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"For The Buckeye Fan Who Needs To Know More"

March 5, 2022

Paying It Forward



Ohio State Is Finding Its 'Edge' In The NIL Race

By **CHASE BROWN, PATRICK MAYHORN, BRADEN MOLES**
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writers

The infrastructure of college athletics was built to function within one very specific framework. It moves glacially, with lots of little parts that fit together to keep everything churning and a design entirely averse to sudden shocks to the system.

The NCAA made its hay for decades with committees for committees, meetings about meetings and patience sometimes bordering on outright apathy. It is not a governing body that likes to adapt on the fly, and for the vast majority of its existence, it hasn't needed to. It was built to be a one-speed bicycle.

Naturally, when something comes along and rips out the brakes and sends that bicycle down a mountain, there's going to be a little bit of panic. And if multiple lawsuits against the NCAA's amateurism model were the brakes being removed, the passage of laws that allowed for athletes to profit off of their names, images and likenesses on July 1, 2021, was the shove that launched the NCAA down the mountain and into an unprecedented era of turmoil and change.

Varying laws across state lines, many pieced to-

gether at the last minute and without more than the absolute bare bones to avoid the wrath of local universities and their fans. NCAA legislation that cedes essentially all power to those individual state (and within those states, individual universities) guidelines. Months of questions about the legality of just about every new development, from standard one-on-one deals between athletes and businesses to the creation of recruiting-centric "collectives" and even around the punishments – if there are any at all – for breaking the few rules that exist. Rumblings of a new "Wild West" echoed by everyone from message board posters to university presidents and athletic directors, including Ohio State's Gene Smith. This is the NIL era, eight months in – chaos.

Or is it?

Despite the widespread panic about the destruction of collegiate athletics as it was once known; about burlap sacks with dollar signs on them with signing bonuses inside – cartoon cowboy style – and about the pace at which everything is happening, the power brokers in the arena are presenting a sense of comfort as the new era of college sports approaches its first birthday.

In speaking to the media on Feb. 16 for the first time since what can be loosely grouped as "the NIL laws" went into effect, Smith was blunt about his concerns – which exist almost exclusively within the football and basketball recruiting spaces – but he was

just as quick to establish that this new normal isn't really all that abnormal. Although navigating in the new world has been challenging, there have been "so many stories" of student athletes benefitting that have been "just heartwarming" to the OSU athletic director.

In an interview with Buckeye Sports Bulletin, Ohio State's Carey Hoyt – who has served as a guiding force in the OSU athletic department in setting its path within NIL circles – echoed those sentiments, saying that for the most part, the chaos of the early months has subsided. Matt Brown, one of the nation's foremost experts on the business of college sports and the founder of Extra Points, a newsletter about just that topic, told BSB that the changes haven't been as transformational as many fear.

"I would just encourage everybody to not leap to gigantic sweeping conclusions because, honest to God, I don't think this has been as transformational as the Internet makes it out to be," Brown said.

Setting Standards And Limits

That's not to say that the administrators most directly involved with setting the standards for their school's approach to NIL rights are without any complaints. Smith and Hoyt agreed that they'd like to

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From The Message Board

After the Ohio General Assembly passed legislation allowing college athletes to profit from their names, images and likenesses on July 1, 2021, Ohio State has become a national leader in NIL activity. We asked readers of BuckeyeSports.com and staff members how they initially viewed NIL and if that perspective has changed or remained the same in the last nine months. Here are some responses:

"I think NIL is good for the athletes, but I fear it may not be good for college sports down the road. I hope tweaks will be made to NIL, but how and by whom? Wherever there is money, there are surely crooks."

"The love of money is the root of all kinds of evil."

– Terrier Buck

4:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m. Monday to Friday. Besides carrying a full class load, I worked part-time to pay for tuition, books and housing, as I had no full scholarship. This taught me valuable skills to balance and prioritize time and resources."

"Whenever big money is available, corruption can't be far behind."

– R1TBDBITL

"I am against NIL. While attending Ohio State, I was in the marching band, rehearsing from

"I think the fact that gambling houses are taking over sponsorship

of much of sports broadcasting at the same time as fuzzy NIL rules are being implemented is a recipe for disaster. In my Cleveland years, I crossed paths with a guy named 'Tony the Enforcer' at a wedding. If I were a player, I would have needed new underwear if this guy had come up to me before a game and said, 'The boss wants you to miss your free throws.'

"It's happened before in college sports, and it will inevitably happen again, probably sooner rather than later. Can you imagine going to Draft Kings Stadium for a game? That's probably going to happen, too. What happens when gambling houses start paying players under NIL?"

– Michael Bauer

"In a year, NIL will be completely different. You can't fix something if you don't know what the problems are. We are finding those problems out – and the good things also – rapidly."

– Poster That Harley Built

"I think it's too soon to make a definitive statement on the pros and cons of NIL. At the moment, I simply have a bad feeling in my gut about it, but I hope it turns out for the greater good."

– PeyoteBuck

a wonderful thing for collegiate athletes. It allows them to profit from their name, image and likeness while attending school. When I talked with student-athletes about this issue, they shared that school and athletics are like two full-time jobs."

"As a full-time college student, I can tell you that going to school, working part-time, participating in a local ministry and planning a wedding has me drained and exhausted at times. I imagine that they feel like me a lot of the time, probably even more tired and in need of rest."

"NIL offers these student-athletes a chance to make money on their time, which is an incredible thing. I know we will point to the football and men's basketball teams as the biggest benefactors of NIL, which is somewhat true. Still, some fantastic Olympic athletes are taking advantage of these opportunities, and that warms my heart. They don't often get the same recognition as the big programs, but they are just as vital to Ohio State's brand. I'm excited to see more Olympic athletes use the university's resources to earn income and build a brand!"

– Chase Brown, BSB

"I miss the days when football players got a summer job, sat around on the loading dock all day, or maybe didn't even show up at all, but still drew a handsome paycheck. With college football now being a year-long endeavor, the days of the cushy job are over, and players need to find other ways to meet their financial needs. If the NCAA had been a little more thoughtful about this and addressed this earlier, they might have come up with a solution that didn't make college the wild, wild west – at least for the time being."

– Frank Moskowitz, BSB

"For me, I thought NIL would be

– Tiffin Buckeye

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OPINION

Plenty Of Ground To Cover Since Last Issue

It seems whenever we step away for a week or two, the news comes faster and more furiously. As we Ohioans navigate our way through every zigzag weather pattern Mother Nature can imagine, headlines throughout the sports world have been generated by the likes of everyone from Jim Harbaugh and Gene Smith to Juwan Howard, Tom Izzo and Michigan quarterback J.J. McCarthy.

Taking things in chronological order, on Groundhog Day (insert your own joke), Harbaugh informed Michigan officials that he would return to Ann Arbor next season, ending an apparently one-sided courtship with the NFL's Minnesota Vikings. The accompanying uproar – mostly from those outside Michigan – wondered how in the world Harbaugh could maintain control over his program after entertaining the notion of leaving.

That was an argument I couldn't really get my head around. Did someone believe Harbaugh was the first college coach who ever thought about leaving his team before deciding to stay? He wasn't even the first coach at his own school to do that.

Texas A&M tried to lure away Bo Schembechler in 1982 with an offer that would have made him the highest-paid college football coach in the country. His interest was strong enough that he called a meeting with his assistant coaches to gauge how they felt about making the move. The staff was reportedly mixed, and Schembechler obviously remained at Michigan.

It's also happened at Ohio State.

In January 1987, Earle Bruce traveled to Tucson, where he discussed with University of Arizona officials the possibility of becoming head coach of the Wildcats. According to a 2018 story in the Tucson Daily Star, Bruce and Arizona had reportedly reached agreement on a contract for him to replace fellow Ohio native Larry Smith, who had just been hired as USC's head coach. But after contemplating the move over the ensuing weekend, Bruce decided to stay at Ohio State, where he was fired 11 months later.

Longtime Penn State head coach Joe Paterno was offered jobs elsewhere on a regular basis, including in 1969 by the Pittsburgh Steelers before they hired Chuck Noll. The NFL came calling again in 1973 when the New England Patriots offered Paterno to become their coach and general manager.

In the cases of Schembechler, Bruce and Paterno, none lost any control over their respective programs. Bruce lasted only one more season after his dalliance with Arizona, but that was due more to a faction of powerful OSU insiders who had long wished for his ouster.

Anyone believing Harbaugh will have a tough time retaining the attention of his players is fooling themselves. Instead, Michigan should concentrate on the replacements for offensive coordinator Josh Gattis and defensive coordinator Mike Macdonald. They were the real architects of Michigan's resurgence in 2021, not Harbaugh.

A little more than two weeks after the Harbaugh announcement, Smith met with reporters for about an hour on a wide range of topics including the alliance of the ACC, Big Ten and Pac-12, and possible future expansion of the College Football Playoff.

When the Big Ten announced last August its alliance with the ACC and Pac-12, it was purported to strengthen all three conferences as the SEC eyed expansion with Texas and Oklahoma by 2025 (and perhaps earlier), creating a so-called super-conference that, like Godzilla, would simply stomp into dust everything in its path.

But when one of the pillars of the new alliance was scheduling teams for nonconference games, it quickly began to fall apart. Smith all

but acknowledged that, blaming the fact that Big Ten schools remain protective of a nine-game conference schedule.

"When we first started The Alliance, there

EDITOR'S NOTEBOOK Mark Rea

was a little bit about scheduling, and that kind of shifted," Smith said. "We had the eight vs. nine (conference games) conversation more intensely at that time with the thought that if we played eight, would there be an ACC or Pac-12 school that we might play? But we moved away from that pretty quickly because many of us felt like nine games were still right for us."

So, what about The Alliance? Its value, Smith said, "was just bringing together schools that think alike." In other words, it's an alliance for alliance's sake. No more, no less.

When the discussion turned to the College Football Playoff, Smith reiterated he was in favor of expansion to 12 teams. But then he dropped a bombshell, saying if that expansion leads to home games in the early rounds, he would prefer Ohio State "hosted" a game at Lucas Oil Stadium in Indianapolis rather than at Ohio Stadium.

Smith gave a rambling response about having to play in frigid conditions, something OSU fans have long criticized Southern schools for trying to avoid.

"I don't want a hard surface for the players," he said. "And I know the fans would love to have it in the 'Shoe and maybe it's snowing or we're playing whoever, but that surface is a whole new ballgame. I would prefer to have the indoor elements and have a clean field."

The athletic director was summarily roasted for his comments by Ohio State fans online, wondering why Smith would want to cede gate receipts, concession revenue and home-field advantage. Why indeed? Weather concerns never seem to matter much to the Green Bay Packers or their fans, who have sold out every game at Lambeau Field since 1960.

In the end, Smith's opinion really didn't matter. CFP administrators announced Feb. 18 that the playoff field would remain at four teams at least through 2025.

During his lengthy news conference, Smith even entertained a question about a contract extension for Ryan Day, although the answer was probably something less than what the head football coach might have wished for. Well aware of the huge salary hikes realized by Mel Tucker, James Franklin and even Harbaugh, Smith still sidestepped the question, saying, "(Ryan) and I haven't talked about his contract. We've been 100-percent focused on his current staffing. ... There will be a time that he and I will sit down and talk about his contract, but we haven't done that at this point in time."

That seemed to be a clear signal Day might be more careful with his words. During the Harbaugh kerfuffle, the OSU head coach might have lost some bargaining power when he said, "I love Ohio State. I love this place. My family loves it here. I tell recruits all the time, if I was to go take another job, I'd be going by myself because my family's not leaving Columbus. And that's the truth. They love it here."

Day's contract, by the way, runs through 2026 and includes a reported salary of \$7.6 million for this year. That's a decent chunk of change for you and me, but still only the fourth-highest salary among Big Ten football coaches.

Hotter Heads Prevail

Just about the time the Harbaugh dust began to settle, a new storm hit Ann Arbor when Howard was suspended for the remainder of the men's basketball regular season for slapping a rival assistant coach following a game played Feb. 20.

The combustible Howard, who got into a shouting match with former Maryland head coach Mark Turgeon and had to be restrained at last year's Big Ten tournament, was upset with Wisconsin head coach Greg Gard, who called a timeout with 15 seconds remaining and his team ahead by 15 points.

The altercation began in the postgame handshake line, when Gard grabbed Howard by the arm in an attempt to explain why he called the timeout. Howard yelled, "Don't (blinking) touch me!" and put his right index finger in Gard's face as the two began to argue.

After the two head coaches were separated, Howard swung his right hand and struck Wisconsin assistant Joe Krabbenhoft on the left side of the head with an open hand. That triggered a brief melee that included players from both sides throwing punches.

"Someone touched me and I think it was very uncalled for – for them to touch me – as we were verbalizing and communicating with one another," a defiant Howard said during the postgame news conference. "That's what escalated it."

Those of us who are of a certain vintage can remember when that kind of behavior from a college coach was automatic grounds for immediate dismissal. Yet it was a full 24 hours before the Big Ten released a statement stating the conference, "in conjunction with the University of Michigan and the University of Wisconsin," imposed disciplinary actions that included suspension for the remainder of the regular season and a \$40,000 fine for Howard and a \$10,000 fine levied against Gard, each for violation of the conference sportsmanship policy.

One would think the University of Michigan wouldn't have needed 24 hours and a CYA news release from the Big Ten to level sanctions on Howard, who apparently found contrition only after he was suspended and fined.

One thing more about the incident, and it has to do with a bunch of media knuckleheads who suggested the way to avoid Howard's type of behavior in the future is to do away with the postgame handshake line. In response, Izzo, nearing the end of his 27th season as head basketball coach at Michigan State, had some pointed comments.

"That, to me, would be the biggest farce, joke, ridiculous nature of anything I've ever heard of," Izzo told reporters the day after the incident. "We've already taught these poor 18-year-olds that when you're told to go to class and you don't like it, you can leave. We've already told these kids that if you're not happy, you can do something else. We've already told these kids that it's hard to hold them accountable."

"And now we're going to tell them to not man up and walk down a line to someone who's kicked your butt and have enough class to shake their hand? That's utterly ridiculous."

We finish full-circle back in Ann Arbor where they seem intent upon cornering the market on ridiculousness. McCarthy told Wolverine Digest on Feb. 27 that he was still jazzed about beating Ohio State in November and was looking forward to a repeat performance in 2022.

"All we know is beating Ohio State right now," McCarthy said. "So we're going to keep that going."

Maybe someone needed to remind young Mr. McCarthy that Michigan has beaten Ohio State exactly three times in his lifetime.

OHIO STATE INSIDER

Smith Takes Center Stage

For the first time since July of 2021, Ohio State athletic director Gene Smith held court with local media on Feb. 16, addressing everything from NIL developments (as reported on the cover of this BSB) to his plans for the future, and quite a bit in between. Buckeye Sports Bulletin has collected everything of note from that press conference and included it below in this edition of Insider.

Day's Contract On Back Burner

Rumors have swirled this offseason that a new contract could be in the works for Ohio State head coach Ryan Day, but Smith confirmed that no discussions have taken place yet regarding a potential extension for the football program's lead man.

"At the end of the day, he and Nina are very happy here," Smith said at his press conference. "His family's here. I think that's exactly what he shared when he was talking to you. I know that he's very comfortable here."

Day's current contract runs through 2026 after he signed an extension in 2020. As part of his extension, he was paid \$6.5 million in 2021 and will be paid \$7.6 million in 2022.

A potential update to Day's contract has been expected following Ohio State's appearance in the 2021 College Football Playoff National Championship Game, as well as connections with job openings in the NFL, though both Day and Smith have refuted those reports.

"He and I haven't talked about (his contract)," Smith said. "We've been 100 percent focused on his current staffing. We just finished that with the football hires ... There will be a

2022 Ohio State Football Schedule

Date	Opponent	Result/Time (ET)	TV	2021 Record
Sept. 3	NOTRE DAME	TBA	TBA	11-2
Sept. 10	ARKANSAS STATE	TBA	TBA	2-10
Sept. 17	TOLEDO	TBA	TBA	7-6
Sept. 24	WISCONSIN	TBA	TBA	9-4
Oct. 1	RUTGERS	TBA	TBA	5-8
Oct. 8	at Michigan State	TBA	TBA	11-2
Oct. 22	IOWA	TBA	TBA	10-4
Oct. 29	at Penn State	TBA	TBA	7-6
Nov. 5	at Northwestern	TBA	TBA	3-9
Nov. 12	INDIANA	TBA	TBA	2-10
Nov. 19	at Maryland	TBA	TBA	7-6
Nov. 26	MICHIGAN	TBA	TBA	12-2

time when he and I will sit down and talk about his contract, but we haven't done that at this point in time."

Beyond adding years to the contract, Day could be looking for a significant pay increase, especially considering recent contracts handed out to fellow Big Ten coaches.

This past season, Penn State head coach James Franklin signed a 10-year contract that will pay out \$7.5 million annually, and Michigan State head coach Mel Tucker signed a 10-year, \$95 million contract to become one of college football's highest-paid coaches.

"We've always tried to make sure that our top of the pyramid coaches like him are paid consistent with expectations and consistent with performance, so whenever we get to that, we'll look at it from that perspective and then we benchmark and look at the other people in the league, we look at national," Smith said. "I haven't even started, so we'll go down that process."

Given the comfort that Smith said Day feels in Columbus, he said he does not feel any urgency to get a contract extension done.

"I feel like we need to do it the right way with he and his family and the university president and board of trustees," Smith said. "We'll get to that, but historically, I've always tried to make sure that we compensate consistently with expectations and performance. I don't feel a sense of urgency."

"It kind of helped me you had to ask that question (about Day's NFL interest). He said,

'Yeah, I'm happy here and I'm not going anywhere.' Those rumors were rumors," Smith continued. "He and I are very transparent. If somebody had offered him a job, he'd call me right away. That didn't happen, so I'm good."

Smith Wants CFP Flexibility

Smith told the gathered reporters that he's in favor of College Football Playoff expansion to 12 teams, but if that expansion includes home games in the early rounds, he would prefer to see his Buckeyes host away from their traditional home in Ohio Stadium.

Smith's concerns lie largely with the Columbus weather, which is famously unfriendly into late December when playoff games have been traditionally played. Instead, he'd like for the Buckeyes to play at an indoor field – namely Lucas Oil Stadium in Indianapolis – saying that OSU would benefit from a clean environment away from the elements.

"I don't want a hard surface for the players," Smith said. "And I know the fans would love to have it in the 'Shoe and maybe it's snowing or we're playing whoever, but that surface is a whole new ballgame. And I would prefer to have the indoor elements and have a clean field. If it was this year, I would want (Ohio State quarterback C.J. Stroud) to have good weather. It's just that simple."

"Pinpointing a date where this thing ends up, we may look at the historical calendar and say it's OK to play in Columbus. But for us, it

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plays into the weather issue. The deeper you go in December, as you know, the more challenging it is here. I'm kind of anxious to see how this playoff schedule actually will end up. When will it actually start? That's critical."

When pressed about the comments, which sparked a firestorm among Ohio State fans online, Smith clarified that his concerns are specific to the extreme weather conditions in the North, not that he'd prefer games away from home stadiums across the board.

"We would only do that because of the weather," he said. "I just want it for the North. I certainly wouldn't want to go play in Glendale when you can play outdoors at Arizona State."

As for the home-field advantage that the Buckeyes would hope to lean on in the case of a matchup with teams specifically from the South, Smith says he has no concerns about Ohio State's ability to travel and that the Buckeyes have proven a willingness to pack Lucas Oil Stadium time and time again.

"I know our fans rally around that, and they'd like to host Alabama up here. But now we have the flexibility to move into domes," Smith said. "Now we can move into (Lucas Oil Stadium) or Ford Field (in Detroit) or Minneapolis or whatever if we ended up hosting. And I think that that's important, because who knows what the inclement weather could be like at that time of year in any of our places in the North. We need that flexibility."

"We've been blessed to have experiences in (Lucas Oil Stadium) playing in the Big Ten championship and I think our fans understand that environment, they love the hotels, they love the restaurants and all that. While it's difficult to take it away from the 'Shoe, I still think that's the right thing to do for the players in the game."

Smith's dreams of CFP expansion might take years to come to fruition, however, as the College Football Playoff board of managers announced on Feb. 18 that the postseason tournament will remain a four-team playoff through the 2025-26 season, with negotiations to continue for a new format beginning in 2026-27.

The board of managers accepted a recommendation from the management committee to continue the playoff's current format, which was envisioned as a 12-year plan that began in the 2014-15 season. Recently discussed proposals for an expanded playoff included eight- and 12-team formats, some including the higher-seeded school hosting a game, as Smith discussed at his press conference.

"Even though the outcome did not lead to a recommendation for an early expansion before the end of the current 12-year contract, the discussions have been helpful and informative," said Bill Hancock, executive director of the College Football Playoff. "I am sure they will serve as a useful guide for the board of managers and for the management committee as we determine what the playoff will look like beginning in the 2026-2027 season."

Hancock added the management committee has been "thorough and diligent" in reviewing the 12-team proposal and other ideas for expansion.

"This has been a long, careful, and detailed process that involved many people considering a complex matter," he said. "I am grateful to everyone for their dedication to college football and the detailed and deliberative effort everyone put into the consideration of a different format. I know the four-team event will continue to be successful."

Smith admitted in his meeting with the media that he expected this result from the committee, claiming that there is still much to work

out before the board members reach an agreement for college football's direction.

"I think there are things that just need to be solved and worked out," he said. "I think we're going to get there. I just think we've got to keep working through these little interests that each conference has, and some people will have to sacrifice and give up some of those interests. It's a negotiation. I think we'll get there. I hope we get there because I think it's a cool thing, I really do."

OSU Turned Page After U-M Loss

In the months following Ohio State's 42-27 loss to Michigan, everyone sounded off on the Buckeyes, from players, coaches (even oppos-

ing ones), fans and media alike. The one voice who had yet to speak up was Smith, who told media that the Michigan loss was hard on everyone in the building.

"That's not one that we ever want to experience again, and it's not something that we really think should ever happen again," Smith said. "Our expectation is to win that game every year, and we've done that historically."

"So how do we respond? What I try to do as the athletic director is step back and look at the big picture, and I did that with the whole season as I considered that game," he continued. "We were young, we grew as the season went on. I really felt we grew."

It was the first loss to the Wolverines since 2011, and while a loss to Michigan is humili-

ating in and of itself for the Buckeyes, it was a manhandling in Ann Arbor that caused a fair amount of introspection among the program. Day orchestrated a complete overhaul of his defensive staff – a move that Smith said he supported fully.

