

Strong Culture Builds Premier Club Program



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One may not know it just from looking, but in the shadow of Ohio Stadium on the Lincoln Tower Park fields, Ohio State has grown a new football powerhouse from thin air.

Created in 2009, the Ohio State club football team has in its 12 years of existence sprouted from nothing to one of the finest programs in the National Club Football Association. On Dec. 4, it won its second straight national title, defeating George Mason, 42-27, in Waynesburg, Pa. to cap a perfect season in NCFA play.

And it's on those fields, on chilly nights like Dec. 1 - the final practice before traveling to Pennsylvania to battle George Mason for the second time in a season (the Buckeyes won their first meeting on Oct. 10, 29-28) that a title-contending stalwart has been built.

Head coach James Grega Jr. patrols the field, working primarily with the offense (which he coordinates) while his small team of assistants runs the rest of the team through drills. Players, often coming straight from class or other academic appointments, don whatever practice equipment they can get ahold of, as club players provide their own equipment.

As those mismatched jerseys fly across the hardened field, more teammates shuffle in at their own pace, arriving later for this 5:30 p.m. practice because of those academic obligations. Two players, slated for action on the lines, arrive together during the full-team session of practice and elicit quite a bit of delight both from Grega and from defensive coordinator Dylan Barron, though Grega catches them before they can join the action to ensure that they've stretched (they had not).

At one point early in the practice, these Buckeyes have to move off their original field and onto a shared field with the club rugby team to make room for intramural flag football. Later, as the team breaks for water, a player not to be named to protect his identity from the club sports authorities nabs a water bottle from the rugby team after being told not to, because he forgot to bring his own.

With about 10 minutes left in their allotted time on the fields, a rogue donut supplier appears and immediately becomes the most popular man on the field, but Grega eschews his efforts and reminds his team that they have work left to do and that they can partake so long as they finish strong.

Minutes later, his team has reached a fever pitch as light snow picks up, executing crisp option looks and delivering plays to a satisfying enough end that Grega adjourns practice and draws his team over for a quick speech about preparedness, playing for the guy next to you instead of against the one across from you, and about how everyone who doesn't raise a hand to signal otherwise is expected to attend a film study the next day - while riling his group up with the offering of a "wing night" for its performance on these suddenly snowy fields ahead of their most important game of the season.

It's a perfect encapsulation of the ethos that the team has built. This is a ragtag bunch, mismatched equipment and all, but it's a bunch that can really play when it locks in. This practice is full speed, and it's obvious in everything they do that this is a team that takes its coaching to heart. At one point during the team session, Barron is upset over his group's communication. One of his linebackers missed a pre-snap adjustment from the coach's mouth, which is only a problem when the rest of the defense isn't echoing those adjustments as they should. He gets on the group about yelling out the calls, and for the rest of the practice, the defensive side of the field is a cacophony of adjustments.

There's lots of fun to be had, from joking on the sidelines to pining after those donuts. Wide receivers and cornerbacks jaw with each other before, during and after plays. At one point, a linebacker snares an interception and is met with chirping from the peanut gallery about "finally catching one." Apparently, he'd been dealing with a case of the drops for weeks.

Their resources pale in comparison to the ones that the players only minutes away in Ohio Stadium have. This is a pay-for-play league, about \$200 a pop, and with equipment charges Grega estimates that a player can spend well over \$1,000 over a career with the club team. In fact, with COVID stripping away a season, the Buckeyes turned to GoFundMe this year to secure funds to travel to the national championship game. With a few weeks to spare, they passed their goal of \$2,000, with the extra money going directly into the fund for next season's team.

"The big issue was our kids have to pay to play," Grega said. "Our coaches volunteer. We don't get a really big budget from the university. During COVID, we didn't play at all. A lot of our money relies on fund-raising, and we couldn't do any fundraisers because everything was shut down. We budgeted just enough to get us to the championship game but ended up having to spend a little more on jerseys and on our trip to Oakland (Mich.) earlier in the year, which is 4½ hours away. We needed a little extra cash to fund this trip to the national championship game.

