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OSU Fires Cooper

Geiger: 'Deteriorating Climate' Behind Move

By STEVE HELWAGEN
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Editor

Andy Geiger was hoping Ohio State's experience at the Outback Bowl would lead to a "renewal" for the school's embattled football program.

Instead, the weeks leading up to the game and the contest itself — a 24-7 loss to South Carolina — were examples of everything the OSU athletic director believed had gone wrong with the program.

In the hours after the Jan. 1 bowl game, Geiger decided it was time to make a change and buy out the remaining three years on head coach John Cooper's contract. OSU President William "Brit" Kirwan concurred, and early on the morning of Jan. 2 Geiger informed Cooper he was being relieved of his duties.

Geiger said at his press conference later in the day that the decision did not hinge on the Outback Bowl.

"I would say, though, that yesterday was a capstone of what we've seen of a deteriorating climate within the football program," he said. "There were concerns about discipline, competitiveness and academic pursuits — a whole series of things. I thought yesterday's performance was proportionally an exhibit of all those things."

The move ended Cooper's 13-year reign as OSU's coach and immediately touched off speculation on his successor. Names leading the hunt included Pittsburgh's Walt Harris, Minnesota's Glen Mason, Youngstown State's Jim Tressel and OSU assistant head coach Fred Pagac (see story, pages 16-17).

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MIKE WACHSMAN

SO LONG — With his wife, Helen, by his side, John Cooper addresses reporters just hours after he was relieved of his duties as Ohio State head coach Jan. 2. In 13 years at OSU, Cooper posted a 111-43-4 record.

Dismissal Stuns 13-Year Head Coach

By MIKE WACHSMAN
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

Loss of control of the Ohio State football team ultimately meant loss of a job for John Cooper.

The man who had guided the Buckeyes' gridiron fortunes for 13 seasons was sacked Jan. 2, less than 24 hours after his team's lackluster 24-7 loss to South Carolina in the Outback Bowl.

Athletic director Andy Geiger said it wasn't necessarily the loss to the Gamecocks but an overall "deteriorating climate" in the program that gave Cooper his walking papers.

Even with the loss, however, Cooper said he never saw the firing coming. He fully intended to captain the Buckeyes' ship, at least through the 2001 season.

"I was shocked," Cooper said at a press conference the evening of his termination. "It was unexpected. I thought I would coach one more year, at least I hoped that."

Now he won't have that opportunity. "I would have loved to coach here at least one more year," Cooper said. "At one time my goal was to win 200 football games, and certainly I'm not going to do that now. At least not here at Ohio State. I love Ohio State and I'll always be a Buckeye."

What precisely set the wheels in motion to ax Cooper isn't known, but numerous off-field incidents, two sub-par seasons coming on the heels of two runs at the national championship and repeated academic problems likely sped the machine.

Cooper finishes his Ohio State career with a record of 111-43-4, with three shared Big Ten titles and one Rose Bowl appearance.

The lack of trips to the left coast, three wins in 11 bowl appearances and a 2-10-1 mark against hated rival Michigan by themselves might not have done Cooper in. But they sure didn't help.

"What can I say that hasn't been said? I would have loved to beat Michigan every time we played them,"

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Program Under Construction

Related stories on the firing of head football coach John Cooper:

- OSU's verbal commitments react to the news (Page 13)
- Events of final six weeks troubling (Page 14)
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- OSU football historian Jack Park says that when head coaches leave it's usually on bad terms (Page 18)
- OSU players react to the firing, get involved in the search (Page 19)
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STEVE HELWAGEN

THE END — Ohio State athletic director Andy Geiger speaks during the Jan. 2 press conference that saw him announce the firing of head coach John Cooper.

OSU FIRES COOPER: FOOTBALL RECRUITING

Few Recruits Sound Like They'll Renege On OSU

By MIKE WACHSMAN
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

While the firing of John Cooper as Ohio State head coach impacted those close to the football program, there also were others who felt the ripple effects — the Buckeyes' verbal commitments.

OSU had 13 verbals prior to Cooper being let go Jan. 2, and while they all expressed regret about the coach's firing, very few sound as if they're ready to bolt for another school.

Cooper felt the timing of the firing more than the firing itself was bad, stating it might have a negative impact on this year's recruiting haul.

"I hope all of the recruits come here," he said. "The ones that we have committed, hopefully they didn't commit just because of John Cooper."

"All these local players, there's an opportunity for them to play and for their families to watch them and come to practice."

Athletic director Andy Geiger admitted that the timing may not have been the easiest to deal with, but there was definitely some thought behind the move.

"Decisions like this are not made with a short view," he said. "They are made with a long view. Timing is awkward but we'll have to move forward with the decision we made."

"Clearly, the timing is not perfect. We are recruiting and we will continue to recruit. The assistant coaches are still part of The Ohio State University football staff until any decision is made otherwise. We will continue to have recruiting weekends and work at it."

OSU recruiting coordinator Bill Conley admitted that it's not easy to host recruits and keep them sold on Ohio State when there's no head coach in place.

But all he can continue to do is his job, selling the school as best he can.

"Right now, as coaches, we're calling the guys we've recruited and have commitments from and trying to keep them, as you say in recruiting, 'in the boat,'" he said. "Hopefully they'll stay in the boat."

"You don't know who the head coach is going to be. Again, from the indication that we've got from our athletic director, those commitments will be honored. But he's really the person who makes that call right now."

In what could be a good sign, the Buckeyes welcomed a 14th verbal commitment over the weekend of Jan. 5 when Cincinnati's Moeller tight end Ryan Hamby visited and committed despite the lack of a head coach. (For more on Hamby, see Recruiting Outlook on pages 8-11.)

Buckeye Sports Bulletin contacted Ohio State's verbal commitments. Here is a look at how they feel about their decisions and about the firing of John Cooper.

• **Redgie Arden, linebacker, Ironton, Ohio** — Arden admitted that he was taken aback by the decision, but he sounded like he'll stand firm and sign with the Buckeyes on signing day.

"I'm just basically waiting to see who they'll bring in," he said. "I was pretty disappointed to see Coach Cooper fired. My parents talked to Coach Conley about it and they were a little upset. But

it shouldn't affect my decision much."

• **Rodney Carter, wide receiver, Columbus Brookhaven** — Assuming he makes grades, Carter plans to become a Buckeye. However, he's been unnerved by these recent events enough that he isn't ruling out other options.

"I was still planning on coming to Ohio State," he said. "But I'm real concerned about who the next coach is going to be. If it's Coach (Walt) Harris, Coach (Bob) Stoops or Coach (Glen) Mason, then I'm fine. If it's someone else I might open it back up. I want to see someone who really wants to spread the ball."



Rodney Carter

Carter said that Pittsburgh, Michigan State, Toledo and Akron have turned up the heat in recent days, and he's just biding his time before giving any sort of promise of a visit to those schools.

• **Angelo Chhattams, wide receiver, Dayton Chaminade-Julienne** — This standout receiver admitted that he is getting overtures from Michigan, Michigan State, Purdue, Northwestern and Alabama. He is scheduled to visit OSU over the weekend of Jan. 12, though.

"I don't want to go there without them having a coach," Chhattams said in published reports. "I might start looking at some other schools. When I committed to Ohio State, I committed to Coach Cooper and his staff."

Chhattams put a vote in for Pitt's offensive-minded Harris.

• **Ryan Cook, offensive lineman, Martinsville, Ind.** — Cook wasn't happy with the decision but understood that it's the climate in college football. He remains rock solid on his commitment.

"My commitment was to Ohio State, not to John Cooper," Cook said. "If you don't produce, something like this is going to happen. You've got to beat your rival."

• **Dustin Fox, defensive back, Canton (Ohio) GlenOak** — Fox was very happy to commit to Cooper, but now that Cooper's out, the race for his services may open up again. He intends to take an official visit to OSU Jan. 13-14 and may pay a visit to Penn State, where his brother Derek played in the defensive backfield.

"Coach Pug (Fred Pagac) called and said the visit is still on," Fox told BSB. "I'm totally up in the air. There's a lot of mixed emotions right now. I don't really feel like a Buckeye right now."

Fox would like to see Ohio State go after someone with experience and was excited by initial reports that OSU might chase Oklahoma coach Bob Stoops.

"I don't know what kind of shot they have, but I'd play for him in a second," he said.

• **Simon Fraser, defensive end, Upper Arlington, Ohio** — A vital part of the Golden Bears' state title team, Fraser is standing firm with his commitment. He, too, was stunned by Cooper's firing.

"I was completely taken by surprise," Fraser said. "When you think of Ohio State football, Woody Hayes comes up

right away and then, for me, probably John Cooper because he's been the coach there almost my whole life."

"Coach Conley called the night it happened and reassured me I still have a scholarship. I'm still very much committed to Ohio State."

"I don't see me changing my position at all. I'm sure they'll bring in a great coach who's high-profile."

Fraser recounted going through a similar situation at UA when coach Kerry Hodakievic left for Canton McKinley.

"It turned out we got an even better guy (Darrell Mayne) to prepare us for the states," said Fraser, who helped UA win its first Division I state title this past season. "So you never know what fate may bring you."

Fraser said if there's a coach in place by Jan. 12, he'll visit OSU at that time.

• **Brandon McKinney, defensive lineman, Dayton Chaminade-Julienne** — McKinney is still set on OSU but said several schools have contacted him.

"I'm still totally committed to Ohio State, but it's got me thinking about if it's the right choice," McKinney told The (Cleveland) Plain Dealer. "Cooper getting fired could cause a lot of commotion up there."

• **Adam Olds, offensive lineman, Dublin (Ohio) Coffman** — Olds wasn't completely caught off-guard by the firing and he has reaffirmed his pledge to become a Buckeye.

"Coach Conley called to say everything is fine and that I still have a scholarship," he said. "I told him I'm still committed. I'm real anxious to see who they bring in as the new coach, but that's not the only reason why I chose Ohio State. I like the school and the tradition and it's close to home."

Olds will try to make an official visit soon, but he has a wrestling tournament Jan. 13-14 that could preclude him from doing so.

• **JaJa Riley, running back, San Diego Mission Bay** — See story on page 12.

• **Brandon Schnittker, fullback, Sandusky (Ohio) Perkins** — Yet another player caught off-guard by the firing, Schnittker said he was choosing Ohio State for the school, not necessarily the coach.

"I was kind of surprised by the firing, I guess," Schnittker said. "I was not expecting it to happen, but I had been told by different people in the area (like the local media) that during the time I was down there that there would be a coaching change. I believe in the program. Good things will come out of it."

They'll get a good coach and only go up from here."

Schnittker said Toledo has reopened lines of communication, but he's sticking with Ohio State.

• **Jacob Stewart, defensive back, Ypsilanti, Mich.** — Stewart is one of the few who said he may indeed make himself available to other schools. He is watching the situation closely.

"I'm not totally ruling them out, but it depends on who they get in there," he said when contacted by BSB. "A big factor is if the person who recruited me (linebackers coach Brian Williams), if he's still there."

Stewart, who would like to see South Carolina coach Lou Holtz get the job, said he plans to visit Michigan, Michigan State and Iowa, though he doesn't have firm dates yet.

• **Andree Tyree, tight end/linebacker, London, Ohio** — The burly pass catcher said he may indeed choose to go elsewhere, but he's not jumping ship immediately. He wants to see whom Ohio State is going to hire.

He heard the news out of the blue while watching morning television the day after the Outback Bowl.

"I was very surprised," he said. "I just woke up and turned the TV on. I was watching 'The Price Is Right,' and it was breaking news. I was very, very surprised. There was no prior information that it was going to happen."

"I don't want to say I have doubts, but it kind of makes me want to have a backup plan, especially if the assistants leave. I wanted to play for Ohio State, but if the assistant coaches all leave, I don't know if I want to be there. If they stay I see no reason why I wouldn't want to be there."

Tyree said that Toledo has called but he hasn't spoken with them. He plans to take official visits to Northwestern and Michigan State and is trying to set up visits to Louisville and Miami (Fla.).

• **Chris Vance, wide receiver, Fort Scott (Kan.) Community College** — For an update on Vance, a JUCO transfer already enrolled at OSU, see Ohio State Insider.

BSB staff members Darrell Dawson, Steve Helwagen and Jeff Rapp contributed to this report.



Andree Tyree

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COVER STORY: FIRING STUNS COOPER

Cooper: 'Andy Had A Job To Do And He Did It'

Continued From Page 1

Cooper said. "It's tough. Michigan's got a great program. Same way with the bowl games. A lot of people in the Big Ten, including Bo (Schembechler, former Michigan coach), didn't have a great record in bowl games."

"We have not done as good a job against Michigan and in the bowl games as we would have liked to have done."

Understands The Reason

Cooper, himself an athletic director at Tulsa, knew that Geiger would have some hard questions staring him in the face when OSU returned from Tampa, Fla.

In fact, Cooper sounded ready to take some steps to remedy the problems. That's what he thought Geiger was getting ready to do when he showed up around 9 a.m. Tuesday morning.

Maybe a coaching staff shake-up, similar to the one that happened last off-season when Mike Jacobs and Shawn Simms were let go, was in the works.

There was a coaching shake-up all right — the ultimate one. In hindsight, Cooper understands why Geiger did the deed.

"It's not unusual for an athletic director to come in and make changes and get his people in position," Cooper said. "It happens. Andy and I have worked here for the last six years, but I'd be lying to you if I thought it wasn't a matter of time until he got his guy in here."

"I don't want it to sound like I'm shooting flames at Andy. Andy had a job to do and he did it. He's been good from that standpoint, allowing me to hire good football coaches and to keep them. For that I'm grateful."

Cooper was expected to collect a \$1.8 million buyout for the remaining three years on his contract.

Cooper said he could, with the right offer, stay in coaching. But it would have to be "an unusual situation." He said he wouldn't be an assistant, and he's not going to a poor program just to build it up.

Originally hired from Arizona State after, among other things, he defeated Michigan in the 1987 Rose Bowl, Cooper slowly rebuilt an Ohio State program that had seen its talent erode and big wins become fewer and fewer.

But it was soon evident that Cooper had a few strikes against him.

Cooper was rumored to be on the way out two other times — after a horrid 23-11 loss to Air Force in the 1990 Liberty Bowl and after falling to Penn State in Happy Valley 63-14 in 1994. In the latter instance, Cooper rallied the troops and OSU won its final three games, including a 22-6 stoning of the Wolverines.

Cooper also was from Tennessee, and many never let him forget that. He wasn't about "Buckeye tradition," though he said he learned to love Columbus and what Ohio State football stood for.

"I came here because of the great opportunities for a football coach," he said. "It's been a privilege and an honor for me to coach these great players and work with the assistants I've had at such a great institution."

Cooper took issue with the statements that his team didn't conduct itself well on the field.