"I turned the page immediately to what I needed to do to help Ryan do what he needed to do to fix," he said. "In this building, his mindset was fixing the defense and creating more leadership among the players, and he's done that. The question for me was about helping him. The mood in the building was felt more for me through him and what he was trying to do."

Though it will be a few months before

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OHIO STATE INSIDER

Continued From Page 5

Ohio State's new-look defense will take the field, Smith was still pleased with the immediate response to the loss to Michigan with the Buckeyes' comeback win over Utah in the Rose Bowl.

"I love the reaction and how we responded in the Rose Bowl," Smith said. "I think that was a direct result of him trying to get more leadership from the players. Great teams have talent, they have great coaches but at the end of the day, players at some point in time have to take control, be it of the locker room or of the game if you want to be champions. And there were just so many puppies last year – one of the youngest teams in our history."

'The Alliance' Won't Impact OSU

Smith set his sights on "The Alliance" between the ACC, Big Ten and Pac-12 as well, explaining that it might not lead to scheduling changes between the three conferences regarding future football games. In fact, Smith

Next BSB Print Set To Mail On March 15

The next print issue of Buckeye Sports Bulletin is scheduled to be mailed on March 15. There is no reason to miss any of the Buckeye sports action in the interim, however, as the BSB staff will be reporting all the latest news at our BuckeyeSports.com website.

We will be posting all the latest recruiting news and other football news as we head toward spring practice, as well as news of the men's and women's basketball teams and their Big Ten tournament play, the hockey and wrestling teams and any other news of the day as it happens. BuckeyeSports.com is free to all subscribers.

Along with the daily posts, we offer reprints from the Buckeye Sports Bulletin archives as part of our popular Reprint Thursdays. Also, staff members man the BuckeyeSports.com Fan Forum, interacting with subscribers on the hot topics of the day.

Please note that recent developments with the mail service have us concerned about delivery time for BSB. We remind you the complete print edition of Buckeye Sports Bulletin is posted at BuckeyeSports.com at the time the issue is mailed

and is available to subscribers free of charge, as is all the other content provided at the site.

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claimed the Big Ten would prefer to keep its nine conference games rather than make room for another nonconference matchup.

"When we first started The Alliance, there was a little bit about scheduling, and that kind of shifted," Smith said. "We had the eight vs. nine (conference-game) conversation more intensely at that time with the thought that if we played eight, would there be an ACC or Pac-12 school that we might play? But we moved away

from that pretty quickly because many of us felt like nine games were still right for us.

"We thought that conference contests, from a TV partner point of view, were just as valuable. We decided to kind of walk away from that a little bit. That doesn't mean it might not come back up. The value of The Alliance was just bringing together schools that think alike."

Smith said the Big Ten is doing what it can to remain at the forefront of the college football conversation. He recognized that the SEC had made strides in recent years to become a more independent entity, which required the ACC, Big Ten and Pac-12 to form an alliance that would ensure each conference's survival.

While survival may seem like a bleak term, one can look to the Big 12 as an example of what can happen when the SEC chooses to flex its muscles. The Southeastern Conference poached blue-blood programs Oklahoma and Texas from the Big 12 in August 2021 and was reportedly looking to add more universities to bolster its already-impressive college football footprint.

When asked if the Big Ten schools were trying to keep pace with the SEC, Smith said that the Big Ten primarily focuses on itself and how it can remain an entertaining collection of teams in various sports.

"We talk more about what do we need to do with the Big Ten, to keep the Big Ten as valuable as it is in our footprint, for our fans, for our athletes, and our television partners," Smith said. "It's rare that we compare ourselves to even the ACC or the Pac-12. The Alliance, if we were just looking at TV value, we're more valuable to the ACC or the Pac-12 than they are to us."

When explicitly asked about the impact that a potential scheduling arrangement between the three conferences could have on Ohio State's scheduled series with schools such as Alabama, Georgia and Texas in the future, Smith said he'd prefer to keep those matchups in place rather than move things around to accommodate matchups with teams in The Alliance.

"I just don't see philosophically for us a scheduling model where we would be supportive of making that change," he said. "Nine (conference games) makes sense to us. We still

want to listen to eight, but even if we go eight, I'm not so sure we're going to carry the load for the conference and schedule Pac-12 and ACC schools. We're going to play whoever it is. It might be a Pac-12 or ACC school – Washington is on our schedule down the road.

"But I don't see us making any changes that way. Those games are huge. Like with Notre Dame (this fall), this is the sixth time we've played them in the regular season. That's the coolest thing. I don't see us making that change."

For now, Ohio State has home-and-home series scheduled with Notre Dame (2022-23), Washington (2024-25), Texas (2025-26), Alabama (2027-28), Georgia (2030-31) and Oregon (2032-33). The Buckeyes will receive their first test against that bunch when the Fighting Irish head to Ohio Stadium on Sept. 3.

Smith Has No Retirement Plans

Smith concluded his chat by establishing that he will maintain his position as the university's athletic department leader as long as he remains capable and energized.

"I just go year to year," Smith said. "As long as I'm healthy, passionate, feel like I can contribute, my president wants me, my wife is happy, and I can see my family (I'll keep going). I don't think (about shifting trends). I go year to year, project to project, initiative to initiative and goal to goal. When the time comes, I'll know. I'm not one who has an ego that says I have to reach (any specific thing). I'll know when it's time for me to step away and for Ohio State to have new leadership."

Smith is already the third-longest tenured athletic director in Ohio State history in his 17th season behind L.W. Scott (35 years; 1912-47) and Richard Larkins (23 years; 1947-70) – the school's first two athletic directors.

After Larkins retired, Ohio State had four athletic directors in 24 years, including J. Edward Weaver (1970-77), Hugh Hindman (1977-84), Rick Bay (1984-87) and Jim Jones (1987-94). Smith took over as the university's eighth athletic director in 2005 after he served in the same role for Arizona State, Eastern Michigan and Iowa State. His predecessor, Andy Geiger, was at the helm for 11 years, from 1994 to 2005.

Podcast Back To Weekly Schedule

The BSB podcast, hosted by associate editors Wyatt Crosher and Patrick Mayhorn, with occasional guest spots from Chase Brown and Braden Moles, publishes every Friday morning, covering the stories of the week in Ohio State athletics.

The show is free for everyone. To find it, go to your favorite podcast app or website and type in "Buckeye Sports

Bulletin Podcast," and click the subscribe button. You can listen on Amazon Music, Apple Podcasts, Audible, Google Podcasts, iHeartRadio, Podbean, Spotify, Stitcher and anywhere else that podcasts are found. For those of you who are new to the podcast world, the show is also posted at 10 a.m. every Friday on BuckeyeSports.com, as well as on the BuckeyeSports.com Fan Forum.

Vrabel Named NFL COTY

Former Ohio State linebacker and current Tennessee Titans head coach Mike Vrabel was named the AP NFL Coach of the Year at the NFL Honors ceremony on Feb. 12.

Vrabel's Titans finished the season with a 12-6 record, falling to the Cincinnati Bengals in the AFC Divisional Round, 19-16, after earning a first-round bye as the AFC's No. 1 seed.

Vrabel is the first former Buckeye to be named NFL Coach of the Year. The honor came just days after Vrabel earned a contract extension with the Titans for leading them to their third consecutive playoff berth.

The Akron native played for Ohio State from 1993-96 and is still atop the record books in career sacks (36) and career tackles for loss (66). In 14 NFL seasons with the Pittsburgh Steelers (1997-2000), New England Patriots (2001-08) and Kansas City Chiefs (2009-10), Vrabel played in over 200 games, amassing 762 tackles (63 for loss), 57 sacks and 11 interceptions.

He retired following the 2010-11 season and returned to Ohio State as a linebackers and defensive line coach. He later joined the NFL coaching ranks with the Houston Texans in 2014 and remained with the organization until accepting the Titans head coaching position in 2018.

Bengals, Ex-Buckeyes Lose Super Bowl

Four former Buckeyes started for the Cincinnati Bengals in Super Bowl LVI, but they fell to the Los Angeles Rams, 23-20, on Feb. 13.

Cornerback Eli Apple, safety Vonn Bell, defensive end Sam Hubbard and right tackle Isaiah Prince started for Cincinnati in the NFL's fi-

nal 2021-22 game. If you count quarterback Joe Burrow, who played three years in Columbus before finishing his career at Louisiana State, five former Buckeyes started.

Ohio State had never had more than three starters in a Super Bowl before this year. Tom Matte and Bob Vogel started for the Colts and Matt Snell started for the Jets in Super Bowl III, and Keith Byars, Terry Glenn and William Roberts started for the Patriots in Super Bowl XXXI.

Former safety Jordan Fuller is a team captain for the Rams. However, he did not participate in their postseason games after injuring his ankle in the final regular-season contest. He started in 17 games before he ended the year on the injured reserve but will still get his Super Bowl ring as a member of the Rams.

Hubbard collected eight tackles and two tackles for loss. Bell recorded seven tackles with one tackle for loss. In contrast, Apple recorded five tackles and a pass breakup but allowed the game-winning touchdown to NFL Offensive Player of the Year Cooper Kupp, who won Super Bowl MVP. Kupp beat Apple to the outside on a fade route, jumping over the cornerback to secure a 1-yard touchdown.

Cincinnati's offensive line struggled to protect Burrow throughout the contest. Prince was a primary culprit, allowing Rams defensive tackle Aaron Donald to break free on more than one occasion. He also was called for a 15-yard unnecessary roughness penalty that halted an offensive drive for the Bengals.

The Bengals will return next season with a target on their back. Still, they remain well-equipped to make another run at a Lombardi Trophy, with more than a few Buckeyes leading the way.

Smith signed a four-year contract extension in May 2021 that would keep him in place as the athletic director at Ohio State into 2026. Terms for his new contract began last July, with Smith earning more than \$2 million a year, receiving an annual base salary worth \$1.58 million and supplemental compensation for media, promotion and public relations, adding \$480,000.

He will receive fringe benefit allowances worth \$30,000 in 2022 and \$12,000 for his wife to travel for road games. Smith's performance bonuses are set at a maximum of \$250,000.

When the new contract ends, Smith will be 70 years old, and he would be the first Ohio State athletic director since Larkins to spend more than two decades in the role.

"There's an old saying in leadership about the right leaders for the right time, and I'll know. Nobody will have to tell me. You guys (the media) will probably tell me. I'll read about it one morning, wake up and it'll be on Twitter and I'll say, 'OK, I guess I'm gone,' " he joked.

Liddell Calls Out Illini Fans

Ohio State men's basketball forward E.J. Liddell is no stranger to being the center of attention. The junior has led the Buckeyes on both ends of the court all season, drawing countless double teams and game plans around slowing him down in the process – just as he did at the end of the 2020-21 season, when he and guard Duane Washington Jr. directed the Buckeyes to a Big Ten title game berth and a No. 2 seed in the NCAA Tournament.

Unfortunately, that attention on the court has drawn additional, often unwanted, attention off it for the OSU standout. Liddell spoke publicly after Ohio State's first-round loss to Oral Roberts in last season's NCAA Tournament about the messages he received online – some vulgar, some racist, some outright threatening the then-sophomore.

After Ohio State's 86-83 victory over Illinois on Feb. 24, Liddell – a native of Illinois who came to Ohio State by way of Belleville West and picked the Buckeyes over his home-state squad – spoke out again. He took to Twitter on Feb. 25 to say that while he took no issue with jeering from the Illini crowd (booing, chants of "E.J. sucks"), some in the crowd took their comments too far.

"(It) was too late to tweet something out after the game yesterday, but man did I have a great time! I got to see my best friend, some family, and a lot of fans of mine from home," Liddell shared. "Great environment, I loved the boos and the chants, they made me feel special.

"But I can't even explain how rude and disrespectful some fans were. Know your place. I have no hard feelings with that university, but man, (you all) are crazy as hell if you think you can just talk to an athlete any kind of way. I play basketball every day with a smile on my face. If you hate me for that, I don't know what to say. (It) makes me wonder how some of (you) treat

others.

"(You) can't take me out my element. (I) love some good trash talk, and the chants 'E.J. sucks' because at the time I was (0-for-3 shooting), wasn't playing the best at the beginning. (I'm) happy my family didn't get a chance to make it due to the weather and (that) they only heard things that were said on TV. All (of) that aside I had a great time! Some fans just need to get over (the fact) that I didn't pick their school."

Head coach Chris Holtmann shared a similar sentiment after the game, saying that while he appreciated the intensity of the crowd, he sees no room in college basketball for the kind of things some fans said to his star forward.

"I thought the environment, fans were highly engaged," Holtmann said. "I didn't love some of the things they were saying to one of our players. I thought that was completely uncalled for. Completely uncalled for. I don't think there's a place for it. Having said that, they were highly engaged and highly involved. They stayed engaged the entire game. It was made for a very difficult finish."

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NIL Legislation Changes Not Likely In Near Future

Continued From Page 1

see legislation from somewhere to limit the seedier parts of this new era, though neither delved into true specifics of what that legislation might look like.

"There's no question about it, I think it should be regulated," Smith said. "In fact, I served on the (NCAA Division I council committee for NIL) and made the ultimate recommendation with my colleagues. I felt at that time there might be some regulations that would emerge, either from the NCAA or federally. That didn't happen. There are no federal regulations right now, and the NCAA has taken a little bit of a different approach, understandably so with all the different state laws that they would run up against.

"I'm hopeful that at some point we get federal legislation. I don't think the NCAA is the answer, in this case. It needs to be federal legislation, and that won't happen now because of what's going on in Washington, but maybe it will at some point. There are enough politicians who are paying attention and are interested, but it's going to take time and in the interim, it is a Wild West. So many different things have emerged, and what we have to do is make sure that we don't lose ground and our competitive advantage in this space, and also that we do what's right for our student-athletes, protecting them and making sure they can take advantage of this."

Legislative changes are not likely coming within the next two years according to Hoyt, largely because of a stalemate at the potential levels of legislative power related to these rules – outside of the state ranks, which have largely moved in the opposite direction.

"I don't think there's going to be anything big happening federally," Brown explained. "The NCAA really wants that to happen. The problem is that nothing will be passed at all after April because of the midterm elections. And most of the lawmakers that are most personally invested in figuring out solutions here are retiring or about to get redistricted out. A lot of the politicians pushing for this can't get any kind of consensus.

"I don't think the NCAA is going to do very much either, even though their administrators and coaches are calling for it, because they don't want to get sued. Two cases are working their way through the federal court system about amateurism that don't look great for the NCAA. They want to keep their

head down.

"Where you are going to see changes and where we're already seeing changes is at the state level. We're seeing some states, particularly in the South, either get rid of their laws or revamp them to be much more permissive. This is happening in Florida, where there's a push to get rid of the clause that prohibits schools from brokering deals. I want to say Mississippi is in the process of getting rid of theirs entirely. We'll see if that's a good decision five or 10 years from now.

"The dirty little secret is that most of those state lawmakers who pushed their NIL deals don't follow college sports at all. And they were really shoddily done. So now, when a coach calls somebody up and says there's a recruiting disadvantage, they're going to change things."

Beyond that, there's the occasional upshoot of questions about education, and about those doing the educating of players and coaches about this subject. Many student-athletes have no marketing experience – especially not in marketing themselves – before their arrival on a college campus, and unless they find a major in the business or marketing industry, they aren't likely to pick that up. Some programs, Ohio State included, have turned to marketing experts and NIL "influencers" (essentially online experts) to educate their players on operating within the NIL space. Brown would like to see that pushed further, potentially into a formal education opportunity even on the level of majors and minors.

"What a place like Ohio State should be doing, and maybe isn't doing enough, is not so much brokering the deal, but sitting down there and helping the athlete understand the situation," Brown said. "Saying, 'Here's the number of people you have on Instagram. Here are the kinds of deals you could get. Here's what you could be doing to make yourself more marketable.' And that's not just an Ohio State problem. A lot of programs honestly aren't doing that very well.

"I want to say Illinois did a job fair, as did a couple of SEC schools. I suspect others are creating majors or minors and saying, 'Look, we could pay Opendorse (a market for athletes to connect with businesses) \$20,000 or we could pay an influencer \$20,000, but we have marketing professors on campus that have been doing this for much longer. Why don't we have one of them set up a class for



FILE PHOTO

LATE TO THE PARTY – Ohio State athletic director Gene Smith said that the NCAA passed legislation on Name, Image and Likeness rights for student-athletes too late and that he can't remember a time the NCAA "was ever on the offensive." That delay, he said, has led to the current situation around NIL legislation.

athletes and give them credit hours to think academically about branding and campaigns and pitching yourself?"

"I think that's a great idea. That's not a baloney class. That's real-life information that helps people. It would be smart, I think, for Ohio State to say, 'Let's send some people to flier every single business on High Street, Lane Avenue and Neil Avenue to invite them to come to a job fair to talk about these kinds of things.' I don't think that would be inappropriate."

Smith, it bears mentioning, rebuffed the idea of formalizing NIL education when BSB asked him about it as both difficult to dedicate university resources to and potentially as overkill, given the progress he's seen within locker rooms and among athletes.

"We haven't talked about it being a formal class," Smith said. "I'm not sure you could justify credit hour production to have a faculty member actually filling that space. We do have a relationship with our innovation and entrepreneurial program with the Fisher College of Business – they help us. (Influencer) Jeremy Darlow has written several books on marketeering, and he's a part of our education process. I think we will stay with that model because we're constantly figuring out new information and bringing in new people.

"Learfield (a collegiate sports marketing company), for example, has some education pieces in development and we'll end up using what they have on their platform. I don't see us moving to a class. I see us just constantly using our third-party partners and our experiences to keep educating them. And we have them educating each other. This morning

(Feb. 16) I was with the football team and it was really beautiful that many of the athletes were educating each other on topics that I was bringing up. A lot of this stuff happens in the locker room.

"Our men's basketball team ended up doing their 'Players Edition.' They got a deal with a gear company where they're all (marketing) it and sharing the money. That happened in the locker room. It wasn't us saying that they should go do it. That's how this stuff happens. I don't see us doing a class, I think we have to just continue to encourage them to use their experiences and their intellectual property. They'll come up with ideas. These kids are creative as all get out. It's unbelievable what they come up with."

But that's largely where the critiques start and stop. Smith praised the creativity of Ohio State's athletes in the deals they have successfully made and said that as the Buckeyes constantly work to update their guidelines, he's gained more comfort. Whether his attitude is truly a result of comfort within these new systems or closer to acceptance that rules are unlikely to change within the next few years only Smith knows, though he alluded to it being a little bit of both.

That seems to be the case for many within the power structure of the NCAA, although Smith was a bit more forthright about it than most, calling out the NCAA for its inflexibility on major issues going back decades – which he sees as a direct cause of the current issues it is facing both with NIL and in the courts.

"I think NIL came too late; the NCAA didn't dodge a bullet because it came too late," an impassioned Smith said. "It's kind

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of like cost of attendance (school stipends to athletes to cover some expenses outside of the scope of an athletic scholarship). At the end of the day, all of that was too late. We had that (pre-cost of attendance) scholarship model for decades and it was flawed. We couldn't get (anything new) in place because we're part of 350-some schools in Division I.

"At the end of the day, NIL was too late, cost of attendance was too late, paying for parents to travel to postseason games was too late. All of it. Had we done many of those things years ago, we'd be in a different place right now. I can go back to different meetings where all these things were talked about, but we couldn't get it done. We've been on the defensive as the NCAA forever. I can't remember a time when we ever were on the offensive. We're too late, which is why pressure groups and interest groups are ruling the day."

NIL Edge Team

On the other side of that coin, though, Smith and Hoyt both posture as newly optimistic while Ohio State – along with dozens of other schools – establishes new guidelines and gains a better feel for how it can operate within these spaces.

The biggest change came in January, when the university announced the creation of the NIL Edge Team, with Hoyt leading the way.

That deserves a deeper dive beyond the school release, which described it as "an internal advisory group whose members can assist student-athletes with access and resources to successfully pursue NIL opportunities."

In layman's terms, it's a middleman to make simpler the connections between athletes and businesses interested in pursuing NIL deals. If a business is looking for athletes who fit a certain profile, it no longer has to do that work on its own – nor does it have to cold-call any college students.

"The Edge Team is a result of our SWAT team, which is the legal compliance and trademark-licensing group that looks at the deals that our student-athletes upload into our portal," Smith said. "The state law requires our athletes to share their deals



Carey Hoyt

before they enact them – that's how OpenDorse, our partner, helps them. The athletes upload their deals into the portal, the SWAT team looks at them and makes sure there's no adult entertainment, distilled liquor, marijuana deals – those type of things. They don't approve or disapprove the deals, they just monitor, and then the athlete enacts the deal.

"We realized over time that the one thing missing was a connector, and that's the Edge Team. We've communicated with donors, the chamber members, and others about how NIL works, but many of them don't know how to connect with the athletes. Now they can call an Edge Team representative and say, 'This is what I'm looking for (in an athlete)' as opposed to them going to a team roster and reading all of the backgrounds on an athlete. Now they can just call the Edge Team and we can connect them with athletes that fit. We don't do the deal, we don't negotiate it or anything, we just provide the phone number, email address, whatever else of however many athletes that fit the profile and they can run with it."

On Hoyt's end, as Ohio State loosened its guidelines to allow for contact between the university and businesses interested in these deals – not in brokering deals, just in connecting them to athletes – everything has clicked into place as well as she could have

hoped.

"There are four of us that are designated staff who can work with outside brands," Hoyt said. "I oversee those staff members. We're not negotiating deals between brands and student-athletes, we're just facilitating the connection – especially if there's any coordination that needs to happen among multiple team members because there are brands that want groups of student-athletes and that's a little bit harder for an outside company to manage, dealing with multiple student-athletes. That's our role right now. We're not soliciting deals. We have enough interest coming in that we're not seeking out deals for student-athletes."

"I think right now, with the updated guidelines in January, there's been a lot more communication on my end with outside companies and brands that want to engage," Hoyt continued. "With that, everyone can be more confident that the deals that they're seeing online or reading on Twitter are permissible and that there are appropriate ways to do the deals."

"In July it was just so new, and nobody knew what to put in a contract or if they even needed a contract and there was just a lot of uncertainty. Now, there's some momentum and brands are reaching out, and I think it's working as well as we could have hoped at this point."

The Edge Team has struck a chord with the entity many Buckeye fans were most worried about during these past eight months too, drawing compliments from head football coach Ryan Day about its ability to keep the Buckeyes on pace with the rest of the nation.

