Also pretty much forgotten was the fact that the winning points came on a 19-yard field goal from Ruggles with just nine seconds remaining.

The bottom line is that Ohio State beat Utah in an evenly matched Rose Bowl three years ago because the Buckeyes didn't try to be anything but themselves. It's a winning formula – if you're not too prideful to use it.

### Perception Vs. Reality

I must admit I'm getting increasingly weary answering this question from friends and family: If Ohio State loses to Tennessee, will Ryan Day get fired?

The short and quick answer is “No.” The university is not going to risk becoming the laughingstock of college football for dismissing a coach with an .868 winning percentage. Plus there is the matter of buying out the remainder of a long-term contract that could cost the school somewhere in the neighborhood of \$37 million.

Despite all of the hand-wringing over the four-game losing streak to Michigan, Day remains a good and decent man whose recruiting classes consistently rank among the nation's top five and whose program purrs along without a sniff of impropriety or scandal.

When his team hits the Ohio Stadium turf for its first-round playoff game, Day will stare across the field at his Tennessee counterpart and see someone similar in background and philosophy.

Josh Heupel is currently in his fourth season as head coach of the Volunteers. Heupel and



Vol. 44, No. 13  
Dec. 21, 2024

www.BuckeyeSports.com

Buckeye Sports Bulletin (USPS 705-690, ISSN 0883-6833.) is published 24 times a year (weekly September through November, biweekly January through April and monthly May through August and December) by:

Columbus Sports Publications  
1200 Chambers Road, Suite 206  
P.O. Box 12453  
Columbus, Ohio 43212  
(614) 486-2202  
bsb@buckeyesports.com

Periodical class postage paid at Columbus, Ohio, and additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to: Buckeye Sports Bulletin, P.O. Box 12453, Columbus, Ohio 43212. Subscription rates: \$124.95/year.

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#### 2024-25 PUBLICATION SCHEDULE (VOL. 44)

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The next issue will be mailed on Jan. 14 or Jan. 22.

Buckeye Sports Bulletin is a privately owned newspaper and is not affiliated directly or indirectly with The Ohio State University.

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# Buckeyes Focused On Task At Hand In CFP

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win a national championship.

"When you look at a bunch of the teams that are in there, our guys have played some of these teams whether it was this year, in the past, whenever it might be," Day said. "There are guys who have a lot of confidence looking at the draw saying, 'We know who these teams are.' They're very good, but we also feel confident.

"We also have to make adjustments and make corrections and fix the things that need to get fixed. Coming off the last game, that has to happen, but almost every team in this playoff has their own issues. They have their own things that they need to address. That's going to be a huge part of who has success here."

There is still concern around Buckeye circles that the black cloud of the Wolverine loss will still be hanging over the program's head when Dec. 21 rolls around – something former Ohio State quarterback and longtime ESPN analyst Kirk Herbstreit referred to on air just moments after it was revealed the Buckeyes were getting a home game, saying Day's program would be better off playing on the road to avoid frustrated fans at Ohio Stadium from booing if the offense faces some early struggles.

Regardless of how the fans will react that night, Day understands that getting the first win could be the most important one in terms of getting the team back on track to the best version of itself.

"The guys have a good look in their eye," Day said. "We were (in the Woody) at noon watching the selection show and there was a great energy up there. They want to play. They want to get back on the field and get a win.

"Getting this first win is going to be critical and building momentum as you head into the teeth of the playoffs. When you look at tournament play, when you look at playoff play, we all know that the first game is very, very important. It's not bowl prep. It's very different. It's a quick turnaround, and all of our focus is on these guys."

If Day's demeanor was any indication, the team will be out to prove something after the head coach was back to his usual confident self in the post-selection show press conference.

He also understands that while the Michigan game definitely wasn't a good one, the team can't overcorrect the mistakes it made in that contest and will just have to game-plan with what is best for the Buckeyes on Dec. 21 instead of making too many changes. The offense had its worst game in years, not scoring a single point in the second half and failing to record a first down for the final 19 minutes.

"I think that's important," Day said about not overcorrecting. "It's similar to what happened in the Oregon game on defense. When you saw some of the adjustments that were made, to the naked eye it's like, 'OK, what really was different?' But there was a difference. It's going to be that way here up front and how we're running the ball. Some of it is execution,



FILE PHOTO

**NEXT MAN UP —** The season-ending injuries to center Seth McLaughlin (56) and left tackle Josh Simmons have forced Donovan Jackson (74) and Carson Hinzman (75) to switch positions to plug the holes. The offensive line will come under scrutiny against Tennessee's stout defense on Dec. 21 in Ohio Stadium.

some of it is making sure we put the guys in the right position to be successful.

"I've definitely been spending some time with the offense. We'll look at it and see whatever makes the most sense and win this game. We'll do whatever it takes."

Before the Buckeyes' place in the 12-team bracket was officially revealed, it was easy to imagine where they might be placed after the previous week's rankings.

Day and the team had taken a look at that and were very prepared to be matched up against Tennessee, a team with both the No. 4 scoring defense in the country (13.9 points allowed per game) and total defense (278.3 yards allowed per game).

The Vols also have the No. 9 rushing offense in the nation (232.0) due to the 2024 SEC Player of the Year, Dylan Sampson, manning the backfield, providing some sort of trouble on both sides of the ball for the Buckeyes. But Day feels like his team will be ready to bring their A-game against the Vols under the lights at Ohio Stadium.

"You could kind of project out where we might be. This is one of the projections that we saw," Day said. "So we've been looking at these guys and a couple other opponents, but we're fired up. We're excited about playing in the first-ever playoff game in Ohio Stadium. Ohio Stadium has been around a long time, over 100 years. There's been a lot of great games, but never a playoff game like this. A night game, 8 p.m., it's going to be electric."

One thing they are looking back at the Michigan game to try to fix is the offensive line. With two season-ending injuries to starters – both left tackle Josh Simmons (knee injury) and center Seth McLaughlin (torn Achilles) going down – it would be tough for any team to deal with the fallout, but it's also not a reality the Buckeyes can change.

With a total of 77 rushing yards against the Wolverines on 26 attempts (3.0 yards per carry), Day wasn't happy with how the front five performed in the second game that Donovan Jackson, Austin Siereveld, Carson Hinzman, Tegra Tshabola and Josh Fryar played together.

It's mainly the interior that Day is taking a look at, where he and his staff will

be giving players the ability to step up. He named Luke Montgomery and Joshua Padilla – the left guard and center backups to Siereveld and Hinzman, respectively – as possible replacement candidates if they are able to step up in the weeks leading up to the game, saying on Dec. 16 that Montgomery would get his chance to play in the playoff game.

While he did say George Fitzpatrick could possibly impress enough to step up at left tackle to make the Buckeyes comfortable enough to move Jackson back to left guard, it didn't seem like the likely solution if they do go into the matchup with a different configuration.

"I know who's going to be in the mix. I'm not going to get into that just yet," Day said. "We have two weeks of prep that we have to dive into and identify what gives us the best chance to go win this thing. There will be some guys in the mix. Luke Montgomery will be in the mix, Josh Padilla will be in the mix, and we'll make sure it's right. Based on how they practice we'll figure out how it's going to look."

But while the Buckeyes are preparing for the playoff game, they also have to deal with the question of transfers and whether they are still going to be allowed to dress for the game.

Wide receivers Jayden Ballard and Kojo Antwi, linebacker Gabe Powers, offensive lineman Miles Walker and quarterbacks Devin Brown and Air Noland have already announced their intention to enter the portal, which opened on Dec. 9.

Of those five, it has been revealed already that Brown, who has been the direct backup for Howard all season, would be able to remain with the team for the remainder of the playoffs. That is a significant development considering he was thrust into action for two plays in the second quarter against Michigan after Howard went down with a head injury.

"I entered this season with the intent of doing everything I could to win a national championship with my brothers, and that goal is still very much alive," Brown said in a Twitter post on Dec. 8. "I will remain with the team and honor my commitment for the remainder of the season as we pur-

sue our goal of winning it all."

"It's a very unique situation," Day said of players entering the transfer portal the same time the Buckeyes are preparing for a run at the national championship. "We're going to deal with each of those situations on an individual basis because there are guys who want to finish off what they started here. These guys made a commitment to the team – it's a close team – and they want to finish up their commitment. I think those guys deserve a lot of credit for wanting to do that.

"Some guys need to figure out, 'OK, what's next for me?' It's not their fault. It's just the way it's designed. They have to make decisions while we're getting ready to go play in a playoff. We have to make sure that we're being fair to our guys but also have enough depth that we need to go make this run."

The first 12-team playoff will provide no shortage of intrigue, but before the Buckeyes even think about the Rose Bowl and a rematch against No. 1 Oregon – which would be where they are headed with a win – they will have to take down the Volunteers, a game for which they will take advantage of being at home and "Scarlet Out" Ohio Stadium, telling all fans to wear scarlet to match the Buckeyes' all-scarlet uniforms.

"No, we're not there. We have to win this first game and then build from there," Day said when asked if they had been looking forward to other matchups at all. "I don't think there's one person in this building that's looking way down the road. When you're in this style of play, you have to get that first win. You have got to get started and build some momentum into the playoffs. That will be our focus."

A matchup against a tough SEC team and then potentially after that the No. 1 team in the country likely isn't where the Buckeyes wanted to be going into the playoff at the start of this "natty or bust" season, but it's something that Day understands they are solely responsible for.