"In my opinion there was not loss of control," he said. "I cannot think of an off-the-field problem we had on our football team this year. I've been here 13 years and I don't think we've had a lot of off-the-field problems. We've had some, and one is one too many as far as I'm concerned. I think we've got a bunch of good kids on this football team."

Cooper can be forgiven for not wanting to paint his team as ruffians, but not knowing there were problems, some believe, is tantamount to condoning what went on. He eventually admitted that discipline may have been a tad lax.

"I don't like penalties any more than anybody else does," he said, noting that Ohio State was second in the league in penalties to Northwestern. "Does there need to be more discipline on this football team? Absolutely."

Future Comes Quickly

Since Cooper thought he'd be around at least one more season — the language in his contract gave him the option of coaching through 2001, and then if he so desired taking a position with Ohio State that hadn't been determined — he didn't really know what to say when someone asked him what he'd do in the mornings now that he had all this free time.

"I'll find something," he smiled. "Maybe shovel the snow. I told (daughter) Cindy that she had a free baby-sitter now."

Cooper won't forget why he got into coaching in the first place.

"One of the great satisfactions you get out of being a college football coach is seeing these guys come from less privileged situations and have an opportunity to go to college," he said. "I got into coaching a long time ago with the idea of helping people. I think I did that."

He said the catcalls and vitriol he heard from the fans comes with the territory, and it won't be any different for his replacement.

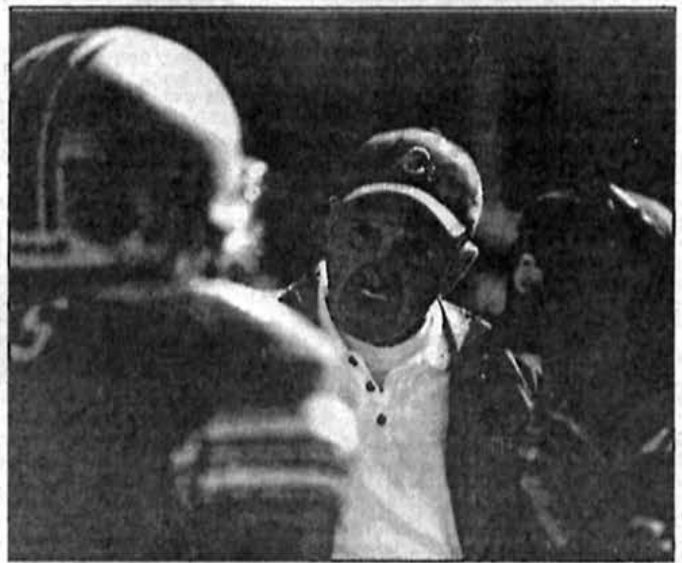
"I think 95 percent of the people here have been great to me," Cooper said. "There are some people in this town that nobody's going to please. Coach (Woody) Hayes didn't please them, Coach (Earle) Bruce didn't please them, Eldon Miller didn't please them, Fred Taylor didn't please them. And the next coach is not going to please them."

Upon reflection, Cooper said he'll do whatever is asked — if anything is — by the next coach.

He sounded like a man with few regrets.

"We've had 13 good years here, we won a lot of games," Cooper said. "We

Six Weeks Of Turmoil



SCOTT BROCKWAY

FINAL MONTH — OSU coach John Cooper, pictured during the New Year's Day Outback Bowl, found himself at the center of controversy throughout the month of December leading up to the bowl game.

Here is a look at the series of events from late November on that culminated in John Cooper's firing as OSU football coach on Jan. 2.

- **Nov. 18** — Three OSU interceptions pave the way for Michigan to take a 38-26 win in Columbus, dropping Cooper's record at OSU against the Maize and Blue to 2-10-1.
- **Nov. 20** — OSU accepts a bid to play in the Outback Bowl. Later that day, OSU President William "Brit" Kirwan and athletic director Andy Geiger take turns praising Cooper and the Buckeyes during the team's awards banquet.
- **Dec. 11** — The NCAA reveals its latest graduation rate data, placing the OSU football program at 28 percent for the four-year entry period of 1990-93. That figure is last in the Big Ten by 13 percent.
- **Dec. 19** — Cooper suspends senior receiver Reggie Germany for the Outback Bowl after he fails to pass any fall quarter classes. At the same time, word leaks that as many as 23 players were in danger of losing their eligibility with their fall showing.
- **Dec. 20** — Senior receiver Ken-Yon Rambo appears at the last practice in Columbus with a cast on his left hand. Rambo initially told reporters he fell on the hand in practice, but word later leaks out that he injured it in a playful locker room exchange with freshman running back Sam Maldonado.
- **Dec. 26** — Senior running back Derek Combs arrives in Tampa, Fla., at 10 p.m. — eight hours after the reporting time. His arrival was not a result of travel delays. Rather, he set his itinerary to arrive late and failed to change it. Cooper replaces Combs in the starting lineup with Jonathan Wells.
- **Dec. 27** — Sophomore linebacker Matt Wilhelm publicly blasts Rambo for his conduct as a team captain.
- **Dec. 30** — Published reports claim that senior lineman Tyson Walter was suing teammate LeCharles Bentley for damages in connection with an alleged assault during conditioning the previous February. Later that day, Geiger again stands behind Cooper, saying "there is no connection" between these incidents and Cooper's control of the program.
- **Jan. 1** — The Buckeyes are embarrassed by unranked South Carolina 24-7. Former Ohio Mr. Football award winner Ryan Brewer, spurned by Cooper and OSU, scores three TDs in a game marred by several OSU personal foul penalties and overall lackluster play.
- **Jan. 2** — Geiger informs Cooper that the university intends to buy out the final three years of his contract for the prescribed \$1.8 million.

— Compiled by Steve Helwagen

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love Columbus, and we'll continue to make this our home. I will fully support the next coaching staff here at Ohio State and do anything I can to help.

"I will hopefully be at all the games, and they will have no better fan than John Cooper. I can tell you that right now."

COVER STORY: OSU FIRES COOPER

Geiger Took Many Factors Into Consideration

Continued From Page 1

"I would like to have an outstanding new coach as quickly as we can have an outstanding new coach," Geiger said.

Cooper had just signed a new five-year deal worth at least \$1.1 million per year in September 1999. As part of the terms of that deal, Cooper was owed a \$1.8 million buyout — three times his base salary of \$200,000 for each of the three years he had remaining.

It had been a turbulent six weeks for the program leading up to the Outback Bowl (see graphic, opposite page). News was revealed that OSU's most recent measured graduation rate, for players entering school in 1990-93, was a dismal 28 percent.

In addition to that news, the program also had senior wide receiver Reggie Germany suspended for the bowl game due to academics, senior tailback Derek Combs report late to Tampa, Fla., for the bowl game and linebacker Matt Wilhelm publicly blast senior receiver Ken-Yon Rambo for his selection as a team captain.

Then two days before the game, news surfaced that offensive lineman Tyson Walter was suing teammate LeCharles Bentley in connection with an alleged assault that had occurred during a conditioning session last February.

OSU's lackluster play in the bowl game — leaving the Buckeyes at 8-4 on the year — was, perhaps, the topper.

"I'm not sure that I would say that loss of control is the way I summarize it, but I think a change in climate and leadership is indicated at this point," Geiger said.

Geiger was asked if the comportment of the players factored as much or more than the team's 3-4 finish.

"You have to combine outcomes with how outcomes happen," he said. "We did not have a very good fall academic quarter. To say there was manifest concern would understate it."

"I had looked forward to the bowl season as a period of renewal and recovery and a chance to show we earned the opportunity to play in that showcase, and I was disappointed."

Geiger was then asked if Cooper, his staff and players had ignored departmental directives to improve academically.

"I wouldn't say he wasn't getting the message," Geiger said. "The climate just didn't seem to change."

Added Kirwan, "For me, I can say it was not the won-lost record. My concern was the graduation rate numbers."

For his part, Cooper was stunned to see his tenure come to an unceremonious end. However, his comments showed that even he would have approached 2001 as a "lame-duck" year, of sorts.

"I was shocked," Cooper said. "It was unexpected. I thought I would coach one more year, at least I hoped that. My contract was written where I could coach one more year and then help the university in other ways. Andy's got a job to do and I respect his position."

"We took a football team that was picked to finish eighth in the league to third (actually fourth) in the conference. But we made progress and there's still some talent left on this football team."

It Was (Mostly) Academic

Each December, the NCAA releases updated graduation rate information for its member schools.

OSU's latest football ranking of 28 percent was down from 36 percent for the years (1989-92) measured in last year's



STEVE HELWAGEN

EXPLANATION — Ohio State athletic director Andy Geiger is the center of attention Jan. 2 as reporters ask him about the dismissal of football coach John Cooper. Everything from academics to discipline to performance were considered factors in buying out Cooper's contract.

book. It was also roughly half of the national average of 56 percent and ranked dead last in the Big Ten.

"We certainly don't like to be toward the bottom of the Big Ten," Geiger said. "We aspire to be not only a Big Ten leader but a national leader."

When asked what percentage would be acceptable, Geiger replied, "Better than we're doing."

Just as bad or worse, reports leaked out that no fewer than 23 members of the football team lost their eligibility following the fall quarter due to poor showings. Those players — other than Germany, who reportedly had a 0.0 GPA for the quarter — were still eligible for the Outback Bowl on Jan. 1.

But, had the Buckeyes qualified for the Orange Bowl, played on the first day of winter quarter classes Jan. 3, none of those unidentified players would have been eligible to play.

Clearly, it was time for a change, Geiger said.

"Make no mistake, these high expectations are not represented only by wins and losses, but perhaps most important, by success in the classroom and in building the character of student-athletes," Geiger said.

"I am confident we will find just the right person to carry on this tradition."

The Decision Process

In the days leading up to the Outback Bowl, Geiger publicly maintained firm support behind Cooper. But, according to Kirwan, there were growing concerns behind the scenes.

"The decision had been building, and the concerns had been there for some time," Kirwan said. "I think Andy and I were looking to see what direction things would begin to move."

"I think Andy's assessment after the (Outback Bowl) was that the events of the last three or four weeks had convinced him that the situation was getting worse."

Just two days before the game, Geiger had knowledge of the Walter-Bentley lawsuit but still stood behind his coach.

"He is our coach," Geiger told reporters Dec. 30. "He has a contract for three more years."

But the winds shifted drastically two days later as an unmotivated, undisciplined OSU team was whacked by an unranked South Carolina squad.

"At the time I talked to you (Dec. 30), it was my fervent hope that we would not make a change," Geiger said. "I have said many times I believe in stability. I don't like doing what we're doing. I really am very fond of John Cooper. I feel very, very badly today because of that fellowship I've felt with him. I have enjoyed working

with him a great deal. This is not the most fun thing."

"But I was dismayed by things that happened in and around the Outback Bowl, the game itself and some of the incidents or non-incidents that happened during the week."

"If you look at the fact there were six weeks to prepare for that game and there were six weeks to work on all kinds of issues that you and others have raised and have a competitive performance and an enthusiastic performance, which we all hoped for, it certainly did not materialize."

Geiger typically joins Cooper for the postgame press conference. But he was nowhere to be found as the coach fended off questions surrounding his team's performance and his future. In fact, Geiger left Tampa's Raymond James Stadium to get some fresh air.

"I went for a long walk," Geiger said. "I caught the charter flight at 8 p.m. At that time, I was certainly pretty close to deciding, but I wanted to sleep on it."

"I talked to (Kirwan) that night. We both agreed we should sleep on it and talk again this morning. We wanted to check again in the morning and see if we had the same mind-set and we did."

When asked if he had to sell Kirwan on the buyout deal, Geiger replied, "I would say the conversations were mutual. The relationships here are very close and collegial. I report directly to the president and we talk often. We're familiar with each other from a previous relationship."

"He was encouraging and supported the decision I made."

As Geiger met with Cooper at his office at the Woody Hayes Athletic Center shortly after 9 a.m. Jan. 2, Kirwan and his aides were informing OSU's Board of Trustees of the decision.

"The trustees like to be informed, but they do not generally try to manage programs within the university," Geiger said. "The president and/or members of his staff consulted with them this morning."

The Career Of John Cooper

Here is a look at the 24-year career of former Ohio State head football coach John Cooper. Included for each year are overall and conference records and bowl appearance.

Year	School	Overall	Conference	Place	Bowl
1977	Tulsa	3-8	2-3	4th	None
1978	Tulsa	9-2	4-1	2nd	None
1979	Tulsa	6-5	2-0	N/A	None
1980	Tulsa	8-3	4-1	1st	None
1981	Tulsa	6-5	5-1	1st	None
1982	Tulsa	10-1	6-0	1st	None
1983	Tulsa	8-3	5-0	1st	None
1984	Tulsa	6-5	5-0	1st	None
1985	Arizona State	8-4	5-2	2nd	Holiday (L)
1986	Arizona State	10-1-1	5-1-1	1st	Rose (W)
1987	Arizona State	7-4-1	3-3-1	4th	Freedom (W)
1988	Ohio State	4-6-1	2-5-1	7th	None
1989	Ohio State	8-4	6-2	3rd (T)	Hall of Fame (L)
1990	Ohio State	7-4-1	5-2-1	5th	Liberty (L)
1991	Ohio State	8-4	5-3	3rd (T)	Hall of Fame (L)
1992	Ohio State	8-3-1	5-2-1	2nd	Citrus (L)
1993	Ohio State	10-1-1	6-1-1	1st (T)	Holiday (W)
1994	Ohio State	9-4	6-2	2nd	Citrus (L)
1995	Ohio State	11-2	7-1	2nd	Citrus (L)
1996	Ohio State	11-1	7-1	1st (T)	Rose (W)
1997	Ohio State	10-3	6-2	2nd	Sugar (L)
1998	Ohio State	11-1	7-1	1st (T)	Sugar (W)
1999	Ohio State	6-6	3-5	8th	None
2000	Ohio State	8-4	5-3	4th	Outback (L)

Cooper At OSU Overall: 111-43-4 (.715)

Cooper At OSU Big Ten Games: 70-30-4 (.692)

Cooper 24-Year Career Total: 193-83-6 (.695)

OSU FIRES COOPER: WHO'S NEXT

Large Cast Of Candidates Mentioned For Job

By STEVE HELWAGEN
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Editor

What happens in Atlanta Jan. 8-10 could go a long way toward determining what will happen in Columbus for the next several years.

OSU athletic director Andy Geiger was in Atlanta at the American Football Coaches Association convention to interview one or more candidates for the Ohio State head coaching vacancy.

According to reports, Geiger or other OSU officials had received permission to interview two outside coaches — Minnesota's Glen Mason and Youngstown State's Jim Tressel. Also, Fred Pagac, a longtime OSU assistant and the assistant head coach under John Cooper this past season, figured to be interviewed.

Two other candidates — Ohio native Bob Stoops of newly crowned national champion Oklahoma and former OSU assistant Walt Harris of Pittsburgh — were getting considerable run for the OSU job, although neither seemed to be in a position to formally interview for the job.