"It's huge (to have the NIL Edge Team)," Day said in January. "This past year has been a learning experience for all of us to figure out where this is and where it's going. Some of the opportunities that our players have had are, in some metrics, No. 1 in the country. With the city of Columbus, the brand of Ohio State and Ohio State football, some of our guys have really capitalized on it. It's been tremendous some of the opportunities that they have been afforded."

"The more that we can get involved with this at the administrative levels (the better). We have to follow the rules, obviously, so we're going to be really cautious about that and make sure we're doing things the right way, being really deliberate about what we're setting up, but Gene is at the forefront of this to make sure that we're competing with everyone in the country."

Ultimately, that last piece seems to be the guiding force behind the development of the Edge Team, and of everything else that Ohio State has done in shaping its latest guidelines. A constant message throughout every proceeding has been that the Buckeyes feared falling behind and that with the Edge Team, they can avoid a fate like that.

Falling behind what, though? That too deserves a much deeper dive, all the way into the part of NIL that drew those Wild West comments from Smith, that have generated calls for legislative change from Brown and Hoyt, and that have kept college football coaches around the nation awake deep into the night. It's the lifeblood of the biggest money-makers in collegiate athletics, and sudden-

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Collectives Playing Major Role On Recruiting Trail

Continued From Page 9

ly, an unexplored land with many operators planted firmly among the willows.

Welcome to college football recruiting in the NIL era.

Collectives Setting New Standard

When NIL was first introduced in July 2021, the common thought was that the top players would still flock to the largest schools due to the media prospects of attending one of the nation's premier schools, such as Alabama, Georgia, Ohio State or, more recently, Texas A&M. That has mostly remained true through the first eight months of NIL, with those four schools all finishing in the top four in the latest recruiting cycle.

Student-athletes would benefit not only from the viewership that comes with playing for the country's most popular schools but would also be able to take advantage of deals within vibrant local communities, in which they are recognized as celebrities among their peers and alumni still roaming their former stomping ground.

These kinds of deals have been evident across the country, especially at Ohio State. Numerous OSU student-athletes can be found participating in autograph signings, meet and greets, or in the latest commercials for automotive companies. Former OSU quarterback Quinn Ewers famously nabbed a car dealership deal and another partnership with a memorabilia brand reportedly worth north of \$1 million despite only taking two snaps in his career with the Buckeyes.

However, the avenues for both funding and participating in these NIL deals are not necessarily what was expected when this was enacted last year. Though many student-athletes are still electing to work in tandem with local and national businesses or through Ohio State's Edge Team, some have instead opted to go through an NIL broker, of sorts, in the form of collectives.

For the uninitiated, these are groups of donors and businesses that – completely

unaffiliated with the university they support – help to raise NIL funds for current student-athletes and future recruiting classes. Over 30 of these already exist among Power Five and Group of Five schools, including notable programs such as Auburn, Florida, Florida State, Penn State, Oregon, Tennessee and Texas.

Each of these collectives work slightly differently, but the general ideas remain consistent among most groups, which aim to provide NIL opportunities for student-athletes. This encompasses a website with a donation function, a list of participating businesses and student-athletes (including contact info) that are available for NIL deals, as well as a list of “perks” for donating to the collective, which can often include private charity auctions, exclusive merchandise and one-on-one events with student-athletes. Depending on how deep one's pockets are, donations can range from one-time contributions of a few dollars to recurring, monthly donations of over \$1,000.

While schools are hesitant to bring this information to the forefront in recruiting for fear of catching an inducement charge, which means a student-athlete is persuaded to attend a university with the promise of certain NIL deals that could come their way, collectives are allowed to be more brazen given the lack of oversight between a student-athlete and these third parties.

“That's the part where we need that federal legislation,” Smith said. “We have to get a hold on the inducement part. That's the difference between us, the NFL, the NBA and others. We have to recruit. And so how do we find a way to eliminate that part of it. We need help in that space. Otherwise, it's going to keep going crazy and the whole model will be affected in a big way. If we have to shift all of our focus to supporting collectives, it's going to be a whole new financial model. I know collectives are emerging in our marketplace, a couple who have contacted our SWAT team to make sure they do it the right



FILE PHOTO

GETTING INVOLVED - Ohio State publicly opposed NIL collectives like the ones popping up at Tennessee and Texas A&M, but Columbus businessman and Ohio State booster Brian Schottenstein and former Buckeye QB Cardale Jones (above) plan to launch their own, The Foundation, by April 16, when Ohio State is set to play its spring game.

way and that their focus is rightfully on our current students and not on recruiting.”

Smith says many collectives that have reached out to their schools have done so “the right way,” but the fear throughout college football is aimed toward the collectives that are not going about it the right way. The lack of guidelines nationally within the NCAA or federally complicates this further.

For all that's said about NIL making college football reminiscent of the Wild West, those gun-toting outlaws did have a sheriff to answer to after robbing a stagecoach. It doesn't appear the same can be said in the

NIL space. While little seems explicitly illegal, even if something does break the rules, concerns abound about the complete lack of formal enforcement against third-party inducement.

“I don't know what, if anything, the NCAA is prepared to do to actually enforce the spirit of NIL because the spirit of NIL is not pay for play,” BuckeyeScoop recruiting analyst Marc Givler told BSB. “In terms of the recruiting component of this, first of all, you're not supposed to be able to lure kids to your school during the recruiting process with NIL promises. Then, you're seeing the Texas offensive line deal where every Texas offensive lineman gets \$50,000. That's, at best, a gray area in terms of the rules.”

“You're not really rewarding someone's name, image and likeness in that sense, because you don't even necessarily know who the offensive linemen are going to be from year to year,” he said. “You're putting a price tag on the position at the school. You're not putting a price tag on the actual human being's name, image and likeness when you do that. There's a lot of circumventing of what the rules are supposed to be going on right now.”

Although Ohio State does not have an established collective yet, one is in the works between former Buckeye quarterback Cardale Jones and Columbus businessman and Ohio State booster Brian Schottenstein. Others will presumably rise, with experts believing every Power Five program will have a collective created on their behalf by the end of the year.

According to Schottenstein, “The Foundation” collective has been approved for 501(c)(3) status, which establishes it as a nonprofit that is exempt from federal taxes and is reportedly aiming to launch by Ohio State's spring game scheduled for April 16.



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"Our goal is to have this be the largest NIL nonprofit fund in the country," Schottenstein told Columbus Business First. "We figure with Ohio State having one of the biggest alumni bases, why not create something our base can get behind and support their student-athletes?"

While schools cannot openly embrace these collectives due to NCAA bylaws, support can come from afar in the way of leaving them alone and letting them operate. Smith made it clear, however, that Ohio State is not on the side of these collectives – even if he felt it put the Buckeyes behind the pack in this past recruiting class, though not as significantly as one might expect because of the inherent advantages of the Columbus market.

"I felt like, in that particular space with the collectives where you see some of that recruiting stuff going on, there's no question we were behind because we weren't doing that and we're not encouraging that," Smith said. "But the other part of it is that if you're a recruit coming to Columbus, Ohio and Ohio State, you're having those conversations with someone like (sophomore running back) TreVeyon Henderson who can say, 'Hey, this is what I get here.' I don't want to disparage other markets, but the reality is that in this market if you're an entrepreneur and you're willing to get out there and do this thing the right way, you're going to hit home runs."

Ohio State is in a rare place among schools dealing with the challenges brought about by NIL, as the Buckeyes lead the nation in NIL compensation as well as student-athletes with at least one reported NIL activity (225 student-athletes) according to a presentation to the board of trustees' legal, risk and compliance committee on Feb. 10. Additionally, Ohio State is second in total NIL activities, NIL compensation per activity and the percent of student-athletes with at least one NIL activity.

Given the bustling NIL activity among Ohio State's student-athletes, this means the lack of a collective does not necessarily spell doom for staying relevant among the national powerhouses.

"Regardless of what you hear, Ohio State has not been put in the garbage can because they haven't set up an NIL collective that's cheating the same way those in Texas are, and this isn't as much the Wild West as you think," Brown said.

Givler echoed Brown's thoughts and said that, in the long term, Ohio State could still find itself in a good enough spot.

"I think the data so far is pretty good for Ohio State in terms of what guys are getting once they get to the campus," he said. "I think they're going to be able to combat that if they're not willing to go down the road some of the other programs are going right now."

Impact On Recruits' Decisions

If Jones and Schottenstein's joint collective takes off, it would be just in time for the 2023 recruiting class to start seriously considering their college of choice. The Class of 2022 did not have time to truly grasp NIL and what it could offer them, so this upcoming class will be the first allowed to take full advantage of the opportunities before them.

"The recruits definitely are curious," Givler said. "Now, is every kid going to base his decision on NIL? No. A lot of these kids are still going to put whether it's something like geography, being close to home or the child-

hood dream school, things like development and getting to the NFL – those things, I think, are still going to be the major factors in a recruit's decision. But absolutely, they're asking questions (to) college coaches like what type of NIL deals are guys getting right now. They want to see the numbers."

As for how some of the shadier collectives are operating? That leans heavily on stretching the definition of what is or isn't inducement. Collectives cannot explicitly offer recruits NIL packages, but enough winking from media, coaches and student-athletes has indicated that to some degree, it is taking place. That's what has Smith and many of his colleagues spooked.

"I've heard of it happening, and again, I think that's what Ohio State's trying to avoid right now," Givler said. "It's really a violation of what the rules are. Again, you are not supposed to be enticing kids to come to what school you're donating this money for. You are not supposed to be enticing them to pick your school with NIL money. The cart is leading the horse right now on this. You're supposed to get to your school and then once you're there, then you know, based on your market value in that market, companies can then hire you to pitch a product or whatever, but it's become something different entirely. It's become a bidding war."

However, while these closed-door deals might be taking place – at least for the top recruiting prospects – this is not something new to college football. It's just moved into the open.

"There are really two different NIL markets happening right now," Brown said. "There is a market for top-300 college football and top-100 men's basketball recruits. And there is a little bit of a Wild West there because that's always been the case. And now the question is to what level should recruiting compensation be aboveboard with NIL or below-board with bagmen? Both of those things are still happening, and I don't like that. And that's going to continue to be a thing."

In this context, the "bagman" is the mysterious figure providing McDonald's bags full of cash, or the unrelated trainer accompanying a recruit on every visit, regardless of whether or not their presence is needed. This has existed for decades, but now, the light is actively shining on these activities.

"Not to say that wasn't happening before – I think we are getting a little naive on this," Givler said. "Look, unsavory things have been going on in college athletics for decades, so I don't think this is as new as people are acting it is. But it is now playing out right in front of our eyes. It's no longer playing out behind closed doors. It's now playing out very publicly, right in plain sight."

Brown cautions too that what's popular in the NIL and recruiting circles right now, such as these collectives, may not rule the roost years down the line.

"It's important to impress upon everybody here that nothing about this is inevitable. Both the rules and what people are doing are changing pretty quickly," he said. "The example I would give here is that last year, everybody was doing a SPAC, which is a special purpose acquisition group. This was the financial vehicle that every business and even some universities were looking at getting into, then the rules changed and the market changed and now it's much less popular. It was kind of an 11-month thing."

"Be very cautious of anybody, especially in the recruiting world, who is trying to tell you that what Tennessee is doing is the future and that everybody will be using this exact vehicle in three years," he continued. "It's unknowable. I understand why a school that has so many built-in advantages, like Ohio State, would want to take a more conservative approach. That makes sense."

And while this seedy underside of NIL is certainly part of the discussion, it's also noteworthy that this is not how most deals are being operated. Despite some questionable deals that are brokered, the large majority of these deals are done aboveboard.

"The rest of it is the NIL deals that are proposed for other athletes, and I really push back hard at the idea of that being some kind of crazy Wild West," Brown said. "Because the reality is even in a place like Ohio State, most athletes aren't doing it. Assuming that Ohio State's numbers are correct, it is among the national leaders in athletes with deals and in money earned from deals. And less than one-quarter of all of Ohio State's athletes are doing any of these at all. Some of those are not eligible to do deals because they're international athletes. Even if we exclude them, we're looking at one-third of all OSU athletes."

"The median value of these deals is still typically a couple hundred bucks," he continued. "For all the freaking out about Wild West and people getting \$1 million deals and 'bag man, bag man, bag man,' there's a lot of this. For every (Ewers) out there, there are hundreds, if not thousands, of \$250 volleyball deals. I think it's dumb to say this market is broken when it's working, or could even be working better for the majority of athletes."

Olympic Majority Thriving In NIL

Olympic athletes aren't likely to receive new trucks from local car dealerships or a lifetime supply of sandwiches from a roast beef chain, but they have found an opportunity to leverage their university's name recognition and resources to earn money and build a brand, especially at Ohio State.

According to the Ohio State athletic department, football has the highest percentage of NIL engagement among 36 varsity sports at 27.4 percent. While it's fair to assume men's basketball – the university's only other revenue sport – would have the second-biggest share of NIL activity, the women's volleyball program claims that spot at 8.6 percent.

"It's surprising," head coach Jen Flynn Oldenburg told BSB. "You wouldn't think that women's volleyball would be right up there with football as one of the top sports for NIL activity, but we are in a unique space. Our team has the level of exposure that allows them to make a little bit of extra money, but we're not making big money like them. It might get there soon, but for now our team is starting small."

Oldenburg said her team primarily uses these newfound NIL opportunities to run camps, clinics and training sessions in Columbus or their hometowns.

The biggest benefactor of this process within Oldenburg's program has been sophomore defensive specialist Sarah Sue Morbitzer. As a walk-on, Morbitzer used the money she earned from camps and training sessions to offset room, board and tuition costs for her parents.

"Sarah Sue doesn't have the opportuni-

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Olympic Athletes Seizing NIL Opportunities

Continued From Page 11

ties that a full-scholarship student-athlete does on our team," Oldenburg said. "This is such a cool space for her because she's going, 'Hey, Mom and Dad, you don't have to give me that spending money that normally I would need because I'm going to work for it.' She's put herself out there and has done a great job."

Morbitzer was a three-time Mid-State League Player of the Year and All-Ohio player at Hamilton Township High School in Groveport, Ohio, a small suburb outside of Columbus. She uses the high school's gym to run events, using the opportunity to give back to local youth and teach them more about volleyball.

Even with her high school accolades, Morbitzer didn't believe she would have much of a platform to benefit from NIL deals. She thought that her walk-on status and lack of playing time through two seasons would have made other players in the program a more attractive option for NIL opportunities, so she decided to create her own path through the camps and clinics.

"I didn't think I would benefit from the NIL opportunities here because I don't really have a huge name in the world of volleyball," Morbitzer said. "(But I've been able to) use my name around Columbus to my benefit and formed relationships with a lot of coaches and players around here. That has helped me tremendously in the clinics that I run. I've been sending it out to the coaches around here and players around here, trying to get my name out more, and it's been amazing. I've had an amazing turnout at my sessions – much more than I expected."

Because Morbitzer experienced significant turnouts at her events, she also brought in more money than she initially thought possible. Through one summer of sessions, she collected over \$3,000 while learning how to promote and plan future events better.

With each opportunity, Morbitzer looked for ways to best reach local youth and max-

imize her profits. She wasn't expecting to make the big money that an Ohio State football player might make from an NIL deal. Rather, she offered affordable camps and training to young athletes looking to improve their skills while she made money to alleviate the financial pressure for her family as she attends Ohio State.

"Making money from these camps is a huge deal for me and my parents," Morbitzer said. "I don't get a weekly or monthly check like a lot of my teammates (who are on scholarship) get. My parents had to pay for my room and board and my tuition. They are very thankful that I am taking this opportunity to just have some spending money every month or every few months for groceries and other necessities. It's even nice just to have money to spoil myself and buy some new clothing and other fun things."

Running camps or engaging in other NIL opportunities gives Morbitzer, her teammates and other Ohio State student-athletes the chance to develop strong relationships with local businesspeople who may want to partner with them. It allows them to make money on their time without the restrictions of a job that requires them to devote countless hours to earn a wage – a reality that seems impossible for many with class, practice and training on the schedule.

"(NIL) gives an opportunity for all of Ohio State's athletes to build a professional network, learn about entrepreneurs and learn about being an entrepreneur while growing their awareness of different industries," Brown said. "And to do it in a way that they wouldn't have been able to before because most of them don't have the time to do internships. They don't have the time to do outbound networking because they have to work 25 hours a week for their sport. They can't go study abroad, and this is the way that gap can be limited a little bit."

As a full-time student majoring in exercise science and human development and family sciences and a full-time student-athlete, Morbitzer agreed that she wouldn't have had time to work another job to make money for school and other necessities. Oldenburg said she requires her athletes to be at the Covelli Center and Schumaker Complex for 20 hours a week, not including time spent in the training room, rehabilitating an injury or traveling for games, which she claims could easily approach 40 hours depending on the student-athlete.

"I know there are some who think that student-athletes shouldn't get paid," Morbitzer said. "I don't think they understand that being a college athlete is a full-time job. I will be the first to tell someone that we simply don't have the hours in the day to commit to a real job. Unlike other students who can go to class for a couple of hours then go make some money at their job, we go to practice and training for four hours after our classes. It's a very different lifestyle that we live and go through. I am so thankful that I can make some money in the offseason while I don't have that opportunity during the season."

The flexibility NIL offers is the preferred benefit for most student-athletes. However, not every NIL opportunity is one-size-fits-all. Ohio State men's lacrosse player Mitchell Pehlke has used the new legislation to earn income from his Facebook, Instagram, Tik-



COURTESY OF OHIO STATE ATHLETICS

NOT JUST FOOTBALL - Ohio State's football team accounts for more than 25 percent of the school's NIL deals, but it isn't alone in producing success stories. Women's volleyball player Sarah Sue Morbitzer (in the air), a walk-on, made more than \$3,000 over the summer running volleyball camps in her old high school's gym.

Tok, Twitter and YouTube followings, which require him to constantly produce engaging content that attracts bigger audiences.

Pehlke began his social media enterprise as a freshman at Riverside High School in Leesburg, Va. What primarily started as an outlet to share meaningful memories with his friends to the digital world quickly became a functioning business. Pehlke conducted brand deals to sponsor YouTube videos, promoted his other social media outlets and sold merchandise. For the next four years, Pehlke profited from his brand.

However, when Pehlke decided to further his academic and athletic career at Ohio State in 2020, NIL legislation was not yet in place, which meant he needed to monetize his YouTube channel and pause sponsorships with partnering companies. When Ohio legislation passed to allow collegiate athletes to engage in NIL activities, Pehlke's brand went live again.

"When NIL came around, I felt excited and knew this would lead to big things long-term," Pehlke said. "I didn't know right off the bat what direction it would go, but I met with brands to make deals and it took off. The deals are stunning for the football and basketball guys. I didn't get deals like them because those are, as we know, the money makers in the industry. But for someone like me, I believe this is what NIL was made for – for people that want to create content who are college athletes."

Pehlke's YouTube channel has over 26,000 subscribers, and his social media accounts combine to reach over 105,000 followers. Pehlke's TikTok leads all of his social platforms with 74,000 followers and nearly five million likes across hundreds of videos that detail the life of a college lacrosse player at a Division I university.

Although Pehlke has benefited tremendously from the Ohio State brand and fre-

quently references the Buckeyes in his videos, he desires to create content that isn't reliant entirely on the university's name recognition and hopes that these experiences can launch him into that world.

"Putting a Block 'O' on my content will attract more eyes, but with content creation, the Ohio State brand can only take you so far," Pehlke said. "Being a student-athlete at the university will bring them to your page, but the only way they're going to stay is with the good, quality content. You can bring them in with the flashy stuff. However, it's nice for them to stay within what you provide."

"I always ask myself, 'What type of content are you producing? Is it engaging?' I think (the OSU brand) has done a lot and it will give me a lot more eyes in this industry. But I truly think for followers to stay and continue to watch that falls back on me because no one's going to watch somebody that's boring just because they're at Ohio State. You've got to keep them engaged."

Pehlke extended his gratitude to the Ohio State athletic department for allowing him the chance to leverage the university's resources for his personal gain. He was surprised that employees from Opendorse and the NIL Edge Team would align themselves with his career goals and care deeply for the future of his social media enterprise.

As a sport industry major, Pehlke spends his mornings and evenings in the classroom or working at the Student-Athlete Support Services Office (SASSO) to complete homework, quizzes and exams. When he isn't devoting time to his studies, Pehlke visits the Schumaker Complex on Ohio State's athletic campus working on his craft and strengthening his body.

Pehlke excels in his studies, becoming an Ohio State Scholar-Athlete and Academic All-Big Ten honoree in his first two seasons in Columbus. Head coach Nick Myers has

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COURTESY OF OHIO STATE ATHLETICS

GETTING CREATIVE - Men's lacrosse player Mitchell Pehlke (left) has carved out an NIL niche for himself by producing content online for more than 105,000 combined followers across his various accounts. He's most popular on TikTok and YouTube, where he spends 10-30 hours a week creating videos about his life as a Division I lacrosse player.

been impressed with Pehlke for his work on and off the field and admires how he finds a healthy balance between school, sports and work during the season.

"Mitchell is leveraging his skills," Myers said. "He's worked really hard. He's developed his YouTube and his social media presence over the years. He puts in 10 to 30 hours a week outside of being a student and an athlete. This is his profession, and I appreciate his work ethic. To have a chance to reward him for that, I think that's awesome. He's making a lot of sacrifices, and he's really good at what he does."

Pehlke's profession includes hours spent editing YouTube videos, recording TikToks and making other social media posts. It might seem strange to those accustomed to a traditional office job, but Pehlke's work requires an intense focus toward keeping his followers engaged and interested in future entertainment.

He admitted that he's struggled to maintain the schedule that school, sports and content creation demand. However, he explained that Ohio State's athletic department has partnered with him and showed him a direction that will lead to growth.

"Gene Smith has put so much toward NIL," Pehlke said. "A lot of other schools are doing this, but Ohio State is at the forefront. I walked off the practice field one day and (deputy director of athletics) Janine Oman came up and said, 'Hi, Mitch, I love what you're doing. But how can we make it better?'"

"The athletic department is always looking for ways to improve. I got off a call with Opendorse earlier this year and they told me Ohio State won Rookie of the Year for NIL. I committed here because I knew it would be a leader in academics and athletics. Gene Smith has made us a leader in NIL, too."

