

Throwback Film Study: 1997 Rose Bowl



With the return of football up in the air, now serves as a perfect time for reflection on the history of football, and the strategic evolution of the game. To do that, the film study will be spending the offseason looking back at classic Ohio State games. Today's film study revolves around Ohio State's 1997 Rose Bowl victory against Arizona State, 20-17. Playbook graphics are from here. Video is from this cut-up. Last week's film study can be found here.

There's been a common thread through each of the first six throwback film studies, be it on offense or defense, led by Woody Hayes or Earle Bruce: much of Ohio State's success in the games that we've looked at has come through good coaching, be it in the form of clever scheme or good gameplanning. The Buckeyes were certainly supremely talented under both coaches, but for the most part, the biggest wins of the eras were driven by combining that talent with top notch coaching, some of the best in the nation.

That, as the Hayes era showed, doesn't always mean coaching that was on the cutting edge of innovation. Hayes was frequently behind the curve and proud of it, even through the 70s as he was dragged, kicking and screaming, away from the T-formation and into a more fashionable I-form look by offensive coordinator George Chaump. Bruce wasn't quite so stubborn, as we saw with the innovative defense of Gary Blackney against Iowa in 1985, though Bruce's Buckeyes weren't exactly reinventing the wheel either.

Still, without innovation, there was still creativity in those staffs and on those teams, and they were teams guided at their cores by good, smart coaching. Ohio State, like most powerhouses of the time, was usually playing not to lose, but that didn't mean that the Buckeyes were playing dumb, nor did it mean they were relying exclusively on talent to get by.

Ohio State's win against Arizona State in the Rose Bowl following the 1996 season, at least on the offensive side of the ball, will serve as the first game in this throwback film study series that doesn't quite follow that mold, partially by the design of head coach John Cooper.

That design, put simply, places an emphasis on acquiring as much talent as possible, and putting that talent into a fairly open system on both sides of the ball to allow the players to utilize their superior

ability to dominate lesser teams. Cooper certainly wasn't the only coach that employed a model like this, in fact, this was really the flavor of the month in the 1990s, with programs like Florida State, Florida, Michigan, Notre Dame, Penn State and Tennessee running the era thanks to lineups filled to the brim with top tier talent. While college football to this point had been defined by traditional, hard-nosed coaches preaching precision, the sudden burst of national recruiting that had spread to college football's powerhouses led to a much looser, athleticism and talent-based 90s.

Cooper was firmly in that boat, and had quite a bit of success with it at Ohio State once he was able to populate his rosters with that top national talent that had mostly avoided Ohio State under Cooper's predecessor, largely because Bruce didn't have much interest in playing the recruiting game, at least not at an elite level. Cooper, on the other hand, made his living as a national recruiter, and once that finally took hold of Ohio State's roster, Cooper's primary job was just to stay out of the way.

For the most part, that approach worked for Cooper during his tenure with the Buckeyes. Ohio State erupted for 43 wins from 1995 to 1998, coming up just short of serious national title contention in three of the four seasons, after spending the first seven years of the Cooper era trying to build up that talent base and develop a national recruiting brand, winning just 54 games from 1988 to 1994. During that four-year stretch of dominance, Ohio State did exactly what supremely talented teams are supposed to do. It throttled lesser opponents, rarely slipping up against any teams without a ranking in front of their name.

However, when it came to showings against those top teams, Ohio State always seemed to come up just short, falling flat against Michigan and in bowl games year after year, never seeming to have an answer for how to edge out teams that could match the Buckeyes in talent. Through the lens of the 1997 Rose Bowl, a win in spite of quite a few gameplanning and scheme flaws, the constant struggles that Ohio State had with teams of equal or greater talent start to make a little bit more sense.

To start, it is worth saying that, for the most part, talent is going to beat coaching in college football. It just is. A brilliant scheme, carried out by brilliant coaches can get you quite a bit, but most of the time, the more talented team is going to win. It's the nature of the sport, and something that seems to be lost on quite a few people. There's a reason that the same 10 teams win more games than everyone else every year, and it's because they have more talent than everyone else. Talent is the king in college football, and you cannot win on the highest level if you don't have highest level caliber talent coming into the program.