"We were always going to make it work. We knew we were always going to make it work and we were going to go, but to reach our goal, we're just extremely grateful. And we're extremely blessed to be in that situation where we have such great support from our family, from our friends and from our alumni. It means the world to get us there because it's not only going to set us up for the championship game, but we got enough to where it's going to help us set the starting blocks for next season as well. It means everything, especially to these kids who are paying a pay-to-play fee of about \$200 every year, plus equipment. You're talking about a kid ultimately putting up over a grand to do this over four years. It means the world."

Beyond the financial limitations, the volunteer staff really has the time to recruit only from within the student pool at Ohio State, leaving the team with a large group of options but a fixed talent base.

"It's a combination of a lot of things," Grega told BSB, where he worked as a staff writer for several years before moving into academic work so that he could coach more. "All of our coaches are volunteers, so we don't really have the resources to recruit full time. A lot of what we do is recruit our student body. Ohio State has 50- to 60,000 kids on campus. You have a pretty wide pool to choose from.

"As we've started to grow in the program, we have gotten interest from high school seniors who could probably play Division II, Division III ball, but some of those smaller schools don't offer their preferred major. So it's, 'Well, I'll go to Ohio State and I can still play club football.' It's not as demanding as a Division III school. It's not as competitive, although I think we could compete with some DIII schools in this country. But it's still full-contact football, you still get to be a part of a team and play almost a 10-game schedule."

Despite that limited recruiting outreach, this is a team filled with talent, experience and with a whole lot of guys who sacrifice a good chunk of their free time after class only for one more chance to be a part of a football team. Others have larger aspirations - putting games on tape in hopes of jumping into the higher divisions or even to earn a walk-on spot at Ohio State - but many of the 17 seniors whom the Buckeyes took into Waynesburg played their final football game as they secured that title against George Mason.

Grega references them in his speech, too. He tells his players that they owe it to those seniors to make that final game as special as they can.

For this group, it's especially true. This class of seniors that the club team has just seen off is certainly the best that Ohio State has ever seen and could very well be the greatest club football class of all time, anywhere. It worked to claim the first titles in school history and didn't lose an NCFB game in either of its final two seasons in Columbus.

Quarterback Kellyn Gerenstein is the face of the program, a three-year starter who came in with Grega when he took the job, but he's far from the only impactful senior, to whom Grega gives a big chunk of credit for Ohio State's success.

"A lot of it has been the guys we've had since I've been here," Grega said. "Kellyn has been guaranteed our starting quarterback for four years. His first day as a member of this team was my first day as a head coach. We've been attached at the hip ever since. He's an unbelievable player, but also there's been a lot of guys in his class and in the class after him who are just unbelievable athletes. They're unbelievable kids. And they have stayed committed to the program."

That commitment runs throughout the program and has helped to cement the club team not just as a force to be reckoned with on the field but as a viable option for prospective players.

In one case, star wide receiver Casey Scroggins even turned down a chance to walk on for the varsity team, sticking with the club team because of the flexibility it offered him.

"Casey Scroggins, our leading wide receiver, leads the league in receiving yards. Ohio State offered him a walk-on spot this year, and he ended up turning them down because he's a pre-med major and he just couldn't handle the responsibilities both being pre-med and a full-time football player. We've been able to keep this thing going purely because we've got really good kids. We've got really good players that have shown commitment to the program. And when that happens, it makes it a lot easier to recruit to because when they're passionate about it, that shows to potential recruits. They want to be a part of

this thing as well.”

For a group with so many backgrounds, the buy-in this staff has drawn really is something to behold. Just about every player has a different reason for playing club football, but every one of them has found the kind of passion and the feeling of brotherhood that made them fall in love with the game from the start.

Some, like Gerenstein, went underrecruited in high school – in his case, an injury in his senior year kept him out of the limelight – but couldn’t bear the thought of being away from football. He even does scouting on the side for Sports Illustrated.

“I don’t think any soul walking this earth likes football more than I do,” Gerenstein told BSB. “Right now, along with playing, I’m a scout. I could be a coach, a scout, whatever. Anything, as long as it’s football. I could go play overseas. This is what I want to do. It’s who I am.”

In their years together, Grega and Gerenstein have formed a bond that the quarterback describes as the best you’ll find between a coach and quarterback. The two have an innate understanding of what the other wants and have worked to build an offense that just always seems to have exactly what it needs, exactly when it needs it. Gerenstein hits his marks on time every time, and when he needs to, he’s trusted to make a play with his legs – which he does frequently, and with gusto.