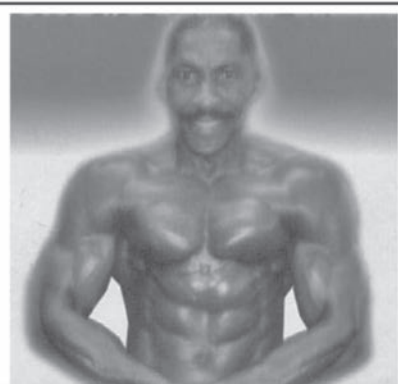
Although Smith's Feb. 16 State of the Union speech looked extensively into the impact NIL has had on football and he was quick to share his concerns, he made clear his soft spot for the Olympic athletes in Columbus having experiences like Morbitzer's or Pehlke's.

He said that football might hold the most significant share of NIL money made at the university and that there are certainly issues

to address within the details, but he returned often to the core that ultimately inspired the legislation to begin with.

"TreVeyon, (quarterback C.J. Stroud), those guys are at the top of the pyramid, but when I talk to the Olympic sport athletes who can engage with this, it's just so heartwarming," Smith said. "We have to remember this, they're on partial scholarships and not full rides. They can offset some of the costs they incur. Mitchell's story was a perfect one, and he said publicly that he's going to make about \$200,000, he's getting paid by YouTube monthly. He's on a 30 percent scholarship, and he won't leave with (debt). That's what moves me."

"TreVeyon's story moves me as well because he can help his family, but with our Olympic sport athletes, Sarah was a walk-on, and now she's killing it through clinics. I hear so many stories and it's just heartwarming. (NIL is) not stressful. It's just challenging to constantly stay ahead of it."

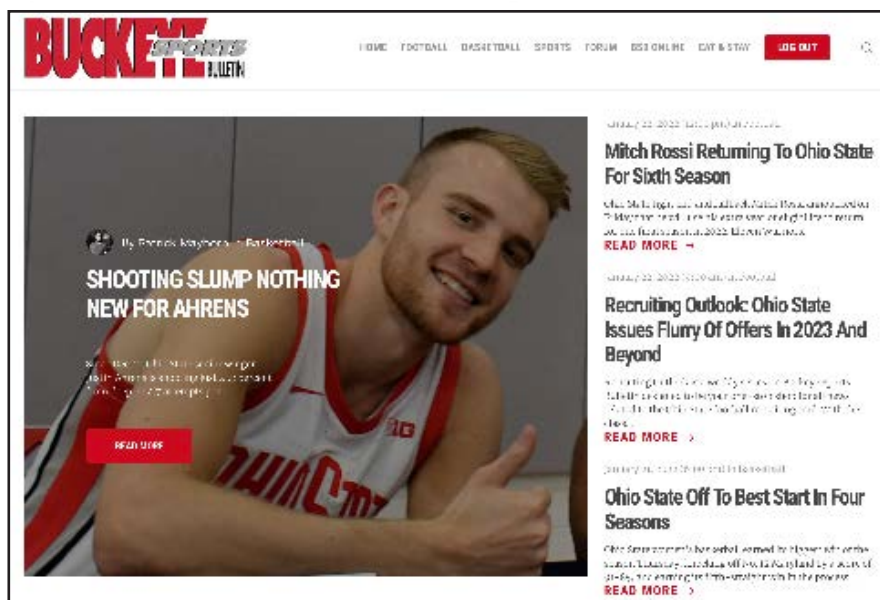


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Fields Stands Out In Readers' Greatest QB Poll

By **CRAIG MERZ**

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

Justin Fields wasn't on the ballot in 2018 when Buckeye Sports Bulletin asked readers to vote for the greatest Ohio State quarterback of all time.

That summer, Fields was about to embark on his freshman season at Georgia after being a five-star recruit and the top dual-threat quarterback in the class of 2018 by 247Sports.com. The Kennesaw, Ga., native also earned the tag as the overall No. 2 recruit behind Clemson QB commit Trevor Lawrence.

A switch in plans after his rookie year resulted in his transfer, and in two illustrious seasons for the Buckeyes, he set numerous records in helping them reach the College Football Playoff twice, including the 2021 title game.

Now, he's been voted the best of the best among Ohio State quarterbacks in the latest BSB polling, edging Rex Kern and J.T. Barrett among the 12 players on the ballot. There were also a few write-ins.

Fields, entering his second season with the Chicago Bears, took the crown but earned just one first-place ballot among the respondents.

One of the reasons for his being lower on some lists was his brief stint (2019 and '20 seasons), compared to an earlier era when players were around for three or four seasons.

"Greatest athlete but only here two years – could have been the best," wrote Mike McGrew, 55, of Miamisburg, Ohio. He voted Fields fourth behind Barrett, 2006 Heisman Trophy winner Troy Smith and Cornelius Greene (who now spells his name Green).

Placing in a tie for second were Barrett (2014-17) and Kern, a member of the 1968 national championship team.

"Rex Kern brought passing to OSU," commented Michael Owens, 69, of Mentor, Ohio, on why Kern topped his listing. "Tough competitor and a team leader. To lead OSU to a national championship as a sophomore was incredible. 1968 was a magical year!"

Smith, who was fourth, did not make the top 10 on four ballots even though as McGrew pointed out, he was a "Michigan Killer and Heisman winner."

Rounding out the top 10 were Art Schlichter, Craig Krenzel, Greene, Braxton Miller, Dwayne Haskins and Joe Germaine.

Bobby Hoying was 11th, followed by Terrelle Pryor.

Cardale Jones was a write-in No. 1 for Bob Helvey, 73, of Holland, Ohio, for leading the Buckeyes to the 2014 College Foot-

ball Playoff championship.

Robert Turner, 78, of Elk Grove, Calif., sent a note in support of Jones, noting that as the third-string QB, Jones led the Buckeyes to wins over Wisconsin in the Big Ten title game and Alabama and Oregon to earn the College Football Playoff championship in 2014.

If the trend continues in this pass-happy era of college football, there may be the need for a third poll in several years to make room for upcoming redshirt sophomore C.J. Stroud, who succeeded Fields and finished fourth in Heisman Trophy voting in 2021.

Stroud received a first-place vote on a write-in ballot.

Here's a review of the 12 QBs on the ballot in order of their finish.

1. Justin Fields (2019-20)

20-2 as a starter after transfer from

Georgia. ... Threw for 385 yards and six touchdowns in the 2020 semifinal, a 49-29 win over Clemson. ... 2019 Heisman Trophy finalist. ... Threw for 5,373 yards, 10th all-time at OSU. ... 63 touchdown passes are second at Ohio State. ... Rushed for 867 yards and 15 career touchdowns. ... MVP of 2019 Big Ten Championship Game. ... First QB in Big Ten history with 40-plus passing TDs and 10-plus rushing touchdowns in a season (2019).

Final Fan Vote

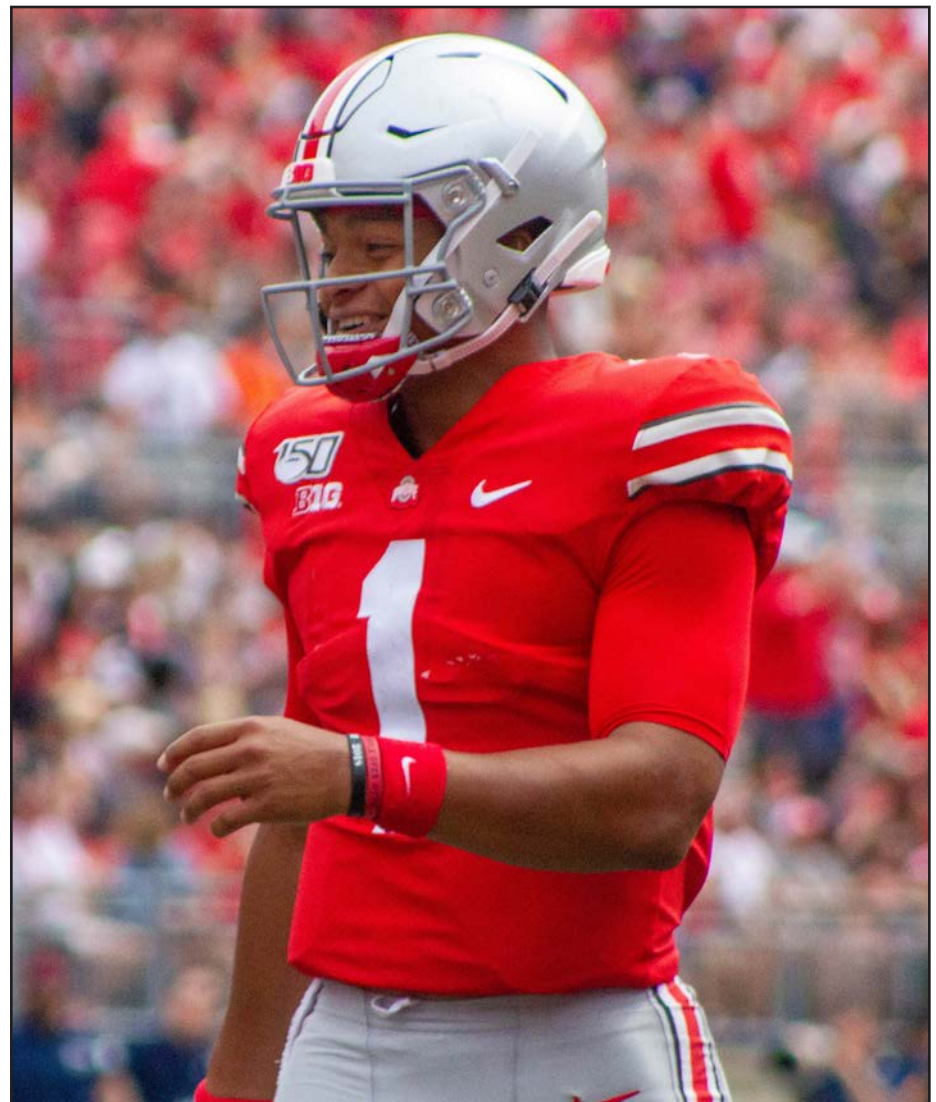
Rk.	Name	Years
1.	Justin Fields	2019-20
T2.	J.T. Barrett	2014-17
T2.	Rex Kern	1968-70
4.	Troy Smith	2003-06
5.	Art Schlichter	1978-81
6.	Craig Krenzel	2000-03
7.	Cornelius Greene	1972-75
8.	Braxton Miller	2011-15
9.	Dwayne Haskins	2016-18
10.	Joe Germaine	1996-98
11.	Bobby Hoying	1992-95
12.	Terrelle Pryor	2008-10
Also receiving votes: Cardale Jones, C.J. Stroud		

T2. J.T. Barrett (2014-17)

2016 Chicago Tribune Silver Football Award winner (best player in Big Ten) and a three-time Big Ten Quarterback of the Year while helping OSU to conference championships in 2014 and '17. ... Responsible for 147 touchdowns scored (school- and Big Ten-record 104 passing, plus 43 rushing). ... Set 39 records (34 Ohio State, five Big Ten). ... First three-time captain in program history. ... 4-0 vs. Michigan. ... In 2016 U-M game, his 1-yard plunge on fourth down in the second overtime barely kept the game alive and allowed Curtis Samuel to score on the next play for a 30-27 win.

T2. Rex Kern (1968-70)

25-2 as starter ... As a sophomore (first year eligible) led the Buckeyes to 1968 national championship with 27-16 Rose Bowl win over O.J. Simpson and Southern California when he was named game's most valuable player. ... For 1968 season he was 75 of 131 (57.3 percent) for 972 yards with seven touchdowns and six interceptions. ... In 29 career games he was 188 of 364 (51.6 percent) for 2,444 yards, 19 TDs and 24 interceptions. He also ran for 1,714 yards (4.9 average) and 24 scores. ... OSU reached No. 1 ranking in each of his junior and senior seasons.



FILE PHOTO

TOP DOG – After leading the Buckeyes to a pair of College Football Playoff berths with Heisman Trophy-contending seasons in 2019 and 2020, Justin Fields is the new pick for greatest quarterback in program history according to the Buckeye Sports Bulletin QB poll, which ran throughout the 2021 college football season.

4. Troy Smith (2003-06)

2006 Heisman Trophy winner with second-largest margin of victory in balloting at the time ... 25-3 as starter, including 3-0 vs. Michigan. ... 2006 Chicago Tribune Silver Football Award winner. ... In 13 games that season completed 203 of 311 passes (65.3 percent) for 2,542 yards and 30 TDs against six interceptions when the Buckeyes went 12-0 before losing 41-14 to Florida in the BCS championship game. ... As a sophomore in 2004 he accounted for 386 total yards in a 37-21 win against Michigan. ... Career passing totals were 5,720 yards, 54 TDs and 13 interceptions.

5. Art Schlichter (1978-81)

Four-year starter after heralded career at Washington Court House (Ohio) Miami Trace. ... His freshman season was Woody Hayes' last. ... Finished fourth in Heisman Trophy voting as a sophomore, sixth as a junior and fifth as a senior. ... In 1979, led Buckeyes to 11-0 regular season in first year for Earle Bruce. Lost 1980 Rose Bowl and chance for national title, 17-16 to Southern California. ... Ended career with 7,547 yards passing with 50 touchdowns and 46 interceptions. He rushed for 1,303 yards and 35 TDs.

6. Craig Krenzel (2000-03)

24-3 record as starter. ... Offensive MVP in 2003 Fiesta Bowl when OSU defeated the University of Miami 31-24 in double overtime to win the BCS national championship to complete a 14-0 season. ... Leading rusher in the game with 81 yards on 19 carries. Offensive MVP in 2004 Fiesta Bowl with 189 yards passing and four touchdowns to beat Kansas State 35-28. ... 4,493 career passing yards with 28 TDs against 21 interceptions. ... Honors graduate in molecular genetics.

He was the first choice of Thomas Farish of Port St. Lucie, Fla.: "Stats are great. I like a quarterback that manages a team to a national championship!"

7. Cornelius Greene (1972-75)

All-American and Chicago Tribune Silver Football winner in 1975. ... First Black to start at quarterback for Ohio State in 1973. ... 31-2-1 as a starter, helping OSU to three Big Ten titles and an undefeated season in 1973. ... Played in four Rose Bowls, starting last three years. ... 1974 Rose Bowl MVP when he threw for 129 yards and ran for 45 yards and TD in 42-21 victory over USC. Inducted in Rose Bowl Hall of Fame in 2019. ... Completed in his career 55.1

percent of his passes for 2,348 yards and 17 touchdowns; rushed for 2,066 yards (4.9 average) with 29 touchdowns.

"Cornelius Greene was the greatest quarterback in OSU history," BSB reader Dan LaVille of Grand Rapids, Mich., said. "He was our first African-American QB and endured many taunts, letters and phone calls deriding him as a Black QB. He paved the way for many to follow him."

LaVille listed many of Greene's accomplishments and ended with, "It's a shame that many of today's fans did not get to see him play!"

8. Braxton Miller (2011-15)

2012 and 2013 Chicago Tribune Silver Football Award (best player in the Big Ten) while playing quarterback ... Led OSU to 12-0 season in 2012. ... After missing 20 months while recovering from a shoulder injury and two surgeries, returned for 2015 season at wide receiver. Earned honorable-mention all-Big Ten honors after catching 26 passes for 341 yards and three touchdowns plus rushing for 281 yards and another score ... 5,295 passing yards and 52 touchdowns in his career along with 3,315 rushing yards and 25 TDs.

Ohio State football historian Jack Park on Miller's legacy: "It would be fair to say he's probably the most multitalented quarterback that we had, who could do so many different things. Just a very exciting player who could make a play and get a lot of extra yardage when almost no other quarter-

back could have done that."

9. Dwayne Haskins (2016-18)

Heisman Trophy finalist and Chicago Tribune Silver Football winner in 2018, his lone season as a starter when he set 28 school and seven Big Ten records. ... Threw for the most yards (4,831) and touchdowns (50) in conference history while leading the Buckeyes to a 13-1 record, including wins in the Big Ten Championship Game and Rose Bowl. ... Passed for 396 yards and six touchdowns in 62-39 win vs. Michigan and set school record with 499 yards and five TDs vs. Northwestern in title game. ... Passed for 251 yards and three TDs in 28-23 win against Washington to earn 2019 Rose Bowl MVP.

10. Joe Germaine (1996-98)

Chicago Tribune Silver Football award winner (1998). ... Held nine Ohio State quarterback records. ... Team MVP (1998). ... Rose Bowl MVP in 1997 when he guided Buckeyes 65 yards in 12 plays in final 1:40, capped by 5-yard TD pass to David Boston with 19 seconds left for 20-17 victory over No. 2 Arizona State. ... Threw for 3,330 yards with 25 TDs against seven interceptions as a senior. ... For his career – which included only 13 starts among 37 games played in three seasons – he had 6,370 passing yards, 56 touchdowns and 20 interceptions.

11. Bobby Hoying (1992-95)

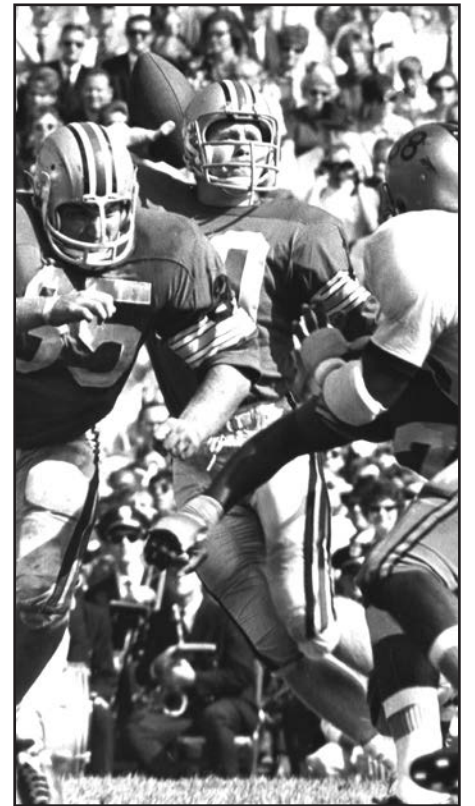
First-team All-Big Ten as a senior by

throwing for then school-record 3,269 yards along with 29 touchdowns. ... Was second that season nationally and set school record for passing efficiency (163.4) ... 30-7-1 record as a three-year starter. ... Had 16 games with more than 200 yards passing. ... Threw for 7,232 yards in his career ... 57 TD passes was a school record at the time and is still third on the OSU career list behind Barrett and Fields. ... Won National Football Foundation's Vincent dePaul Draddy Award in 1995 as the top senior student-athlete in college football.

12. Terrelle Pryor (2008-10)

2008 Big Ten Freshman of the Year ... 2009 Big Ten honorable mention (media) ... 3-0 vs. Michigan ... 2010 Rose Bowl MVP in 26-17 win over Oregon when he completed 23 of 37 passes for 266 yards, two TDs and one interception. He also rushed 20 times for 72 yards. ... On Sept. 25, 2010, he had six touchdowns (four passing, one rushing, one receiving) vs. Eastern Michigan. ... Withdrew from school prior to 2011 because of the memorabilia-for-pay scandal known as "Tattoogate". ... Passed for 6,177 yards and 57 TDs with 26 interceptions in his career and ran for 2,164 yards and 17 scores.

Frank Doss, 64, of Lancaster, Ohio, had this to say of Pryor, whom he voted third behind Barrett and Smith: "Pryor would have been higher if he didn't get screwed by NCAA."



FILE PHOTO

TITLE BUMP - Rex Kern (center) finished in a tie for second place in the BSB greatest quarterback poll on the strength of his 25-2 record as a starter and his guidance of the 1968 Ohio State Buckeyes to a Rose Bowl win over USC to claim the national title.

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Clock Ticking For Haskins To Replace Big Ben

By **CRAIG MERZ**

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

Fans hoping for a duel in the fall between former Ohio State quarterbacks Joe Burrow and Dwayne Haskins may be disappointed. Burrow, barring injury, will have no problem keeping his end of the deal for the defending AFC champion Cincinnati Bengals, but it's a long shot that Haskins will be the starter for Pittsburgh even with the retirement of Ben Roethlisberger after 18 seasons with the Steelers.

That's seems to be the opinion of the Steelers brass and certainly one shared by Alan Saunders, who covers the team for PittsburghSportsNow.com. He said comments by outgoing Steelers general manager Kevin Colbert on Feb. 21 point to Mason Rudolph as the heir apparent.

Colbert, who following the NFL draft in April will step down after 22 seasons, also said the Steelers will bring in two more QBs before training camp, likely a midlevel free agent and a draft pick.

"If we started a season today, Mason would be our starter, and we're excited to see where that can go," Colbert said. "Let's try to build the best team we can around him, and that's just the way it is. Mason is 5-4-1 as a starter. One of those games this year, he found out he was going to be the starter Saturday night (when Roethlisberger tested positive for COVID-19), and he tried to give us what he could. We almost won that game – we didn't.

"I'm comfortable that Mason has won more games than he's lost as a starter. Where that can go, we'll see. To be an NFL starter you can win with, you've got to prove it over 16 games, and I'm anxious to see that if that's the case."

Saunders heard those comments and had an immediate reaction.

"That was not a great day for Dwayne Haskins," Saunders told BSB. "It was a lot of, 'We have confidence in Mason Rudolph, and we have faith in Mason Rudolph. We're probably going to bring Haskins back and he can be competition and maybe he'll turn out to be good. Who knows?'

"It wasn't a sparkling endorsement of Dwayne Haskins as a guy that could compete with Mason Rudolph."

He feels the Steelers aren't really sold on Rudolph, a third-round pick in 2018, or Haskins. The dream of many in the Iron City would be to draft Pittsburgh Panthers star Kenny Pickett, but that's not realistic without a blockbuster deal since the Steelers have the 20th pick and he should be long gone.

"You don't spend your entire time at the Senior Bowl staring at and digging into the six quarterbacks there if you're super excited about the guys that you're bringing back," Saunders said. "Even saying 'We're excited about Mason Rudolph' is probably not the whole truth.

"And add to the fact that all they can say about Dwayne is he can be some competition didn't seem like that's a sign they're really strongly considering him as an option at quarterback."

Haskins was a 2018 Heisman Trophy finalist in his one season as a starter at Ohio State and parlayed that into being the 15th pick by Washington (now the Commanders) in the 2019 draft.

His two seasons in the nation's capital showed flashes of promise but were also punctuated by poor play and immaturity. By the time he was released before the end of the 2020 season, he was a third-stringer.

For the 2019 season in nine games (seven starts), he was 119 of 203 (58.6 percent) for 1,365 yards with seven touchdowns and seven interceptions. He ran for 101 yards and was sacked

29 times. He also lost four of six fumbles.

While he completed 61.4 percent of his passes for 1,439 yards the following season, he threw only five TDs and was intercepted seven times.