"The first thing is it's our responsibility to win the conference," Day said. "When you win the conference, you're in. So when you don't do that, you put yourself at risk."

There's nothing Day and the Buckeyes can do to change where they are at this point. The loss to Michigan already happened. Having to watch the Big Ten Championship Game from their couches already happened as well. But even though those two preseason goals are no longer in reach, their third – and depending on who you ask, biggest of the three – is still well within reach.

"Our draw is our draw. The teams we're going to play are the teams we're going to play," Day said. "Tennessee is coming to our place to play us at home. When you think about the opportunity our team has to go do something like this, it would be an unbelievable accomplishment to go on a run here and go win the whole thing when you're four games away.

"(The Michigan loss) hurt. It hurt. But here we are now, and all the focus has to go on Tennessee and winning this first one."

## COLLEGE FOOTBALL PLAYOFF INSIDER



## COLLEGE FOOTBALL PLAYOFF INSIDER

### Second Meeting Between OSU, U-T

The last time Ohio State and Tennessee squared off on the gridiron, two College Football Hall of Fame honorees and NFL legends went head to head.

Peyton Manning, at the time a sophomore at Tennessee, and senior running back Eddie George, fresh off a Heisman Trophy-winning campaign, highlighted their respective teams in the 1996 Florida Citrus Bowl, a game Tennessee ultimately won 20-14.

George scored the first touchdown for Ohio State, a 2-yard scamper that gave the Buckeyes the only lead they would have all day. Both teams traded scores up until the fourth quarter before Volunteers kicker Jeff

Hall nailed two late field goals to break a 14-14 tie.

In the loss, George rushed for 101 yards and a touchdown on 25 carries in his final collegiate game while Manning threw for 182 yards on 20 completions with a score. The game, which was played in sunny Orlando, Fla., would be a dream compared to the conditions expected Dec. 21 in Columbus. A high of 29 degrees is expected that day, with a low of 16, and the 8 p.m. game time could lead to those temperatures approaching the colder end of the spectrum. It would be the coldest game for Tennessee since 2015 and one of the coldest since 1950.

With the second all-time meeting between the Buckeyes and Volunteers also coming in the postseason like the first, it's easy to see that the matchup always spells implications for overall season outlook and success, and that's even more apparent in the tilt this season.

"We're certainly excited about being in the playoff and obviously playing a great program," Tennessee head coach Josh Heupel said. "Ohio State has had a ton of success in recent history but throughout their program history and certainly what they've done on the field this year, and we're excited that we get the opportunity to play an elite program like that. As we get ready here, we understand what it's going to take to go on the road and play really good football against a great football team."

### First December Home Game For OSU

While Ohio State fans are accustomed

to playing games in the final month of the year, Buckeye faithful will have a first-time treat with the matchup against Tennessee marking the first December Ohio State home game in the 102-year history of Ohio Stadium.

The Buckeyes have knocked on the doorstep of December just twice all-time at Ohio Stadium, losing to Michigan 14-0 on Nov. 30, 1918, and in the most recent edition of The Game. Furthermore, in the 132-year history of Ohio State football, the team has never hosted a home game of any kind in the month of December.

The last time Ohio State played in the month of December was last season's 14-3 Cotton Bowl loss to another SEC foe, Missouri.

### Ohio State Set To 'Scarlet The 'Shoe'

It will be a sea of scarlet come Saturday, as Ohio State announced that the team will don all scarlet jerseys and pants for the matchup against Tennessee while also advertising the game as a "Scarlet the 'Shoe' theme for fans.

Encouraging fans to wear red is not something new for Ohio Stadium. There has been a Scarlet Out the past four seasons: a 33-24 victory over Penn State in 2021, a 54-10 win over Iowa in 2022, a 20-12 win over Penn State in 2023 and this year's 21-17 win over Nebraska. However, the last time the Buckeyes wore scarlet from head to toe was that 2021 win over Penn State, also a night game played at Ohio Stadium.

The Buckeyes seem to be pulling out all the stops for their primetime playoff matchup with the Volunteers. In addition to the jerseys, Ohio State athletic director Ross Bjork said on 97.1 The Fan that the school plans to have a drone show and pyrotechnics inside the stadium for the matchup, which he said is an effort to create more of an exciting gameday atmosphere.

"We want that to (have) an atmosphere that we can really latch on to," Bjork said of the playoff game. "So maybe (we can do) more things than with our LED boards, with our video board that normally would be a sponsor, now we can make it about the atmosphere. So we'll have pyro, we'll have a drone show. I mean, we're going to do as many things – having a night game, people have been clamoring for night games, so now we have it. So we want to go all in."

On the other side of the coin, Tennessee's presence at the 'Shoe has added a wrinkle to Ohio State's gameday operations, as the Volunteers will get their own entrance video due to the College Football Playoff organization having a say in post-season stadium operations.

"The in-game atmosphere will be a little bit more controlled by the CFP. Our staff will do it, but the scripting, how music is played," Bjork said. "Like Tennessee will have an intro video when their team runs on the field. We wouldn't do that for a normal visiting team. But we'll be able to do a lot of similar things we do now. The script will be a little more tame than what the CFP will allow."

### "College GameDay" In Columbus For Game

ESPN's "College GameDay" will return to Columbus on Dec. 21 for Ohio State's first-round matchup against the Volunteers. This will be the second school the show will visit that weekend, with it also heading to South Bend, Ind., on Dec. 20 for Notre Dame's first-round game against No. 10 seed Indiana.

This marks the second time this season the Emmy-winning college football pregame show – which features a panel of hosts Rece Davis, longtime analysts Lee Corso, Kirk Herbstreit and Desmond Howard, ESPN personality Pat McAfee and former Alabama head coach Nick Saban – will visit Ohio State for a Buckeye game.

The first instance occurred on Nov. 23 when the show aired from Ohio Stadium before the Buckeyes' top-five matchup against then-No. 5 Indiana, a 38-15 victory for Ohio State. Former Ohio State quarterback Justin Fields served as the show's celebrity guest picker on that day.

"College GameDay" was also on hand for Ohio State's 32-31 road loss to now-No. 1 Oregon at Autzen Stadium on Oct. 12 and its 20-13 road win at Penn State on Nov. 2, giving Ryan Day's team a 2-1 record this season when they are the featured matchup on the show.

Ohio State boasts a 42-20 record in its 62 all-time appearances on "College GameDay," which dates back to 1996. Corso has donned Brutus Buckeye's headgear a record 44 times in his 28 years as the show's game picker, although he picked his former team Indiana before the Nov. 23 matchup.

### Ticket Prices Soar After Presale Code Leak

As Ohio State geared up to host the first December home game in the school's history, Buckeye fans hit a snag on Dec. 12 when attempting to get presale tickets.

According to an Ohio State football spokesperson, tickets would start off at \$100. However, as BSB went to press, resale tickets were starting at \$175.

While there are myriad possibilities as to why these ticket prices have jumped so suddenly, such as the historic nature of



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## COLLEGE FOOTBALL PLAYOFF INSIDER

the matchup, it appears that a potentially leaked presale code allowed for eager Volunteer fans to get their hands on early-access tickets.

"Good morning Vol Twitter," the user VolFan4Life21 posted on Twitter on Dec. 11. "Last night an Ohio State season ticket holder decided to give us his season ticket code for the presale. Had to prove I was an Ohio State fan, so I photoshopped an OSU jersey on myself and it worked. We're officially invading their section."

Bjork warned Buckeye fans about the threat that a heavy Tennessee presence would pose on the game come Saturday.

"Don't sell your tickets," Bjork said on Dec. 13. "Tennessee fans, they're rabid fans. They are going to invade the 'Shoe. Let's make sure we don't have as much orange in there as people think."

Furthermore, according to several Volunteer fans on social media, the presale code was "OSUFB," allowing for the easy-to-guess code to be cracked by Tennessee fans who were looking to spoil the first home playoff game for the Buckeyes.

### Vols' Depth Hit By Portal Departures

As BSB went to press, eight Volunteer football players had entered their names into the transfer portal, with some marking major losses in terms of depth before Tennessee's matchup against Ohio State.

In total, five within the group come from the offensive side of the ball, but arguably the biggest loss is linebacker Jalen Smith, who appeared in all 12 games for the Vol-

unteers, pouring in 34 tackles (13 solo) and 1½ tackles for loss. With the loss of Smith, Tennessee's stellar defense, which has allowed only 278.2 yards per game (fourth in the NCAA), will need to fill a lost role against one of the most efficient offenses in the country in Ohio State.

On top of the loss of Smith, the Volunteers also said goodbye to three wide receivers in Nathan Leacock, Chas Nimrod and Kaleb Webb. Nimrod was the most prolific of the group, catching 10 passes for 121 yards this season, a year removed from catching 19 passes for 194 yards and a score.

While Ohio State hasn't been too hampered by the transfer portal as BSB went to press, the Buckeyes have also been challenged depth-wise with the losses of Seth McLaughlin and Josh Simmons due to injury along the offensive line and the departures of wide receiver Jayden Ballard and linebacker Gabe Powers to the transfer portal among others.

### Day, Heupel Share Mutual Respect

Before their first meeting as head coaches on the gridiron, Heupel and Day both offered words of respect and excitement about the upcoming matchup between the two schools.