As of press time, it was unclear how quickly Geiger and OSU would settle on a new coach. The athletic director had not granted interviews since announcing Cooper's firing on Jan. 2.

"We will find somebody that we think is outstanding to come and lead the football program," Geiger said at that time. "The search is absolutely and completely wide open. Let me emphasize we will try to do this well. If we do it rapidly, that's fine. But that's not as important as doing it well."

"I prefer to be open-minded on this thing. There is no inside track. I want to get the lay of the land and learn about what's possible. It is an awkward situation in terms of timing. That may dictate the pool a little bit. We'll have to see."

Archie Griffin, an OSU associate athletic director, was assisting Geiger in the search and interview process. They co-chaired an initial search committee that also included Buckeye players Steve Bellisari and Joe Cooper, Board of Trustees chairman George Skestos, Varsity "O" Association president Jeff Logan and faculty members David Frantz, Susan Hartmann and Jack Rall.

"Archie and I will essentially do the searching," Geiger said of the committee, which met Jan. 4. "We will work with the committee in terms of deciding where to go with the list."

Given the parameters of the search, Geiger spoke in generalities about finding Cooper's successor. He was asked whether he would put a premium on a candidate with Ohio ties.

"I think that is a piece of it, but I think you can assimilate that, too," Geiger said. "An Ohio State connection would be a positive but not a necessity."

He also was asked whether he would

consider hiring from within, namely Pagac, given the fact that he cited a "deteriorating climate" within the program as the prevailing reason for firing Cooper.

"I don't have any objection or bias about promoting from within, but I don't want to speculate about any individual," he said.

Mason, if hired, would be the first head coach to move from one Big Ten school directly to another since Wes Fesler resigned from OSU after the 1950 season and, weeks later, became the head coach at Minnesota.

Geiger was asked how he would approach dealing with a Big Ten member school.

"We're going to try to do the very best job we can for The Ohio State University," he said. "If that means we have to negotiate with somebody else in our (Big Ten) family, we will not be shy about doing that."

"We will do it in a gentlemanly, straightforward and aboveboard manner — if that's the direction we decide to go. I'm not signalling anything by saying that."

Not in The Running?

The initial front-runner in the OSU coaching derby was Oklahoma's red-hot Stoops, who, in just his second year with the Sooners, led them to the national championship game in the Orange Bowl.

As news of Cooper's firing broke on Jan. 2, Stoops was asked about the OSU job. He denied interest, saying he was trying to concentrate on his team's Jan. 3 game with Florida State, which the Sooners won 13-2 to clinch their first national title since 1956.

The 40-year-old Stoops, a native of Youngstown, would be a dream candidate for Ohio State. He played at Iowa under Hayden Fry and served on the staffs at Kent State, Kansas State and Florida — where he was the defensive coordinator and assistant head coach under Steve Spurrier — before moving to Norman.

But it would be extremely hard to leave the Sooners after winning a championship, and OU athletic director Joe Castiglione, angered by reports that cast a pall over his school's bowl preparation and victory celebration, has said he would deny OSU permission to talk with Stoops.

"We're playing in a national championship game," Castiglione said. "What the hell are they thinking? Do they think he's going to go somewhere else? He just won the national championship."

"Ohio State's a great program, but it's not any better than Oklahoma. I almost get insulted when people think we're a steppingstone to another job."

Stoops is believed to be the fourth-highest paid coach in the country with a total package of \$1.45 million. He received a raise from \$675,000 a year in October on a new deal that runs through 2005.

A day after the title win, when asked whether he would listen to OSU if the school called and if he was interested, Stoops replied, "No and no."

According to published reports, though, a buyout of Stoops' contract would not be especially taxing. It would only take roughly \$400,000, one report said. He has a two-year record of 20-5 at OU.



SONNY BROCKWAY

PAST AND FUTURE? — Minnesota coach Glen Mason (right) speaks with OSU coach John Cooper before kickoff of their 1999 game in the Metrodome. Mason, an OSU alum and assistant under Woody Hayes and Earle Bruce, was a name often linked to the OSU coaching vacancy.

Likewise, Harris, 54, had thrown up the roadblocks to entering any type of formal interview process for the Ohio State job.

However, he remains fondly remembered in the hearts of OSU fans for his work with Buckeye quarterbacks Bobby Hoying, Joe Germaine and Stanley Jackson over the 1995-96 seasons, where OSU won a combined 22 games, including the 1997 Rose Bowl.

"I think there is nobody better than Walt Harris for the job," Germaine told The (Cleveland) Plain Dealer Jan. 2. "To me, in my career, Coach Harris is one of the most influential coaches I've had. He would bring a lot of good things to the table. They definitely would not go wrong by hiring him."

In 1996, Geiger and Cooper offered Harris the offensive coordinator's job and, many believe, also the title of assistant head coach to try to entice him to stay. But the lure of a head coaching job was too much to resist.

In four seasons at Pitt, Harris is 20-26. His first team was 6-6 and reached the Liberty Bowl. Then, after 2-9 and 5-6 campaigns the next two years, Pitt was 7-5 this year and reached the Insight.com Bowl. His career record is 31-50, including a three-year stint (11-24 from 1989-91) at his alma mater, the University of the Pacific.

According to reports, Harris signed a

deal last March that pays him \$600,000 a year through 2006. Pitt just moved into a new practice facility and will share that facility — as well as the new downtown football stadium — with the NFL's Pittsburgh Steelers.

Pitt athletic director Steve Pederson, a former OSU recruiting coordinator, released a statement Jan. 5 saying he denied Geiger permission to speak with Harris.

"I was contacted by Ohio State, which requested permission to talk to Walt Harris," Pederson said. "Consequently, Coach Harris has said he's happy and excited to be at Pitt, and he is not looking to leave."

"In that vein, I have denied Ohio State permission to talk with him. Coach Harris is comfortable with the position we have taken."

Harris also issued a statement.

"There has been a lot of discussion in the past week about myself and the Ohio State head coaching vacancy," Harris said. "Ohio State is a great school and I enjoyed my time there, but Pitt is the right place for me. We are building something special here and I want to continue the progress we have made over the last four years."

But broadcast reports on Jan. 8 had Harris canceling a meeting with Geiger in Atlanta after his name surfaced as one of the key candidates for the newly vacant job with the NFL's Buffalo Bills.

The Primary Candidates

Those developments left Mason, Pagac and Tressel as the known front-runners for the job as BSB went to press. Here is a look at each of them.

• **Mason** — The 50-year-old Mason is a former OSU player and assistant coach under Woody Hayes and Earle Bruce. He served as the offensive coordinator and line coach under Bruce before leaving for the head coaching job at Kent State in 1986.

Between stops at Kent, Kansas and Minnesota, Mason has compiled a 15-year record of 81-89-1.

Minnesota athletic director Tom Moe granted OSU permission to speak with Mason.

"If they want to talk to him, they'll talk to him," Moe said. "We're not going to stand in the way."

Mason made his best case for the job on Oct. 14, when his Golden Gophers came into Ohio Stadium and won for the first time since 1949. The 29-17 decision dealt sixth-ranked OSU its first defeat of the season after a 5-0 start.

Afterward, Mason all but campaigned to be Cooper's successor, saying, "I've got great feelings about this great university. I don't know if I could put it into words."

"When we were riding in on the bus down High Street, I had tears in my eyes. I have great feeling for this place. I make no bones about that."

Mason, a native of Colonia, N.J., earned his bachelor's degree at OSU in



Walt Harris

OSU FIRES COOPER: WHO'S NEXT

1972 before embarking on his coaching career as a graduate assistant at Ball State that fall.

After assistant coaching stops at Allegheny College, back at Ball State, Iowa State and Illinois, Hayes hired Mason as an assistant in 1978. Since he had already worked for Bruce at ISU, the new OSU coach retained him when he replaced Hayes in 1979.

Mason spent two seasons at Kent before moving to Kansas in 1988. He stayed there nine years before moving on to Minnesota in 1997. Family concerns actually prevented him from becoming the head coach at Georgia in 1996.

Mason has declined to discuss the OSU job publicly, telling reporters in Atlanta Jan. 7 he was "in a delicate position" as the head coach at Minnesota.

• Pagac — As a current Ohio State employee — at least for the next 60 days — the 48-year-old Pagac has not been hamstrung by not being able to discuss the OSU job.

"I have a very strong interest in the job," Pagac said. "I want it badly. I have told both Mr. Geiger and Archie that I want the job. I intend to come after it hard."

Pagac, who played tight end for the Buckeyes in the early '70s, has spent 19 seasons as a full-time assistant at OSU. After a brief NFL career, he returned to OSU and served as a graduate assistant under Hayes. He became a full-time assistant under Bruce in 1982, was retained by Cooper in 1988 and became the defensive coordinator in 1996.

Not coincidentally, OSU — behind Pagac's "eleven Silver Bullets flying to the ball" motto — developed into one of the country's top defensive units over much of the last five years.

He has had opportunities to take other jobs, but he said he remained loyal to OSU in hopes of one day becoming the head coach.

"I was going to wait on this job as long as it took," he said. "As far as being ready, I know what I can do. A man's got to know his limitations. I feel very confident about the job I could do."

"As far as not having any head coaching experience, I think you go to Bobby Stoops, Lloyd Carr, Phil Fulmer, Butch Davis, you name them. You've got to start somewhere."

Pagac has the overwhelming support of the players, who told Geiger during a Jan. 3 meeting that they would like to see his promotion and the rest of the staff's retention. But that could also work against Pagac since Geiger seems bent on "changing the climate" of the program.

Pagac was asked about OSU's supposed lack of discipline.

"It starts at the top and goes down from there," Pagac said. "I think there needs to be an adjustment as far as attitudes on this team. I don't think it's a job that can't be done. I think it's probably a small percentage, not as large as some people think. But perception is a reality and I understand that."

"I know that if I get the job I can handle that type of thing. I know I have a little different philosophy about some things and there would be some changes. There needs to be some discipline enforced."

Pagac also indicated that he would retain a good portion of the staff.

"I would probably keep a high percentage of the current staff," he said. "I think it's a great staff."



SONNY BROCKWAY

SCARLET-BLOODED — Ohio State assistant head coach Fred Pagac (wearing headset) has made no bones about his desire to one day become the head man at his alma mater. With the firing of John Cooper, Pagac is hoping that day is finally near.

Although he is known as a defensive guru, Pagac said he would also be involved on the offensive side as well.

"I would be hands-on on both sides of the ball. I have some definite ideas offensively."

• Tressel — The 46-year-old Tressel is somewhat of a wild card in this process. He served as an OSU assistant under Bruce for three seasons (1983-85), coaching quarterbacks and receivers.

He left in 1986 to become head coach at Division I-AA Youngstown State, where he has built a dynasty. In 15 years there, Tressel has posted a record of 135-57-2. He has guided the Penguins to four national championships (1991, '93, '94 and '97) and two other appearances in the title game (1992 and '99).

Tressel is a native of Beres, Ohio, where he played for his father, Lee, the longtime coach at Baldwin-Wallace College. After graduating from B-W in 1975, the younger Tressel spent time as an assistant at Akron, Miami (Ohio) and Syracuse before landing at OSU.

His name has surfaced for major college jobs at Marshall and Miami (Fla.), when Butch Davis got the job instead. But Tressel has never felt the time was right to leave YSU — until now, perhaps.

"Anyone from Ohio would be lying if they said they weren't interested in OSU," said Tressel, who also serves as YSU's executive director of athletics.

"The timing is certainly better the older (your kids) get. Some of the other opportunities that came up were also further away, and that's never fit well with our feelings."

Tressel told the Warren (Ohio) Tribune Chronicle that Cooper's firing was not a major surprise.

"Not really, because it's such a tough business," he said. "John's been there 13 years and he's been through some highs and some lows. The expectations at a place like Ohio State or Youngstown State are so high."

What About Spielman?

No one — other than Pagac, perhaps — has campaigned to one day be the Ohio State head football coach harder than former Buckeye linebacker Chris Spielman.

The 35-year-old Spielman wrapped up his playing career with the NFL's Cleveland Browns prematurely due to injury in 1999. Cooper then offered him a position on the staff to get his foot in the door. But Spielman, citing family concerns, turned the job down and the position went to current assistant Brian Williams.

All through his playing days, Spielman told reporters his dream job was to one day be the OSU coach. But many feel his lack of coaching experience will work against him in that pursuit.

"I'm interested in the position," said Spielman, who currently serves as a college analyst for Fox Sports Net. "I think it's well-known I'm interested in it. If they're interested in me, I certainly would not say no."

"I've made my intentions clear for a long time. Would I like to be the head coach at Ohio State? Yeah. I don't say that with any arrogance or cockiness, but with confidence and belief in the tradition for and love for the university."

"That's not only for the football team but for the main library, the Longaberger Alumni House, the Max Fisher College of Business, for Park Hall, where I lived, for the towers, for the James Cancer Hospital. It's something that lives inside of me. It's something I would be willing to give other players if they come here."

Spielman, a former All-American and the 1987 Lombardi Award winner, remains as beloved an OSU figure as there is. He doesn't feel his lack of coaching experience should hinder him.

"I've been around football my whole life," he said. "My father was a high school coach from the time I was born. I know how staffs are put together. I played for Ohio State. I played under a

good man named Earle Bruce. I observed things while I was playing."

"I played under Darrell Rogers, Wayne Fontes, Marv Levy and Chris Palmer. I watched how these coaches organized. I sat there and knew one day I would coach. I took notes."

Family concerns have been a big part of Spielman's life. He took the 1998 season off to assist his wife, Stefanie, in her recovery from breast cancer. Fully recovered, Stefanie is now close to delivering the couple's third child.

But Spielman argues he would bring everything he has to the position.

"I can bring youth and enthusiasm and I know one thing for sure — that team would play hard," he said. "I'll put my reputation, job and everything on the line when I make that statement."

On The Periphery

As is always the case, a number of other names (see below) have been tossed out concerning the OSU opening.

They should merit some consideration if for no other reason than the fact that Geiger, when faced with a men's basketball opening in the spring of 1997, courted a number of high-profile coaches — and even offered the job to the likes of Rick Barnes and Tubby Smith — before settling on not-so-well-known Jim O'Brien.

Here are other names that have been making the rounds.

• Randy Walker — Walker, 46, has spent the last two years at Northwestern, leading the Wildcats to an improbable Big Ten co-championship this past season.

He built a strong resume as the coach at Miami (Ohio) prior to that and is a native of Troy, Ohio. His deal at NU runs through 2007, however.

• Mike Stoops — If the Buckeyes can't get Bob Stoops, they could still go after his brother Mike, 39, who serves as OU's defensive coordinator.

He, too, is a Youngstown native.

