

Throwback Film Study: 2003 Fiesta 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 2003 national title victory over Miami, 31-24. Video is from this cut-up. Last week's film study can be found [here](#). Mark Dantonio's 2002 playbook is [here](#).

With the benefit of more than 17 years to reflect, it's easy to say that Ohio State's gameplan for the 2003 national title game was the obvious one, and that the success it had makes total sense. After all, Miami did have a massive, glaring weakness in the form of quarterback Ken Dorsey, and he essentially served as the only form of any weakness on the entire roster.

Again, that's easy to say in retrospect, because in 2020, Dorsey looks a lot less like a threat, and a lot more like a soft spot that can be exploited to the point of nearly crippling one of the most talented college football teams ever assembled.

At the time, however, Dorsey was largely considered a strong member of that team. His 3,369 yards, 28 touchdowns and 12 interceptions in 2002 was enough to earn him a fifth-place finish in the 2002 Heisman voting, despite completing just over 50 percent of the passes that he threw, even with nothing but NFL receivers around him.

The brilliance of Ohio State's gameplan for the 2003 national title game is that without 17 years to reflect, defensive coordinator Mark Dantonio saw right through Dorsey. He looked at what was considered a borderline Heisman-caliber quarterback that had gashed Big East defenses for three straight seasons, and decided to do what all of Miami's opponents had been too afraid to do: he called Dorsey's bluff.

"We felt like we needed to pressure the quarterback," Dantonio said. "He's too good to stand back there and just let him throw it. He's got (TE Kellen) Winslow and he's got (WR Andre) Johnson and those other guys are good, too. It's a tough situation."

To pressure Dorsey, Dantonio focused primarily on linebacker blitzes, utilizing a solid group of backers to bring one or two other rushers, complementing a stout front led by Will Smith. The Buckeyes also had the benefit of one of the best safeties to ever come through Columbus in Mike Doss, who played a crucial role in both run and pass coverage in this game. The plan for Ohio State's defense was,

essentially, to force Dorsey to beat them with pressure constantly in his face.

As Dantonio said, he was solid when he had time, but Ohio State was willing to gamble that he would falter under a rush, even if it meant leaving the defensive backfield on a bit of an island against one of the best receiver rooms in the nation.

From the first possession of the game, Ohio State stuck strictly to the script that Dantonio had written, pressuring Dorsey on Miami's first play from scrimmage.

From a 4-3 front, Ohio State brings the mike linebacker, Matt Wilhelm, right up onto the line of scrimmage. The Buckeyes are expecting a pass, meaning that the 21 personnel that Miami shows isn't likely to play too much of a role in pass protection, and that five rushers should be enough to generate a free blitz if the misdirection is good enough to confuse the five offensive linemen.

That misdirection happens with the defensive tackle, Darrion Scott, and Wilhelm. Wilhelm bull rushes the B gap between the left guard and tackle, picking up both of them for just long enough to keep that tackle distracted. Scott stunts in and heads for the center, while the other side of the line is just rushing straight. With Scott and Wilhelm combining to take on three blockers with just two bodies, Smith is able to sneak around the edge just before the left tackle shifts his focus away from Wilhelm, and darts around the edge to connect with Dorsey and knock him over.

Ohio State only sacrifices one player from the coverage on this play, but attacks the Miami line in the right way to overwhelm it, despite Miami having a numbers advantage when halfback Willis McGahee is included as a blocker in the backfield. The misdirection gives Ohio State a sack, while the personnel stills gives the Buckeyes a relatively solid six-man backfield to prevent any receivers from being immediately open.

While the primary goal of the constant pressure was to throw Dorsey off, it did quite a bit of good against the run as well, holding Miami to just 65 yards on 33 total rushes, with sacks included.

Here, Ohio State is again rushing five, with a five-man front and both ends dropping into short zones, while two linebackers blitz, each heading for the A gap on either side of the center. Behind the front, it looks like a cover 3, with both corners expected to drop into a deep third along with a safety, while the other safety, Doss, cycles into the underneath shell to help against the run.

Miami is running off the tackle, which cornerback Chris Gamble and Doss read quickly on the playside. Gamble sets the edge, Doss makes a quick read of the Miami front, finds the likely hole for the halfback, and promptly fills it with a massive hit right as McGahee arrives. This isn't recommended when you have a normal safety, but Doss was pretty far from normal. He made plays like this one more than pretty much any other safety in the nation.

Now, the Buckeyes weren't perfect in this game, because if they had been, it wouldn't have gone into two overtimes. Miami usually only found success on the few times that Ohio State decided to sit back in coverage let its four linemen try to get pressure, but occasionally, Dorsey did manage to break the blitz. When he did, Ohio State's secondary had no chance, like on this, Miami's first touchdown of the game.

The Buckeyes rush six, with pressure coming into the A gap from a safety blitz while Wilhelm holds up

the center. However, that safety pressure just misses Dorsey because of a great play by McGahee, giving him the time that he needs to hit a wide open Roscoe Parrish for the touchdown. Parrish was alone against Doss down the field, and while Doss was great, he was never going to win that battle if Dorsey had the time to see it.