"I have not had an opportunity to cross paths with him very much," Heupel, now in his fourth season with the Volunteers, said on Dec. 8. "I have great respect for what he's done in his coaching career and what he's done there at Ohio State. The success

that they've had year in and year out, I have a great appreciation for how he's done it and what he's accomplished there.

"When you get into the postseason, and you're getting into a game like this, you've got to do the ordinary things at a really high level. You have to do things consistently for four quarters. It's not about some magical play that's going to be the difference in the football game. It's about the fundamentals, technique, eye discipline, and playing within the structure of what you're doing in all three phases of the game."

Day also acknowledged his opponent's coach, emphasizing the offense that Heupel has built in Knoxville, Tenn.

"(Heupel) is a very innovative coach," Day said on Dec. 8. "I think (Tennessee quarterback Nico Iamaleava) has a strong arm. (Volunteers running back Dylan Sampson) is excellent. He's All-SEC, runs low to the ground. They spread you out and try to create space issues for you. The receivers are some big ones. There are some quick guys in there. I mean, they're talented. And so, they try to put as much stress on you, especially with the space and the tempo."

While Day already has a College Football Playoff win under his belt, it's do-or-die and national championship or bust time for Ohio State while Tennessee is looking for its first taste of postseason success under Heupel.

### Former Buckeye Not Worried About Noise

Former Ohio State and now Tennessee safety Andre Turrentine added his portion of fuel to the already-burning fire between

the Buckeyes and Volunteers, this time regarding Ohio Stadium's atmosphere.

"The 'Shoe isn't as loud as the SEC," Turrentine, who spent his 2021 freshman season with Ohio State, said. "It's a different animal here. Whether you're at South Carolina at nighttime or whether you're at Arkansas at nighttime, whether you're at Neyland (Stadium) at nighttime, or the daytime for that matter, it's loud here. I would say it's deafening."

Maybe in an effort to retract his words, Turrentine did give some props to his former stadium.

"I would say the 'Shoe is the same way, that they have really diehard fans that are willing to make enough noise to achieve what they need to," Turrentine said. "So I would say that the SEC is a little bit louder, but the 'Shoe brings it as well."

It won't be a personal contest just for Turrentine, though. Tennessee edge Caleb Herring also has a bad taste in his mouth toward the Buckeyes. Herring, a four-star recruit, was never offered by Ohio State.

"Well this game is actually going to be pretty personal," Herring said on an episode of "The Locker Room" television show on Dec. 8. "Because I remember when I was talking to Ohio State, they (said) whenever I get on campus, they're going to (give me) an offer and it will be all good and stuff. But when I got to campus, I went through the visit and stuff, talked to the coaches and they didn't once mention an offer. So I was like 'OK, get these pictures over with, and then afterwards I'm done with them.'"

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# Vols Hoping To Party Like It's 1996 Vs. OSU

By PATRICK ENGELS

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Associate Editor

With six national championships, 13 SEC titles and a plethora of NFL alumni, Tennessee has long established itself as one of the more recognizable brands and programs in all of college football.

College football fans across the country have become well accustomed to the school's "Rocky Top" fight song and orange, white and smokey gray colors that are on full display every fall Saturday, but over the last few decades, the program has lost some of its luster.

As teams such as Alabama and Georgia have become the dominant forces in the SEC, winning a combined eight national championships and 12 SEC championships since 2009, the Volunteers have yet to accomplish either feat since 1998, when Peyton Manning led them to a perfect 13-0 record and national title game win over Florida State.

The program seemed as far removed from those championship years as ever in 2020 when then-head coach Jeremy Pruitt led Tennessee to a 3-7 record, its third-worst winning percentage in program history and the worst since the 1909 Tennessee team finished 1-6-2.

But things seemed to change in Knoxville, Tenn., that offseason when the Vols fired Pruitt and hired then-42-year-old Josh Heupel from UCF.

Since then, Heupel – a former national championship-winning quarterback at Oklahoma – has methodically brought Tennessee closer to SEC and national title contention, securing nine or more victories in three of his first four seasons, including an 11-2 campaign in 2022 that almost resulted in a College Football Playoff appearance.

It's a four-year rebuild that has the Volunteers competing in the inaugural 12-team College Football Playoff this season as a No. 9 overall seed, set to put their strong 10-2 record and 6-2 mark in the conference to the test on the road against No. 8 seed Ohio State on Dec. 21 (8 p.m., ESPN/ABC).

Heading north to Columbus for a late-December matchup with the Buckeyes – which will be just the second game ever between the two programs, the first being a 20-14 win for the Manning-led Volunteers over Eddie George and the Buckeyes in the 1996 Florida Citrus Bowl – is no easy task for an SEC school.

But regardless, it's an opportunity that

has been years in the making for Tennessee, one Heupel said his players have earned with their play all season.

"It's the next step for our program," he said of the opportunity to play in the College Football Playoff for the first time in program history. "This is something that our players have worked towards since last January. You earn the right to be in a game like this. I'm proud of what we've done throughout the course of the regular season."

"The new season starts here. There was an expectation inside of our program to earn the right to play in a game like this in the postseason. So there is a lot of excitement here. But we also understand that

we're getting ready to go play a great team, and we have to be at our best."

For Heupel's Volunteers, their "best" lies within the trenches, specifically on their defensive line, which is regarded by many as one of the best and most deep fronts in the nation.



Josh Heupel

Led by defensive line coach Rodney Gardner, a 35-year SEC coaching veteran who admitted earlier this season that he is "not the easiest guy to play for," the Volunteers' front four helped them finish the regular season ranked eighth in the nation in rushing defense (99.6 yards allowed per game) and fourth in opponent yards per rush (2.8) while also ranking tied for 39th in sacks (2.42 per game) and seventh in tackles for loss (7.8 per game).

Tennessee's defensive line success begins with the standout junior James Pearce Jr., who occupies the hybrid linebacker/defensive end "Leo" position in defensive coordinator Tim Banks' unit. The Leo is similar to the "Jack" position used sparingly by Ohio State and defensive coordinator Jim Knowles.

While Jack Sawyer, C.J. Hicks and others have all struggled to produce much in the hybrid defensive end/linebacker role for the Scarlet and Gray, Pearce has excelled at the position for the Orange and White, tallying a team-high 7½ sacks and 11 tackles for loss this season, and another 14½ TFLs and 10 sacks in 2023.

This season, Pearce has not quite been able to reach the same dominance he had in 2023 – which is why he has gone from being a potential No. 1 overall pick in the 2025 NFL draft at the start of the year to a projected top-15 selection at the start of the CFP – but that may be due to the fact that opposing offenses have made him the focal

## Get To Know ... Tennessee

• **2024 Record:** 10-2, 6-2 in SEC.

• **Team Information:** Offensive Formation – Veer and Shoot; Defensive Formation – 4-2-5; Starters Returning – Offense 6, Defense 4, Specialists 1.

• **Head Coach:** Josh Heupel, 4th year at Tennessee, 37-14.

• **Series History:** 2nd meeting; Tennessee leads 1-0.

• **School Facts:** Location – Knoxville, Tenn.; Enrollment – 38,728; Nickname – Volunteers; Colors – Orange, White; Conference – SEC; Stadium – Neyland Stadium (Surface – Grass; Capacity – 101,915).

### 2024 Schedule

Date	Opponent	Time/Result (ET)
Aug. 31	CHATTANOOGA	W, 69-3
Sept. 7	at NC State	W, 51-10
Sept. 14	KENT STATE	W, 71-0
Sept. 21	at Oklahoma	W, 25-15
Oct. 5	at Arkansas	L, 19-14
Oct. 12	FLORIDA	W, 23-17 (OT)
Oct. 19	ALABAMA	W, 24-17
Nov. 2	KENTUCKY	W, 28-18
Nov. 9	MISSISSIPPI STATE	W, 33-14
Nov. 16	at Georgia	L, 31-17
Nov. 23	UTEP	W, 56-0
Nov. 30	at Vanderbilt	W, 36-23
Dec. 21	at Ohio State	8 p.m.

### Top Offensive Players

Rushing	Att.	Net	Avg.	TD
Dylan Sampson	256	1485	5.8	22
DeSean Bishop	67	433	6.5	3
Nico lamaleava	89	311	3.5	1

Passing	Comp-Att.	Pct.	Yds.	TD-INT
Nico lamaleava	199-303	65.7	2512	19-5
Gaston Moore	16-27	59.3	201	2-2

Receiving	Rec.	Net	Avg.	TD
Bru McCoy	35	432	12.3	2
Squirrel White	33	364	11.0	2
Chris Brazzell II	28	325	11.6	2
Don'te Thornton Jr.	25	647	25.9	6

### Team Offensive Stats

Points Per Game	— 37.3
Rushing Yards Per Game	— 232.0
Passing Yards Per Game	— 230.9
Total Offense Avg. Per Game	— 462.9

### Top Defensive Players

Def. Leaders	Solo	Asst.	Tot. TFL	Yards	Sacks
Arion Carter	27	38	65.0	6.5-9	0.0-0
Will Brooks	32	22	54.0	3.0-4	0.0-1
Jermod McCoy	22	17	39.0	0.5-0	0.0-0
Joshua Josephs	17	21	38.0	9.0-25	1.5-10
Andre Turrentine	18	17	35.0	1.5-3	0.0-0
James Pearce Jr.	20	15	35.0	11-59	7.5-53
Boo Carter	27	8	35.0	3.0-13	1.0-10
Jeremiah Telford	13	20	33.0	2.5-3	0.5-1

Interceptions	No.	Yds.	Avg.	TD
Jermod McCoy	4	71	17.8	0
Will Brooks	3	152	50.7	1

### Team Defensive Stats

Points Per Game Allowed	— 13.9
Rushing Yards Per Game Allowed	— 99.6
Passing Yards Per Game Allowed	— 178.7
Total Offense Avg. Per Game Allowed	— 278.3

point of their game plans, often implementing double-teams and trying different looks to stop his production.