“I can’t say it’s like a father-son relationship, because we’re too close in age,” Gerenstein joked. “But I was telling my dad back at home that I don’t think there’s a better relationship between a play-caller and a quarterback in any level of football in America. It doesn’t matter if it’s in the NFL or college, I think me and him just, on the field, off the field, there’s just so much leeway and trust. He’s telling me, ‘Hey, I think we should be doing this.’ I’m telling him, ‘Hey, let’s look at this and it’s never a no. It’s usually yes. And if not, it’s, ‘All right, we’ll take a look.’ There’s so much understanding and respect.”

Gerenstein has so much affection for his coach that in October he took to social media to say that any high school program would be lucky to have him at the helm that he’s one of the best young coaches in the state. Grega, for what it’s worth, told BSB that those offers haven’t come in quite yet but he would like to make a career out of coaching either at the high school or college level down the road.

“He’s a player’s guy,” Gerenstein said. “And I think that people really underestimate how much an understanding coach really means to a football team. On top of that, he just knows X’s and O’s, he knows how to call plays, he knows how to game-plan. I think that there’s a lack of compassion in high school football and in the sport in general. If you have compassion for club football, you damn sure would have compassion for something that actually pays you.”

Other players got that itch to return to football after a few years away from the game. Third-year linebacker Colby Stahl spent two years at Ohio State without playing the game after he starred in high school, but watching games in the Horseshoe was too much to handle, and he decided at the urging of a friend to join the club team.

“I played since I was in fifth grade,” Stahl told BSB. “And after two years of being here and watching the Buckeyes play in the ‘Shoe, I just couldn’t stand being away from it any longer. I had to get back out there. I know I still had the build for it. I’ve worked out all the time just in case anything came up. One of my friends on the team asked me to come out so I said, ‘You know what? Let’s do it.’ ”

Then there are some, like tailback Jalen Haley, who see the club team as a chance to build up a profile and make a leap up into a higher level with strong play. The Zanesville, Ohio, product could be well on his way after featuring heavily in Ohio State's offense, carrying the ball 113 times for 841 yards on the season. At only 5-8, 187 pounds, Haley too was overlooked in high school but can prove his talent in the club ranks.

"I just wanted another chance to play football at a high level so I can hopefully take my talents to either the varsity team or any other team with interest," Haley said.

Though he has higher aspirations, he too has found himself fully enmeshed in the brotherhood the team touts.

"It was our bus ride back from Oakland, and I was just listening to all the laughs and jokes," Haley said. "I had my earphones and then I remembered what my mom told me. She said, 'These are going to be the best moments of your life, don't just worry about your stuff. Don't worry about wins or losses.' So I took my earphones out and I just lived these moments with my brothers."

For Haley and for many members of the team, to see a former club team standout in wide receiver Chris Booker break onto Ohio State's varsity team as a walk-on (and one of the best special teamers on the roster) works as motivation to reach their own goals on the field.

"He's definitely a big inspiration," Haley said. "I know we have some players on this team who could have played. Casey Scroggins had an opportunity. It's definitely motivation. It shows you that it can be done, gives you something to work for. Being able to say, 'He came from club football and he's now he's doing that at the biggest level,' it's pretty cool."

But the value of the team far exceeds the opportunity to climb the ladder in Grega's eyes. Club football at Ohio State can be anything to anyone, be it one more chance to be a part of a team, an opportunity to grow - and in some cases to learn for the first time - or just a step in a longer journey.

"It gives you a platform and it gives you the ability to strap up again, put film together, and I think what we've done really well is put our players in positions to succeed," Grega said. "We've had players, like Chris, who are playing for national championships for Ohio State last year, and then we have guys here who've never played football before. We've got all kinds, and whatever your goals are, as long as you're realistic about them, this team will help you get there."

"There are really talented kids out here. It's full football. A lot of times when people hear club football, they think it's like flag football. It's not. It's full contact, and there are kids that can play the DI, DII, DIII levels. It is competitive. When people hear club football, I don't think they take it seriously. It's serious. It's competitive. Our team takes it very seriously. Club football at Ohio State is real, it's something that we're really building, and it's a championship program."