Save for this play, however, Ohio State's pressure gave the Hurricanes fits. Dorsey was flustered early and often, the rushing attack was incapable of generating much of anything, and drives often stalled as soon as Ohio State flipped the switch from passive to aggressive defense.

The rush was also able to help generate several Miami turnovers, including two Dorsey interceptions. The first saw Dorsey sail a pass about 20 feet over his wideout's head and right into the hands of Dustin Fox, thanks partially to some pressure that compromised his form.

The second was a similar story, with a little bit of luck in Ohio State's favor off the tip.

The Buckeyes rush five, generating pressure on the right side of the line by attacking the right guard and center with a straight rush, a stunt, and a blitzing linebacker. The linebacker nearly gets home, collapsing the pocket and forcing Dorsey to throw into the cover 3 shell before he's ready to. Johnson is actually relatively open, but Dorsey sails it just a little. Johnson can't pull it down, and Doss is right there in his deep third to make the interception.

"Dorsey is a great player," Fox said. "But sometimes when you can get pressure on him, he'll just chuck it up there. When he does that, you have to make plays on the ball."

As the game went on, this strategy held about as strong as Ohio State could have hoped. Turnovers gave the Buckeye offense a chance to pick up some points, and Miami's inability to move the ball consistently kept that talent on the outside from gashing the Buckeyes on big plays. Dorsey didn't have the time to hit Johnson or Parrish on the perimeter, even though they were usually pretty open down the field.

As the game started to come down to the wire, however, Ohio State got a little too tight. The Buckeyes, nursing a small lead, looked to four-man rushes a few too many times, and for the first time all game, Dorsey was able to find some breathing room. With just over five minutes to play, Miami worked its way down the field and well into Buckeye territory, leaning heavily on Winslow to chew up yards and move onto the right side of the field, looking to either tie the game at 17 with a field goal or take the lead with a touchdown.

Then, with 5:12 to play in the game, Ohio State, frankly, got lucky. It got lucky in a way that made sense, given the approach of the defense, but for all intents and purposes, the Buckeyes were given a gift by the football gods.

On a third-and medium from just past the 50-yard line, Ohio State decided to trust its coverage ability, dropping seven players into a cover 3 look while rushing just four. The Buckeyes did show a stunt up front, but that wasn't enough to really trouble the Hurricane line.

Dorsey took the time that Ohio State gave him, and tucked a beautiful ball right into Parrish's hands between two defenders for what would have been a spectacular 20-plus-yard gain, putting Miami well

within striking distance to tie the game or even take the lead with just a few minutes to play.

Parrish couldn't hang on to the football, though. He caught it, took two steps and spun at the perfect angle, leaving the ball open for just a split second, right as Fox crashed into his arm, in what was less of a tackle attempt and more of a stumble and lunge into the nearest player he could see.

"I was just trying to tackle him and the ball was there," Fox said. "I just got it out. It was like a perfect tackle, and Will was there to pick it up."

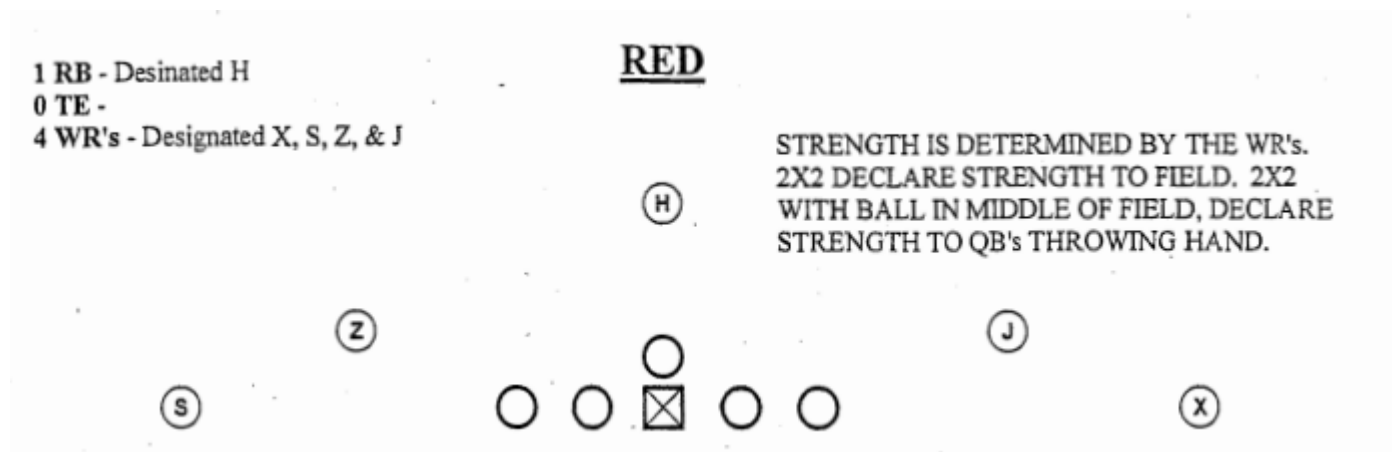
This little bit of divine intervention essentially saved the Buckeyes from themselves, and also seemed to remind Dantonio of what had gotten him this far. On the next Miami possession, following a big punt return, Ohio State went right back to the rush, and was able to keep Miami at an arm's length, surrendering a game tying field goal, but, more importantly, preventing disaster in the form of a last-minute touchdown.