Those game plans haven't completely taken Pearce – who still managed to be a first-team All-SEC selection this year – out of the picture, though, something that his teammates say is a testament to his unique talents and mentality.

"We know he's getting all types of stuff thrown at him when he's pass-rushing and things like that, but for him to still find ways to be effective says a lot on that part alone," redshirt senior defensive tackle Bryson Eason said.

"But him just scraping at the ball, being at the ball, traveling, running – it's simple things, but it matters. And his attitude, how he approaches it is lovely. It helps the whole unit out, helps the whole team out. We love James Pearce through whatever, so shout-out to my guy."

The extra attention put on Pearce has also opened up more opportunities for others on the defensive line to produce. Fellow starters nose tackle Omari Thomas (five TFLs, one sack), defensive tackle Eason (seven, 1½) and defensive end Dominic Bailey (2½, two) have each made their mark this season, while reserves such as Joshua Josephs (nine, 1½), Omarr Norman-Lott (four sacks) and Tyre West (five, two) have also cracked the rotation and made serious impacts.

When put all together, the Vols have a loaded defensive line that feeds off each other and stays fresh throughout, a scary sight for what is now a patchwork Ohio State offensive line that is coming off its worst performance of the season against Michigan.

"Everyone rotates and everyone contributes and everyone does their job," Thomas said. "Being able to have a bunch of guys rotating allows you to play fresh; you play fast."

Tennessee's defensive line is the obvious strength of the team, but its secondary is also nothing to scoff at. The Vols enter Ohio Stadium ranking 17th in the nation in passing defense (178.7 passing yards allowed per game) and ninth in team passing efficiency defense (110.51), allowing just three plays over 40 yards – a mark that is tied for second best in the nation behind Ohio State's two – and 10 over 30 (fifth in the nation).

These successes have been in large part due to the ball-hawking efforts of sophomore defensive back and Oregon State transfer Jermod McCoy, who finished the regular season with a team-high 13 passes defended (four interceptions, nine pass deflections) – a number that ranks second in the SEC and tied for 15th in the FBS – along with 39 tackles (one-half for loss).

Working alongside McCoy at cornerback for Tennessee is fellow sophomore Ricky Gibson III (29 tackles, two tackles for loss, five pass deflections), while safeties Will Brooks (54 tackles, three tackles for loss, five pass deflections), three interceptions, one forced fumble) and Andre Turrentine (35 tackles, 1½ tackles for loss, three pass deflections, one interception) also lead the unit.

Dec. 21 will be a reunion for Turrentine, as the redshirt junior began his career at Ohio State in 2021, playing three games on special teams that year before transferring to Tennessee the next season.

"It's ironic but I kind of expected it to be

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## OHIO STATE VS. TENNESSEE

like this," Turrentine said of the matchup between him and his former team. "College has been a full circle for me personally. I knew we would see them in one form or fashion, so it's just special it being the first game."

Another member of Tennessee's second-year worth noting is true freshman Boo Carter, who started at the hybrid linebacker/defensive back Star position for the last five games of the regular season. The Volunteers allowed less than 150 yards passing in four of those contests, the outlier being the 347-yard outing by Georgia quarterback Carson Beck in the Bulldogs' 31-17 win over the Vols on Nov. 16, while Carter recorded 16 of his 35 tackles in those five games.

"Boo as a young player is just going to continue to get better and better in all areas," Heupel said. "I'm really, really proud of what he's done in a short amount of time."

Tennessee's offense has been just as efficient as its defense, ranking eighth in the nation in both scoring offense (37.3 points per game) and total offense (462.9 yards). And like Banks' group, the success of Heupel and second-year offensive coordinator Joey Halze's offense begins in the trenches, where the Volunteers boast the nation's ninth-best rushing offense, totaling an impressive 232.0 yards per game.

That mark is in large part due to the team's veteran offensive line, which returns four of its five starters from last year, including senior left guard Andrej Karic, four-year starter and 2024 Rimington Award finalist center Cooper Mays, four-year starter and third-team All-SEC right guard Javontez Spraggins and two-year starter and senior right tackle John Campbell Jr.

But also key to that success are the talents of junior running back Dylan Sampson, who has emerged as one of the more explosive running backs in the nation after completing the best regular season by a Tennessee tailback in program history.

The 5-11, 201-pound Sampson tallied a program-record 1,485 rushing yards and 22 touchdowns on 256 attempts this season. His 22 scores were the fifth most by a running back in SEC single-season history and the most since Alabama's Najee Harris' 26 in 2020.



Dylan Sampson

Sampson, who led the SEC in 11 different categories, was named a unanimous first-team All-SEC selection and the conference's player of the year, which put a bow on a spectacular regular season that his head coach said was the best he had ever seen from the tailback position.

"I don't even know if I have the right words to describe (Sampson) and what he means to our team, just as a player and as a leader," Heupel said. "But I don't know if anybody's played the position better than he has this year."

"He's dynamic. Plays great without the ball in his hands. And when the ball is in his hands, he's making things happen. Dynamic plays, muddy 3 and 4 (yard gains). He's special, man. He's played the position this year as well as anybody I've ever had."

The speedy Sampson is not the only

productive running back in De'Rail Sims' room, though. Joining him in the backfield is redshirt freshman and Knoxville, Tenn., native DeSean Bishop, who has had a breakout season for his hometown team in relief of Sampson, totaling 433 yards and three scores on 67 carries.

Sampson and Bishop have formed a formidable rushing duo that could strike fear into a Buckeyes' defense that gave up 172 yards on the ground to Michigan on Nov. 30, but Knowles' unit may also have to worry about an improving Vols passing offense led by redshirt freshman quarterback Nico Iamaleava that seems to be trending in the right direction heading into postseason play.

Iamaleava, a highly touted five-star prospect who sat behind starter Joe Milton III last season, emerged as an early dark horse Heisman Trophy candidate when he threw for a combined 892 passing yards and seven touchdowns to just two interceptions in his first four games of the season.

What followed was a bit of a "rookie" wall for the first-year starter, where he completed just 57.3 percent of his passes (47 of 82) for 521 yards and just one touchdown to two interceptions in his next three games, the first game of that stretch being a 158-yard and no-touchdown performance in the team's 19-14 loss at Arkansas on Oct. 5.

But Iamaleava hit his stride in the final month of the regular season. Over his last five starts, the Long Beach, Calif., native completed 91 of his 133 pass attempts (68.4 percent) for 1,009 passing yards and 11 touchdowns to just one interception, while also showing off some of his dual-threat ability by rushing for another 132 yards on 36 carries.

Iamaleava's improvements over the year have been felt by his head coach, who said his quarterback is playing his best football at the most important time of the year.

"(Iamaleava is) just a young guy who just continues to get better throughout the course of the season," Heupel said Dec. 7 on "The Rich Eisen Show." "Nico has an unbelievable skill set. He's hungry to get better every single day. He's continued to grow as a player throughout the course of the season, and he's just playing really good football right now."

"He has great command of what we're doing. He's taking care of the football through the air. He's done a really nice job understanding our run-pass game and controlling the run game for us. I'm looking forward to him playing his best as we get into the playoffs."

Iamaleava, though, feels there is still so much more he can improve upon as a first-year starting quarterback.

"As a young guy, I can still do better at (taking control of the offense)," Iamaleava said after the win over Vanderbilt on Nov. 30. "I think just me having full command of the offense, knowing what our coaches want, knowing what we want on certain plays and certain downs and distances is what I've been working on."

Iamaleava's improvements have proved beneficial for Tennessee's main pass catchers, most notably senior wideout and Oregon transfer Dont'e Thornton, who eclipsed 100 yards and a touchdown in two of his final four games, including his season-high 118-yard, two-score outing in the season fi-

nale against the Commodores.

Thornton leads the team with an explosive 647 yards and six touchdowns on just 25 receptions, while redshirt sophomore Chris Brazzell II, senior Bru McCoy and junior slot man Squirrel White have been featured more consistently in the passing game, with each of them recording at least 325 yards and two touchdowns. McCoy leads the team in receptions (35) and is second in yards (432).

Also featured in the passing game is senior tight end Miles Kitselman, who has served as a reliable target for Iamaleava all year, ranking second in touchdown receptions with four while also totaling 21 receptions and 296 yards.

The Vols' passing offense ranks just 62nd in the nation at 230.9 yards per game, but it is still a unit that could explode in any game if Iamaleava and his pass catchers can put it all together.

Although Tennessee enters Ohio Stadium with a top-eight scoring offense and defense in the nation, there are some trends that work against it and in favor of the Buckeyes. Perhaps the most obvious example is the likely cold conditions inside at kickoff on Dec. 21, which, according to The Weather Channel, will see temperatures dip to as low as 16 degrees that night with 8 mph winds, a number that is much lower



Nico Iamaleava

than the 41-degree conditions the Volunteers played under against Vanderbilt.