He was signed by the Steelers in January 2021 but never played a regular-season down. He was on the active roster only once when Roethlisberger went into the COVID-19 protocol.

"Dwayne Haskins came in and did some nice things throughout the season as a scout-team quarterback," Colbert said, "He played some in a preseason game, and we're excited to see what Dwayne can provide either from competition or maybe he evolves as a starter. None of us know at this point.

"We have Dwayne and we have Mason. Can we add to that group from the outside? Sure. I mean, we'll always look at trades. We'll always look at unrestricted groups, potential cuts down the road and make those comparisons and compare what it's going to cost us either from a draft compensation or from a free-agency cap availability decision and what that would do to the rest of your team."

With Haskins' troubled times at Washington, including being stripped of the captaincy and limited success on the field, what did the Steelers see in him?

"I think it was a case of 'Let's use this third quarterback spot on somebody that could maybe someday be that (starter) and we can get the luxury to give a player an entire year to sit here to run our system, run our scout team, and we'll get to see what they have,' " Saunders said.

"When you're looking at people available for that role, Dwayne Haskins is an outlier. You don't often get the ability to have somebody who had the talent to be a first-round draft pick and is willing to come in and be somebody's third-string quarterback. That doesn't happen very often."

There was also that dangerous word – potential.

"I think they were excited about his ceiling, his overall talent level," Saunders said. "I think there's probably a bit of a feeling around the league that if you're a player that comes from a certain place and you don't work out there – say you're coming from Jacksonville, if you're coming from Washington, you're coming from the Jets – I think a lot of teams will kind of look at that like was it you or was it the situation?

"How bad were you compared to the team? How bad did they screw you up?" Saunders continued. "That's what the Steelers saw, a player that came from a bad situation, had a lot of talent and they had a pretty unique opportunity to give him the ability to come in and just watch and learn. It gave them the opportunity to observe him and see if they see a potential future quarterback."

A Fit For Pitt

Saunders also said Haskins fills coach Mike Tomlin's philosophy of giving players second chances.

"His theory of coaching is that he wants to get the best out of his players. He wants to coach people up," Saunders said. "He's not some kind of X' and O's genius, where he's just going to outsmart people to victory.

"He wants to make his players better and then win because of their contributions, and I think he has a bit of a soft spot for players like Dwayne who have a lot of talent that have not figured out how to get all that talent to show on the field.

"There's a lot of Dwayne Haskins in the Steelers' history, in the Steelers locker room right now – guys that other teams cast aside that the Steelers pick up and take a chance on and try to find a way to make work. It's part of their DNA."

Rudolph is signed through the 2022 season. While Haskins, 24, is slated to be a free agent, Colbert said the Steelers will tender him for the 2022 season, allowing him to negotiate with other teams.

Steelers team president Art Rooney II had this to say Jan. 28 in an interview for the team website:

"Mason has a winning record as a quarterback in this league and I think has performed well when he's had the opportunity. I talked to him after the season. I know he's looking forward to having the opportunity to compete for the starting job. It will be exciting to see.

"Dwayne Haskins is a young quarterback with a lot of talent, so we'll see how he develops."

Saunders said the uncertainty surrounding the QB is matched by anticipation.

"Mike Tomlin has been the head coach of the Pittsburgh Steelers since 2007, and he's never picked a starting quarterback, which is kind of incredible," he said. "But I think he and the staff are looking forward to putting their stamp on this and making that change and being the ones to come up with what's next and I think they're looking forward to the challenge."

A new signal caller might be what the Steelers need as Saunders noted that Roethlisberger was no longer among the elite QBs his final couple of seasons.

He feels the Steelers could get by with Rudolph or Haskins and possibly make the playoffs as they did in 2021.

"They don't need a quarterback to be great to be average," Saunders said. "They need a quarterback to be great to be better than average. I have a hard time seeing them come up with great quarterback play in 2022 right now."

Looking Back

With Burrow's ascension and Haskins' downfall at the pro level comes some revisionist history.

Apparently, Ohio State head coach Urban Meyer and quarterbacks coach Ryan Day were dead wrong when they chose Haskins over Burrow in the celebrated QB Battle of the Ages in the spring of 2018 to replace J.T. Barrett.

Remember how Haskins faltered and the Buckeyes stumbled to a miserable record while Burrow transferred to LSU and immediately became a star?

That's not exactly what happened, although in fairness, Burrow a season later had a Heisman Trophy-winning year in guiding the Tigers to the national title, leading him to become the first overall pick of the 2020 NFL draft.

Instead, in 2018 Haskins threw a Big Ten-record 50 touchdown passes against eight interceptions while winning the Silver Football Award as the Big Ten's MVP. He completed 70.0 percent of his passes (373 of 533) for 4,831 yards, another conference mark, while leading the Buckeyes to a 13-1 record that included wins in the Big Ten Championship Game as well as the Rose Bowl. He totaled 28 school records and seven Big Ten marks.

It's easy to forget what Haskins accomplished for the Buckeyes in the wake of his disappointing play in the NFL while Burrow has excelled in two seasons with the Bengals.

Burrow finished his rookie season, which was cut short by ACL and MCL tears in his left knee in his 10th game, with a 65.3 completion percentage while throwing for 2,688 yards, 13 touchdowns, five interceptions and a passer rating of 89.8. Burrow had five 300-yard games, and his 264 completions are the most ever by an NFL QB through his first 10 games.

Burrow in 2021 set the Bengals' season record for passing yards (4,611), touchdowns (34)

and passer rating (108.3). He also led the NFL in completion percentage (70.4).

In a comment for BSB's greatest Ohio State QB poll found elsewhere in this issue, an anonymous reader commented on Burrow, "Should have, would have been the greatest (Ohio State) quarterback if given a chance."

Haskins had the edge over Burrow going into spring camp because the prior season as a red-shirt freshman he had relieved the injured Barrett and took the Buckeyes to a victory at Michigan, completing 6 of 7 passes for 94 yards.

But going even further back, Burrow broke a bone in his right (throwing) hand in the spring of 2017, allowing Haskins to claim the backup role and ultimately the No. 1 spot a year later.

"It was an open competition, but we all basically know that Burrow was going to have to knock out the champ," Columbus Dispatch reporter Bill Rabinowitz said in January 2020. "If you go into Ann Arbor and rally the Buckeyes to win there, that's a huge thing on your résumé."

Complicating matters was that Burrow by the spring of 2018 had earned his degree in three years and could immediately transfer and be eligible.

"There wasn't a lot of separation," Rabinowitz said. "(Meyer and Day) wanted both to stay, but Burrow earned the right to move on. There were no hard feelings. It was a completely understandable move by all sides. This was a win-win."

That's a phrase Washington and former Buckeye receiver Terry McLaurin used in talking about witnessing the battle firsthand, recalling how the receivers felt.

"Shoot, it was a win-win for us whoever won the competition," McLaurin said prior to Washington facing Burrow and the Bengals on Nov. 22, 2020. "It was really close.

"I just remember that spring they would go back and forth who would have a good day. Nobody really had a bad day. It was just one guy stood out, then the other guy stood out the next day. They were in a competition, but they were also trying to help each other."

But make no mistake that competition was stressful.

"I loved Joe, but during that battle, for almost two years, me and Joe couldn't stand each other," said Haskins to CBS Sports.com in August 2020. "It was just, every day, whether it was winter workouts, or we had to do mat drills, it was gritty. Or it was (at) practice, and me and him were trying to get in front of each other and get a rep to throw with one of our starting receivers. It was always this heated competition, but we knew we got the best out of each other. We always knew that we made each other better."

Meyer in the same CBSSports.com story called the battle historic.

"It turned out to (be) two of the best quarterbacks ever to play college football," he said. "(Haskins) only played for us one year, and it will go down as Ohio State's best season ever by a quarterback. Think about that. It's also one of the best seasons in Big Ten history. Then you had a guy named Joe Burrow in the quarterback room, and (the competition) was as close as you can get. We wanted to do it right. We did do it right. It was very close, and Dwayne came out on top."

Some people don't see it that way in hindsight.

"In 2018, when you asked which quarterback you would rather have, there were no Ohio State fans who said, 'I wish Burrow were here instead of Haskins,' " Rabinowitz said. "I don't think anyone, not even Joe Burrow, could have envisioned what he did at LSU."

BUCKEYE SCOREBOARD

2021 FOOTBALL (11-2, 8-1)

Sept. 2 at Minnesota, W 45-31; **11** OREGON, L 35-28; **18** TULSA, W 41-20; **25** AKRON, W 59-7.

Oct. 2 at Rutgers, W 52-13; **9** MARYLAND, W 66-17; **23** at Indiana, W 54-7; **30** PENN STATE, W 33-24.

Nov. 6 at Nebraska, W 26-17; **13** PURDUE, W 59-31; **20** MICHIGAN STATE, W 56-7; **27** at Michigan, L 42-27.

Jan. 1 vs. Utah in Rose Bowl, W 48-45.

2022 FOOTBALL

Sept. 3 NOTRE DAME; **10** ARKANSAS STATE; **17** TOLEDO; **24** WISCONSIN.

Oct. 1 RUTGERS; **8** at Michigan State; **22** IOWA; **29** at Penn State.

Nov. 5 at Northwestern; **12** INDIANA; **19** at Maryland; **26** MICHIGAN.

2023 FOOTBALL

Sept. 2 at Indiana; **9** SAN JOSE STATE; **16** WESTERN KENTUCKY; **23** at Notre Dame.

Oct. 7 MARYLAND; **14** at Purdue; **21** PENN STATE; **28** at Wisconsin.

Nov. 4 at Rutgers; **11** MICHIGAN STATE; **18** MINNESOTA; **25** at Michigan.

MEN'S BASKETBALL (18-8, 11-6)

Nov. 1 INDIANAPOLIS (EXH.), W 82-46; **9** AKRON, W 67-66; **12** NIAGARA, W 84-74; **15** BOWLING GREEN, W 89-58; **18** at Xavier, L 71-65 **22** at Seton Hall, W 79-76; **24** at Florida, L 71-68; **30** DUKE, W 71-66.

Dec. 5 at Penn State, W 76-64; **8** TOWSON, W 85-74; **11** WISCONSIN, W 73-55; **18** at Kentucky, Canceled; **21** TENNESSEE MARTIN, Canceled; **28** NEW ORLEANS, Canceled.

Jan. 2 at Nebraska, W 87-79 (OT); **6** at Indiana, L 67-51; **9** NORTHWESTERN, W 95-87; **13** at Wisconsin, L 78-68; **16** PENN STATE, W 61-56; **18** IUPUI, W 83-37; **22** NEBRASKA, Postponed; **27** at Minnesota, W 75-64; **30** at Purdue, L 78-81

Feb. 3 IOWA, Postponed; **6** MARYLAND, W 82-67; **9** at Rutgers, L 64-66; **12** at Michigan, 68-57; **15** MINNESOTA, W 70-45; **19** IOWA, L 62-75; **21** INDIANA, W 80-69; **24** at Illinois, W 86-83; **24** at Maryland, L 75-60.

March 1 NEBRASKA; **3** MICHIGAN STATE; **6** MICHIGAN; **9-13** Big Ten Tournament at Indianapolis.

WOMEN'S BASKETBALL (22-5, 14-4)

Nov. 3 SLIPPERY ROCK (EXH.), W 96-48; **10** BUCKNELL, W 71-48; **14** NORFOLK STATE, W 86-48; **17** BOWLING GREEN, W 94-63; **23** BELLARMINE, W 110-58; **27** CINCINNATI, W 86-50.

Dec. 1 at Syracuse, L 97-91; **5** at Purdue, W 70-53; **7** MOUNT ST. MARY'S, W 94-50; **12** INDIANA L 86-66; **15** ALABAMA STATE, W 97-51; **19** at UCLA, Canceled; **21** at San Diego State, W 66-54; **31** at Michigan, L 90-71.

Jan. 3 PENN STATE, Postponed; **6** ILLINOIS, W 90-69; **9** at Northwestern, W 74-61; **12** MICHIGAN STATE, W 89-83; **15** at Minnesota, W 83-75; **20** MARYLAND, W 95-89; **23** at Rutgers W 80-71; **27** MICHIGAN, L 58-77 **31** at Iowa, W 92-88

Feb. 7 RUTGERS, W 61-57; **10** NEBRASKA, W 80-70; **14** at Illinois, W 86-67; **17** at Maryland, L 72-77; **20** WISCONSIN, W 59-42; **24** PENN

STATE, W 78-55; **27** at Michigan State, W 61-55.

March 2-6 Big Ten Tournament at Indianapolis.

MEN'S GYMNASTICS

Jan. 15 Windy City Invite, Chicago, Ill.; 2nd/7th (387.7.500); **22** New York Alliance, W 399.150-280.300.

Feb. 5 at (6) Illinois, L 394.500-400.750; **12** (4) Michigan, W 403.600-398.100 **19** (10) Army, W 393.950-374.850 **19** (12) William & Mary, W 393.950-364.550

March 5 ARNOLD CHALLENGE, 1:30 p.m.; **8** MINNESOTA/NEBRASKA, 6 p.m.; **16** at Iowa, 7 p.m.; **24** ILLINOIS, 5 p.m.

April 5-6 Big Ten Championships at Iowa City, Iowa; **19** NCAA Qualifier at Champaign, Ill.; **20** NCAA Championships at Champaign, Ill.

WOMEN'S GYMNASTICS

Jan. 7 at Arkansas, L 195.025-195.450; **15** Denver, L 196.600-195.750; **22** Penn State, W 196.450-196.425; **30** Rutgers, W 196.025-195.750.

Feb. 7 NEBRASKA, W 196.675-196.350; **12** at Minnesota, L 197.575-195.775; **18** Big Five Meet at Toledo, Ohio, 2nd/5, 196.900 **26** MICHIGAN ST., W 197.075-196.850

March 4 All-Ohio Meet, 7 p.m.; TEMPLE, 4 p.m.; **6** KENT STATE, 4 p.m.; **11** CAL/PITT, 7 p.m.; **19** Big Ten Championships at TBA

April 4 NCAA Regional First Round; **5** NCAA Regional Second Round; **6** NCAA Regional Final; **19** NCAA Semifinals at Fort Worth, Texas; **20** NCAA Championships at Fort Worth, Texas.

MEN'S ICE HOCKEY (21-11-2, 13-9-2)

Oct. 8 at Bentley, L 2-1; **9** at Bentley, W 7-1; **15** UCONN, W 4-3 (OT); **16** UCONN, W 3-0; **29-30** MICHIGAN STATE, L 2-1, W 5-1.

Nov. 5 PENN STATE, W 5-2; **6** PENN STATE, W 4-1; **12** at Minnesota, W 4-3; **13** at Minnesota, L 2-0; **26** Mercyhurst, L 5-4; **27** MERCYHURST, W 3-2.

Dec. 3 at Notre Dame, W 4-2; **4** at Notre Dame, L 5-1; **10** MICHIGAN, L 5-2; **11** MICHIGAN, W 6-1; **16** BOWLING GREEN, W 4-3 (OT); **17** at Bowling Green, W 3-2; **31** LIU, W 6-0

Jan. 1, LIU, W 7-2. **8** at Wisconsin, W 5-3; **9** at Wisconsin, T 2-2 OT (SW); **14** NOTRE DAME, L 3-2 (OT); **15** NOTRE DAME, W 4-1; **21** at Michigan State, W 4-1; **22** at Michigan State, W 3-2; **28-29** at Penn State, T 2-2, W 6-0

Feb. 4-5 WISCONSIN, W 4-3 OT, W 6-2; **11-12** MINNESOTA, L 2-3; L 1-5; **18-19** at Michigan, L 3-5; L 0-3;

March 4-6 Big Ten Quarterfinals, Penn State; **12** Big Ten Semifinal; **19** Big Ten Championship.

WOMEN'S ICE HOCKEY (27-6-0, 21-6-0)

Sept. 24 ST. THOMAS, W 6-0; **25** ST. THOMAS, W 4-1

Oct. 1 at Minnesota, W 4-2; **2** at Minnesota, W 4-1 **15** BEMIDJI STATE, W 7-0, **16** BEMIDJI STATE, W 3-1; **23** at Wisconsin, L 3-1; **24** at Wisconsin, L 2-1 (OT); **29** ST. CLOUD STATE, W 5-2; **30** ST. CLOUD STATE, W 10-1.

Nov. 5 at St. Thomas, W 8-1, **6** at St. Thomas, W 6-2; **19** MINNESOTA STATE, W 6-3; **20** MINNESOTA STATE, W 9-0; **26** DC Tournament at Washington, D.C., vs. St. Lawrence, W 5-2; **27** DC Tournament at Washington, D.C., vs. Penn

State, W 4-2.

Dec. 3 at Minnesota Duluth, L 5-2; **4** at Minnesota Duluth, W 6-2.

Jan. 7 LINDENWOOD, W 8-2; **8** LINDENWOOD, W 10-0; **14-15** at St. Cloud State, canceled; **21** MINNESOTA DULUTH, L 1-0.; **22** MINNESOTA DULUTH, W 3-1; **28** MINNESOTA, W 2-1; **29** MINNESOTA, L 5-3

Feb. 4-5 at Minnesota State, W 5-0, W 7-1; **Feb 8** at St. Cloud State, W 6-2 **11-12** at Bemidji State, L 3-2; W 8-1; **18** WISCONSIN, W 5-1, W; **19** WISCONSIN, 2-1; **25-27** WCHA Quarterfinals, St. Cloud State, W 6-0; W, 3-0 **MARCH 5-6** WCHA Championships.

SWIMMING & DIVING

Oct. 30 Indiana, Men: L 123-230; Women: L 209-142; Virginia Tech, Men: W 207- 146; Women: W 225-128; vs. Penn State Men: W 250-100.50; 30 Indiana Women: W 225-163

Nov. 11 Akron, Women: W 228-91 **Nov. 12** DENISON, Men: W 184-104; Women: W 183.5-104.5; **18-20** OHIO STATE INVITATIONAL, Men: 1st/9; Women: 1st/2,257pts.

Jan. 21-22 Shamrock Invitational at Notre Dame, Ind., Men: 1st/2; Women: 3rd/3. **28** Michigan, Men: 189-111; Women: 152.5-147.5 **29** Cleveland State, Men: W 159-78

Feb. 11-13 WINTER INVITATIONAL; **16-19** Women's Big Ten Championships at Madison, Wisc.; 1/8. **23-26** Men's Big Ten Championships at West Lafayette, Ind., 2/8.

March 6 LAST CHANCE MEET (women); **6** Last Chance Meet at TBA (men); **10-12** CSCAA National Invitational at Cleveland; NCAA Zone Diving at West Lafayette, Ind.; **16-19** Women's NCAA Championships at Austin, Texas; **23-26** Men's NCAA Championships at Atlanta, Georgia.

MEN'S TENNIS (13-1)

Jan. 19 TOLEDO, W 7-0; **19** XAVIER, W 6-1, W 4-0; **22** Illinois, W 4-0; **29** Arizona State, W 4-0 **30** (17) North Carolina W 4-0.

Feb. 4 (1) TENNESSEE, W 4-0; **6** (6) Virgina, W 4-0; **11** (10) KENTUCKY, W 4-0; **13** (6) WAKE FOREST, W 7-0; **18** ITA National Indoor Team Championships at Chicago; Washington, W 4-1; **19** (6) Wake Forest, W 4-0 **20** (4) TCU, L 3-4.; **25** UCF, W 4-0 **27**

March 12 at Texas, 1 p.m.; **15** at Texas A&M, 7 p.m.; **18** at Michigan, 5 p.m.; **25** ILLINOIS, 6 p.m.; **27** NORTHWESTERN, Noon; **April 1** at Indiana, 3 p.m.; **3** at Purdue, Noon; **9** at Penn State, 12 p.m.; **15** MICHIGAN, 6 p.m.; **17** MICHIGAN STATE, 12 p.m.; **22** Wisconsin, 4 p.m; **24** Nebraska, 1 p.m

29 Big Ten Tournament at Madison, Wisc.

May 6 NCAA First & Second Round; **14** NCAA Regional; **19** NCAA Championships at TBA

WOMEN'S TENNIS (6-3)

Jan. 21 Duke, L 3-4; **23** NC State, 3-4; **29** ITA Kickoff vs. OKLAHOMA STATE, W 4-1; **30** ITA Kickoff vs. TENNESSEE, W 4-0.

Feb. 11 North Carolina, L 1-4; **12** Florida, W 4-3; **13** Auburn, W 4-3; **18** Kentucky, W 5-2 **27** PEPPERDINE, W 5-2

March 4 Penn State, 4 p.m; **13** XAVIER, 12 p.m.; **18** Iowa, 6 p.m; **20** at Nebraska, 12 p.m.; **27** Arizona State, 2p.m.

April 1 MICHIGAN, 4 p.m.; **3** MICHIGAN STATE, Noon; **8** NORTHWESTERN, 4 p.m.; **10** at Purdue, Noon; **15** at Minnesota, 4:30 p.m.; **17** at Wisconsin, Noon. **22** MARYLAND, 6 p.m.; **24** RUTGERS, 12 p.m.; **27** Big Ten Tournament at Iowa, TBA.

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OSU Sets Spring Visits For Top 2023 Prospects

To paraphrase “Rowdy” Roddy Piper’s character in the cult movie classic “They Live,” Ohio State wide receivers coach Brian Hartline is here to recruit five-star receivers and chew bubblegum, and he’s all out of bubblegum.

Fort Lauderdale (Fla.) American Heritage five-star wide receiver Brandon Inniss’ (6-0, 190) decommitted from Oklahoma in November following head coach Lincoln

RECRUITING
OUTLOOK
Braden Moles

Riley’s departure for USC, and Hartline has been intimately involved ever since. Now, the top-rated receiver in 2023 is expected to make an unofficial visit to Ohio State from April 1-3. He made a previous visit to Columbus last summer, camping with the Buckeyes.

Inniss holds all the offers one might expect for the No. 8 rated player in 2023, and he’s shown interest in Alabama, Florida State, Georgia, Miami (Fla.), UCF and USC, in addition to Ohio State, but has yet to release an official top list of schools.

“I’m definitely taking the whole process slowly now because of what happened (at Oklahoma),” he told 247Sports. “I thought I was locked in. I felt good. If (Riley) was still there when it was time for me to go there, then I was definitely going there. But ever

since then, I’m just taking it all in and taking it slowly.”

Inniss previously indicated that despite scheduling visits for the spring, he doesn’t expect to commit until next year, either at the Adidas All-American Bowl or on National Signing Day.