• Tyrone Willingham — Willingham, one of the country's prominent black head coaches, guided Stanford to a Pac-10 title and Rose Bowl berth in 1999.

His name has been mentioned with many jobs and Geiger, a former Stanford athletic director, would certainly look upon him favorably.

• Dom Capers — The former Carolina Panthers head coach served as an OSU assistant under Bruce in 1982-83.

He is said to have close ties to Geiger, although he recently interviewed for the job with the NFL's expansion Houston Texans.

Off The List

Those who definitely won't be coming include:

• Butch Davis — The Miami (Fla.) coach fell out of the running when talks became serious on a long-term extension that would raise his salary from \$900,000 to the \$1.5 million level.

• Lou Holtz — The 63-year-old South Carolina coach put the final nail in Cooper's coffin by directing the Gamecocks to an Outback Bowl win over the Buckeyes.

He has always expressed an affinity to return to OSU, where he helped Hayes win the 1968 national championship as the secondary coach.

But Holtz has released statements saying he is content to finish out his career in Columbia.

OSU FIRES COOPER: PLAYER REACTION

Bellisari, Cooper Among Players Shocked By Firing

By JEFF RAPP

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

With the Ohio State football team in a rush to catch its flight out of Tampa, Fla., and not much to say following a dismal 24-7 loss to South Carolina in the Outback Bowl, only a handful of Buckeye players were made available to the media Jan. 1.

Player reaction was even more scarce the following day, as the few Buckeyes who already had made it back to Columbus found out head coach John Cooper had been fired.

The Akron (Ohio) Beacon Journal did catch up with Canton, Ohio, native Kenny Peterson Jan. 2 and printed his reaction to the Cooper firing.

"Toward the end of the season, I had a feeling his time was short," admitted Peterson, a sophomore defensive end. "He's a good coach and he had some great years at Ohio State, but it might have been time for him to move on and for us to get back to square one."

Peterson didn't say if he was happy to hear the news, but he said some players probably were.

"A lot of the players weren't fond of Coach Cooper because of some of the decisions that he made both on and off the field," Peterson said.

As for what led to Cooper's poor record against Michigan and in bowl games, Peterson had no explanation.

"I'll be honest," he told the ABJ. "I have no idea."

Having A Voice

On the afternoon of Jan. 3, Ohio State co-captains Steve Bellisari and Joe Cooper addressed the media after being appointed to a special advisory committee that would become part of the process to begin looking at potential new head coaching candidates. The players who were in town met with athletic director Andy Geiger early in the day and reportedly were adamant in telling him they'd like assistant head coach Fred Pagac to be hired to the post.

According to Bellisari and Cooper, several players would like to see as little changeover as possible in the coaching staff. However, as members of the advisory committee, which met for the first time Jan. 4, the two players said they would try to have an open mind.

"I think Joe and I are going to be the voice of the team as far as taking their concerns and seeing what they want, and since we've been playing we can try to make a list of what we're looking for in a head coach as far as his involvement and what he's going to do with the team," said Bellisari, the team's junior starting quarterback.

"Going into this we don't want to be close-minded. We want to find the best guy for the job, and if it's one of the guys on staff, so be it."

Added Cooper, a senior linebacker who could petition for another season of eligibility, "I'm trying to do my best

and make sure I can please our team in the best way possible. We'll look for the best talent out there as far as coaching-wise and do what's best for these players. Players have power. The media and everybody outside this building say you have to go out and get a guy with a great record. Well, everyone said that when Coach Cooper came here, too. Remember that? You have to be careful what you say."

"But I'm worried about these players that are returning. They play an important part. And they're emotional right now."

Cooper was so eager to participate in the search, he sounded like someone who intended to dial up coaches himself. When a reporter asked him who outside the program was an intriguing name to him, he searched for the political answer.

"That's an easy question but at the same time a hard question," said Cooper, who finished second on the team in tackles with 80. "There's a lot of teams that are winning, but you can't just throw names out. To everyone here Ohio State is the world, but to everyone at those other places those places are the world. You have to look at what situation is best for that man and his family."

Sorting It Out

Bellisari and Cooper were doing their best to roll with the situation but admitted they, too, were still a bit woozy from the experience.

"I was shocked," Cooper said of his initial reaction. "Everyone was like, 'Well, next year Coach Cooper won't be back,' and I was like 'OK, yeah, whatever.' When I found out on ESPN it was true, I was in Chicago at the time and talked to my brother on the phone. I was in shock. To this day I'm still shocked."

Bellisari didn't know what to think.

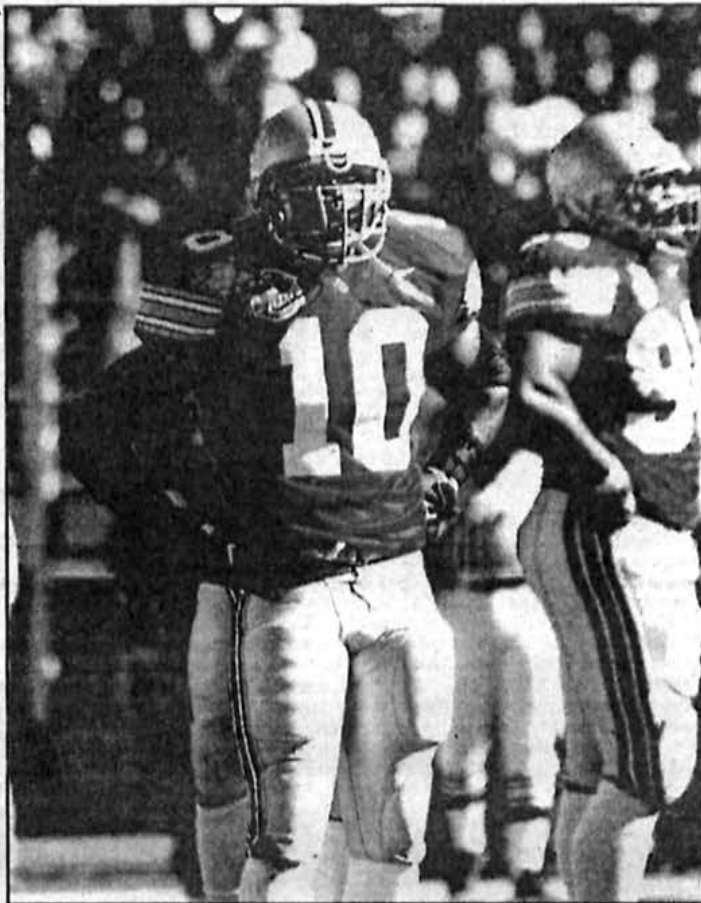
"I think you have to go with what Mr. Geiger says," he said. "At times I've felt yes and at times I've felt no. I'm still not even sure how I want to react yet. I haven't let it all sink in yet."

Later he added, "It's weird. It's hard to take. I don't know how to react to it yet. It's almost a shock and it's hard to explain. My whole time growing up I thought of Ohio State as Coach Cooper."

"There's a lot of things that go into this. I really like Coach Cooper and it's sad for me to see him go. I think he's a great guy and a great coach. I think I'll remember him as a person who always looked out for us."

"There's a lot about Coach Cooper that is really good. I mean, he's been here for 13 years and he was here for a reason. He's done a good job. He's always been a good coach and a good guy."

Bellisari opted not to criticize the OSU administration, but he admitted to feeling bad for the assistant coaches. His older brother, Greg, also was an OSU captain under Cooper and served as a graduate assistant on the



SCOTT BROCKWAY

SPEAKING FOR THE PLAYERS — Linebacker Joe Cooper (above) and quarterback Steve Bellisari were chosen to sit on athletic director Andy Geiger's advisory committee as the athletic department embarks on finding a replacement for former head coach John Cooper.

2000 staff.

"I think the timing of it was kind of bad," Steve said. "When you look at all the other coaches involved with it, it was kind of bad for them. But Mr. Geiger is going to do what he has to do. That's his job, and that's probably the toughest job in America right now."

Bellisari was rankled at the notion that his coach was offed because of a supposed lack of player control.

"There's only so much Coach

Cooper can do about that," said Bellisari, who was the first junior in 16 years to serve as a team captain. "He can't take us by the hand and walk us to class. Some guys should feel responsible."

"As far as the graduation rate, I think that was kind of biased because we've had a lot of guys leave early. There's not much you can do about that. He can encourage as much as he wants about that but if they're talented enough, they'll leave."

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OSU FIRES COOPER: VARIED OPINIONS

Miller Had Scoop On His Coach's Dismissal

By STEVE HELWAGEN
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Editor

The abrupt firing of OSU head football coach John Cooper sent shock waves across central Ohio and the college football community.

Ironically, it was a former Cooper player, Ryan Miller, who broke the story for WBNS-TV. Miller went on the air during the 11 a.m. hour on Jan. 2 with the initial report that Cooper's contract would be bought out.

"I was just lucky, I guess, that people I was acquainted with were connected to what was happening," Miller told BSB. "They let me know about it. It was all going to come out at 4 o'clock when (athletic director Andy Geiger) spoke, but we had it on good authority that it was over so we went with it."

Miller, who played linebacker for the Buckeyes from 1993-96, said poor behavior by the players on and off the field led to Cooper's demise.

"Perception is reality in this business and the perception right now, unfortunately, is that Ohio State has a bunch of thugs running around playing for a coach who can't control them," Miller said.

"I kind of have mixed emotions because I know Coach is such a good person. I hate to see bad things happen to good people."

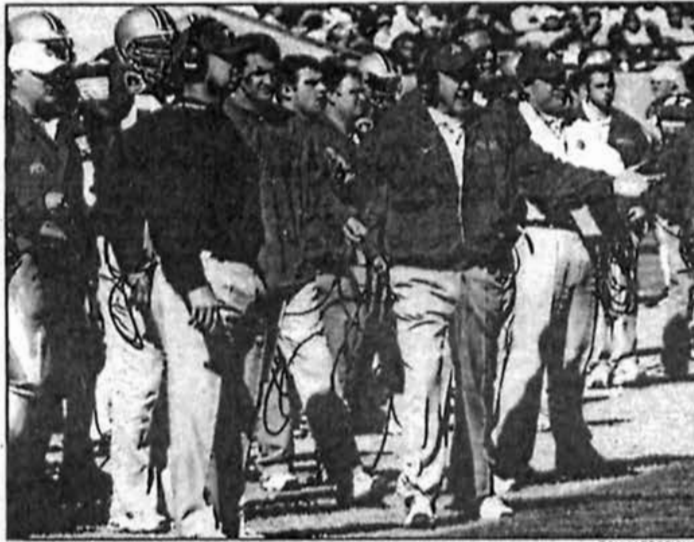
"It just kills me to see all the things people pile up on him at the end. When it's all said and done, I hope people remember the good things like the wins, the players he put in the pros and the 110 academic All-Big Ten players he had. There have been a lot of good kids come out of that program."

"It was inevitable that change had to happen for the future of the program. It's unfortunate that Coach Cooper will not be a part of it. I would like to see him stay in Columbus and continue to help the city."

Miller believes the focus needs to return to the team.

"If a coach or player leaves the team or the program, it's still the team," he said. "The team is always number one. I don't think this is going to be catastrophic for the university. I think this is something that can turn into a positive."

"If I was a recruit out there, I would want to be in this first class of the new



FINAL TIME — Ohio State head coach John Cooper asks the officials for an explanation during the Outback Bowl as assistant head coach Fred Pagac (left, foreground) looks on. The 24-7 loss to South Carolina marked the final game for Cooper at OSU.

coach and be part of the group that turns this around toward a national championship."

Like Miller, former OSU quarterback Jim Karsatos has become a staple in the local media. He has covered the Buckeyes as part of the broadcast team for WBNS-AM for the last 11 years. He said the firing was not a major shock, especially given OSU's lackluster showing in the Outback Bowl.

"I had a feeling this was going to happen, win or lose," Karsatos said. "I knew, from doing the broadcasts and being around the program, it had been mounting with (Geiger) over time. Win or lose, it might have still happened. But the way the game went down, it was inevitable at that point."

"It was not good. The team did not play with any heart. They played with absolutely no discipline. I thought the offensive everything was miserable. As a quarterback on the sidelines, I can get into the rhythm of the offense. I know what's happening and sometimes I can know what's happening next."

"Unfortunately, I could do that for

South Carolina, but I couldn't do it for us. That's not good."

When asked what type of coach he would like to see OSU hire, Karsatos responded:

"I always like a head coach who is defensive minded but also has a strong offensive coordinator. You win championships with defense. I like where our defense is right now. We have great talent and the coaching has been great. I hope that doesn't change much."

"If we could find a head coach with experience who will come in and manage the program and bring an offensive mind with him, that might be the best fit."

"George Belu has only been here a year. I like George. He has lots of experience and I think he's made some strides this year. As far as our specialists are concerned, we need to coach up our quarterback. Our quarterback needs help and our receivers need help. We need a coordinator who is creative and imaginative."

OSU Coaches Support Cooper

Cooper's plight was understood by OSU basketball coaches Beth Burns and Jim O'Brien, who each commented on the firing.

"I'm a fan of John Cooper's and I'm just sad," Burns said. "It doesn't mean I fault Andy Geiger. Leaders have to make tough decisions. I'm sure it was very challenging for Mr. Geiger to have to make that decision."

"John Cooper has been nothing but tremendous to me and to my staff. We can have someone drop in on us, and I have absolute confidence to walk over there. He'll jump out of practice and put his arm around someone. I think he's a very good man. And I wish him the best he can have."

O'Brien also was sorry to hear the news.

"I'm really saddened by the whole

thing," he said. "I think it's the nature of the business, but don't think for one second that this is an easy thing for Andy Geiger. I know that this was a very tough situation for him as well. I have a lot of respect and regard for both of these guys, for Cooper and for Andy."

"How could I not feel this way about Andy? He hired me and he has given me a tremendous opportunity, and I love working for him. But I understand that these things happen. I know it's not easy for John right now."

The public debate over Cooper's job status has amazed O'Brien since he arrived here in 1997, he said.

"It's been a learning experience for me and I think that's all part of the deal today in college athletics," he said. "Is it more at a school like Ohio State? It might be. But I think it's the way that it is. I've never enjoyed the whole idea of this concept where it's so easy for others to talk about other people losing their jobs. Forget about any money that's involved."

"I just think if anybody would just think about the concept of people saying that about them publicly, that they should lose their jobs, whatever their jobs might be, I don't think people would feel all that happy about that."

"When you think about this whole concept of anybody losing their job, I get uncomfortable with that because I don't think that's a pleasant prospect for anyone, regardless of if it's a coach or it's anybody in any profession. I think the concept of somebody losing their job is unpleasant."

O'Brien said he would keep an eye on the search for Cooper's replacement.

"I'm always interested in (who's going to be hired) because the thing that interests me is what's going to be in the best interest for Ohio State and the football program," he said. "I think that we're going to be able to get along with whoever is hired and hopefully be able to establish the same relationship and the same camaraderie as we currently have with their staff. That's something that needs to get worked out at another time."