Tennessee also heads into the CFP with just a 2-2 record on the road, with its two losses being to Arkansas and Georgia and the two wins being against then-No. 15 Oklahoma on Sept. 21 and Vanderbilt, and as the fifth-most penalized team in the country, with 99 flags worth 819 yards.

With all of those things considered, few pundits and experts are selecting the Volunteers to come out of frigid Columbus with a victory, as evidenced by the Buckeyes holding as a 7.5-point favorite by many sportsbooks as BSB went to press.

But Heupel and the Volunteers do not care what the sportsbooks or experts think. They know they have a good team heading into Ohio Stadium on Dec. 21, and they are ready to put in the work and take on the challenge.

"The only thing that matters is (Dec. 21) inside (Ohio Stadium) in Columbus, Ohio," Heupel said. "We've played in big games. We have to be ready to go handle everything that we're going to face that night. But it's your preparation that takes you to that moment. So being completely invested in what happens in the present is the most important thing day to day."

"I think we have the utmost confidence (in ourselves)," Iamaleava added. "We will take this team vs. anyone. I think all our team knows that we have what it takes to go out there and compete on the highest level."

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# The Numbers Game

## Ohio State Season Statistics

2024 Game-By-Game				
Date	Opponent	Result/Time	Crowd	
Aug. 31	(2) AKRON	W, 52-6	102,011	
Sept. 7	(2) WESTERN MICHIGAN	W, 56-0	102,665	
Sept. 21	(3) MARSHALL	W, 49-14	103,871	
Sept. 28	(3) Michigan State	W, 38-7	71,114	
Oct. 5	(3) IOWA	W, 35-7	105,135	
Oct. 12	(3) Oregon (2)	L, 32-31	60,129	
Oct. 26	(4) NEBRASKA	W, 21-17	104,830	
Nov. 2	(4) Penn State (3)	W, 20-13	111,030	
Nov. 9	(3) PURDUE	W, 45-0	103,463	
Nov. 16	(2) Northwestern	W, 31-7	38,147	
Nov. 23	(2) INDIANA (5)	W, 38-15	105,751	
Nov. 30	(2) MICHIGAN	L, 13-10	106,005	

OSU's gameday AP ranking is in parentheses before the opponent, while the opponent's ranking is after the name.

Team Statistics		OSU	Opp
First Downs	248	170	
Rushing	104	71	
Passing	135	79	
Penalty	9	20	
Average Per Game/Rush	169.2	96.8	
Average Per Game/Pass	254.3	144.3	
Total Offense	5082	2893	
Total Plays	749	706	
Average Per Game	423.5	241.1	
Average Per Play	6.8	4.1	
Penalties-Yards	52-481	42-320	
Fumbles-Lost	12-5	18-8	
Third Down Efficiency	61-143	56-166	
Percentage	43%	34%	
Fourth Down Efficiency	18-26	8-21	
Percentage	69%	38%	
Sacks-Yards	35-231	13-85	
Time Of Possession Avg.	29:54	30:06	

Score		By Quarters	1	2	3	4	OT	Tot.	Avg.
Ohio State	76	150	135	65	0	426	35.5		
Opponents	33	53	9	36	0	131	10.9		

Rushing	Individual Statistics				TD	Long
	Att.	Net	Avg.			
Quinshon Judkins	147	805	5.5	8	86	
T. Henderson	108	751	7.0	6	53	
James Peoples	42	191	4.5	2	18	
Will Howard	72	131	1.8	7	19	
S. Williams-Dixon	7	53	7.6	0	31	
Jeremiah Smith	4	47	11.8	1	19	
Julian Sayin	2	24	12.0	0	19	
Emeka Egbuka	5	21	4.2	0	13	
Devin Brown	7	13	1.9	0	10	
Carnell Tate	0	6	0.0	0	6	
Mason Maggs	1	3	3.0	0	3	
Team	10	-15	-1.5	0	0	
OSU Totals	405	2030	5.0	24	86	
OPP Totals	408	1162	2.8	9	38	

Passing	Comp.	Att.	Pct.	Yds.	TD-INT	Effic.
Will Howard	227	314	72.3	2860	27-8	172.1
Devin Brown	10	19	52.6	108	1-0	117.7
Julian Sayin	5	11	45.5	84	1-0	139.6
OSU Totals	242	344	70.3	3052	29-8	168.0
OPP Totals	179	298	60.1	1731	4-9	107.2

Receiving	Rec.	Net	Avg.	TD	Long
Emeka Egbuka	60	743	12.4	9	68
Jeremiah Smith	57	934	16.4	10	70
Carnell Tate	41	583	14.2	4	40
T. Henderson	19	135	7.1	0	32
Gee Scott Jr.	16	150	9.4	2	34
Quinshon Judkins	15	109	7.3	1	21
Brandon Inniss	12	151	12.6	1	27
Will Kacmarek	5	58	11.6	0	32
Bryson Rodgers	5	46	9.2	0	12
Jelani Thurman	4	42	10.5	1	19
Jayden Ballard	2	18	9.0	0	12
Bennett Christian	2	61	30.5	1	55
David Adolph	1	10	10.0	0	10
Kojo Antwi	1	8	8.0	0	8
Patrick Gurd	1	6	6.0	0	6
James Peoples	1	-2	-2.0	0	0
OSU Totals	242	3052	12.6	29	70
OPP Totals	179	1731	9.7	4	69

Scoring	TD	EPK	EPR	EPRC	FG	PTS
Jayden Fielding	11	54-54	-	-	9-12	77
Jeremiah Smith	9	-	-	-	-	66
Q. Judkins	9	-	-	-	-	54
Emeka Egbuka	9	-	-	-	-	54
Will Howard	7	-	-	-	-	42
T. Henderson	6	-	-	-	-	36
Carnell Tate	4	-	-	-	-	24

James Peoples	2	-	-	-	12
Gee Scott Jr.	2	-	-	-	12
Bennett Christian	1	-	-	-	6
Gabe Powers	1	-	-	-	6
Jack Sawyer	1	-	-	-	6
Lathan Ransom	1	-	-	-	6
Brandon Inniss	1	-	-	-	6
Jelani Thurman	1	-	-	-	6
Caleb Downs	1	-	-	-	6
Austin Snyder	-	3-3	-	-	3
OSU Totals	56	57-57	-	-	9-12 426
OPP Totals	14	10-10	-	2	11-16 131

FG Distance	0-29	30-39	40-49	50+	Total
Jayden Fielding	2-2	2-4	5-6	0-0	9-12
OSU Totals	2-2	2-4	5-6	0-0	9-12
OPP Totals	4-5	1-2	4-6	2-3	11-16

Punting	No.	Yds.	Avg.	Bk	Long
Joe McGuire	32	1354	42.3	0	61
Nick McLarty	2	65	32.5	0	35
OSU Totals	34	1419	41.7	0	61
OPP Totals	64	2709	42.3	2	68

Interceptions	No.	Yds.	Avg.	TD	Long
Denzel Burke	2	31	15.5	0	31
Davison Igbinosun	2	45	22.5	0	45
Lathan Ransom	1	24	24.0	0	24
Jordan Hancock	1	0	0.0	0	0
Jack Sawyer	1	12	12.0	0	12
Gabe Powers	1	29	29.0	1	29
Caleb Downs	1	0	0.0	0	0
OSU Totals	9	141	15.7	1	45
OPP Totals	8	112	14.0	1	36

Punt Returns	No.	Yds.	Avg.	TD	Long
Brandon Inniss	12	109	9.1	0	36
Caleb Downs	5	102	20.4	1	79
Jayden Ballard	1	0	0.0	0	0
David Adolph	1	0	0.0	0	0
Caden Curry	1	0	0.0	0	0
OSU Totals	20	211	10.6	1	79
OPP Totals	8	45	5.6	0	14

Kickoff Returns	No.	Yds.	Avg.	TD	Long
T. Henderson	5	58	11.6	0	19
Brandon Inniss	3	47	15.7	0	18
Jayden Ballard	2	23	11.5	0	23
Emeka Egbuka	1	16	16.0	0	16
<b>OSU Totals</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>144</b>	<b>12.0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>OPP Totals</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>152</b>	<b>15.2</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>25</b>