“He’s one of the most college-ready wide receivers to come out of the high school ranks in recent years,” said 247Sports recruiting analyst Andrew Ivins. “He’s an elite route runner with a competitive edge that can take over games and beat double coverage. He was initially mistaken by one Power Five assistant coach for a high school senior when he was just an eighth-grader because of his polish.”

Inniss will be joined on his visit by fellow American Heritage teammate Daemon Fagan (6-2, 180), a four-star safety in 2023 who is rated the No. 244 overall prospect and No. 23 safety in the class.

Fagan is expected to make a return trip for Ohio State’s spring game April 16 with his mother, according to 247Sports. He released a top eight Feb. 21 that included Florida State, Georgia, LSU, Miami (Fla.), N.C. State, Penn State, Ohio State and UCF.

“They just brought in (assistant) Perry Eliano from Cincinnati, and he was recruiting me really hard when he was at Cincinnati,” Fagan said. “There was a point in time where Cincinnati was one of my top schools. Then he made that switch and I already got a connection with coach Ryan Day. Eliano has just made everything better.”

OSU Football 2023 Commitments						
Players in the class of 2023 who have issued a verbal commitment to play football at Ohio State.						
Player	Pos.	Ht.	Wt.	Stars	High School	
Cedrick Hawkins	SAF	6-0	165	★★★★	Cocoa, Fla.	
Ty Lockwood	TE	6-5	225	★★★★	Thompson's Stn. (Tenn.) Independence	
Luke Montgomery	OT	6-5	270	★★★★	Findlay, Ohio	
Joshua Padilla	OG	6-4	265	★★★★	Huber Heights (Ohio) Wayne	
Will Smith Jr.	DL	6-3	260	★★★	Dublin (Ohio) Coffman	

Beyond Fagan and Inniss, the Buckeyes are expecting several visitors in the next few weeks, beginning with recruits set to visit Ohio State on March 5. They include 2023 four-star defensive end Desmond Umeozulu (6-5, 220) and 2024 cornerback Braydon Lee (6-1, 163), both from Charles Herbert Flowers High School in Upper Marlboro, Md. Also visiting on that date will be Lynn (Mass.) St. John’s Prep four-star safety Joenel Aguero (6-0, 195).

The Buckeyes will host a quartet of recruits March 8 with Windsor (Conn.) The Loomis Chaffee School four-star offensive tackle Olaus Alinen (6-6, 315); Many, La., four-star linebacker Tackett Curtis (6-2, 218); Clayton (Ohio) Northmont linebacker Nigel Glover (6-3, 200); and Zephyrhills (Fla.) Wiregrass Ranch four-star wide receiver Bryson Rodgers (6-2, 170) all expected to be on campus.

West Chester (Ohio) Lakota West four-star safety Malik Hartford (6-3, 175) told 247Sports that he plans to visit with his family March 10. He released a top seven Feb. 11 that included Cincinnati, Kentucky, Michigan State, Notre Dame, Ohio State and West Virginia.

Hartford has seen a quick rise through the rankings, gaining nearly 60 spots in the 247Sports composite rankings since November. Along with Aguero and Hoschton (Ga.) Mill Creek’s Caleb Downs (6-0, 185), Hartford is one of Ohio State’s top safety prospects in 2023.

St. Louis DeSmet four-star cornerback Christian Gray (6-0, 175) will visit on March 25, and four-star tight end Mac Markway (6-4, 250), also from DeSmet, will be on campus March 26. Markway, a top-100 prospect, decommitted from Florida in December.

Markway will be on campus the same day as Atlanta Woodward Academy four-star defensive lineman AJ Hoffer (6-5, 245), according to BuckeyeScoop. Hoffer currently has one crystal ball prediction to Ohio State from 247Sports analyst Steve Wiltfong.

Another big visit will then take place March 31, with Orlando (Fla.) Edgewater four-star running back Cedric Baxter Jr. (6-1, 215) set to stop by campus, according to 247Sports.

Ohio State will then have another big weekend from April 1-3, welcoming Jack-

A Look Back At Recruiting From The Pages Of BSB

35 Years Ago – 1987

Despite the versatility of Canton (Ohio) McKinley’s Mark Smith – he completed 83 of 151 passes during the 1986 football season for 1,166 yards and seven touchdowns with seven interceptions – Smith, an Ohio State signee, said he felt certain the name of the game at OSU would be kicking.

“A lot of people have said that I’m going to make it with my leg,” said Smith, a right-footed, soccer-style kicker. “I think that’s true.”

Based on the facts and figures he readily discussed, Smith had obviously done his homework when it came to Ohio State’s kicking game. After commenting at length on the strengths and weaknesses of both Matt Frantz and Pat O’Morrow – the Buckeyes’ two veteran booters – Smith announced that he liked his chances, even as soon as his freshman season.

“I’ve put a lot of hard work into this,” he explained. “The funny thing is, I played soccer when I was 11, but I played goalie! One day, I just went down to the schoolyard and started kicking and punting.”

30 Years Ago – 1992

West Virginia tight end Eric Moss signed with the Buckeyes out of Belle DuPont High School with hopes of immediate playing time at a position that lacked depth at Ohio State.

The top-ranked player in his home state, Moss caught seven passes for 108 yards on offense and made 134 tackles with eight quarterback sacks on the other side of the ball.

25 Years Ago – 1997

Hazelwood (Mo.) East coach Rick Gorzynski said he wasn’t surprised with wide receiver Reggie Germany’s decision to go to Ohio State, nor was he surprised by Missouri’s effort to keep the receiver at home.

“He originally wanted to go to Ohio State, but Missouri really recruited him hard,” Gorzynski said. “There was never any doubt in my mind where he wanted to go, but there is always a lot of pressure on the hometown kid to stay home.”

The chance to follow in the footsteps of Joey Galloway, Terry Glenn and Chris Sanders was a dream come true for Germany.

“I like the atmosphere at Ohio State,” he said. “It’s been a dream of mine to play there ever since they started talking to me about being a Buckeye. I wanted the chance to play at the

next level. I like the way they distribute the ball to the receivers and the way the coaches coach receivers.”

20 Years Ago – 2002

One thing was for certain about defensive lineman Joel Penton of Van Wert (Ohio) High School – he’d be performing on Sundays whether it was on the gridiron or, eventually, on another stage where he felt even more comfortable.

“The only thing that I want people to know about me is my faith in Jesus Christ, and Jesus Christ is my life,” said Penton, who dreamed of being a minister.

“I’m not ashamed to say that because it’s true. Everything I have has been given to me by God and I want others to know about that, because I want others to have the joy in their heart that I have in mine. If there was one word to describe me, it would simply be ‘Christian’ and I want people to know that.”

Up to that point in his young life, however, more people around Ohio knew Penton for his obvious passion on the playing field on Friday nights. He had recently signed a letter of intent to play football for Ohio State.

15 Years Ago – 2007

After receiving an offer from OSU recruiting coordinator John Peterson during the evening of Feb. 28, Westerville (Ohio) Central kicker Ben Buchanan called head coach Jim Tressel the following morning to make it official.

“I was definitely real excited, kind of overcome by emotion,” he told BSB. “I really wasn’t expecting it at all. I knew right away I was a Buckeye, 110 percent.”

Had things worked out differently, Buchanan might have become a Buckeye even sooner. The kicking specialist had been invited to attend OSU’s men’s basketball game against Wisconsin on Feb. 25, but he was unable to attend after contracting a disease while on a mission trip with his church during the prior week.

Buchanan came down with Dengue fever – contracted from mosquitoes – while in Honduras with his father and brother. With flulike symptoms and a fever that spiked to 103 degrees, he was unable to attend the OSU-Wisconsin game.

10 Years Ago – 2012

Long after the ink was dry on 25 national letters of intent

signed Feb. 1 by future Buckeyes, Ohio State fans held their collective breath as they anticipated whether their favorite team could add one more player to the 2012 class.

Unfortunately, it was not to be as five-star wide receiver Stefon Diggs of Olney (Md.) Our Lady of Good Counsel announced Feb. 10 that he would say close to home and play his college football at Maryland.

“I want to win championships and I want to win bowl games,” Diggs said. “Where else is a better place to do it than your city?”

Five Years Ago – 2017

Five-star Las Vegas Bishop Gorman linebacker Palaie Gaoteote, who was a cousin of Ohio State 2017 signee Haskell Garrett, was long considered a Buckeye lean, but he opted to commit to a school out west instead.

Gaoteote (6-2, 230), who was rated the No. 4 overall player and No. 1 outside linebacker for 2018, announced on Twitter on Feb. 19 that he was verbally committing to USC while on an unofficial visit with the Trojans.

“After discussing with my family, I am excited to announce that I am committing to further my education and play football for the University of Southern California,” Gaoteote wrote in a lengthy Twitter post.

When BSB spoke with recruiting analyst Bill Greene regarding Gaoteote’s commitment, he didn’t hide his reaction.

“That’s stunning to me,” Greene said. “That’s shocking.”

One Year Ago – 2021

Ohio State landed a commitment on Feb. 28 from Chandler, Ariz., four-star wide receiver Kyion Grayes, who was in the middle of a three-day unofficial visit to Columbus.

The 6-1, 170-pound Grayes was considered the 17th-best wide receiver and No. 127 prospect overall in the class of 2022. He caught 28 passes for 556 yards and 10 touchdowns to lead the Wolves to the state championship.

A one-time Arizona commit, Grayes was a relatively unknown prospect when he landed a scholarship offer from the Buckeyes in October of 2020. But since then, he had picked up offers from the likes of Auburn, LSU, Nebraska, Oregon, Penn State, Texas, USC and Utah.

ASK AN ANALYST

With Mark Givler of BuckeyeScoop

With Findlay, Ohio, four-star offensive lineman Luke Montgomery (6-5, 270) in the fold, who is Ohio State's next priority target on the offensive line?

"Orlando (Fla.) Dr. Phillips four-star Payton Kirkland (6-6, 325) and Ramsey (N.J.) Don Bosco Prep four-star Chase Bisontis (6-5, 290) are two guys they've put a lot of time in already, and they're definitely in the top couple of schools there for each of those guys. Then three-star Austin Siereveld (6-5, 315) out of Lakota East, another Ohio guy that they offered pretty early, he's going to continue to be in the picture. I think those are the three right now. Brockton (Mass.) Thayer Academy four-star Samson Okunlola (6-6, 295) is probably a longer shot, but I know they liked him quite a bit.

"What will be interesting here is we're not too far away from the spring evaluation period. (New line coach) Justin Frye is going to have an opportunity this spring to get out on the road for a few weeks and maybe make some of his own decisions vs. the recruiting targets that he inherited. Who knows? We may come out of that with the same targets, but we may come out of that with Frye having identified somebody else that he likes."

Fort Lauderdale (Fla.) American Heritage five-star wide receiver Brandon Inniss (6-0, 190), who was originally committed to Oklahoma but decommitted in November, is set for an unofficial visit to Ohio State on April 2. Where do the Buckeyes stand with the top receiver prospect in 2023?

"(They are) definitely in the top three. I would say they probably have as good a chance as anyone at this point. I think USC is the major contender right now with Ohio State, and then the wild-card school that, if they continue to get more involved than they have been that could maybe make him think twice, is Alabama. He's going to visit some other places and it will be a national thing, but I think Ohio State's in a pretty good position.

"I wasn't sure I'd ever say that because I never bought it the first time around. I just didn't feel like he was going to go, but now I think that with Oklahoma being out and with USC being so far away that the door is open for Ohio State, and Brian Hartline has never quit on that. Hartline has kept Inniss in it even when he was going to Oklahoma, tried to keep up with him. It's going to be a big visit."

You're over in Noblesville, Ind., for the Best of the Midwest Combine, which features top prospects from 15 states as well as Canada. Who is standing out among Ohio State's recruiting targets?

"I think the biggest thing coming out of that is that it looks like (Cleveland) Glenville is back to producing talent. Glenville has some dudes again. As far as Ohio State-caliber guys, 2024 cornerback Bryce West (5-11, 177) was probably my top guy there. He's got an early offer from Ohio State, and he ran sub-4.5 in the 40-yard dash. He did a great job in the one-on-one competition period.

"Glenville has another guy, Arvell Reese (6-4, 212), and he's a 2023 linebacker that may grow into an edge rusher. He was another guy who had a great day. Sam Williams-Dixon (6-0, 194) is a lesser-known 2024 running back from West Holmes (in Millersburg, Ohio). He had 2,500 total yards last year as a sophomore, and he had a great day as well. He ran just under 4.5 at about 195 pounds, so he's a guy to watch in that 2024 class."

sonville (Fla.) Bartram Trail four-star cornerback Sharif Denson (5-11, 170) and Bradenton (Fla.) IMG Academy five-star wide receiver Carnell Tate (6-2, 185) for 2023, as well as Opa-Locka (Fla.) Chaminade-Madonna Prep wide receiver Jeremiah Smith (6-2, 185) and Miami Central wide receiver Joshisa Trader (5-11, 160) for 2024.

Jefferson, Ga., linebacker Sammy Brown, expected to be one of 2024's top prospects, will also be stopping by the first week of April, according to 247Sports.

The next visit date of interest will be Ohio State's spring game, set for April 16 at Ohio Stadium. Visits will be locked in over the next few weeks, but the Buckeyes are currently set to welcome in Fort Worth (Texas) North Crowley three-star linebacker S'Maje Burrell (6-1, 215), according to Eleven Warriors, and Titusville (Fla.) Cocoa four-star cornerback Cedrick Hawkins (6-0, 165), who will make a visit to Ohio State after committing Jan. 1.

OL Montgomery Commits To Ohio State

Ohio State won an important recruiting battle for 2023 when Findlay, Ohio, four-star offensive tackle Luke Montgomery (6-5, 270) committed to play for the Buckeyes on Feb. 17.

Montgomery is rated the No. 49 overall prospect in the class, the No. 4 offensive tackle and the top recruit from Ohio. If his commitment holds, it would be the fourth consecutive class that the Buckeyes signed

the top prospect from Ohio.

"Columbus is a great city," Montgomery said during his commitment ceremony at Findlay High School. "I was born there, I lived there for about 10 months of my life before moving to Findlay, so I've always been an Ohio kid. I grew up an Ohio State Buckeye fan. Just being able to play for the home team, it's pretty amazing."

Ohio State was the pick over Montgomery's other finalists, including Clemson, Michigan, Notre Dame and Oklahoma, though recent activity in his recruitment indicated the decision came down to Clemson, Michigan and Ohio State.

"Those three, it was a super-tough decision," he said. "Calling those other coaches, that was really hard. I know they respected that, and I want to coach someday after I'm done playing, so having all those connections and keeping that all throughout my four to five years of college will help me in the long run."

Montgomery will play on the offensive line at Ohio State, but he had been recruited by Notre Dame to play on the defensive line. He had recently indicated his preference was to play on the offensive line, which likely factored into his decision.

"I think he preferred offensive line," BuckeyeScoop analyst Marc Givler told BSB. "It was kind of weird because Notre Dame was the only major school recruiting him to play defensive line. Pretty much all his other top schools saw him as an offensive lineman, so I don't know that it factored

in that much. It wasn't like it was split with 50 percent of schools saying O-line and the other 50 percent saying D-line. It was a very unique thing to Notre Dame."

It also marks an important early win for new offensive line coach Justin Frye, who was able to bring Montgomery in despite being on the job for a little more than a month. Montgomery gives Frye two commitments on the offensive line for 2023, joining Hu-

ber Heights (Ohio) Wayne four-star Joshua Padilla, who committed in November and is the No. 3 prospect in the state.

Montgomery is Ohio State's fifth commitment in the 2023 class, giving the Buckeyes the nation's seventh-best group in the cycle and the second best in the Big Ten be-

Continued On Page 20

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Hartline Focused On Several Top Receivers

Continued From Page 19

hind Penn State, which has secured a commitment from Ashburn (Va.) Broad Run five-star offensive lineman Alex Birchmeier.

Montgomery's commitment also gives Ohio State an early lead-in to Luke's younger brother, Ryan (6-3, 180), a 2025 quarterback at Findlay. Ryan has not been assigned a star rating from any recruiting service, but in addition to Ohio State, he holds offers from Georgia Tech, Michigan, Notre Dame, Penn State, Tennessee and Toledo.

According to Wiltfong, the younger Montgomery is set for a visit to Ohio State on March 26. He's also set to visit Michigan on March 13 and Notre Dame on March 19.

Buckeyes Left Off Proctor's Top Seven

Frye is off to a positive start in 2023 with Padilla and Montgomery already in the fold, but Ohio State will apparently miss out on one of the top tackle prospects in the class.

The Buckeyes were left off Des Moines (Iowa) Southeast Polk five-star offensive tackle Kady Proctor's top seven schools, released Feb. 9. He's the No. 5 overall prospect in 2023 and the No. 1 tackle in the class.

Proctor had Alabama, Georgia, Iowa, Michigan, Notre Dame, Oregon and Penn State among his top schools.

"I think what he's looking at in these programs are schools that have good O-lines and an O-line (coach) who will take him to the next level," Proctor's mother, Sarah Perkins, told 247Sports. "His main goal is (the) NFL. I think the schools he picked in the top seven are all schools that have produced linemen that go to the NFL. I think that's what he's looking at."

Ohio State Among Top Schools For DL Parker

Ohio State is among the top schools for one of 2023's top defensive line prospects,

as Phenix City (Ala.) Central four-star Tomarrion Parker included the Buckeyes in his most recent top five on Feb. 9.

Parker is ranked the No. 13 defensive lineman and No. 88 overall prospect in his class. Ohio State was joined by Alabama, Georgia, Penn State and Tennessee on Parker's list.

New cornerbacks coach Tim Walton, who is listed as Parker's primary recruiter on 247Sports, and defensive line coach Larry Johnson have made quick work forming relationships. Ohio State only recently offered the Alabama prospect on Jan. 24.

"Coach Johnson does a great job producing defensive ends," Parker told 247Sports. "I definitely want to learn more about them and will definitely be taking an official visit up there for sure."

Ohio State already has one defensive line commitment in 2023 with three-star Will Smith Jr. committing in January. There are currently two crystal ball predictions for Parker to commit to Georgia, one of which is by Wiltfong.

Corner Prospect Lee Decommits From UGA

Georgia took an early blow to its 2023 recruiting class when Ellenwood (Ga.) Cedar Grove four-star cornerback Kayin Lee (5-11, 160) decommitted from the Bulldogs on Feb. 22. Lee had been committed to Georgia since September.

"First, I would like to thank everyone at the University of Georgia for the opportunity that I've been blessed with," Lee wrote on social media. "I would like to thank the staff for all the love that they have shown me and my family. After talks with God and my family, I've decided to decommit from the University of Georgia. I know that God will show me where to go and where my future will land me."

The move comes on the heels of Georgia secondary coach Jahmile Addae leaving for the same position at Miami (Fla.). With Lee

back on the market, Ohio State is expected to be involved. Before Lee's commitment to Georgia, OSU was among the top schools he was considering.

"I talk to Coach Walton. We talk almost every other day," Lee told 247Sports. "It's good. I talk to Coach Day. I talk to almost every coach on the staff."

TE Lyons Includes Buckeyes In Top Six

The Buckeyes are looking to bring in two tight ends in this class, and with Thompson's Station (Tenn.) Independence four-star Ty Lockwood already committed, tight ends coach Kevin Wilson might be able to put an early wrap on the position for this cycle if he can bring in Folsom, Calif., four-star Walker Lyons (6-4, 230).

Lyons, rated the No. 88 overall prospect in 2023 and the No. 4 tight end, released a top six Feb. 10 that includes Alabama, BYU, Ohio State, Stanford, USC and Utah.

"Coach Wilson and Coach Day have been very upfront with me throughout the whole process, and for that, I have them here," he told 247Sports. "They have visited multiple times and were one of the first East Coast schools to offer, which has made me see their faith in me. They love their tight ends and have a very good winning history. Overall, it's a very good program headed in a great direction."

Though Ohio State has seldom used the tight end position as a pass-catching one lately, Lyons could fit the bill if the Buckeyes are looking to change things up, having hauled in 42 receptions for 646 yards and seven touchdowns this past season at Folsom.

Buckeyes On Top For 2023 Receivers

Inniss and Tate are the main focus for Hartline in 2023, but in a cycle with 15 wideouts in the top 100 prospects, there's no reason for him not to stay in the good

graces of some other top receivers.

One of those is Fort Lauderdale (Fla.) Stranahan four-star wide receiver Hykeem Williams (6-3, 195), who listed Ohio State among his top eight schools Feb. 7 after receiving an offer Jan. 28.

Williams is rated the No. 59 overall prospect in 2023 and the No. 10 wide receiver in the class. His other top schools include Alabama, Florida State, Georgia, Miami (Fla.), Rutgers, Texas A&M and USC.

"I know they have developed a bunch of great wide receivers," Williams told 247Sports. "I don't know too much about them, but I'm starting to talk to Coach Hartline a lot. I'm trying to get to (know) more and more about them."

Ohio State is in the running for another top receiver in 2023 with Gilbert (Ariz.) Williams Field four-star wideout Kyler Kasper (6-5, 195) including the Buckeyes in his top 10 on Feb. 14. Other teams are Arizona State, Georgia, Iowa, Miami (Fla.), Notre Dame, Oregon, Tennessee, UCLA and USC.

Kasper is the No. 125 overall prospect in the class and the No. 20 wide receiver. He currently has a visit to Oregon scheduled, according to 247Sports, and is planning to take visits to Georgia, Iowa, Ohio State, Oklahoma, Tennessee and UCLA this spring.

Another receiver who included the Buckeyes among his top schools is Folsom, Calif., four-star Rico Flores (6-1, 190), who had Ohio State listed along with Georgia, Notre Dame, Texas and UCLA.

Flores is rated the No. 22 wide receiver and No. 156 overall prospect in the class, and he is from the same high school as Lyons.

"Ohio State makes me feel like family there all around," Flores told 247Sports. "The university is great with what they offer."

In-State OL Siereveld Has OSU In Top Six

The Buckeyes are in on one of Ohio's top prospects, named Feb. 10 to the top six for Liberty Township Lakota East four-star offensive lineman Austin Siereveld.

Siereveld is ranked the No. 23 offensive lineman and No. 325 overall prospect in 2023 and is ranked the No. 7 recruit in Ohio. The Buckeyes are joined in his top six by Alabama, Cincinnati, Iowa, Michigan and Notre Dame.