Other Opinions

The following is a look at other opinions on the Cooper firing from outside the program.

• **Matt Calhoun** — Calhoun played fullback for Cooper from 1993-96.

"I was surprised that it happened so quick and I figured they were going to do it, (but) like Cooper said, they should have done it after the Michigan game," Calhoun said. "I feel bad for him, I feel bad for all the assistant coaches. They didn't just get rid of Cooper, they're getting rid of a lot of quality coaches."

"Personally I wish they would have given him one more year and then just decide from there. I understand there are reasons: not beating Michigan and not winning bowl games. I understand both sides of the story."

Calhoun discussed his view of potential replacements.

"The two that I'm familiar with and I like them both are Fred Pagac and Walt Harris," he said. "I think both

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OSU FIRES COOPER: VARIED OPINIONS

Former Players, Media Discuss Cooper Firing

Continued From Page 20

would do an outstanding job. Obviously, with Pagac getting the job it would allow a lot of them (other assistants) to stay on board and hopefully Harris would keep a few of them, too."

Calhoun saw Harris' impact firsthand.

"Basically what he did for us was take the passing game and turn it around," he said. "That was his game and he's extremely intelligent. He's really detailed, very detailed. The quarterbacks, he was watching their every step. Look at what he did for Bobby Hoving, the one year he was there."

"And talking to the other quarterbacks who played for him, they've got an awful lot of respect for him. I was a running back ... but we were with him a lot and he was good, it was easy to tell. He rejuvenated the offense in '95. Plus, looking at what he did with Pitt, it was in the cellar before he was there."

Calhoun sized up the recent turmoil in the program.

"As far as the (Tyson Walter-LeCharles Bentley) lawsuit, all that happened back in February and just got out recently," he said. "With the grades with (Reggie) Germany, that's a shame. Guys need to take more responsibility. But look at Florida State: It happens all over. When I was there, the guys who were struggling, they kept checking up on them, but they can't hold everyone's hand. Guys have to grow up and take some responsibility themselves."

"They stressed that a lot when I was there. If a player wants to do well, they can do well. They talk about the graduation rate, but what I'd like to see is the graduation rate for the guys who don't go to the NFL."

"You go to school to prepare for a job and these guys get the best job in the world (those that go on to the NFL). I think it's misleading. Obviously, it

Bruce Shares View On Successor's Fate

As John Cooper stood before the press and a podium Jan. 2, the very day he was relieved of his duties as Ohio State football coach, he looked into a television camera and said, "In this business there are two kinds of coaches — those that get fired and those that are going to get fired."

Earle Bruce nodded.

Hearing that statement from his winter home in Naples, Fla., Bruce didn't need anyone to explain. As Cooper's predecessor and OSU's coach from 1979-87, Bruce was a well-respected figure and a very successful coach. And, as the fates of the job would have it, he was fired.

"I think John described it well," he told BSB. "It's the nature of coaching and it's a shame. But you could say the same thing about athletic directors and presidents. They usually last about nine years, or at least that's what I've read."

"But I will say this: God bless John Cooper. He's lasted a long time and he went 2-10-1 against Michigan. Before if you lost three straight times to Michigan you were gone. That was even true of Woody (Hayes). If he had won his last three times against them he probably could have killed that kid (Clemson linebacker Charlie Bauman in the 1978 Gator Bowl) and still been coach."

Bruce, of course, was kidding, but his point was made just the same. He actually finished with a 5-4 mark against UM but was fired by university president Ed Jennings on the Monday prior to the 1987 game with the Wolverines as the Buckeyes sat on a 5-4-1 record. What ensued was the most emotional week of his long coaching life, replete with players wearing headbands bearing his name on game day and the OSU marching band playing school songs outside his suburban home. The Buckeyes won

23-20 and Bruce went out on the shoulders of his players, pumping his right fist.

Cooper departed with much less fanfare and condolences and a festering belief that he had lost control of his players.

"John Cooper is a high-quality person and a good family man; it's a shame it had to end that way," said Bruce, who serves as a radio analyst in Columbus on WTVN-AM. "But with that said it was time to move on."

"I don't know everything that happened and how it was handled, but he's got to accept the responsibility, good or bad. I mean, the credit for the economy the last several years has been given to (President Bill) Clinton and he had nothing to do with it."

"The graduation rate used to be damn good there and now it's lousy. I'm sure if there was a high graduation rate you'd step up and say, 'I'm proud of that,' and link yourself to that."

Bruce has been a visible avid supporter for Cooper the last several years. The two often had kind words at Cooper's weekly press luncheons and Bruce even defended Cooper to the hilt moments after the fateful Outback Bowl when radio colleague Greg Frey, who played for both coaches, called for Cooper's head.

"I feel badly for anybody who gets fired, especially a football coach," said Bruce, who served as a collegiate head coach at Tampa, Iowa State, OSU, Northern Iowa and Colorado State. "I don't like to see that in college athletics."

"But I really believe if a guy loses three times in a row to Michigan he should be fired. Pretty soon that rivalry is going to be dead."

Bruce also admitted feeling disgust during OSU's horrid 24-7 loss to South Carolina.

"Obviously the team played very poorly and it didn't seem like the intensity was there at all, which is sad to see," he said. "I think the thing

that was most unbelievable to me was seeing the Walter kid (OSU lineman Tyson Walter) there. I couldn't have that kid on the field (sideline) with the other players. How could you? When he's suing another player? I don't know how that could even happen."

Bruce didn't put his name in the OSU coaching ring and he didn't stump for a particular candidate either. But, not surprisingly, he'd like to see someone with a local tie get the job. After all, Bruce was a highly successful coach at Massillon (Ohio) Washington High School just like Paul Brown and he was an assistant under Hayes at OSU.

"I can't say I don't want someone from Ohio," he said. "I'm a Buckeye and I believe in Ohio football. If somebody comes in here with an understanding of that, that's a great thing."

"But I want them to bring in as successful a head coach as possible. Ohio State should get a quality guy who's at the top of the heap."

Even if that happens, though, Bruce knows full well the pressures — and ghosts of the past — will surface again.

"If I get perturbed at anything it's when people always refer to Coach Hayes when they talk about that job," said Bruce, speaking from experience.

"The most important guy is the guy who's coach there now. You don't keep talking about a guy who was there 30 years down the road and is now dead. What's important is what's going on right now."

— Jeff Rapp



Earle Bruce

would be nice to have a higher rate, but I'd like to see the rate other than those who go to the NFL. They can come back anytime and get their degrees."

• **Greg Frey** — Frey started at quarterback under Cooper from 1988-90. He now serves as a gameday analyst on WTVN-AM.

"Coach Cooper is a good man and he did some good things," he said. "I'm not

sure anyone is questioning that. But he looked like someone who had really lost his players. And when you lose your players it's hard to get them back."

"This was a team crying out for discipline. It was nothing like the Ohio State teams I grew up watching and that I played for. We might not have always played well, but we didn't make the foolish mistakes this team made."

• **Eddie George** — George played tailback for Cooper from 1992-95, winning the Heisman Trophy as a senior. George, who plays for the NFL's Tennessee Titans, discussed the move with The Nashville Tennessean.

"Outside of (Michigan and the bowls), he's won 80 percent of his games," George said. "By him not being successful in the postseason and

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against you know who, that's what he was judged by.

"By taking that position at Ohio State, that's what goes along with it. Coach Cooper's had a great career there, a great run, and I guess they see fit that changes be made and hopefully the next guy that comes in can get the job done."

• **Kirk Herbstreit** — Herbstreit played quarterback at OSU from 1988-92. He now serves as a national college football analyst for ESPN.

"This is tough for me because I was the first recruit to commit to Coach Cooper when he arrived here," he said.

"It's not so much losing games that bothers people following the Ohio State football program. It's how the team goes out and plays and represents the university. That's probably equally important."

"I think that was the area where Ohio State was beginning to struggle, the intangibles of a program. I'm very happy to hear Andy Geiger address those things and I'm sure when he brings in his new man those will be some of the things that will be addressed. They have to take care of things on and off the field."

Herbstreit wants to see OSU revered again as a respected program.

"Let's get the class back," he said. "That's not to say it wasn't too far removed, but in the last couple of years I think things got a little bit out of control."

"There are certain individuals within the program who I don't think represented the university very well. They were not disciplined for that and, because of that, you lose control of the situation."

• **Bruce Hooley** — Hooley joined the OSU beat as a reporter for The (Cleveland) Plain Dealer in Cooper's first season of 1988.

"It doesn't surprise me that it happened," he said. "I am sort of surprised that it happened now, after the bowl game. Because, for as many times as he has slipped off the hook before in similar circumstances, I expected he'd survive this one like he survived the other times."

"What stood out for me was the amazing sameness to the entirety of his career here: You could pretty much count on them getting into position to do something then failing to get it done."

• **Matt Keller** — Keller played fullback for the Buckeyes from 1995-99, serving as a captain last season.

"It's kind of one of those things where I was a little surprised, but I thought it would be inevitable that some plan of action would be taken," he said.

"The biggest thing I remember about him, to win as many games as he did and (all) people will talk about is his coaching. Let them talk about that, but when it comes down to it, he was a great human being. That's what tore me up. This guy dedicated 13 years to Ohio State University."

"I talked to some people in Columbus and people were partying. Instead of saying, 'Coach, thanks for the great years,' they were saying, 'Get out as soon as you can.' That's classless the way they were talking about him."

"He won 71 percent of the games in the 13 years he was here. That's phenomenal. You get spoiled because you're

winning and when you're not winning, when it comes down to it, you look at the head coach. That's the nature of the position."

Keller admitted that Cooper's record against Michigan and in bowl games was below par.

"They have every right to be (mad), but as the team and coaching staff go through that, we're disappointed, too," he said. "It's not like we're not prepared or not doing the same things that we've been doing throughout the year."

"The talk about Coach Cooper (not) motivating well, that's bullshit because when you're 21 years old, a kid going in front of 100,000 people on the national stage, I don't know how you can't be motivated yourself."

Keller believes Cooper deserved a better fate.

"This guy did so much in the community," he said. "I've been a big Coach Cooper fan; my parents loved him. My parents would go to practice and he'd talk to them. He didn't have to do that. I feel bad for (his) family, some of the things they said about him. I wish he could have had a more glorious send-off for the things he provided for the university."

"The thing that amazes me about that was these kinds of problems were going on when Eddie (George) was here and we were winning the Rose Bowl. If he would have beaten Michigan and we would have won the bowl game, people would have forgotten about the academic stuff, the off-the-field stuff, the bickering among the players."

"You've got to win, period. Maybe I'm wrong saying that, but all that stuff would have been forgotten about if they would have won the last two games."

"It's a damn shame. I'll always remember him as a great person. He was great to me."

• **Rusty Miller** — Miller covered the Cooper regime as the state sports editor for The Associated Press.

"Personally, I grew to respect him," he said. "But I remember that I asked a question at his first news conference. I said, 'Coach, are you the kind of guy who adapts to the talent you have or do you make them fit your system?'"

"He said, 'I've won with this system every place I've been. They'll adapt to what I want to do.'"

"That made me question him immediately. Sometimes you have to adapt. Lou Holtz is running the spread at South Carolina when he was always a big option guy at Notre Dame. Joe Tiller has always liked to run the ball, but he's throwing it now at Purdue because it works. The great coaches will adapt."

• **Alex Rodriguez** — Rodriguez was a prized recruit from Chicago who played fullback for the Buckeyes from 1992-94.

"I find myself with mixed emotions right now," he said. "John Cooper treated me well and gave me a free education, and he's a tremendously likable guy, but he couldn't roll with the times. I think he was a victim of his own system because he was never willing to change. I don't know if he was able to evolve with the way athletes changed over the years."

"He didn't take time to really know his players really well and teach them some life skills. He wasn't the type of coach where you'd go into his office, tell

him you're getting married or you're having problems with your career. You didn't see that type of family atmosphere, so there was no need for players to go back and stay in touch."

"For the longest time I would get in arguments with fans who bashed Cooper, but I have to say the program has deteriorated. It was time."

• **Jack Schrom** — Schrom produced "The John Cooper Show" on television and also handled Cooper's corporate endorsements.

"My first thought was for Andy and John," he said. "I love them both. As far as people to work with, I have never worked with better people. I'm sure it took a toll on both of them."

"The most unbelievable thing to me all along — and something John never wanted it known — was he would go to the James Cancer Hospital every Friday and visit patients there. That is a very difficult thing to do. For him to do it and continue to do it and not let anybody know about it speaks volumes."

"On the corporate side, I think about hundreds of thousands of dollars he helped raise for various charities like the Alzheimer's Association and the different promotions we did like Kroger For Kids and the Sack For A Sack program. He's a real gentleman."

Schrom said memories of Cooper's shining moment — the Rose Bowl win over Arizona State — will be hard to top.

"I was talking to somebody today about that Rose Bowl victory," he said. "I can't remember a time when I was more thrilled than the way Ohio State won that game. That was probably the epitome for me in following Ohio State sports. We'll always have that moment, and I hope people will remember John for that."

• **Chris Spielman** — Spielman was an All-American and Lombardi Award-winning linebacker for the Buckeyes who played from 1984-87.

"I think Coach Cooper has done a wonderful job for 13 years," he said. "I have great respect for him. He opened up the facility to former players and a lot of guys appreciated that. I can say I'm a friend and I feel bad for what he's going through right now."

"It's a sad day. After a guy served the school for 13 years, did the best job he could possibly do, established the record he has and put as many guys in the pros as he has, it's hard to see."

• **Korey Stringer** — Stringer, now with the NFL's Minnesota Vikings, started at tackle for the Buckeyes from 1992-94.

"It's unfortunate," he said. "I played under Coach Cooper and always considered him a good guy. But things change. That's the nature of the business."

BSB staff members Darrell Dawson, Jeff Rapp and Mike Wachsmann contributed to this story.

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OSU FIRES COOPER: THE TIMELINE

The John Cooper Timeline

It was with high hopes that 50-year-old John Harold Cooper, accompanied by his wife, Helen, strode to the podium at the Woody Hayes Athletic Center on Dec. 31, 1987, and announced he had accepted a five-year contract as the new head football coach at Ohio State.

Cooper, who replaced the fired Earle Bruce, would last 13 years as the OSU coach before his firing on Jan. 2, 2001.

He arrived after three successful seasons as the head coach at Arizona State. The former Iowa State football captain also served eight years as the head coach at Tulsa and a combined 14 seasons before that as an assistant at five different schools.

"I felt we could win the national championship at Arizona State," said Cooper, who led the Sun Devils to their first-ever Pac-10 title and Rose Bowl win over Michigan after the 1986 season. "That's a goal we had every year and that's a goal we'll have at The Ohio State University."