Def. Leaders	Solo	Asst.	Tot.	TFL-Yds.	Sacks
Sonny Styles	33	43	76	6.5-35	4.0-29
Cody Simon	31	43	74	8.5-49	5.0-44
Caleb Downs	34	28	62	6.5-11	0.5-2
Lathan Ransom	32	25	57	6.0-9	0-0
Jack Sawyer	20	26	46	4.5-28	4.5-28
Denzel Burke	31	10	41	2.0-2	0-0
Ty Hamilton	12	28	40	4.0-15	2.5-10
JT Tuimoloau	19	19	38	11.5-58	6.0-38
Arvell Reese	16	21	37	2.5-8	0.5-5
Jordan Hancock	21	11	32	1.5-4	0.5-3
Tyleik Williams	9	23	32	5.5-16	2.5-9
Davison Igbinosun	18	12	30	2.0-6	0-0
C.J. Hicks	9	12	21	2.0-14	2.0-14
Caden Curry	11	7	18	2.5-39	1.5-16
Kayden McDonald	7	10	17	1.5-3	0-0
J. Mathews Jr.	10	5	15	2.5-6	1.0-3
H. Hicks	8	5	13	0-0	0-0
Jaylen McClain	6	6	12	1.0-1	0-0
Mitchell Melton	6	5	11	3.5-15	2.0-12
K. Jackson Jr.	5	6	11	2.0-11	1.5-11
Tywayne Malone	1	6	7	1.0-1	0-0
Malik Hartford	3	4	7	0-0	0-0
Gabe Powers	4	1	5	0-0	0-0
Eddrick Houston	2	2	4	0-0	0-0
Payton Pierce	1	3	4	0-0	0-0
Joshua Mickens	2	1	3	1.0-7	1.0-7
C. Simpson-Hunt	1	1	2	0-0	0-0
Aaron Scott Jr.	1	1	2	0-0	0-0
Hero Kanu	-	2	2	0-0	0-0
Bryce West	-	1	1	0-0	0-0
Dominic Kirks	1	-	1	0-0	0-0
Will Smith Jr.	1	-	1	0-0	0-0
Joey Velazquez	-	1	1	0-0	0-0
OSU Totals	363	370	733	78-338	35-231
OPP Totals	401	338	739	42-153	13-85

Fumbles Forced:	Ransom (3), Hancock (2), Sawyer (2), Curry, Hamilton, Simon, Tuimoloau.
Fumbles Recovered:	Sawyer (2), Hamilton, Igbinosun, Jackson Jr., Ransom, Simon, Styles.

## Tennessee Season Statistics

2024 Game-By-Game				
Date	Opponent	Result/Time	Crowd	
Aug. 31	(15) CHATTANOOGA	W, 69-3	101,915	
Sept. 7	(14) at NC State	W, 51-10	72,730	
Sept. 14	(7) KENT STATE	W, 71-0	101,915	
Sept. 21	(6) at Oklahoma (15)	W, 25-15	84,071	
Oct. 5	(4) at Arkansas	L, 19-14	75,573	
Oct. 12	(8) FLORIDA	W, 23-17 (OT)	101,915	
Oct. 19	(11) ALABAMA (7)	W, 24-17	101,915	
Nov. 2	(7) KENTUCKY	W, 28-18	101,915	
Nov. 9	(7) MISSISSIPPI STATE	W, 33-14	101,915	
Nov. 16	(6) at Georgia	L, 31-17	93,033	
Nov. 23	(10) UTEP	W, 56-0	101,915	
Nov. 30	(7) at Vanderbilt	W, 36-23	28,934	

Tennessee's gameday AP ranking is in parentheses before the opponent, while the opponent's ranking is after the name.

Team Statistics		TEN	Opp
First Downs	287	201	
Rushing	139	78	
Passing	131	100	
Penalty	17	23	
Average Per Game/Rush	232.0	99.6	
Average Per Game/Pass	230.9	178.7	
Total Offense	5555	3339	
Total Plays	888	772	
Average Per Game	462.9	278.3	
Average Per Play	6.3	4.3	
Penalties-Yards	99-819	86-666	
Fumbles-Lost	17-8	23-9	
Third Down Efficiency	87-181	49-166	
Percentage	48.1%	29.5%	
Fourth Down Efficiency	10-16	6-21	
Percentage	62.5%	29.6%	
Sacks-Yards	29-191	26-115	
Time Of Possession Avg.	29:46	30:13	

Score		By Quarters	1	2	3	4	OT	Tot.	Avg.
Tennessee	102	143	125	71	6	447	37.3		
Opponents	33	37	41	56	0	167	13.9		

Rushing	Individual Statistics			TD	Long
	Att.	Net	Avg.		
Dylan Sampson	256	1485	5.8	22	56
DeSean Bishop	67	433	6.5	3	53
Nico lamaleava	89	311	3.5	1	31
Peyton Lewis	54	262	4.9	3	35
Cameron Seldon	23	118	5.1	1	14
Khalifa Keith	21	100	4.8	1	23
Hunter Barnes	7	38	5.4	0	14
Jake Merklinger	7	22	3.1	0	24
Gaston Moore	3	18	6.0	0	15
Bru McCoy	2	15	7.5	0	9
Patrick Wilk	3	12	4.0	0	9
Navy Shulere	2	5	2.5	0	6
Miles Kitselman	2	1	0.5	1	1
Squirrel White	1	-7	-7.0	0	0
Team	8	-29	-3.6	0	0
TEN Totals	545	2784	5.1	32	56
OPP Totals	422	1195	2.8	9	50

Passing	Comp.	Att.	Pct.	Yds.	TD-INT	Effic.
Nico lamaleava	199	303	65.7	2512	19-5	152.7
Gaston Moore	16	27	59.3	201	2-2	131.4
Jake Merklinger	6	9	66.7	48	0-0	111.5
Navy Shulere	1	3	33.3	10	0-0	61.3
Team	0	1	0.0	0	0-0	0.0
TEN Totals	222	343	64.7	2771	21-7	148.7
OPP Totals	199	350	56.9	2144	9-11	110.5

## OHIO STATE FOOTBALL

# Fourth Straight U-M Loss Heats Up Day's Seat

By **BOBBY GORBETT**

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

Inside the walls of the Woody Hayes Athletic Center, the 2024 season started like any other with the team's three goals – beating Michigan, winning the Big Ten and winning the national championship – touted by head coach Ryan Day and the rest of the coaching staff.

Outside the program, those objectives didn't seem like goals but rather the expectations for a team returning star seniors such as wide receiver Emeka Egbuka, defensive ends Jack Sawyer and J.T. Tuimolau, and defensive tackle Tyleik Williams, among many others.

For those players, the motivation to return for their senior season and bypass early selection in the NFL draft was fairly simple: They hadn't achieved any one of those three goals during their time at Ohio State and wanted to come back for one more year to accomplish them.

"When we decided to come back, I mean, there really wasn't much talk about any other game besides this one and winning the Big Ten title and winning the national championship," Sawyer said on Nov. 23 before The Game.

"I mean, this is what you come back for. This is what we do it for, right here. This is what Buckeye Nation does it for every year, no matter the sport you're playing at Ohio State. Especially for us, we want this one so bad, this is what we came back here for."

In one fateful afternoon at Ohio Stadium, the Buckeyes saw two of their three goals slip through their fingers in a stunning 13-10 loss to Michigan on Nov. 30, a defeat that took them out of the Big Ten Championship Game for the fourth straight season.

With a 10-2 record and wins over top-10 teams Penn State and Indiana, Day's team did enough to make the College Football Playoff, hosting No. 9 seed Tennessee at Ohio Stadium on Dec. 21 (8 p.m., ABC/ESPN). Now the Buckeyes' only hope to avoid a fourth consecutive season without accomplishing their three major goals is to run the table in the CFP and win the national championship.

The season isn't over, but so far, one of the most anticipated Buckeye teams in recent history has not lived up to expectations, and Day and his coaching staff have been right in the line of fire.

"I wouldn't want to go as simple as saying the coaches have done a bad job, but I do think it's fair to say that the expectations for this team are higher than what they've accomplished so far and that if they don't make a deep college football playoff run that this season would be viewed as a big disappointment, and that ultimately comes back to the coaches," Dan Hope of Eleven Warriors said.

Ohio State's loss to a 6-5 Michigan team that was largely removed from College Football Playoff contention in mid-October was one of the biggest upsets in the history of The Game, and it leaves the Buckeyes at a low point in the Day era.

As of right now, the high point of Day's tenure seems to still be at the beginning. Taking over for national championship-win-



FILE PHOTO

**TAKING THE HEAT** — Coach Ryan Day is feeling intense pressure from the fan base to achieve the last attainable goal for the program this season — winning a national championship — after failing the past four years to either beat Michigan or win a Big Ten title.

ning coach Urban Meyer, Day led the Buckeyes to back-to-back Big Ten championships and CFP appearances in his first two seasons in 2019 and 2020, making it all the way to the National Championship Game against Alabama in 2020.

Day's teams had success through the majority of the 2021, 2022 and 2023 seasons but ultimately fell short when it mattered most against Michigan in each year. The Wolverines made and won the Big Ten Championship Game from 2021-23 — although they may have had help from the ring-leader of the sign-stealing scandal Connor Stalions — while the Buckeyes had to settle for only one appearance in the College Football Playoff in 2022, which ended with a heartbreaking loss to Georgia after a potential game-winning kick was missed by Noah Ruggles as the clock struck zero on both the game and 2022.

Marcus Hartman, a BSB alum who now writes for the Dayton Daily News, said Day was at his best in his first two years as Ohio State head coach but has since struggled to maintain that same championship-level success, a regression that he attributes to several problems that the staff has worked to get rid of but struggled to address right away before it negatively impacted the program.

"He did a great job with the adjustments that he made in '19," Hartman said. "I mean, they were way better in '19 under him than they would have been if Urban came back because he improved the quarterback. I think that they had a little bit different mindset.

"He did a legitimately good job the first couple years, and now they keep running into various problems, and he seems to be good at solving problems after they arise, but a lot of times it's too late."

Perhaps the biggest problem that needed to be solved from the Buckeyes' shortcomings in 2021, 2022 and 2023 against Michigan was what many described as a lack of toughness. In the 2021 game specifically, the Wolverines were unstoppable on the ground in the 42-27 win, rushing for 297 yards and six touchdowns on 41 carries behind the running back duo of Blake Corum and Hassan Haskins.