Siereveld's recruitment has moved quickly. He received his first Power Five offer Oct. 29 from Michigan State, and in a matter of weeks, he picked up offers from Ohio State, Cincinnati, Notre Dame and Alabama. 247Sports does not list Siereveld as having an offer from Michigan.

Siereveld was initially recruited by former offensive line coach Greg Studrawa, but Frye has already made inroads with Siereveld.

"Coach Frye is an amazing guy and he is someone that everyone wants to play for with Ohio State," Siereveld told 247Sports.

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Early Enrollees Get First Look At Program

By **BRADEN MOLES**

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

The first few weeks of college can provide some of the most pivotal moments in a young person's life. They'll be exposed to the cornerstones of the college adventure, including unpacking belongings in their dorm room, attending their first class, heading out to a party and potentially meeting lifelong friends while being on their own for the first time in the big world.

Beyond creating those core memories, they'll run into issues as well early on, like missing class, bombing a test or forgetting far too late into the evening that their favorite campus eatery is closed early on the weekends.

These are all the normal happenings for a college student, Ohio State athletes included, but student-athletes – specifically those in the football program – run into a different set of problems during their first weeks. Namely? Getting up on time for strength and conditioning director Mickey Marotti's grueling workouts.

"Waking up, really," linebacker C.J. Hicks said of the biggest problem he's faced so far. "But it's been really good though. Not too hard."

Safety Kye Stokes echoed Hicks' thoughts about the difficulties of getting up early to work out but said he'll do what he has to do now that he's arrived at Ohio State.

"I'm not going to say it's been easy, but I'm a go-with-the-flow type of guy," Stokes said. "If I've got to get up at 5:30 to come get in some work, I'll get up at 5:30. Like I said, I'm not going to say it's easy. But I'm prepared to do what I have to do."

The newest Buckeyes will have to wait until Sept. 3 against Notre Dame to hit the big stage for the first time, but workouts are often considered the "welcome to college football" moment for the early enrollees, of whom Ohio State has 11 from the 2022 class.

"It's way different. It's a different intensity," wide receiver Caleb Burton said of the workouts. "You're doing way more reps. You're doing more different workouts in only one day."

Cornerback Jyaire Brown said the number of workouts has been eye-opening since he arrived on campus.

"If we're lifting weights, the amount of time we do lift weights, that shocked me," he said. "It's a little longer than what I'm used to. Other than that, it's been what I expected, just coming ahead and knowing that it's going to be hard. It's been hard, but I'm just fighting through it, every day working hard, trying to get better, getting ready for spring."

Similarly, defensive end Caden Curry is finding himself having to put in more work in the weight room with high standards at the Woody Hayes Athletic Center.

"The ab (workouts) really got me," he said. "I haven't really worked out that hard, so getting in here definitely changed my gears. I'm definitely working a lot harder."

Transfer linebacker Chip Trayanum is entering his third season of college football after transferring in from Arizona State, and while college workouts are nothing new, he's still enjoying the new experience.

"It feels good," Trayanum said. "I feel like I'm emptying the tank every day, so that's a good thing. I feel like I'm getting 1 percent better every day, so I'm just staying consistent in what I do in the weight room and what I do on a field and what I do in the locker room. The winter training has been very good, and it's just getting started, so I'm excited."

Beyond the weight room, the early enrollees have already been given directives for how they need to bulk up, and that can present as much of a challenge as getting into the weight room.

"We've only worked as a team for about a week, but really just the biggest thing we've done is eating," linebacker Gabe Powers said. "You know, it's a lot of eating. Even more than what I was used to, so that's the biggest thing. ... I don't keep track of calories, but I try to get around six meals a day. I'm constantly eating."

Along with the workouts, players are being refreshed on the expectations of the program and its culture. While that was likely made clear during the recruiting process, the first few weeks on campus have helped to establish a firm understanding among the new players, especially after one of the more challenging seasons for Ohio State in recent years.

"We're all working as hard as we can," Powers said. "We know there's a lot of talk from last year and the older guys are really fed up with it. We're all ready to work, so we've been working really hard in the weight room, and we're going to continue that."

Only a few early enrollees are expected to make a significant impact this season, but the next-man-up mentality is already being instilled, and the expectation is that they will be ready to play.

"Hard work. That's a generic answer, but that's how I got here," Stokes said. "Hard work, putting in extra work, doing what nobody else wants to do. I feel like that's what's going to get me on the field. I was talking to (former defensive coordinator Matt Barnes) when he was here, and he was saying, 'You've just got to attack it. You've got to attack it, come in like your life depends on it.' That's what I'm going to do."

Different perspectives came from Trayanum and fellow transfer Tanner McCalister, a safety from Oklahoma State. McCalister followed his Cowboys defensive coordinator Jim Knowles to Columbus, while Trayanum made the jump from the Sun Devils, where he was a running back although he will transition to defense at Ohio State.

"The difference I notice here is just really the culture – just that winning cul-

ture, coming in and competing every day," Trayanum said. "Expectations are very, very high. That's what I'm normally used to. That's normally what my standards were coming from Akron Hoban. It feels right being in an environment like this."

McCalister is transferring from a program coming off one of its most successful seasons in school history, as the Pokes fell just a yard short of a Big 12 title and a likely berth in the College Football Playoff. Given the success he saw at Oklahoma State, he's noticed the similarities as well as the differences between his old and new school.

"(Ohio State) has been in national championship conversation a lot, year after year after year. Last year was our first time getting a taste of it," he said. "Oklahoma State recruits really good players, really good guys. They build them up in that program. Here, every year, (Ohio State) is expected to win. What comes with being a player here is pressure, but as players, we thrive under pressure. You want that pressure on you because you're going to go out there and play to the best of your ability."

Beyond the pressure of being a football player at Ohio State, the other challenge the early enrollees run into is often the forgotten part of being a student-athlete – balancing athletics with their education.

"I think it is discipline – self-control and discipline," said Stokes, who added that he loves being a college student. "You have a lot of freedom. In high school, I'm not going to say they hold your hand, but your day-to-day life is kind of guided, and coming to college, it's kind of, 'Here's what you need to do. Do it.' It does take a lot of discipline and self-control, but it's nothing new to me. I feel like I fit right in."

"Really finding a way around," he added of the issues he's facing. "Getting to class, getting from class back to my apartment and getting from my apartment to tutoring and that sort of thing. I think that's really the biggest issue."

With just a week or two under their belts of living on campus, where Ohio State freshmen are required to live unless given an exemption or they are staying with family that is local, the early enrollees are still adjusting to life on their own.

"To me, just being in a rural area (and) coming down here to the city, I'm kind of just learning the traffic and everything," Curry said. "That got me the most, honestly, but other than that it's been really good."

Offensive lineman George Fitzpatrick, who is moving to Ohio State all the way from Colorado, said the experience has been great so far even as he adjusts to a new place.

"Being here has been a dream of mine since I was little," he said. "The first couple of weeks are kind of tough, adjusting to classes and all that."

While it's a big transition for these student-athletes, they can rest easy knowing that every player on the team has experienced the same challenge.

Those early bonding experiences help to create the foundation of Ohio State's oft-mentioned brotherhood.

"Everything's going pretty smoothly," Stokes said. "Classes are good. It's just class. I'm used to it. College, everybody jells well. The team, that's really who I hang out with, everybody on the team. We have a great bond, a great relationship, joke around and laugh around a lot."

Curry added that the new group of Buckeyes already has a great bond, with a group chat that was mentioned by numerous early enrollees where all of the class members are talking and introducing themselves to one another.

"We're all brothers. We're all moving in and getting settled in, so if we all need something, we all get with each other," Curry said. "It's definitely been great. It's kind of like having a whole different team besides having the real team."

Out In The Cold

In just this calendar year, central Ohio has already seen nearly a foot of snow-fall across multiple winter storms. This doesn't even include the ice that has accumulated, causing challenging road conditions in and around Columbus.

While Ohio drivers are used to these circumstances – or not, depending on your opinion of drivers in the state – the weather is a new experience for many of the early enrollees and transfers.

Ohio State's three in-state early enrollees – Brown, Hicks and Powers, as well as Trayanum, who transferred from Arizona State but is from Ohio, are all used to the weather. The same goes for quarterback Devin Brown from Utah, Curry from Indiana and Fitzpatrick from Colorado, states that often see snow.

The remaining five enrollees and McCalister, however, are getting their first taste of winter in Ohio. McCalister transferred from Oklahoma State but grew up in Texas, along with Burton, a fellow representative of the Lone Star State.

"It's cold. It's cold out here, man," McCalister said. "Oklahoma gets cold, too, but it's really cold out here."

Stokes and cornerback Ryan Turner, both from Florida, plus tight end Bennett Christian (Georgia) and wide receiver Ky-ion Grayes (Arizona) are among those seeing winter weather for the first time.

"I'm coming from Florida. I'm actually kind of enjoying it right now," Stokes said. "It's my first time seeing the snow and everything. It's interesting. I haven't gotten tired of it yet. I'm enjoying the weather."

Brown was originally from Arizona but spent time in Utah during his senior season at Corner Canyon and saw a fair amount of snow to prepare him for Ohio.

"Some of these guys are freezing up here," he said. "Kye and Ryan are from Florida, and they're like, 'Man, I've never seen snow before.' I barely saw it in Arizona where it was 120 (degrees) in the summers. Moving up to Utah, I was only there for like six months, when I left there was like three feet of snow. I got used to it pretty quickly."



Kye Stokes



George Fitzpatrick

Big Ten Suspends Punch-Throwing Howard

Michigan head men's basketball coach Juwan Howard threw a punch toward Wisconsin's coaching staff, striking assistant coach Joe Krabbenhoft following a Feb. 20 loss to the Badgers, and the Big Ten punished the Wolverines' leader for his misconduct.

Howard was handed a five-game suspension and a \$40,000 fine, keeping him away from his team for the rest of the regular season.

BIG TEN NOTES Joe Dempsey

"It has been determined that there was a clear violation of the Big Ten Conference's Sportsmanship Policy by Michigan Men's Basketball Head Coach Juwan Howard," the conference's statement read. "Additionally, the University of Wisconsin Men's Basketball Head Coach Greg Gard was in violation of the conference's sportsmanship policy."

Howard's punch incited a scuffle between some players and staff members on both sides. A day after the Wolverines' 77-63 loss to the Badgers, Howard apologized with a prepared statement.

"After taking time to reflect on all that happened, I realize how unacceptable both my actions and words were, and how they affected so many. I am truly sorry," Howard said.

"I am offering my sincerest apology to my players and their families, my staff, my family and the Michigan fans around the world. I would like to personally apologize to Wisconsin's Assistant Coach Joe Krabbenhoft and his family, too.

"Lastly, I speak a lot about being a Michigan man and representing the University of Michigan with class and pride; I did not do that, nor did I set the right example in the right way for my student-athletes. I will learn from my mistake and this mistake will never happen

again. No excuses."

Big Ten Commissioner Kevin Warren said coaches and student-athletes in the conference are "expected to display the highest level of sportsmanship conduct."

"Our expectation is that the incident yesterday will provide our coaches and student-athletes with the opportunity to reflect, learn and move forward in a manner that demonstrates decorum and leadership on and off of the court," Warren said in a statement.

In addition to Howard's fine and suspension, Michigan forwards Terrance Williams II and Moussa Diabate were suspended for one game for their parts in the brawl.

For the Badgers, Gard was charged with a \$10,000 fine, and guard Jahcobi Neath was suspended for one game.

As for the interaction itself, the situation all boiled over in the postgame handshake-line. After the Badgers beat the Wolverines, Howard could be seen saying something to Gard while the two exchanged postgame handshakes.

Gard grabbed Howard with his left hand to stop him from advancing, which appeared to anger Howard. The head coaches argued in close quarters before being separated. Then, a Wisconsin assistant began yelling at Howard, and he responded by throwing an open-handed hook, sparking a brawl-like showing from both sides.

Following the melee, Gard spoke with CBS Sports on the court to explain his perspective of the altercation.

"Apparently, he didn't like that I called a timeout to reset the 10-second call because we only had four seconds to get the ball over half court," Gard said. "And I didn't want to put my backups - I had all my bench guys in the game - in that position of scrambling with only four seconds.

"So, I took a timeout and I got us a new 10 seconds and helped them get organized and get the ball in. He did not like that when he came through the handshake line, so I'll leave it at that and the tape will show the rest."

Howard addressed the incident in the post-



FILE PHOTO

PUNCHING OUT - Michigan head coach Juwan Howard was suspended by the Big Ten for the remainder of the regular season and handed a \$40,000 fine for striking a Wisconsin assistant after a game on Feb. 20.

game news conference, admitting that he was upset with the late timeout and expressing his displeasure with the physical contact from Gard.

"I didn't like the timeout they called," Howard said. "I'll be totally honest, I thought it was not necessary at that moment, especially with it being a large lead ... I thought that wasn't fair to our guys.

"Basically, I addressed with the head coach that I would remember that because of that timeout. For someone to touch me, I think that was very uncalled for him to touch me as we were verbalizing and communicating with one another. That's what ended up happening.

That's what escalated it."

Michigan athletic director Warde Manuel released a statement after the game, condemning brawls.

"I am aware of and watched the end of our men's basketball game," Manuel said. "There is no excuse for any of our staff or student-athletes to get into a physical altercation with others regardless of instigating factors.

"I reached out and apologized to (Wisconsin AD) Chris McIntosh, and (Michigan) President (Mary Sue) Coleman has reached out to UW Chancellor (Rebecca) Blank to apologize for the totally unacceptable behavior."

Purdue 4-Star QB Enters Transfer Portal

Purdue quarterback Michael Alaimo has entered the NCAA transfer portal.

The 2020 Montvale (N.J.) St. Joseph Regional product was the No. 261 overall prospect, No. 12 pro-style quarterback, and No. 8 player in New Jersey. Alaimo committed to the Boilermakers June 19, 2019.

Brian Dohn, a national recruiting analyst for 247Sports, compared the four-star recruit to Philadelphia Eagles quarterback Nate Sudfeld in his evaluation on Oct. 25, 2019.

"Alaimo has an excellent frame with the ability to carry 225 pounds," Dohn wrote. "He's a very good athlete, with a strong arm and nice release point. He can throw deep outs and shows touch on deep ball, and on top of that, he's tough and not afraid of contact.

"But he's not a big stat producer. Alaimo amassed 200+ yards just once in two years as starter. He had 21 touchdown passes in 21 games in his last two seasons. As for his game, he needs to work on his composure in the pocket, his accuracy needs improvement, and he has a tendency to watch the line of scrimmage rather than looking downfield."

Alaimo's Power Five offers included Boston College, California, Kansas, North Caroli-

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na, Oklahoma State, Pittsburgh, Rutgers and West Virginia.

Alaimo appeared in one game for the Boilermakers and did not throw a pass.

Trotter Puts PSU In Top 5

Josiah Trotter, the son of former Philadelphia Eagles linebacker Jeremiah Trotter, included Penn State in his top five schools on Feb. 25.

Trotter, who is a four-star linebacker in the 2023 class, also included Clemson, South Carolina, Virginia Tech and West Virginia in his top five. The Philadelphia St. Joseph's Prep standout is the No. 26 linebacker and No. 269 overall prospect nationally.

According to 247Sports' in-house rankings, Trotter is a three-star recruit, but the 247Sports composite ranking bumps him up to a four-star recruit. The defensive standout is seen as a key target for the Nittany Lions' 2023 class, with head coach James Franklin aiming to keep the seventh-ranked linebacker in the

state close to home.

Trotter has not announced when he expects to unveil his final decision. Notably, his older brother, Jeremiah Trotter Jr. (a 2021 four-star recruit), signed with Clemson. Trotter's father, the former 11-year NFL veteran, was a four-time Pro Bowl player who became a fan favorite with the Eagles.

Husker Football Loses Pair To Portal

Nebraska outside linebacker Pheldarius Payne initially entered the NCAA transfer portal Dec. 6, before deciding to return on Dec. 17. However, Payne decided to re-enter the transfer portal Feb. 25, which played a factor in the Huskers making three new offers to different edge rushers to close February.

In two seasons for the Cornhuskers, Payne totaled 40 tackles, 4½ TFL and three sacks in 18 games. The Suffolk, Va., native was expected to play a role behind Garrett Nelson and Caleb Tannor as one of Nebraska's primary edge rushers before announcing his intent to leave.

Also on Feb. 25, third-year freshman wide receiver Will Nixon entered the transfer portal. He saw action in three games in 2021 against Buffalo, Fordham and Northwestern, finishing the year with one catch for 5 yards.

In 2020, Nixon suffered a season-ending knee injury during summer workouts.

The former three-star wideout from Waco, Texas, is the son of Carolina Panthers assistant coach Jeff Nixon. He found himself buried in a deep wide receivers room since Nebraska added five more scholarship players to their roster at that spot over the offseason under new position coach Mickey Joseph.

IU Safety Enters Portal

Indiana safety Juwan Burgess will seek a sixth season in college football elsewhere.

As a fifth-year senior for Indiana in 2021, Burgess played in 11 games as a reserve safety and on special teams, tallying 14 tackles, including one for a loss.

During his four-year playing career, the

safety posted 76 tackles, including five TFL, along with three passes defended, two forced fumbles and three fumble recoveries. Burgess redshirted the 2017 season after coming to Bloomington as a three-star prospect from Tampa (Fla.) Plant, which is the same school as head coach Tom Allen's son Thomas and linebacker Micah McFadden.

Burgess' most notable season in Bloomington came in 2019 when he started seven games, recorded 29 tackles and shared the team lead with two forced fumbles and two fumble recoveries. He was the Hoosiers' defensive player of the week in a pivotal win over Maryland for the 2019 squad.

The 6-1, 199-pound Burgess arrived at Indiana as the No. 385 overall prospect, No. 22 athlete, and No. 48 player in Florida in the 2017 class. He originally committed to USC in 2016 before flipping to Indiana before the 2017 national signing day.

Overall, Indiana has seen 25 players depart the program via the transfer portal since the start of 2021 fall camp.

From The Pages Of BSB

40 Years Ago - 1982

Indiana coach Bobby Knight said Clark Kellogg "may be the best forward in the country."

But Kellogg, a 6-7 junior out of Cleveland and one of the most prolific players to don the scarlet and gray, didn't want to talk about himself. He chose, instead, to talk in terms of his team.

Having just finished a 24-point performance to deliver a 68-65 win over the Hoosiers on Feb. 25, Kellogg explained that he was only one of five players on the floor at any time and that he was no more important than any of the other four.

"It's a great win for us," said Kellogg after the win, which boosted the Buckeyes into third place in the Big Ten and within a few more wins of a possible NCAA Tournament berth. "But we're just concerned about trying to play better as a team, and I think in some areas we did that tonight. But we still have a long way to go.

"Our patience on offense was really good throughout the ballgame. I think maybe there were three or four different times where we rushed the shots, but other than that we handled the ball stronger and we were patient in our half-court offense."

35 Years Ago - 1987

Gary Williams knew there would be days like the one his Ohio State basketball team experienced when it went up against Illinois on Feb. 25.

"I think we played tonight like I was afraid we'd play all year," said Williams, shortly after the Buckeyes had been blasted 93-70 by the homestanding Illini in a Big Ten matchup. "In other words, it was the one night against a good team when we didn't come out ready to play"

Williams was asked what the setback, which dropped the Buckeyes' record to 9-7 in the league and 18-10 overall, meant.

"I think it just shows where we are in our program," said Williams. "We've done some really good things this year and had some big wins. I'm really proud of this team. But when we don't get ready to play, that's going to happen against any of the top teams in the Big Ten this year. We certainly weren't ready, and Dennis (Hopson) didn't have the greatest first half. I think we kind of stood around and watched."

The Buckeyes watched as Illinois (20-7, 10-5) ran rampant. The Illini, in rebounding from an overtime loss to Purdue two days earlier, could do no wrong, extending a 25-12 lead 12 minutes into the game into a 45-20 halftime advantage. The evening never improved for OSU, as the Buckeyes hit only 30 of their 68 attempts while Illinois outrebounded them 49-24.

30 Years Ago - 1992

Ohio State's Jim Jackson was drawing rave reviews from opposing Big Ten coaches, who roundly declared him a candidate for both the league's Player of the Year honor and for the same title on a national scale. Though his competition on the latter was stiff - Duke's Christian Laettner, Alonzo Mourning of Georgetown and Shaquille O'Neal of LSU were all considered favorites - the coaches who had seen him closest were convinced that he deserved being in that company.

"Jimmy Jackson, I feel, is the best basketball player in the nation," Minnesota head coach Clem Haskins said. "I've said that from day one. Not only is he the best basketball player in the Big Ten, Jimmy Jackson has my vote for college player of the year."

Iowa head coach Tom Davis agreed, saying he wished Jackson were a Hawkeye.

"Jackson is the kind of player you wish you had on your team,"

Davis said. "He is so versatile that you can't concentrate on any one thing. Plus, he is very strong. I haven't seen them all, but he certainly must rank among the best in the country."

Indiana's Knight, famously stingy with praise, called him a great example for younger players to emulate.

"I think the kid is a hell of an example of what a great college player should be. He's as good an example for kids to emulate as I've seen in the Big Ten."

25 Years Ago - 1997

Responding to speculation that Ohio State's new Schottenstein Center would have to refrain from booking top entertainment events in deference to the city of Columbus' proposed arena, OSU athletic director Andy Geiger said the school's new arena would have those events.

"We are going to have a full-service arena," Geiger said. "Our arena will be capable of anything done at any arena that's been built in recent years.

"The core (of the OSU arena) is university athletics plus any event that will serve the university community."

20 Years Ago - 2002

Ohio State men's basketball coach Jim O'Brien was named one of 20 finalists for the 2002 Naismith College Coach of the Year Award. The award was set to be presented at the Final Four in Atlanta on April 5.

When told of being in the running, O'Brien sarcastically said, "How many guys are in that? Twenty? I've got a real good chance for that one."

O'Brien, of course, was also a prime candidate to repeat as Big Ten Coach of the Year. He also won that award in 1999 just before OSU embarked on its run to the Final Four. Also in '99, O'Brien was the NABC Co-National Coach of the Year as well as the Clair Bee National Coach of the Year.

He was in position to lead OSU to a 20-win season and a berth in the NCAA Tournament for the fourth straight year, the latter of which had never been accomplished at Ohio State.

15 Years Ago - 2007

The Ohio State men's basketball program was about to enter uncharted territory.

The postseason was afoot and the Buckeyes (27-3, 15-1) would enter it in a unique position - as the nation's No. 1 team and one that seemingly attracted as many critiques as votes in the major polls.