"I think you're better off aiming for the sky and hitting an eagle than you are aiming at an eagle and hitting the ground."

Cooper told reporters that day, "I coach coaches. This allows me to have more time with the players. I'm in the locker room, on the sideline and in the huddle with them. They'll feel my presence, I assure you."

Over the next 13 years, Cooper would build a record of 111-43-4 (.715). That win total is second only to Woody Hayes' OSU career mark of 205 and he stands behind only Hayes (28 years) and John Wilce (16) in years served. Cooper's teams shared three Big Ten championships, played in one Rose Bowl and enjoyed three top-10 finishes.

The following is a year-by-year look at Cooper's 13-year tenure at Ohio State, compiled by BSB editor Steve Helwagen. This timeline tracks the highs and lows on and off the field for Cooper and his OSU teams.



John Cooper introduces his wife, Helen, upon taking the OSU job on Dec. 31, 1987.

• **Record, Ranking:** 8-4; 6-2 Big Ten (tied for third); 24th in final AP poll.

• **Notable:** The season was dampened almost from the start after lopsided losses at USC (42-3) and Illinois (34-14). But the Buckeyes quietly reeled off six straight wins. One of those was a 41-37 decision at Minnesota, where Frey rallied the Buckeyes back from a 31-0 deficit to tie the largest comeback in NCAA history. The winning streak put OSU in position to play for a piece of the Big Ten title at Michigan.

• **Meeting Michigan:** OSU went to Ann Arbor without starting TB Carlos Snow, who was injured. Converted FB Scottie Graham had a big day, but the third-ranked Wolverines prevailed over No. 20 OSU 28-18. This was the first of five UM losses under Cooper that would cost OSU at least a piece of the Big Ten title.

• **Bowl Game:** Ninth-ranked Auburn rallied from a 14-10 halftime deficit to take a 31-14 win at the Hall of Fame Bowl.



John Cooper is pictured leafing through a 1989 edition of BSB at his St. John Arena office.

1990

• **Recruiting (Feb. 1990 signing):** Another strong effort had OSU second in the Big Ten and sixth nationally, led by TB Robert Smith, TB Butler By'not'e, WR Joey Galloway, QB Preston Harrison and QB Joe Pickens.



John Cooper (center) and assistant Ron Zook speak with Vinnie Clark.

• **Record, Ranking:** 7-4-1; 5-2-1 Big Ten (fifth); unranked in final AP poll.

• **Notable:** Natural grass returned to Ohio Stadium. Smith, a two-time Ohio Mr. Football from Euclid, debuted to much fanfare and broke Archie Griffin's freshman rushing record with 1,126 yards. Home losses to USC (35-26) and Illinois (31-20) clouded an otherwise fine season. The USC defeat was punctuated by a thunderstorm with Cooper conceding defeat for safety reasons with 2:36 left.

Cooper picked up his 100th career win as a head coach in dramatic fashion as the Buckeyes upset No. 6

Iowa 27-26 on Frey's TD pass to Olive with one second left.

• **Meeting Michigan:** No. 19 OSU needed a win at home over 15th-ranked Michigan to win the Big Ten and reach the Rose Bowl. But Frey was stopped for no gain on a rare option play on fourth-and-1 late and UM's J.D. Carlson kicked the game-winning field goal as time expired for a 16-13 win.

• **Bowl Game:** In one of the darkest moments in OSU history, the Buckeyes were thrashed by unranked Air Force 23-11 at a rainy, cold Liberty Bowl.

• **Quotable:** Cooper called the Liberty Bowl loss "the lowest point in my career."

1991

• **Recruiting (Feb. 1991 signing):** On the heels of the loss to Air Force the year before, OSU struggled to a sixth-place Big Ten finish and No. 30 ranking nationally. Signees included QB Bobby Hoying, DB Marlon Kerner, LB Craig Powell and late signee DT Dan Wilkinson. TB Ki-Jana Carter (Penn State) and DL Trent Zenkewicz (Michigan) got away.

• **Record:** 8-4; 5-3 Big Ten (tied for third); unranked in final AP poll.

• **Notable:** A preseason spat between Smith and offensive coordinator Elliot Uzelac over academics caused the prized TB to sit out the season in protest. Meanwhile, Snow returned after a season away to assume the TB duties and Notre Dame transfer Kent Graham took over at QB. The Buckeyes were off to starts of 4-0 and 6-1 before suffering a 16-9 home upset to Iowa.

• **Meeting Michigan:** No. 4 Michigan, behind Heisman Trophy winner Desmond Howard, who struck a Heisman pose after a 93-yard punt return for a touchdown, crushed No. 18 OSU 31-3. This was OSU's worst loss in the series since a 58-6 defeat in 1946.

• **Bowl Game:** Syracuse QB Marvin Graves threw a 60-yard TD to Antonio Johnson for the margin of victory in a 24-17 win over the Buckeyes at the Hall of Fame Bowl.

• **Contract Status:** With negative recruiters from other schools harping on Cooper's contract status, the coach was granted a three-year extension to take him through 1995. The announcement was made 30 minutes before the loss at Michigan.

1988

• **Recruiting (Feb. 1988 signing):** Taking over late, Cooper and his new staff still managed to land the Big Ten's third-best class in February 1988. The class, ranked 20th nationally, featured QB Kirk Herbstreit, DL Rich Frimel, LB Judah Herman, DB Buster Howe, LB Brent Johnson and OL Corey Fargo. RB Chuck Webb (Tennessee) and WR O.J. McDuffie (Penn State) got away.

• **Record, Ranking:** 4-6-1 overall; 2-5-1 Big Ten (seventh); unranked in final Associated Press poll.

• **Notable:** Everything seemed to be peachy when the Buckeyes downed Syracuse 26-9 in Cooper's debut. For the first time in school history, OSU had no turnovers or penalties in the win. But, a week later at Pittsburgh, OSU fell 42-10. Cooper felt the wrath of OSU fans who made the trip and the honeymoon was already over. The Buckeyes regrouped and upset No. 7 LSU 36-33 a week later on a late TD pass from Greg Frey to Bobby Oliver.

OSU, which lost co-captain Vince Workman to suspension (illegal dealings with an agent), then lost its first three Big Ten games for the first time since 1971. The Buckeyes ended up with their first losing season in 27 years.

• **Meeting Michigan:** The 12th-ranked Wolverines took a 20-0 halftime lead, but the Buckeyes battled back. UM needed a late long bomb to John Kolesar to pull out a 34-31 win.

• **Bowl Game:** None.

• **Quotable:** Cooper, speaking off the cuff at a Columbus service club luncheon, said his team was saddled with "too many slow white guys."

• **Contract Status:** Cooper's initial five-year deal gave him a reported base salary of \$98,000 and a guaranteed total package of \$338,000.

1989

• **Recruiting (Feb. 1989 signing):** Cooper's first true class was ranked tops in the Big Ten and fourth nationally, featuring DB Roger Harper, TB Rayment Harris, DT Chuck Jones, OLB Tyrone Morrison, DB Chico Nelson, DE Jason Simmons, DE Alonzo Spellman, MLB Steve Tovar and OLB Mark Williams. As many as eight of this year's signees would reach the NFL.

OSU FIRES COOPER: THE TIMELINE

1992

- **Recruiting (Feb. 1992 signing):** OSU rebounded with the top class in the Big Ten and sixth-best nationally, led by DL Luke Fickell, LB Jayson Gwinn, DB Rob Kelly, OLB Ryan Miller, DT Eric Moss, OL Juan Porter, OT Korey Stringer and LB Lorenzo Styles. RB Eddie George and WR Terry Glenn were almost afterthoughts.
- **Record, Ranking:** 8-3-1; 5-2-1 Big Ten (second); 18th in final AP poll.
- **Notable:** With Uzelac fired by Cooper, Smith returned to the lineup and helped OSU jump out to a 3-0 start, including a 35-12 upset win at No. 8 Syracuse. But back-to-back losses to Wisconsin (20-16) and Illinois (18-16) left OSU 0-2 in Big Ten play. Herbstreit, a future ESPN college football analyst, was a captain and starter at QB.
- **Meeting Michigan:** Reports surfaced that Cooper needed a win over No. 6 Michigan to save his job. After quite a struggle, the teams fought to a 13-13 tie, a result dubbed by then-OSU President E. Gordon Gee as "one of our greatest wins."
- **Bowl Game:** Georgia's Garrison Hearst broke loose for 163 yards and two touchdowns as the eighth-ranked Bulldogs stopped OSU 21-14 in the Citrus Bowl.
- **Quotable I:** Cooper, speaking after the Michigan game to The Columbus Dispatch sports editor George Strode, whose newspaper reported the "win-or-else" ultimatum — "Thank you, George, for your fine coverage this week."
- **Quotable II:** Cooper, to all reporters on why he opted to punt the ball away late and preserve the tie against UM — "You want to gamble, but you want to gamble with my chips."

1993

- **Recruiting (Feb. 1993 signing):** OSU was a distant 30th nationally and seventh in the Big Ten. Key signees included LB Greg Bellisari, DE Matt Finkes, QB Stanley Jackson, CB Shawn Springs and DE Mike Vrabel. FB Marc Edwards (Notre Dame) and RB June Henley (Kansas) got away.
- **Record, Ranking:** 10-1-1; 6-1-1 Big Ten (tied for first); 11th in final AP poll.
- **Notable:** The Buckeyes began an assault on the top five of the national polls that would last five of the next six seasons. OSU enjoyed its best season since 1979 and earned its first Big Ten title under Cooper. An early-season nighttime home win over Washington (21-12) got the ball rolling. RB Raymont Harris helped roll over Penn State (24-6) in the first-ever Big Ten meeting between the schools. Marion Kerner blocked a late field goal to preserve a 14-14 tie at Wisconsin. QBs Bobby Hoying and Bret Powers split time.
- **Meeting Michigan:** Ranked fifth nationally, OSU needed a win at Ann Arbor to end a nine-year Rose Bowl drought. But the unranked Wolverines blanked OSU 28-0.
- **Bowl Game:** Before he knew what bowl the Buckeyes would be playing in, Cooper guaranteed a win while speaking at his team's postseason banquet. Cooper wound up getting his first bowl win in four tries with a 28-21 win over BYU in the Holiday Bowl but only after the Cougars misfired on four passes inside the OSU 10 in the final minute.



MIKE GREER

John Cooper exhorts the crowd at Senior Tackle before the 1993 game with Michigan.

1994

- **Recruiting (Feb. 1994 signing):** OSU was tops in the Big Ten and second nationally (behind Tennessee) with a class that included DB Che Bryant, DT Winfield Garnett, OL Eric Gohistin, TE John Lumpkin, WR Dee Miller, RB Joe Montgomery, DB Damon Moore, OT Orlando Pace, RB Pepe Pearson and LB Jerry Rudzinski. RB Curtis Enis (Penn State) got away.
- **Record, Ranking:** 9-4; 6-2 Big Ten (second); 14th in final AP poll.
- **Notable:** Hoying took over as the full-time QB, but the road was unkind as the Buckeyes fell at Washington (25-16) and Penn State (83-14). Many thought Cooper was gone after the PSU loss, OSU's worst since 1946. But OSU rallied to win its last three regular-season games to save Cooper's job.

- **Meeting Michigan:** Cooper's record against Michigan at OSU improved to 1-5-1 with a resounding 22-6 win over the Wolverines in Ohio Stadium.
- **Bowl Game:** Sixth-ranked Alabama turned back No. 13 OSU 24-17 in the Citrus Bowl after a late 50-yard TD pass from Jay Barker to Sherman Williams.
- **Contract Status:** Once again, Cooper was down to the final year on his existing deal and, as OSU stalled for time, he interviewed at LSU. But new athletic director Andy Gelger awarded Cooper a five-year extension that superseded his old contract and took him through 1999. The new deal raised his base salary to \$130,000 and his total package to \$600,000. It also allowed for Cooper to earn one-year renewals for meeting certain criteria.



KEVIN DYE

A happy John Cooper is escorted out of Ohio Stadium after the '95 win over Notre Dame.

1995

- **Recruiting (Feb. 1995 signing):** The class was ranked fifth in the Big Ten and 25th nationally, led by LB Randy Homa, RB Matt Keller, DB Percy King, OL Rob Murphy, DB Ahmed Plummer and DB Antoine Winfield. JUCO transfers QB Joe Germaine and LB Kevin Johnson were also in the mix. CB Charles Woodson (Michigan) and WR Peerless Price (Tennessee) got away.
- **Record, Ranking:** 11-2; 7-1 Big Ten (second); sixth in final AP poll.
- **Notable:** OSU tied the school record with 11 wins, jumping out to an 11-0 start and rising as high as No. 2 in the national polls. Nonconference wins over ranked foes Boston College (38-6), Washington (30-20) and Notre Dame (45-26) got the ball rolling. A come-from-behind win at Penn State (28-25) served notice to the Big Ten.
- **Bowl Game:** RB Eddie George set a new single-game rushing record with 314 yards in a snowy win over Cooper nemesis Illinois (41-3). That helped George bring home the Heisman Trophy, Big Ten MVP and the Maxwell Award. OT Orlando Pace won the Lombardi Award, while Glenn won the Biletnikoff Award.
- **Meeting Michigan:** OSU had everything on the line at No. 12 Michigan but fell 31-23 when TB Tim Blakabutka went for 313 yards and Ohio product Woodson picked off two Hoying passes. Northwestern, unbeaten in Big Ten play, went to the Rose Bowl instead.
- **Bowl Game:** Played in a steady downpour at the Citrus Bowl, this match-up of co-No. 4 ranked teams went to Tennessee 20-14. QB Peyton Manning threw for 182 yards and a TD for the Vols, who got away with wearing illegal longer cleats for better traction on the wet turf.

1996

- **Recruiting (Feb. 1996 signing):** OSU's class was ranked No. 1 nationally, featuring DB Gary Berry, WR David Boston, RB Nick Gools, DE Brent Johnson, LB Andy Katzenmoyer, OL Jefferson Kelley and RB Michael Wiley. QBs Rashard Casey (Penn State) and Tim Couch (Kentucky) got away.
- **Record, Ranking:** 11-1; 7-1 Big Ten (tied for first); second in final AP poll.
- **Notable:** Back-to-back wins over top-five foes Notre Dame (29-13) and Penn State (38-7) helped OSU to a 10-0 start and a lofty perch at No. 2. Stanley Jackson started every game except Michigan at QB while splitting time with Joe Germaine. The Buckeyes clinched



KEVIN DYE

John Cooper and Joe Germaine hoist the 1997 Rose Bowl trophy.

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The Five Greatest Victories

No one can dispute that there were some pretty big wins during the 13 years of the John Cooper era. Here are five of the biggest, as ranked by BSB.