In 2022, the Buckeyes were solid against the run for much of the day but allowed Michigan running back Donovan Edwards to run for 75- and 85-yard touchdowns in the fourth quarter before losing 45-23.

The next season, Day appeared to have had enough of the questions about his team's toughness. Moments after a 17-14 win over Notre Dame that September, Day called out former Notre Dame head coach Lou Holtz after he previously criticized the Buckeyes for their lack of toughness heading into that game.

"I'd like to know where Lou Holtz is right now," Day said in an interview with NBC Sports after the game. "What he said about our team, what he said about our team — I cannot believe. This is a tough team right here. We're proud to be from Ohio. It's always been Ohio against the world, and it will continue to be Ohio against the world. But I'll tell you what. I love those kids. We have a tough team."

Day's impassioned defense of his team was to no avail for The Game played a few months later. Although the rushing battle was much closer between Ohio State and Michigan in 2023 — with the Wolverines gaining 156 yards and two scores on 39 carries and the Buckeyes gaining 107 and one on 28 totes — the Wolverines had enough of an edge in the trenches to win the game 30-24.

Despite all the troubles of the past three years, the 2024 game seemed different. Not only were the Buckeyes one of the hottest teams in the country and national championship favorites headed into The Game, but the Wolverines went through severe struggles offensively, heading into the matchup with the 127th-best passing offense in the nation (140.1 yards per game) and the 107th-best scoring offense (23.1 points per game).

A funny thing happened though on Nov. 30, when the Buckeye offense — which up until the last game of the regular season was much improved statistically from 2023 — really started to struggle.

The offense's struggles weren't helped by graduate quarterback Will Howard throwing two costly interceptions and playing poorly in general, but a game plan that had the Buckeyes repeatedly run the ball up the middle despite little success rather than feed their highly skilled receivers on the outside drew the majority of the ire from fans and media personnel after the game.

"That 2021 game really created this narrative of Ohio State isn't tough enough to win The Game," Hope said. "They can't win this game a certain way, and I think there's been kind of a concerted effort to win The Game that way ever since. I think this year in particular, you have this clear advantage in terms of your skill-position talent that you really should be utilizing. And there was almost such an insistence on, 'We have to be able to run the ball. We have to win the rushing battle,' and they didn't play to their strengths. They basically played into Michigan strengths."

There have been plenty of theories attempting to explain the Buckeyes' seemingly bizarre decision to attack the Wolverines' star-studded defensive line — led by All-Big Ten defensive tackles Mason Graham and Kenneth Grant — rather than a slightly depleted secondary that was playing without star cornerback Will Johnson, but Hope's viewpoint that Day was trying to send a message has been shared by several others outside of the program.

Hartman, however, believed it simply had more to do with Howard, who didn't just have a bad game but was briefly injured in the second quarter when he was hit hard by Michigan safety Makari Paige and subsequently evaluated for a concussion.

"I believe they went in there with the game plan that everybody thinks they should have had, which is to throw the ball around, and then Will Howard didn't play well," Hartman said. "I think he was not 100 percent after he got hit. He made a really bad mistake, and they had terrible field position. So I think that's how things ended up like that with them running the ball too much. It was more game situation."



## OHIO STATE FOOTBALL

Regardless of the source of the Buckeyes' ineffective game plan, the end result was Ohio State lost its fourth straight to Michigan, and with plenty of fans in a state of extreme frustration and shock, Day's job security was questioned by many in the aftermath of The Game.

But as the dust began to settle in the days following the Michigan game, OSU Athletic Director Ross Bjork expressed a vote of confidence in Day to The Columbus Dispatch.

"Our full focus right now is on the College Football Playoff and making a strong run," Bjork said on Dec. 1, one day after The Game. "We have a ton to play for. We have a great team made up of talented players and great young men. Coach Day does a great job leading our program. He's our coach."

According to 247 Sports' Steve Helwagen, a couple of factors are keeping Day's job relatively secure despite the loss, most notably a hefty \$37.28 million buyout that the university would have to cough up in addition to a new coach's potential salary.

"From the university's standpoint, do they really want to pay a buyout of over \$30 million to get rid of this coach when seemingly every other aspect of his job he does pretty well?"

Unfortunately for Day, though, beating Michigan is what many believe is the most important part of the job. While any fan will tell you that each of Day's teams' slip-ups against the archrival Wolverines were hard to look past, the 2024 loss was particularly inexcusable, according to Hope.

"Without a doubt, it's the worst loss he's had. It's the first time he's lost to an unranked team," Hope said. "I think you could justify each of the three previous losses based on the fact that Michigan had a really good team. Of course, you could factor the Connor Stallions stuff in there as well. But there's really no excuse at all for this loss. I mean, Ohio State clearly has a better roster this year. It's a game that Ohio State should not have lost in any way. And I think because of that, there are a lot of people who would not have said Ryan Day should be fired two weeks ago and are saying that now."

As Hope pointed out, it was Day's first loss to an unranked opponent in his entire tenure as the Buckeye head coach, breaking a winning streak of 47 games. With the comparisons to former Ohio State head coach John Cooper—who beat Michigan only twice in his 13 years as OSU head coach—at an all-time high, Day's first unranked loss couldn't have come at a worse time.

According to Hartman, the loss cost him a chunk of fan support.

"He still has some defenders, but I mean, just from a narrative standpoint, that was a pretty bad loss because the No. 1 defense of him was that he didn't lose to bad teams," Hartman said, "Urban Meyer had a couple of upsets, and now that's out the window. On top of it, when it's to Michigan, that makes it a lot worse. And I don't really think that was a very good defense anyway."

"Even if (Ohio State fans) were on the fence before (regarding Day), I think that they're off the fence," he added. "Or, at best, they're saying it's now or never with this playoff run."

Some fans are put in a bit of a bind with the highly unusual set of circumstances that the expanded College Football Playoff has provided, which has given Ohio State a

chance to avenge its loss to Michigan with its first national title since 2014.

According to Helwagen, the appreciation of potential postseason success this season is partially dependent on each fan's age.

"A lot of people who are older fans still hang their hat on the Michigan game as the end-all-be-all, and it's very important, certainly," Helwagen said, "But the year is now 2024, and I think that there are other things to play for and other things to chase, and it would be a tremendous accomplishment if this team would win or beat Tennessee and Oregon. So I don't think you can diminish that in any way, shape or form."

"It's two different things. One does not necessarily depend on the other anymore, and they've had any number of opportunities taken away from them (in the past) because they lost to Michigan. Well, that's no longer the case. You can still get where you want to be despite losing that game, as we see this year."

At least in the short term, Day appears to have the administration's support. But according to Hope, a loss to Tennessee as a home favorite, given the talent on the roster—which was at least partially put in place by NIL funding that was reported to be around \$20 million for the 2024 season—could challenge that support.

"My feeling is, if Ohio State loses the first College Football Playoff game, Ohio State will likely have a new coach next year," Hope said. "Beyond that, I'm not sure. And I think that's where you maybe get into some discrepancy between what the fans would do and what the athletic department would do."

"There are certainly fans out there that are of a mindset of, 'Unless Ohio State wins the national championship, Ryan Day may be fired.' I don't think that Ohio State is looking at it quite that way. I do think if they were to lose this first-round game at home with this roster and with four straight losses to Michigan, it's very likely Ohio State would make a change."

Although one of the main mottos of the team at the beginning of the season was national championship or bust, the Buckeyes now face an absolute gauntlet in the playoff.

With a win over Tennessee in the first round of the tournament, the Buckeyes would take on No. 1 Oregon at the Rose Bowl, which could potentially be followed by No. 5 seed Texas in the semifinals and ultimately No. 2 Georgia in a potential national championship game, assuming they win their respective games. Helwagen believes a win in each round would help Day get a portion of fans to support him again.

"(The administration) would love for him to win a couple of games, and then that would get everybody off their back to get rid of him," Helwagen said. "I think for him, the more games he wins, the better. One win will bring back a few people. Two wins would bring back most people. Three wins would bring back almost everybody. And if a fourth win doesn't bring back people, they're not worth bringing back, in my opinion."

With Day's large buyout in mind, Helwagen doesn't expect him to be fired even in the event of a loss to Tennessee, but 2025 doesn't exactly have the brightest outlook for the Buckeyes. Ohio State could have to replace 15 or more starters from its 2024 team, leaving Day to have to manage perhaps his worst team on paper in 2025 with arguably the least amount of job security

he's had in his career.

Michigan, meanwhile, appears to be headed out of mediocrity after it signed a top-10 class in the country, led by consensus No. 1 overall recruit Bryce Underwood (6-4, 205), a five-star quarterback out of Belleville, Mich.

With The Game back in Ann Arbor in 2025 and Ohio State likely in a relatively down year, Hartman foresees a bleak future for Day at Ohio State.

"I think it's next year or that's it," Hartman said. "This is just my speculation. I think he will not be back in 2026 if they don't accomplish any of their goals next year, and quite honestly it would be surprising if they did accomplish any of their goals next year because they're not going to be as good, barring whatever they get in the portal. So I think (next year) is it."

If Day is to finally get the monkey off his back and defeat Michigan for the first time since 2019, he will have to push aside whatever problem it is that always seems to get in his team's way in The Game.