With that said, when talent is equal, coaching and gameplanning can be the difference, as they were pretty frequently during the Cooper era at Ohio State. Quite a few of those high profile losses to top teams happened because other staffs were able to put their top talent in better positions to succeed than Ohio State's staff was. That note about getting top talent and getting out of the way isn't just a nifty slogan. Those were the words that coaches like Bobby Bowden lived by. The systems didn't have to be complex, nor did they have to be precise, but they did have to put top tier talent in a good position to succeed, by amplifying the strengths of a roster. In big matchups, Cooper often failed to do that, encumbering his talented rosters with playcalling and gameplanning that did little to make things easier for the players.

The best example of that in this Rose Bowl was the constant, seemingly random switching at the quarterback position. Ohio State opened the game with junior quarterback Stanley Jackson, and then flipped, for essentially the remainder of the game, between Jackson and former junior college standout

Joe Germaine. Jackson was the better runner of the two, and had found success through the 1996 season as a game manager, easily paired with starting running back Pepe Pearson. Germaine was the better passer of the two, and usually played when Ohio State wanted to open things up down the field, and get the ball to playmakers on the perimeter like David Boston and Dimitrious Stanley.

The two basically split time through the season, with neither really finding much separation from the other. It worked, for the most part, as Ohio State rolled to a 10-0 start to the season and a No. 2 ranking, prior to another defeat at the hands of Michigan that ended the Buckeye title hopes once again.

Against Arizona State, as it had against Michigan, that split-time approach seemed to cause more trouble than it was worth, again lending some credence to the idea that Ohio State's big game coaching may have cause more issues than it solved. Jackson had trouble finding any breathing room against an Arizona State defense that was intent on rushing seven or eight defenders on every play, and played a major role in Arizona State's five sacks, along with several more QB hurries that didn't show up in the stat sheet.

There was the occasional rush like this one, a designed play action with a rollout that let Jackson escape the pocket quickly and run to the side of the line that had Orlando Pace on it (generally a good idea), but for the most part, Jackson's day was filled with dropping back, looking downfield, and finding nothing but maroon and gold. Here, Jackson fakes the hand off and is supposed to be looking to pass downfield, but finds nothing, and makes some room to pick up a solid gain.

This play was actually part of one of the few positive Jackson drives in the game. The Buckeyes followed this up with another Jackson keeper, this time to the right side off of a fake, again originally designed as a play action pass.

Jackson plays the fake well, pulling one edge rusher inside and holding another linebacker in place long enough to allow for time to get outside of the pocket and scoot for about 20 yards.

A play later, Ohio State breaks out another cool look, finding fullback Matt Keller wide open on a really well-designed play action wheel route. Jackson fakes the hand off told hold those linebackers in place and keep their eyes in the backfield. While he shows the fake, two wide receivers to the left are digging hard and looking to pull at least one safety away from the short side of the field, while tight end John Lumpkin is getting vertical and attacking the other safety in the deep middle of the field.

While the defensive backfield is being moved to the strong side to pay attention to the three primary receivers, Keller sneaks out of the backfield outside of the right tackle, completely unnoticed by the still distracted linebackers, and into an uncovered part of the field where either those linebackers or a safety were supposed to be. The Buckeyes capped the drive with a touchdown pass to Boston a few plays later.

Outside of this, however, Jackson was mostly ineffective. He wasn't able to run as much as he would've liked because of the blitzing Sun Devils, and he completed just six of his 14 passes for 59 yards.

Still, Ohio State continued to entrust the starter for the majority of the year, leaning on him for much of

the first half and even inserting him back into the game in the fourth quarter. It was Germaine, however, that managed to lead the majority of Ohio State success against the Sun Devil defense, despite spending much of the game on the bench. He got the nod early in the second half after scored to take a 10-7 lead, and Ohio State finally seemed to break away from an attachment to both Jackson and the running game that made little sense against such an aggressive defense.

Germaine dropped and found Stanley for a first down on a post route. The play was pretty basic, with three receivers on the field. Dee Miller at the top of the screen, running a comeback, with Stanley on a post and Boston running an intermediate dig route. It's designed to beat man coverage and do so fairly quickly, which was pretty much exactly what Ohio State needed after Arizona State terrorized the Buckeyes with man coverage and blitzing for the entire first half.

Germaine barely fakes the hand off, but does so enough to again at least give the linebackers something to think about, while Stanley draws a safety in man coverage. Without a linebacker dropping deep enough into a zone (because of that fake), Germaine has an easy throw underneath the safety and inside to that post, leaving the responsibility to Stanley to make a great catch. He does, and Ohio State has its first positive play in what feels like an eternity.