— Steve Helwagen

• **1. Ohio State 20, Arizona State 17 (Rose Bowl), Jan. 1, 1997** — It had been 23 seasons since OSU's last Rose Bowl win, but the Buckeyes pulled it out behind a two-minute drive led by quarterback Joe Germaine. His 5-yard touchdown pass to David Boston with just 19 seconds left provided the margin of victory.

• **2. Ohio State 45, Notre Dame 26, Sept. 30, 1995** — An Ohio Stadium-record crowd of 95,537 was on hand as the Buckeyes blasted the Fighting Irish in the first meeting between the two schools in 59 years. Eddie George rushed for 207 yards and two touchdowns, while Bobby Hoying threw for 272 yards and four scores.

• **3. Ohio State 22, Michigan 6, Nov. 19, 1994** — This was Cooper's first win in seven tries against Michigan as the OSU coach and, after he punched a hole in the blackboard at halftime, it probably saved his job. OSU unveiled the "Tunnel of Pride" for this game.

• **4. Ohio State 31, Michigan 16, Nov. 21, 1998** — This was Cooper's only other win over Michigan at OSU, provided by the exploits of Germaine (330 yards passing, three touchdowns) and Boston (217 yards receiving, two TDs).

• **5. Ohio State 24, Penn State 6, Oct. 30, 1993** — Tailback Raymont Harris helped pave the way for this win with 159 yards and a touchdown on a snowy day in Columbus. This was the first-ever Big Ten meeting between the schools and helped propel the Buckeyes to a piece of Cooper's first Big Ten title at OSU.

OSU FIRES COOPER: THE TIMELINE

The John Cooper Timeline

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their second Big Ten title under Cooper and first Rose Bowl since 1984 with an all-time close win at Indiana (27-17).

Pace repeated with the Lombardi and added the Outland Trophy and the Big Ten MVP.

- **Meeting Michigan:** A week after the feel-good win at IU, the Buckeyes were a 16-point favorite over No. 21 Michigan and were looking to close out a perfect regular season. Once again, though, UM prevailed, this time 13-9 in Ohio Stadium.

- **Bowl Game:** Germaine guided a late scoring march to lead the No. 4-ranked Buckeyes to a 20-17 win over No. 2 Arizona State at the Rose Bowl. It was OSU's first Rose Bowl win in 23 years and raised Cooper's OSU bowl record to 2-6.

- **Quotable I:** Cooper, on ABC moments after the Rose Bowl — "This one's for all our great fans. They're with us win or tie."

- **Quotable II:** Cooper, on the stadium mike at the Rose Bowl and much to the chagrin of the 40,000 ASU fans in attendance — "How about a boy from Scottsdale (Germaine) coming back to beat the hometown team?"

1997

- **Recruiting (Feb. 1997 signing):** OSU's class was ranked third in the Big Ten and 10th nationally, led by DE Rodney Bailey, LB Courtland Bullard, RB Derek Combs, WR Reggie Germany, OL Tam Hopkins, LB Jason Ott and WR Ken-Yon Rambo. RB Tony Driver (Notre Dame) and LB Dan Morgan (Miami, Fla.) got away.

- **Record, Ranking:** 10-3; 6-2 Big Ten (tied for second); 12th in final AP poll.

- **Notable:** A narrow 31-27 loss at No. 2 Penn State, keyed by Ohio product Enis, was the only blemish for the Buckeyes, who opened 10-1 and rose as high as No. 4 in the national polls. Jackson and Germaine split time at QB. LB Andy Katzenmoyer won the Butkus Award.

- **Meeting Michigan:** A win at top-ranked Michigan would have given OSU a piece of the Big Ten title and the Rose Bowl berth. But Heisman Trophy winner Woodson again thwarted the Buckeyes with a catch to set up a score, a punt return for a touchdown and an interception as UM prevailed 20-14.

- **Bowl Game:** OSU, ranked ninth, used its considerable pull to outflank No. 3 Kansas State for a spot in the Sugar Bowl opposite No. 4 Florida State. The Seminoles rocked the Buckeyes 31-14.

- **Quotable:** Cooper, addressing the crowd at the Buckeye Bash the day before the Sugar Bowl — "We're going to kick their ass!"



KEVIN DYE

John Cooper tells fans at the Buckeye Bash before the 1998 Sugar Bowl, "We're going to kick their ass!"

1998

- **Recruiting (Feb. 1998 signing):** This small 14-man class was ranked third in the Big Ten and 16th nationally, featuring QB Steve Bellisari, DB Nate Clements, OL Scott Kuhnheim, DE Kenny Peterson, DT Ryan Pickett, RB Jonathan Wells and DE Julius Yeast. RB Tony Fisher (Notre Dame) and LB Shamar Finney (Penn State) got away.

- **Record, Ranking:** 11-1; 7-1 Big Ten (tied for first); second in final AP poll.

- **Notable:** OSU was installed as the preseason No. 1 team, despite academic problems involving Katzenmoyer, S. Damon Moore and OG Rob Murphy. All became eligible and the Buckeyes held the top spot for 10 weeks until falling to unranked, 28-point underdog Michigan State (28-24). The Buckeyes still won a piece of the Big Ten title but were aced out by Wisconsin for the Rose Bowl berth.

- **Meeting Michigan:** Germaine, the full-time QB, won the Big Ten MVP award, while CB Antoine Winfield won the Thorpe Award.

- **Meeting Michigan:** Germaine and WR David Boston connected for two TDs in a 31-18 rout of the Wolverines. The win lifted Cooper's OSU record against UM to 2-0.

- **Bowl Game:** Boston shrugged off an ankle injury to earn MVP honors as the Buckeyes downed No. 8 Texas A&M 24-14 in the Sugar Bowl. OSU ended up behind Tennessee, the Fiesta Bowl winner over Florida State, in the final polls.

- **Quotable:** Cooper, reflecting on the 1998 season — "We quite honestly feel we had the best team in the country."

1999

- **Recruiting (Feb. 1999 signing):** OSU's class was judged tops in the Big Ten and No. 2 nationally behind Texas. Key signees included OL Bryce Bishop, OL Adrian Clarke, DB Mike Doss, RB Kelton Lindsay, DB Richard McNutt, LB Fred Pagac Jr. and LB Matt Wilhelm. QB Chris Simms (Texas) and LB T.J. Duckett (Michigan State) got away.

- **Record, Ranking:** 6-6; 3-5 Big Ten (tied for eighth); unranked in final AP poll.

- **Notable:** Ranked ninth in the preseason, the Buckeyes fell to Miami (Fla.) 23-12 at the Kickoff Classic. Cooper notched his 100th win at OSU against Cincinnati (34-20).

- **Meeting Michigan:** OSU played, perhaps, its most inspired game of the year but still fell 24-17 at No. 10 Michigan.

- **Bowl Game:** None.

- **Contract Status:** Cooper had earned the maximum number of three automatic renewals, which would have taken him through the 2002 season. But he and the school agreed to a new deal at midseason. This new five-year deal, which went through the 2003 season, paid him a \$200,000 base salary and a guaranteed total package of \$1.1 million annually.

2000

- **Recruiting (Feb. 2000 signing):** OSU's class was ranked No. 2 in the Big Ten and seventh nationally, led by LB Marco Cooper, RB Brandon Joe, RB Sam Maldonado, OL Shane Oliva, LB Robert Reynolds, LB Darrion Scott, DE Will Smith and OL Alex Stepanovich. OLs Mike Munoz (Tennessee) and Antonio Hall (Kentucky), TE Sean McHugh (Penn State), DE Sam Ruhe (Penn State) and RB Chris Perry (Michigan) got away.

- **Record, Ranking:** 8-4; 5-3 Big Ten (fourth); unranked in final AP poll.

- **Notable:** OSU cruised to a 5-0 start and moved as high as No. 6 nationally. But Minnesota and potential coaching candidate Glen Mason brought the Buckeyes back down to earth with a 29-17 win, the Gophers' first in Columbus since 1949. A showdown at Purdue also went awry when Drew Brees completed a 64-yard TD pass to Seth Morales with 1:55 left for a 31-27 win.

- **Meeting Michigan:** The Buckeyes hosted No. 19 Michigan with a piece of the Big Ten title still on the line. But QB Drew Henson was too much and the Wolverines rolled over No. 12 OSU 38-26, dealing Cooper his 10th loss in 13 tries against the Wolverines during his OSU tenure.

- **Bowl Game:** After a month of off-the-field turmoil, the Buckeyes made a star out of spurned Ohio product Ryan Brewer. He scored three TDs in South Carolina's 24-7 Outback Bowl win. The lackluster defeat was the last straw for Geiger, who informed Cooper the next morning that he was being relieved of his duties.

- **Quotable:** Cooper, speaking at a press conference hours after his firing — "There are two kinds of coaches — those that have been fired and those that are going to get fired. I've been in this for 38 years and I've been fortunate up until today to not be fired."

Cooper By The Numbers

- **Career Record (24 years):** 193-83-6 (.695)
- **Ohio State Record (13 years):** 111-43-4 (.715)
- **Big Ten Record:** 70-30-4 (.692)
- **OSU Record Vs. Michigan:** 2-10-1 (.192)
- **OSU Bowl Record:** 3-8 (.273)
- **OSU Record Vs. AP Top 25:** 29-28-3 (.508)
- **OSU Record Vs. AP Top 10:** 8-11-1 (.425)
- **OSU Record Vs. AP Top 5:** 3-8 (.273)
- **OSU Record As AP Top 25:** 88-36-2 (.706)
- **OSU Record As AP Top 10:** 49-9-1 (.839)
- **OSU Record As AP Top 5:** 30-6-1 (.824)

The Five Toughest Defeats

Crushing defeats — typically with Big Ten or national championships hanging in the balance — became a calling card of the John Cooper era. Here are five that still leave a bit of a sting.

— Steve Helwag

- **1. Michigan State 28, Ohio State 24, Nov. 7, 1998** — This defeat — in the friendly confines of the Horseshoe, no less — denied the top-ranked Buckeyes a shot at the first Bowl Championship Series title game at the Fiesta Bowl. OSU blew a 24-9 second-half lead and could not score a touchdown on four straight pass plays after reaching the MSU 15 with 1:39 left. OSU rebounded to win its last three games and finished No. 2 nationally.

- **2. Michigan 31, Ohio State 23, Nov. 25, 1995** — OSU was 11-0 but still needed a win to clinch the Rose Bowl. It did not happen, though, as UM tailback Tim Blakabutuka rushed for 313 yards. Northwestern, unbeaten in Big Ten play, went to Pasadena instead and OSU was shuffled off to the Citrus Bowl to meet Tennessee.

- **3. Michigan 13, Ohio State 9, Nov. 23, 1996** — OSU already had the Rose Bowl bid locked up and was playing for an unbeaten regular season, but the Wolverines — motivated by watching former OSU coach Earle Bruce speak at Senior Tackle on television the day before — had the last laugh. OSU cornerback Shawn Springs slipped, allowing UM receiver Tai Streets to get free on a 69-yard catch from Brian Griese and score the day's only touchdown.

- **4. Michigan 28, Ohio State 0, Nov. 20, 1993** — OSU was 9-0-1 and needed a win at Michigan to clinch the Rose Bowl and keep its national title hopes alive. But OSU quarterbacks Bobby Hoving and Bret Powers threw a combined four interceptions and the Wolverines laughed their way to the win.

- **5. Penn State 63, Ohio State 14, Oct. 29, 1994** — The top-ranked Nittany Lions jumped to a 35-0 halftime lead and never looked back. Columbus-area product Kijana Carter had 137 yards and scored four touchdowns to lead the rout. OSU suffered its worst defeat in 48 years.

OSU FIRES COOPER: ASSISTANTS FACE FUTURE

Futures Of Cooper's Assistants Up In The Air

By JEFF RAPP

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

To say the Ohio State football coaching staff had a lot to ponder on Jan. 2 is like saying the Buckeyes had a disappointing showing in the Outback Bowl.

While Buckeye fans nursed their holiday hangovers, John Cooper's nine full-time assistants spilled into the Woody Hayes Athletic Center trying to sort out what went wrong in the 24-7 loss to South Carolina, hoping to continue a fine recruiting effort, and with thoughts for next season. Then the crushing news trickled in — their boss had been sent home, for good.

Not surprisingly, the assistants had some very different overt reactions as reporters hung around the WHAC hoping to interview them about Cooper's dismissal.

Offensive coordinator Chuck Stobart walked and talked with reporters for several minutes and gave his usual low-key, honest answers. Assistant head coach Fred Pagac and defensive line coach Jim Heacock nicely declined requests on their way out of the office (Pagac addressed the matter publicly the following day).

Running backs coach Tim Spencer and recruiting coordinator/tight ends coach Bill Conley admitted their disappointment but vowed to trudge on for the sake of the Buckeyes. Defensive coordinator Jon Tenuta poked his head out a door, saw a few journalists in the lobby and shot out another exit. Linebackers coach Brian Williams made a similar hurried escape. Quarterbacks and receivers coach Tim Salem and offensive line coach George Belu made early-afternoon departures.

But it appeared all nine assistants had the same internal reaction — shock.

"I think anytime something like this happens, obviously you're caught off-guard a little bit," Conley said from his office. "Those decisions are beyond us and right now we just go on and try to do the best we can until the new guy's hired."

"There's no doubt that I was shocked," Spencer added. "To hear that your boss has just been let go means that you're let go, too, basically."

Spencer detailed his day, which began with the bad news and led to a feeling of numbness.

"About 10-something (a.m.), a couple guys had already met with Coach (Cooper), and I walked in and was going to say something to Jim Heacock, and he asked me had I heard, and I said 'No.'"

"(Cooper) had already told his staff so I was actually told by Coach Heacock. And I really didn't see Coach until probably about 1 (p.m.). He just said, 'I guess you probably heard by now,' and there really wasn't much he could say."

"I can't describe what it's like because I never have been in this situation in this profession," Spencer added. "As a matter of fact I'm on my way home now. My wife and I need to talk. When you think about all the other families that are involved, it's obviously not a good day for all of us assistant coaches



STEVE HELWAGEN

SAD DAY FOR COACHES — Ohio State offensive coordinator Chuck Stobart talks to reporters Jan. 2 about the dismissal of OSU head coach John Cooper. Cooper expressed sympathy for his coaches, but the overriding feeling among the assistants in the hours after the news broke was shock.

or Coach Cooper or anybody else that's close with our family."

Stobart First To Speak Up

An understandably downtrodden Stobart offered the first official reaction within the team Jan. 2 as he headed for the main office near the WHAC atrium.

"I think we were very close to being good; we'll have to see what happens now," said the coordinator after meeting with OSU athletic director Andy Geiger.

When asked if Geiger gave a reason for Cooper's dismissal, Stobart said, "He didn't give us any reason at all. He just said we're making a change."

The trip to Tampa, Fla., for the Outback Bowl loss had a bit of a different feel for Stobart, he said.