Many fans have surmised that the Buckeyes' problems with beating Michigan start with the mental side of the game, but Helwagen believes their shortcomings are simply due to their issues in the trenches.

"People will say, 'Oh they play tight, they take on the persona of their coach and he's tight,' and whatever," Helwagen said. "I just think that physically, they've been beaten up. It's a game of football. It's a physical game and the more physical team wins nine times out of 10."

Holistically, there are plenty of indicators

that Day has led a consistent, impressive program at Ohio State.

The Buckeyes have a 66-10 record under Day during his tenure and have secured 10 or more wins in five of his seasons as head coach, the only exception being the COVID-19-shortened 2020 campaign that had Ohio State go 7-1. Perhaps most importantly, his recruiting classes have been in the top five ever since Day started recruiting his own guys after the 2019 season.

But for whatever reason the Buckeyes have had little to nothing to show for their talent in the last four years.

"The thing that makes it so tough is if you look at what Ryan Day has done at Ohio State, other than maybe three or four programs, like Alabama or Georgia, pretty much anywhere else in the country, Ryan Day would be praised for doing phenomenal work," Hope said. "To be as consistent as he's been every year—they're winning 10, 11-plus games every single season—just about any other program in the country would take that in a heartbeat."

"But the reality is at Ohio State you are one of the highest-resource programs in the country. The expectation at Ohio State is being the best team in the country, it's winning national championships, and obviously, there's still a chance to do that this year."

"But the reality is that in terms of those major goals, particularly in the last four years, he hasn't accomplished them. If that's the goal that's going to be stated, if that's the standard for the program, these last four years have not lived up to the standard of the program."



## OPINION

# Day's Future Still Cloudy Despite Bjork's Message

It could be something, or it could be nothing.

Either way, it's going to shape the future of the Ohio State football program for the foreseeable future.

## THE FACTS MAN Mike Wachsman

There are a whole lot of upset people in Buckeye Nation, folks who believe that action should have already been taken on coach Ryan Day following a fourth straight loss to hated rival Michigan. The fact that this was one of the weaker Wolverines units in recent memory only adds to the frustration and has made some fans label Day as "John Cooper 2.0."

OSU athletic director Ross Bjork does not see it that way and offered what amounted to a vote of confidence to Day during a recent appearance on 97.1 The Fan.

"Coach Day is awesome," said Bjork, who came from Texas A&M to replace the retiring Gene Smith last summer. "He's great to work with. He totally gets it. He loves being a Buckeye. So we're going to support him at the highest level."

The final result was not the only lingering memory of the Buckeyes' loss to Michigan. Also indelible was the image of Day standing back and doing nothing while his players were involved in postgame melee. He had a faraway look in his eyes, and rather than showing the toughness fans demand, he was a bystander. That caused even more consternation from Ohio State fans, who couldn't believe that Day wasn't given his walking papers on the walk back to the locker room.

Bjork framed it more as a look toward the future than a look back at the recent past.

"The reason we had to say something after (the Michigan) game is, we're still breathing, we're still alive," Bjork said. "The season's not over. The book is not closed."

Day and the Buckeyes came into the season with huge aspirations, assembling a roster of talent that was the envy of most of college football. Their stated goals were beating Michigan, winning the Big Ten and winning the national title. Two of those are off the table, and there doesn't

seem to be much optimism that the third is attainable.

For many, winning the national title is the only way Day can save his job – and even then, a few believe it isn't enough. They will want him gone regardless, believing a national title that does not include a win over Michigan to be tainted.

Bjork no doubt lost a faction of Buckeye Nation when he said that the conversation has to be approached differently than it is currently.

"What we have to do is this whole 'championship or bust' mentality, you want that as the goal, but it has to be about the process," Bjork said. "To me, we have to maybe change some conversations a little bit. I think we need to maybe just approach things a little bit differently."

Bjork has been down this road before, saying one thing before eventually delivering another.

Prior to his arrival in Columbus, Bjork oversaw a buyout of Jimbo Fisher at Texas A&M that changed the landscape of college football contracts. The Aggies went 5-7 in 2022 after inking a huge recruiting class, and fans in College Station were understandably restless. It's well known how seriously they take their football in Texas, and the fact that rival Texas was once again becoming relevant made the Aggies' impotence sting even more.

Fans wanted a change, but Bjork stepped in and offered up a long-term approach.

"Build to last. That's my mantra," Bjork said to ESPN at the time. "There's no panic here. You can't be a blow-by-the-wind program in how you make decisions and expect to win championships in the SEC. Sure, last year was disappointing for all of us, but I look at where we're headed, and so does Jimbo."

By mid-November of 2023, with A&M at 6-4, Fisher was gone, and the school owed him over \$75 million, which it would be paying him until 2031. It was a huge monetary hit, though a lot of it was covered by boosters and disgruntled A&M alums who felt the Aggies should be big players on the championship stage.

Bjork had apparently decided well before the actual firing that the move was necessary.

"The assessment that I delivered (to the school president) was that we are not reaching our full potential" Bjork said in a news conference. "We are not in the championship conversation, and something was not quite right about our direc-

tion and the plan.

"We should be relevant on the national scene."

While Ohio State is a far cry from sliding into irrelevance – it has, after all, won at least 10 games in every season of Day's tenure (outside of the shortened 2020 season when the Buckeyes went 7-1) – the lack of championships, both Big Ten and national, and continued futility against Michigan has made Day's status a hot-button issue.

Bjork's words had to be expected. What is an athletics director going to say? "Ryan has to win or he's out"? Even if Bjork has reached a decision to the contrary, he must present a strong front to the public. It may turn off fans who have already tuned out, but it's the thing that's best for business. If fans and players know their coach is a lame duck, then things have already spiraled out of control.

And that *definitely* means something – a something that is not good.

## Renewed Energy

There are reasons to be excited about Ohio State's CFP showdown with Tennessee.

For one thing, it's a marquee matchup. Blue-blood conference against blue-blood conference. Blue-blood program against a program that isn't quite to that level but one that has been very good and that has been a contender on the national scene within the last decade. Tennessee fans have an inflated sense of just where their program is in the hierarchy of college football, but nonetheless the Vols are very good and are a relevant, dynamic program that has all of the resources to be a yearly contender in the national title chase.

Like Ohio State, the Vols have made their bones this season on defense. Tennessee ranks fourth nationally in yards allowed per play, just a couple of spots below the Buckeyes, and their 13.9 points per game allowed is tied for fourth best in college football.

While Tennessee is not as good defensively as the Buckeyes, they could be a nightmare matchup because the Vols are built from the inside out – a snarling front that gets after the quarterback and was rated 12th nationally in pressure rate by Pro Football Focus. That could be a real problem for an OSU offensive line that still has not found solid footing since injuries to Josh Simmons and Seth McLaughlin upended the unit.

Day knows that getting the offensive line right is the top mission for the Buckeye coaching staff. If that part does not work, the entire offense will bog down, and Ohio State will be looking at an early exit.

To his credit, he does not sound like a man who feels a ton of heat.

"I don't think right now that that's the case because coming off of that last game, is there pressure to win that game? Yes," Day said. "And I just think that we have moved on from that. It didn't go well. Did people press? You can say yes or no on that, but we don't want that anymore. We want to make sure that when we're playing

in this game, we're playing free, we're playing with our focus on winning the game and not worried about the consequences. And so that's what we're going to do. We're fired up to be at home, too. This is a historic event for everybody. This has never been done before, and I think our guys are going to have that approach."

Ohio State was in somewhat of a similar spot following the 2022 loss to Michigan. It got into the four-team CFP and had what looked to be an impossible semifinal game against No. 1 Georgia. There was fear the Buckeyes would get Dawg walked, but instead they came out loose, hit some big plays and had Georgia on its heels for most of the game before ultimately losing 42-41 on a missed field goal at the end of the game.

Day took shots downfield, schemed a great game, and never allowed Georgia to get comfortable until the clock read triple zeroes. With a one-and-done challenge looming, he and the coaches will need to adopt that mindset again.

"I think you have to be that way," he said. "I think it's how you coach, it's how you approach it. It's how the guys play, it's confidence. It's all those things. We've got to do that in all three phases. We have to be that way, and we will. Every year when you get into these games, you have to be aggressive. We have to game plan the right way. And a big part of that is the confidence going to the game, making sure that you know what you're doing, that you feel like the game plan is clean and that you can execute at a high level, and then you go to work."

"And when you look at the guys around you, you know you have good players next to you. We'll do everything we can to address the issues coming off the last game so that we can attack and we can be aggressive in the game."

There is some legitimate concern about just how into the game Ohio State fans will be. Many have already checked out of the season, and even the prospect of a rematch with Oregon and a run at the national title is not enough to get them back on board. While the Misery Bunch decides to sit this one out, Day hopes the majority of Buckeye Nation is dialed in and loud and raucous and makes Tennessee uncomfortable.

Because he is supremely confident that his charges will be ready.

"When you have a target and a mission, that's where your focus goes," Day said. "We kind of felt like this may shake out like this, and now we're in it. Now you know exactly what it is. Now you're really diving into it, and I'm telling you right now, our guys are excited about it. This is an opportunity that we have to jump on. And I just think back to what this game could be – a Saturday night game, 8 p.m., first playoff game ever in the Horseshoe. It's going to be electric. It's going to be where the fans feed off the players, the players feed off the fans – a historic game. So there is a lot to be excited about."



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