Then, a play later, Germaine makes a play that leads Brent Musburger to say that "this quarterback controversy is history." Honestly, Ohio state probably would've been better off listening to him.

Germaine sells the fake so hard that the cameraman loses track of the ball, drawing all of those linebackers in again while Stanley again runs a hard post right into the heart of the ASU defense. With two tight ends attacking the intermediate middle of the field, the safeties are drawn too far in, while leaving Stanley in single coverage with poor Jason Simmons, a very good player in his own right, who absolutely never had a chance to make this play. Stanley dusts him, Germaine hits him in stride, and Ohio State shows off just what top talent can do for you.

Through the rest of the third quarter and most of the fourth quarter, Ohio State returned to its shell. The Buckeyes looked to run as the first option, kept the passing game short and underneath, and relied on its defense, as had been the case for much of the season. Even players, including Keller admitted that the dynamic had become a bit unfair to the defense.

"The defense has been there all year and the offense has been under fire a little bit lately to the point where people were questioning us," Keller said.

It was the constant reliance on the defense holding on in tight games that led to the shock of the actual end of the game. After nearly a full game of excellence, the Buckeye defense finally snapped, as ASU quarterback Jake Plummer slipped into the end zone with 1:40 to play to give the Sun Devils a 17-14 lead. Trailing with less than two minutes to play, Ohio State did what it was unwilling to do for the entire season: made a decision at quarterback. The Buckeyes put the ball back into Germaine's hands at the pleading of quarterbacks coach Walt Harris.

"Before that final drive, there was a discussion on the sideline about whether it should be Germaine or Jackson in the game," BSB's Mark Rea recounted of the moments before the final drive. "When neither Cooper nor offensive coordinator Mike Jacobs could seem to make up his mind, Harris said, 'It's got to be Germaine.'"

“Cooper then pointed to Joe and the rest, as they say, is history.”

Ohio state couldn't have asked for a better two-minute drive from the quarterback. Free to finally attack the Arizona State backfield, Germaine picked apart the Sun Devil defense on an incredible game-winning 12-play, 65-yard drive.

After failing to get much going on first or second down to open the drive, Germaine found the ever-reliable Stanley on a curl route, again beating man coverage.

Faced with third down again three players later, Germaine dropped, stepped up in the pocket and hit Stanley on a dig route.

A play later, he hit Stanley on an out route to move Ohio State within striking distance. Several pass interferences later (though only two of the four on the drive were actually called), and Ohio State found itself on the 5-yard line with just over 20 seconds to play. You know what happens next.

The call in the huddle was 240 Smash, was designed for Boston to cut inside on a slant, while Stanley breaks to the outside on a corner route to the back of the end zone. If the corner follows Boston on the slant as expected, it should leave Stanley in single coverage on a linebacker or safety. Instead, however, the safety played Boston conservatively, so he broke off the route and escaped to the outside, an option on the play but not one that's used a ton. The coaches had tipped him off to the possibility before the play, but Boston still had to make the call on the fly.

“We knew they'd expect a slant; that's why we did it,” Jacobs said. “We schemed that up.”

“Dimitrious was supposed to go to the corner of the end zone right there and I don't know where the DB was going,” Boston explained. “Dimitrious is the primary target on that play and I'm supposed to go in and clear it out for him. Really, I'm not supposed to go back out on that play.”

It's fitting that an elite talent making a play on the fly, after the second quarterback made more plays in one drive than the first did all game, is what gave Cooper one of the biggest wins of his tenure in Columbus. So often, he found himself just short of glory, unable to fully let go and allow for his talented players to thrive in big moments. A moment of indecision or the continuation of a poorly constructed gameplan at this stage of the game would've robbed Ohio State of a program defining moment, and a much-needed marquee win. It's easy to say that a more trusting and confident Cooper probably wins at least one title, though it's impossible to prove that thesis.

It's especially frivolous to think about that sort of hypothetical, given Cooper's biggest post-game statement.

“We've won some big games,” Cooper said. “We haven't won one this big. Maybe you guys will quit writing about us not being able to win the big game.”

Sorry, John. It's been 23 years, and at least one person is still writing about the Cooper era Buckeyes being able to win the big game.