"The only thing that seemed different to me was all the rumors surrounding the team," he said. "That bothered me a little bit because you're trying to get a football team ready to play. When you hear all kinds of rumors, it's kind of hard to keep players' concentration."

Stobart has served 36 years as a collegiate coach, including head coaching stints at Toledo, Utah and Memphis. Yet he still seemed a little thrown by the decision.

"Just keep on trucking, keep on moving, I guess," he said. "We all know the good Lord has a plan for us and whatever it is, you just hang in there and it will all work its way out."

Cooper Vows To Help

The assistant coaches are on a 60-day termination-pay system, which means that after March 1 — unless they are retained by the new coach — they'll need to find a new job.

Later that afternoon, Geiger glossed over the issue at his press conference.

"The tenure of an assistant coach is up to the head coach," the AD said. "Some of the assistants may apply to be head coach. Whoever the head coach is may elect to keep some or all of the assistants. Time will tell."

That evening, Cooper spoke publicly

about his dismissal and mentioned the tough spot his assistants face.

"I feel very sorry for my assistant coaches," Cooper said. "The timing is not real good. If the last game was not a factor in whether or not I was going to be here, then I should have been terminated after the Michigan game. There have been 14 jobs that have changed since the Michigan game. It's a terrible time for an assistant coach to get a job."

"I'm going to do what I can to help them land a job. I have a lot of contacts. Whether I can help them or not at this late date remains to be seen."

All of the assistants were due to head to Atlanta for the American Football Coaches Association convention Jan. 7-10 with hopes, certainly, of interviewing for other jobs.

Pagac immediately threw his hat in the ring for the OSU head coaching job and said he would make an effort to retain several of the assistants. Members of the team expressed to Geiger a hope for that scenario and Cooper also would like to see Pagac, a former OSU player under Woody Hayes and longtime Buckeye defensive coach, succeed him.

"There's a lot of good football coaches out there who would be great for Ohio State," Cooper said. "For selfish reasons, I'd like Fred Pagac to get the job and keep the assistant coaches."

"Will he keep all of them? Probably not. The saddest thing in coaching is when these things happen. I brought in two coaches a year ago. One of them, George Belu, just moved into his home about a month ago. I hope he gets to stay."

If someone outside the program is tabbed for the head coaching job, Spencer and Conley may have the best chance of staying put, although reports as of press time had Conley looking at an opening for a tight ends coach at Tennessee. Both coaches played for the Scarlet and Gray and both are highly regarded.

Spencer is a former star running back at OSU and at the professional

level. He's still relatively young (40) and seems to have good rapport with players and recruits. Conley has been mentioned for head coaching positions in the last few years, including the job at Bowling Green, and is considered to be one of the top recruiting coordinators in the nation.

But even if they are retained, others may not be so lucky. Belu and Stobart possess quality football minds but are older generation guys who could be let go by a new coach with new thoughts. Salem, 39, has been a dynamic recruiter but is at a position where a new coach is very likely to want his own guy.

The defensive staff could be totally overhauled, especially if Pagac is bypassed for the head coaching job.

When asked if he would stay on as an assistant, Pagac said, "I don't know that. I'll be honest. I've been an assistant here for a long time. In my first tour of duty with Coach (Earle) Bruce and Coach Hayes, I wasn't ready for the job and didn't ever try for it. When Coach Cooper came, I knew I wanted to be the next guy and that's one of the reasons I stayed so long and tried to prepare myself for that."

Tenuta apparently is preparing for the worst. He reportedly interviewed for similar defensive coordinator positions at Illinois and North Carolina over the weekend of Jan. 6 and would be likely to follow Pagac out the door.

The 36-year-old Williams is a relative unknown who has served just one year at Ohio State. However, he would appear to have a great shot to stay if his former Pittsburgh boss, Walt Harris, is hired as the new head man.

Heacock is a topflight assistant and recruiter. The former head coach at Illinois State could have a reasonable chance to stay.

What If ...

As is natural, some of the coaches expressed regret upon learning the news.

"I feel badly," Stobart said. "I kept thinking, a play here, a play there, that it might never have come to this."

Added Conley, "I guess one of the greatest sixth senses is hindsight, but no, you don't really ever think about that in this profession. Obviously we wish we could have won all our games, but you can't spend your time wondering about this job and what if the situation were different."

Some of the assistants reportedly were unhappy with Cooper's lack of player discipline, a bone of contention with Geiger. But none of them wanted to shed light on that issue moments after Cooper was fired.

"Being on the inside and knowing some of the things that have gone wrong or bad or whatever, I consider myself a Buckeye, and I will always be one and that will never change," Spencer said. "I feel that there are some things that are within the family that are best not said. Obviously I have some feelings about a lot of things and know a lot of things and wish some things were different. But that's not the case."

"If you can look at yourself in the mirror and say, 'Hey, I've done my job, I know I've done the best that I can possibly do,' then there's nothing else you can do."

THE VIEW FROM 15TH AND HIGH

The End Was So Bad, There Was No Outcry At All

One thing about the final days of the John Cooper era at Ohio State: They were so disastrous that there was no quibbling when OSU athletic director Andy Geiger finally pulled the plug on the 13-year coach.

There was none of the uproar that accompanied the dismissal of Earle Bruce back in 1987. After the events of the last month or so of Cooper's tenure, culminating in the embarrassing loss to South Carolina in the Outback Bowl, you had to look long and hard to find anyone who objected to Cooper's firing, if you could find a dissenter at all.

The beginning of the end started with the loss to Michigan back on Nov. 18. It was the 10th loss in 13 outings against the hated Wolverines under Cooper. The loss to the Gamecocks in Tampa left Cooper with a 3-8 mark in the postseason.

But even though the Buckeyes couldn't reverse their losing trend against Michigan and looked utterly unprepared on both offense and defense in the loss to South Carolina, I think Cooper could have survived those losses. After all, the Teflon coach had been surviving these types of defeats for 13 years.

It was what happened between the Michigan game and the Outback Bowl that probably sealed Cooper's fate.

On the academic front, senior receiver Reggie Germany was dropped from the team after he logged a reported 0.00 GPA in the fall and it was announced that Ohio State had the lowest football graduation rate in the Big Ten.

Then linebacker Matt Wilhelm openly questioned the leadership of team captain Ken-Yon Rambo. Even the most casual observer of Ohio State football probably questioned some of Rambo's antics, but Wilhelm went into behind-the-scenes detail on some of the senior receiver's indiscretions.

Team MVP Derek Combs was dropped from the Outback Bowl starting lineup because he did not show up in Tampa on time, and then it was learned just before the game that Tyson Walter was suing fellow offensive lineman LeCharles Bentley over an alleged altercation during conditioning drills the previous winter.

All of the incidents added up to create an environment where it appeared that Cooper had lost control of his team. Particularly troubling to me was the fact that these final episodes all involved veteran players or supposed leaders of the team. It didn't particularly look like Cooper was developing stellar citizens.

Of course if the Buckeyes had gathered strength from all the turmoil — much as Bruce's 1987 team did for the Michigan game — and rallied for a victory over the outmanned Gamecocks, Cooper might be out on the road recruiting right now rather than baby-sitting for granddaughter Olivia. Instead, they were outcoached and outplayed on both sides of the ball by South Carolina and were soundly defeated, 24-7.

To make matters worse, as Ohio native Ryan Brewer — spurned by the Buckeyes out of Troy High School — drove nail after nail into the Buckeyes' coffin, the Ohio State players reverted to the type of cheap shots that they had been guilty of for much of the season. Again, it gave the appearance of a coach who had no control of his team.

The whole mess reminded me of comments from Cooper earlier in the season,

THE VIEW FROM 15TH AND HIGH Frank Moskowitz, Publisher

when he was asked about his team's repeated penalties and trash-talking. He said that he would have to get with his captains to try to fix the problem. Often, some of his captains were the worst offenders. Again, he looked like a coach with no control of his team.

Brewer ended up living out the type of dream most of us can only — well — dream of. Not only does he get a chance to play against the team that passed over him, but he has a career day against that team, helping establish his own team as a player on the national scene in the process.

I believe Brewer illustrated a fundamental flaw in John Cooper's coaching ability. I don't think he would have been able to motivate a player like Brewer to excel against the team that shunned him the way Lou Holtz did. I just don't think that ability is in Cooper's makeup. Similarly, with everyone in Raymond James Stadium knowing that Brewer would be out to prove the Buckeyes made a mistake by not recruiting him, Cooper was not able to motivate his defense to stop Brewer.

Cooper's biggest motivational job at OSU probably came during the Michigan game back in 1994. Bolstered by the first "Tunnel of Pride," Cooper stunned his team by smashing a blackboard at half-time and spurred his team to his first win over the Wolverines. But many felt that Cooper's act of destruction was contrived, and he never tried it again. It just wasn't him.

Perhaps it was that lack of fire in his personality that kept his teams from taking that last step to the national championship. Instead, the Buckeyes and their fans were left with some close calls, but their championship hopes were always thwarted, usually by archrival Michigan.

Those not familiar with the Ohio State program may wonder why Geiger would fire a coach with a .715 winning percentage who twice led his team to a No. 2 ranking in the country. Obviously, the fact that 42 percent of Cooper's losses were against Michigan and in bowl games was a factor. Those losses would also indicate that Cooper's teams often seemed to not improve as seasons progressed.

Cooper's teams also frequently lost in an embarrassing fashion. The embarrassments started early enough. The Buckeyes had been flawless in their first game under Cooper, an impressive 26-9 win over Syracuse. But the next week out, the Buckeyes were crushed at Pitt, 42-10, quickly taking the early luster off the Cooper regime.

That first season featured many other shiners, including a 41-7 loss to Indiana — dubbed "Darkest Day II," after Bruce had called a loss to the Hoosiers the year before "the darkest day in Ohio State football history" — and the loss to Purdue in Ohio Stadium when the Buckeyes were unable to stop little-known senior fullback Ernie Schramayr, who caught 13 passes against OSU after entering the game with only five catches for his career.

There was the game against USC in 1990 when Cooper threw in the towel

because of lightning with time still on the clock and the awful loss to Air Force in the Liberty Bowl later that season after many Buckeyes had complained publicly about even having to go to Memphis.

Few will forget the 31-3 loss to Michigan in 1991, complete with Desmond Howard's Heisman pose, following the announcement that morning that Cooper was having his contract extended, nor the stunning 28-0 loss to the Wolverines in 1993 when the Buckeyes were making their first run at the Rose Bowl and national championship under Cooper.

Then there was the 63-14 debacle at Penn State in 1994 and Tim Biakabutuka gaining an incredible 313 yards to help Michigan keep the Buckeyes out of the Rose Bowl in 1995.

By that time, Cooper had built up enough negative baggage that even big wins over Notre Dame in 1995 and 1996, as well as in the Rose Bowl following the 1996 season, couldn't win the support of all Buckeye fans. The fact that an additional loss to the Wolverines in 1996 and another embarrassing loss, this time to Michigan State in Ohio Stadium in 1998, kept Ohio State from chances at the national crowns didn't help Cooper's position in Columbus either.

By the time a listless Buckeye team struggled to 6-6 in 1999 and then, after an encouraging start in 2000, embarrassed themselves at home against Minnesota, blew a chance at a huge upset over Purdue with a major defensive lapse at the end of the game and then suffered yet another loss to Michigan to deny Ohio State a share of the Big Ten crown, the stage was set for Cooper's exit.

I think many believed that Cooper's best shots at national acclaim were in that period between 1995 and '98 and the program was on a downhill slide. The continued failures, especially against Michigan, were giving rival recruiters plenty of anti-Ohio State ammunition. The glory days may have been over and Geiger probably knew it.

In the end, I also think Cooper lived by the NFL and died by the NFL. Top prep talent came to Ohio State because they saw it as the fast track to play for pay. That talent helped the Buckeyes get to those peak years in the mid-'90s. But those same players also repeatedly left at the first chance at the big bucks, hampering continuity, and ultimately I think Cooper was left with many players who were more concerned about their future on Sunday than whether the Buckeyes could beat Michigan on the final Saturday of the season.

I think by anyone's way of thinking, Cooper was given every opportunity at Ohio State, every benefit of the doubt, and was well-compensated for his efforts.

But, by anyone's way of thinking, it was time to make a change.

What's The Hurry?

By the time you read this, Geiger and Co. may have chosen the 22nd coach in OSU football history.

Many fans seem to be pushing for a quick choice so that recruiting won't be

too badly affected. I don't think this should be a rush decision just because of recruiting. I would rather sacrifice a year of recruiting and bring in the right guy than hasten the selection process and get the wrong guy.

I don't have a particular preference at this point. I would like to see a coach who commands respect and discipline and has a good offensive mind. The Buckeyes need to move forward on that side of the ball. An Ohio background would be nice for the next coach, but I don't consider it mandatory.

By the way, people tend to forget that the choice of Cooper back in late 1987 was very popular at the time. Cooper had led Arizona State to the Rose Bowl and his Sun Devils had beaten Michigan there. That was good enough for most Buckeye fans. At the time, he was considered a dynamic breath of fresh air in Columbus.

And in case you think I'm piling on poor Coop now that he's been fired, I made my position on the coach and his job status clear in this space in the Nov. 5, 1994, issue of BSB following the 63-14 loss to Penn State. Later, in a heated exchange with the coach over that column, I told him that I was man enough to write that column and if he ended up proving me wrong, I would be man enough to say so in this space. I thought I might write that second column in both 1996 and 1998, but after the foibles against Michigan in '96 and Michigan State in '98, I never did.

If anyone would like a copy of that View From 15th & High from 1994, send me a self-addressed, stamped envelope (don't forget, it's 34 cents) and I'll send you one. It's relevant even today, more than six years later.

Other Notes

Germany wasn't Cooper's first player with a 0.00 GPA. In the coach's first year at Ohio State, Patrick Rogan, a freshman linebacker that season, also logged a 0.00 before being booted from the team. Ironically, Rogan ended up playing for Glen Mason at Kansas.

I also found it interesting that Walter and Bentley ended up in fisticuffs during winter conditioning. Cooper always talked about how conditioning drills in the winter and summer help build team chemistry. Instead, we find two players fighting and one suing. And that team chemistry didn't seem so great in the last two seasons, especially in 1999.

I wonder if the new coach, whoever he may be, shouldn't back off on the conditioning a little bit. I've said in this space many times that I think OSU's year-round program is too much football for a college player. I also think it contributes to the many early exits to the NFL. If you're going to have to participate all year, why not get paid for it?

Finally, many have said that one of the reasons Cooper lost control of his team was that he was too nice a guy. In that light, I found the headline of our April 1, 1988, cover interesting. "No More Mr. Nice Guy," says Cooper," the headline read.

"I'm tired of being a nice guy," Cooper said as he headed into his second spring following a 4-6-1 campaign.

"We're not going out there to be a nice guy and try to please everybody on the football team," he added.

That was 12 years ago. I'm not sure how much things have changed.