A big part of that was thanks to this sack by big Simon Fraser, with an assist from a beautifully designed blitz. Ohio State looks to pressure on both edges, on the right with Smith, and on the left with a blitz from linebacker Cie Grant. The hope is that the straight rush from the three interior rushers will either suck the line in, freeing up one of those edge rushers, or, more likely, the edge rushers will collapse the pocket, force Dorsey up, at which point one of those three interior rushers just needs to win a battle.

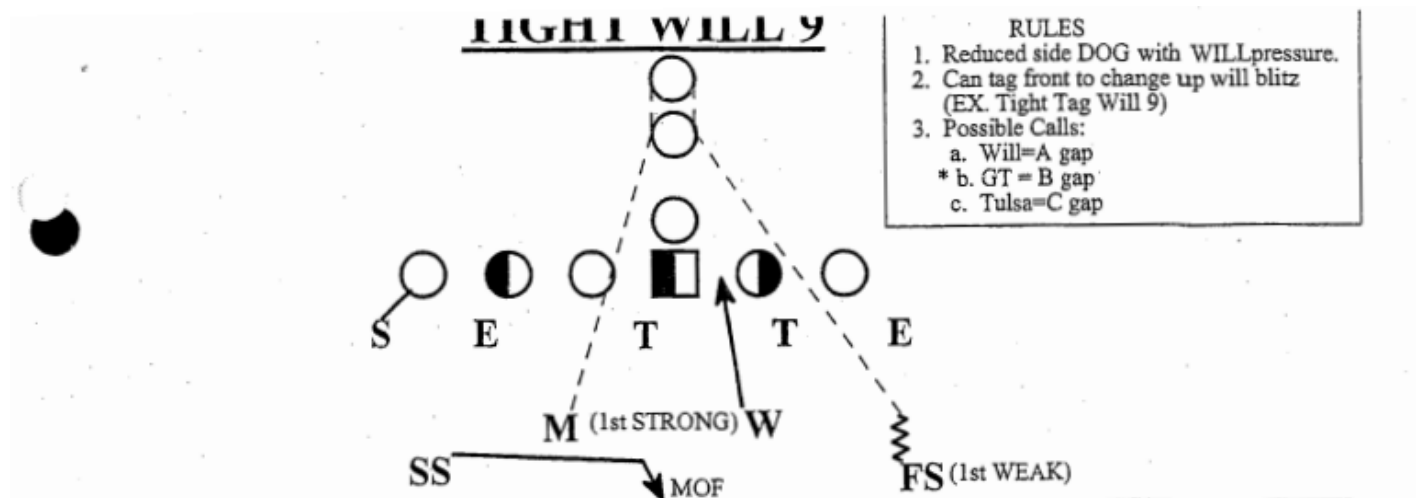
Ohio State gets the latter, Dorsey moves up, and Fraser wins the moment, freeing himself from the left tackle and taking Dorsey down for a season-defining sack. Miami is forced to settle for the field goal, sending the game to overtime.

In overtime, Ohio State kept the pressure up. With a shorter field, Miami was able to find enough room to score a touchdown in the first overtime period, but it was still struggling quite a bit with the blitz. In the second overtime period, with just yards separating Miami from the end zone and a third overtime, Dantonio flexed one more time, orchestrating a brilliant goal line stand and forcing Dorsey into a fourth-and-goal with the season on the line. After daring Dorsey to beat the rush all game long, he had one more shot to prove Dantonio and the Buckeyes wrong.

Ohio State's call was Tight Will Tulsa Red Nine, a man free call adjusted to the personnel that Miami showed: one halfback, four receivers, two on each side of the field. That's what the "red" call signifies.



The "Will" and "Tulsa" announces rusher and gap, with Grant being the will linebacker, and the Tulsa call indicating a rush into the C gap.



"We played man free on that last one - Tight Will Tulsa Red Nine - and we told our middle field safety to double the tight end," Dantonio said.

"That's the first time we called that defense all day where (Grant) came off the open side. When he came free and nobody touched him I thought, 'It's over. That's it.' That's exactly what I thought.

"I knew he wouldn't miss, I knew (Dorsey) was going to be hurried and it was just going to be a matter of whether he made a great play, which he's capable of doing."

Just as it had been for the rest of the game, Dorsey didn't make a great play. He saw the pressure, panicked, and did exactly what Ohio State thought he would do. Dantonio called Dorsey's bluff all game long, and on the final play, Dorsey folded.

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