For the Buckeyes, led by five true freshmen and only nine scholarship players, managing the intensity of the postseason and adapting under the spotlight had been a point of preparation - and of national concern - all season.

"I think our guys deserve a lot of credit for the way they've carried themselves through this season and the way they've taken to coaching," head coach Thad Matta said. "I think they've got a feel for what it takes at this level and how important it is to put great effort into practice, into film study and all that goes with it."

10 Years Ago - 2012

Matta couldn't stand to watch his team practice anymore because it was clear to Ohio State's head coach that his charges weren't ready.

It was the Buckeyes' last practice before their final home game of the season - a game vs. Wisconsin the team needed to win if it was going to share at least a portion of its third consecu-

tive Big Ten regular-season championship - and their coach had a bad feeling.

"I knew going into today's game," Matta admitted shortly after OSU's 63-60 loss to the Badgers on Feb. 26. "I threw them out of practice. They weren't ready to practice, and this team has shown that we play like we practice.

"Trying to get them mentally ready to go and accept the challenge that is in front of them - I think at times they don't understand what I see in our approach and that sort of thing. As we said, guys have to look themselves in the mirror and come back and be ready to go."

Five Years Ago - 2017

When the game clock hit zeros on Feb. 20 at Value City Arena, the Ohio State women's basketball team left the floor fully aware of what they had accomplished after defeating No. 2 Maryland at home.

Not much.

Ohio State still needed to beat Rutgers on the road in order to take home its first Big Ten regular-season crown since 2009-10 after having the title slip out of its grasp in 2015-16.

That season, the Buckeyes needed just one win in two games to take home the conference championship. The trophy had followed them to Minnesota, where Ohio State lost a heartbreaker in overtime to the Gophers, 90-88. Still needing just one win, the trophy, hats and shirts were shipped to East Lansing, Mich., where the Buckeyes dropped yet another gut-wrenching defeat, 107-105 in triple overtime to Michigan State as the Terrapins took the crown instead of Ohio State.

On Feb. 26, 2017, the hats, shirts and trophy were in Piscataway, N.J., and this time, Ohio State got to don the championship gear as the Buckeyes topped the Scarlet Knights, 73-45.

"I am just really happy for our team," Ohio State head coach Kevin McGuff told BSB. "We have worked really hard this year, and this team committed to getting better. You look at where we were coming out of the nonconference to where we are now, we have made significant improvement. That is what I am most proud about with this group."

One Year Ago - 2021

Before hosting Michigan for a Feb. 21 matchup, the Ohio State men's basketball team ranked fourth in the nation with an 18-4 overall record and 12-4 ledger in the Big Ten. The Buckeyes seemingly controlled their own destiny amid competition to secure a No. 1 seed in the NCAA Tournament.

However, head coach Chris Holtmann's squad dropped its showdown with the rival Wolverines in heartbreaking fashion.

With games against top-10 teams in Iowa and Illinois looming, Ohio State tried to get back on track against Michigan State on Feb. 25 and had to do so without starting senior forward Kyle Young, who had suffered a concussion near the end of the Michigan game.

Without Young, Ohio State fell to the Spartans 71-67 in a game where Holtmann was ejected for arguing calls and no-calls with officials.

"We have to take a look at areas that we have to own and improve on," Holtmann said. "At the same time, we all I think recognize that, sure, we've built a really quality season up to this point, but we've got to play better. Obviously, there's been plenty of good times. This is the first time where we've really hit significant struggles. We've got to respond here in this closing stretch."

Liddell Gaining Momentum In Award Races

Ohio State junior forward E.J. Liddell has not gone without recognition for the season he's putting together for the Buckeyes.

Averaging 19.3 points, 7.5 rebounds and 2.5 blocks in 26 games, Liddell earned a spot on the Naismith midseason team in mid-February, is considered a candidate

COURT REPORT Patrick Mayhorn

for an All-American spot at the end of the year and was picked as a finalist for the Karl Malone Award, which goes to the top power forward. But after his performance in Ohio State's win over Michigan on Feb. 12, head coach Chris Holtmann felt that it was time to support his player even more.

An almost exasperated Holtmann extended a plea to the rest of his league to push Liddell as not just an All-Big Ten candidate, but as a serious contender for the conference's player of the year award come March.

"Will somebody please – outside of the people who follow our program – start talking about E.J. as a player of the year in this league? He is deserving," Holtmann said. "He is deserving to be in that conversation as a player of the year. And I'm on him as much as everybody every day. But I don't hear his name mentioned. I don't know why I don't hear his name mentioned. Granted, we have to keep winning, we've got to win more, whatever. But he's got to be mentioned in that conversation."

"The year he's had has been phenomenal. And he's getting better at leading on (both) ends (of the floor), and it's asking a



SONNY BROCKWAY

EARNING PRAISE — Both Ohio State head coach Chris Holtmann and Michigan's Juwan Howard heaped praise on Ohio State junior forward E.J. Liddell (32) after the Buckeyes and Wolverines squared off on Feb. 12.

lot of him. Please. He's deserving of being in that conversation. The year's not over, he's got to keep working. But E.J. Liddell is deserving to be in the conversation of player of the year in this league as long as we keep doing well."

Holtmann isn't alone in his support of Liddell. On Feb. 14, assistant coach Ryan Pedon echoed Holtmann, saying that he's exactly right about Liddell and that the forward is "not a guy just scoring points and making plays for himself." He called Liddell a winner and said that Ohio State "value(s) E.J. at the highest level."

Even Michigan head coach Juwan Howard, who saw Liddell score 28 points up close in a 68-57 win for the Buckeyes, came away impressed with both the player Liddell is now and where he came from to become this player.

"Liddell is unique in a lot of ways," Howard said, "and what makes him so efficient is he really does a good job of getting to a spot, and he's also patient with it as well. Whether he's on a low block and he's getting back to that left shoulder – and everyone knows he's getting to the left shoulder, but it's still hard to stop because he gets so high up on his jump shot. He also does a good job of creating space. Whether it's a crab dribble, with a shoulder bump to knock you off-balance and then he raises up, or whether it's facing – where he faces you, jab, shot. Or it's pick-and-pop, where he pick-and-pop shoots

it, or pick-and-pop, shot fake, drive it.

"He's hard to stop going left, and then going right he's going to raise up and try to shoot over you. I've just seen a lot of growth. The game is slowed down to him, too, because as a freshman, he was putting his head down and going fast – like a lot of freshmen. And then last year he just made a huge turn. He switched and he became their elite go-to guy along with Duane Washington. Now this year, he's one of the best players in the Big Ten who can play at the four or five spots."

As Liddell and the Buckeyes enter the final stretch of the regular season, his competition for the award has become clear. Wisconsin guard Johnny Davis seems to be the favorite, with Illinois center Kofi Cockburn – the preseason pick among Big Ten media – close behind. Indiana forward Trayce Jackson-Davis, Iowa forward Keegan Murray and Purdue guard Jaden Ivey have all been mentioned as well, though the conversation usually ends there. But moving forward, if Holtmann gets his way, Liddell will be in the mix with a serious chance to claim the crown if he can lead the Buckeyes to a strong finish.

If he does ultimately earn the nod, he would be the eighth Buckeye (seven individuals, one two-time winner) to claim it since the inception of the award in 1984-85, giving Ohio State a little breathing room on the leaderboard for winners. OSU would still sit

behind Michigan State, which has had nine winners, but would pick up some space between Indiana, which has seen six winners, and Michigan with five.

Forward Keita Bates-Diop is the most recent OSU winner back in 2017-18, joining guard Evan Turner (2009-10), forward Terence Dials (2005-06), guard Scoonie Penn (1998-99), guard Jim Jackson (1990-91, 1991-92) and forward Dennis Hopson (1986-87).

Towns Will Miss Rest Of Year

Ohio State senior forward Seth Towns will miss the remainder of the season for the Buckeyes, Holtmann confirmed at a press conference on Feb. 8. Holtmann said the decision was made within the 24 hours before his press conference and came about as a new development related to the back surgery that Towns underwent ahead of the season, which had held him out of the first three months of play.

"The doctors just said, 'Hey, let's shut you down and focus on rehab.' They evaluated him earlier this week and that was the (conclusion they came to)," Holtmann said.

The head coach clarified this is "by no means a career-ending injury" and that while a potential return to Ohio State remains a decision that Towns will need to make, he will be eligible and able to return if he so chooses.

Towns has seen his career hampered severely by several injuries, first at Harvard and now at Ohio State over the last two seasons. He starred for Harvard as a freshman and sophomore in 2016-17 and 2017-18 but missed the entirety of the next two seasons with a knee injury, announcing after the end of the 2019-20 season that he would be transferring to Ohio State to finish his career closer to his hometown. He played his high school basketball at Northland High School in Columbus.

He returned from that knee injury to play in 25 games for the Buckeyes a season ago but never reached full strength. Holtmann said that Towns' knee issues have subsided this season, but as they've done so, the back issue that required that offseason surgery has held him out of all play entirely and will now end his season before it ever began.

"He's going to continue to rehab and do everything he can to return to full health," Holtmann said. "I'm disappointed for Seth, I know he's had a rough go of injuries. He's a terrific young man and he's really worked at this thing. This is separate from his knee, which is actually feeling considerably better, the best it has felt. This is more of a back issue."

Despite the severity of the surgery, Ohio State was expecting Towns to play at some point this season prior to this latest determination by team doctors. Forward Justice Sueing has missed a similar amount of time, though Holtmann said there has been no such determination on his season at this point.

"You never plan for this," Holtmann said. "Seth and Justice were both critical for our team last year. Both played important roles, particularly in January and in our Big Ten tournament run. You never plan on not hav-



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ing two integral guys; we expected in the offseason to have both of them. Fortunately, we’ve had other guys who have stepped up that have given us some depth to be able to absorb some of this. But I don’t think you ever plan for two situations where you have guys out this long.”

Though Towns has yet to make any decision on his future with Ohio State, Holtmann claimed that he wouldn’t be surprised if the forward returns next season.

“It’s a real thing for him and his family for him to put on an Ohio State uniform and represent this university,” Holtmann said. “It matters to him. That was true when he committed, and it’s been true every day since. He really means it, it’s important for him, he’s a Columbus kid. I’m optimistic that his days in a Buckeye uniform aren’t over, I really am. For him, it’s disappointing that he didn’t get to go out there with his teammates this year and perform because he worked all summer for that. But I’m optimistic that there will be better days for him.”

Buckeyes Land Second '23 Pledge

Holtmann landed Ohio State’s second commitment for the class of 2023, securing a pledge from Saint Mary’s (Ohio) Memorial three-star center Austin Parks over Indiana and West Virginia. Parks announced his decision Feb. 13 in his high school auditorium.

As an Ohio resident for nearly his entire life (Parks was born in Texas but moved to Ohio when he was 2 years old), it was ultimately the chance to stay close to home that played the largest role in his decision to choose the Buckeyes.

“All of these schools that I have talked to have been great,” Parks said. “It was a real decision between Ohio State and Indiana, and I had to look at all the factors, but my whole family has always been Ohio State fans. It’s about an hour and a half down the road from me, and it’s just really convenient for me and my family with the way my mom works and my dad’s health condition, so it just works out best for everybody.

“I’ve had a good relationship with all of these coaches, but they made me feel like a priority. Coach Holtmann has been to my games a few different times, and he’s made it clear that no other head coach has come out and seen me the way he has. He was at my first game this season, and my recruiters – Coach (Jake) Diebler and Coach Pedon – keep in contact on a daily basis, seeing how I am doing, asking me if I ever need anything and said they will always be there if I need something. They’re like family.”

Parks is ranked the No. 148 overall player and No. 18 center in the 247Sports composite while checking in as Ohio’s No. 6 prospect in 2023. The Buckeyes have expressed interest in the state’s top three players – top-ranked Cincinnati Taft shooting guard Rayvon Griffith, No. 2 Columbus Africentric Early College small forward Da-ilyn Swain and No. 3 Huber Heights Wayne combo guard Lawrent Rice – but has serious challengers to face in each battle.

OSU is considered a favorite for Swain and Rice but has struggled making inroads with Griffith, although it was included in his Jan. 4 top 10 along with Alabama, Arizona State, Cincinnati, Kansas, Louisville, Oklahoma State, Penn State, South Carolina and UCLA.

That gives Holtmann two pledges in

2021-22 Ohio State Men’s Basketball Statistics

18-8 Overall (11-6 Big Ten)
Statistics through games of Feb. 27

Player	G-GS	Min.-Avg.	FG-FGA	Pct.	3P-3PA	Pct.	FT-FTA	Pct.	Rebounds		PF-FO	A	TO	BS	ST	Pts.-Avg.
									O-D	T-Avg.						
E.J. Liddel	26-26	846-32.6	170-339	.501	36-96	.375	125-166	.753	60-135	195-7.5	68-2	69	61	66	13	501-19.3
Malaki Branham	26-25	744-28.6	119-245	.486	30-68	.441	60-71	.845	19-76	95-3.7	41-0	47	38	9	16	328-12.6
Kyle Young	24-1	543-22.6	69-132	.523	15-45	.333	51-64	.797	32-88	120-5.0	44-1	32	24	12	12	204-8.5
Zed Key	26-23	538-20.7	91-161	.565	0-0	.000	34-58	.586	47-94	141-5.4	63-0	14	26	23	6	216-8.3
Jamari Wheeler	25-25	718-28.7	60-127	.472	28-72	.389	27-31	.871	14-65	79-3.2	60-1	81	45	1	35	175-7.0
Justice Sueing	2-0	30-15.2	5-13	.385	0-4	.000	2-2	1.000	1-6	7-3.5	3-0	0	2	0	1	12-6.0
Justin Ahrens	26-17	551-21.2	41-117	.350	40-113	.354	18-24	.750	3-64	67-2.6	34-1	22	19	1	7	140-5.4
Meechie Johnson Jr.	21-5	407-19.4	35-110	.318	25-75	.333	14-19	.737	6-28	34-1.6	35-0	29	31	3	15	109-5.2
Cedric Russell	24-0	311-13.0	42-91	.462	26-59	.441	4-6	.667	0-15	15-0.6	18-0	11	13	0	4	114-4.8
Eugene Brown III	20-6	314-15.7	25-57	.439	7-27	.259	11-17	.647	15-37	52-2.6	29-0	9	10	5	5	68-3.4
Jimmy Sotos	15-0	116-7.7	8-16	.500	4-8	.500	6-8	.750	1-10	11-0.7	14-0	23	5	2	1	26-1.7
Joey Brunk	23-2	121-5.3	13-18	.722	0-0	.000	6-8	.750	5-19	24-1.0	20-0	5	6	5	2	32-1.4
Harrison Hookfin	5-0	11-2.2	1-2	.500	0-0	.000	0-0	.000	1-0	1-0.2	1-0	2	0	0	1	2-0.4
Team									29-34	63			10			
Total	26	5250	679-1428	.475	211-567	.372	358-474	.755	233-671	904-34.8	430-5	344	290	127	118	1927-74.1
Opponents	26	5250	630-1522	.414	178-537	.331	323-445	.726	274-565	839-32.3	454-10	301	273	69	157	1761-67.7

2023, with Christian Academy of Louisville (Ky.) combo guard George Washington III, the No. 46 player in the nation, joining the class back in November 2021. It’s expected to be a second consecutive full class for the Buckeyes after signing 2022’s five-man group, with openings still available at both forward spots and at point guard. The 6-9, 240-pound Parks projects as a skilled and powerful center, not dissimilar from the styles that Zed Key and Kaleb Wesson brought to Columbus, though he’s considered a bit more agile. He’s averaging 20 points and nine rebounds per game as a junior.

NIL Making Impact On MBB

The men’s basketball team hasn’t quite engaged with the new NIL laws on a level that qualified it for the mammoth package featured on the cover of this issue of Buckeye Sports Bulletin, but it isn’t without its own successes in the new market. According to Ohio State’s internal NIL tracking, the men’s basketball program has accounted for 5.6 percent of all athletics deals at Ohio State, trailing only the football program (27.4 percent) and women’s volleyball (8.6 percent).

In fact, within specific deals, the men’s basketball team has actually led the way. Its average compensation per Instagram post is higher than any other at Ohio State at \$9,508, crushing the national average of \$855 for men’s basketball players.

Though not quantified within Ohio State’s accounting, the basketball program has also found itself on the cutting edge in the style and substance of its deals. Guard Jimmy Sotos has pulled in several deals because of his popularity on TikTok, where he and his teammates participate in viral dance trends.

Ohio State athletic director Gene Smith praised the team’s creativity in general, though he isn’t impressed with Sotos’ moves.

“I was talking to Jimmy Sotos last night and he’s on fricking TikTok,” Smith joked on Feb. 16. “Have you ever seen Jimmy Sotos dance on TikTok? I mean, come on.”

The moves are, admittedly, a bit much.

Even more than those videos, Ohio State has found new ground to break in its moves as a collective group. The Buckeyes helped to create one of the first full-team NIL deals

OSU Men’s Basketball Signees

Players in the class of 2022 who have signed to play basketball at Ohio State. (Star ratings are from the 247Sports composite rankings.)

Player	Pos.	Ht.	Wt.	Stars	High School
Roddy Gayle	SG	6-4	195	★★★★	Youngstown (N.Y.) Lewiston Porter
Bowen Hardman	SG	6-3	160	★★★	Cincinnati Princeton
Felix Okpara	C	6-11	210	★★★★	Branson (Mo.) Link Academy
Brice Sensabaugh	F	6-6	240	★★★★	Orlando (Fla.) Lake Highland Prep
Bruce Thornton	PG	6-2	205	★★★★	Alpharetta (Ga.) Milton

in collegiate athletics, announcing “Players Edition,” which is a team-directed merchandise venture including all 15 members of the team.

“We felt like it could be super fun for all of us to be part of something together, and it was also an opportunity to make a historic moment,” Sotos told The Columbus Dispatch. “No team in college basketball is doing a team merchandise deal like this where everybody’s sharing money and everything coming our way right now. We wanted to pioneer this.”

With the social-media savvy Sotos leading the way, the team worked to design a full clothing line around Ohio State’s “Team 123” moniker (this is the 123rd team in school history) – complete with several colors of sweatshirts and T-shirts, all modeled by the current Buckeyes on the Players Edition website. When the site launched in January, Buckeye fans bought out the whole shop and forced some quick restocking.

Next season, because of the work of these Buckeyes, Team 124 is just a simple rebranding away from keeping everything rolling.

“Next year it’ll be ‘124’ merch, and you don’t have to go through all the stuff we had to go through, and that’s why it took so long for the merch to come out,” Sotos told The Lantern. “Now, all you have to do is be part of the team and we’ll take care of the rest.”

Extension Likely For Holtmann

Smith told gathered media Feb. 16 that while the Buckeyes have yet to discuss a contract extension with Holtmann, it’s not for a lack of excitement about the program from within the athletic department.

When asked if OSU had explored a potential extension, Smith said they had not yet, but that he’s really happy with the direction of the program. He alluded to the

current time left on Holtmann’s contract as well, which carries him through June 30, 2025, as part of the original eight-year deal worth \$3 million annually that Holtmann agreed to ahead of the 2017-18 season.

“I haven’t looked at his contract yet; I think it ends in 2025,” Smith said. “At some point, we’re going to look at an extension even if we haven’t yet. I’m really happy where we are. We strive for championships, there’s no question about that. We need to get there and we will. You look at his recruiting and it’s off the chain.”

Holtmann secured the No. 5 recruiting class for 2022, the best of his career, featuring four players within the top 65 in the 247Sports player composite. He holds a 105-52 record through five seasons in Columbus and is currently leading an 18-8 squad jostling for position at the top of the Big Ten. He has impressed Smith with his on-court coaching acumen as well, as recently as in Ohio State’s win over Minnesota on Feb. 14, when the Buckeyes stormed to a 70-45 victory behind a ferocious second-half turnaround.

“I love the teaching he does. I’ll use (the Minnesota win) as an example,” Smith said. “Everybody talked about how ugly the first half was, but my wife played and coached the game so I have a different vantage point. She’s drawing stuff up on napkins against that 3-2 zone, so I knew exactly what we needed to do because I was told (by her). I knew what Chris was going to do, and you look at the second half and how players were positioned, spread out and moving, it was his teaching that won that game. The guys are doggone good.

“I feel really good about what he’s doing, feel good about his recruiting, his hiring of (assistant coach) Tony (Skinn), and at some point we’ll have the contract conversation with him.”

OSU Loses Title Chance, Still Has Hopes For Seeding

By PATRICK MAYHORN
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Associate Editor

Ohio State has fared well enough down the stretch to hold a one-game edge in the race for the No. 4 seed and a pair of byes in the Big Ten tournament, but it saw its conference title hopes all but collapse on the weekend of Feb. 26-27. On the 26th, Wisconsin upended Rutgers on the road to secure its lead atop the league where it now sits alone after losses for Illinois and Purdue.

A day later, Ohio State fell on the road to Maryland – not enough to send it into the mass of seven-loss teams, but a defeat that just about the closed the door on a race for the top spot in the league for Chris Holtmann’s bunch.

However, in the weeks since BSB last published, Ohio State did pick up a number of major wins – none more impressive than a road victory over the Fighting Illini – as well as few painful losses, including its first home defeat of the season. The Buckeyes had three more games to play before Big Ten tournament play, all at home, against Nebraska on March 1, Michigan State on March 3 and Michigan on March 6. Be sure to check out BuckeyeSports.com for coverage on all three.

Brutal End Dooms OSU At Rutgers

Road games haven’t been very friendly to much of anybody in the Big Ten this season. Fans are back in arenas and more than happy to remind opposing players of it, and it seems harder than ever to claim wins away from home, regardless of opponent. Chris Holtmann’s Buckeyes are no exception, and they

held a perfect 10-0 record in Value City Arena but just a 3-4 mark away from home (1-1 in neutral site games) entering their Feb. 9 matchup at Rutgers.

And despite holding just a 13-9 record on the season entering the game, Rutgers’ home-court advantage has been just as strong this season as anyone else’s. The Scarlet Knights held an 11-2 mark in Jersey Mike’s Arena before hosting the Buckeyes, including a December upset of then-No. 1 Purdue and a blowout of then-No. 13 Michigan State only four days before the Buckeyes made the trek out.

Ohio State (14-6, 7-4 Big Ten) found that out the hard way, falling 66-64 to the Scarlet Knights (14-9, 8-5) despite leading for much of the second half before a scoreless final 3:48 allowed a 10-0 Rutgers run down the stretch, snatching defeat from the jaws of victory for a Buckeye team that was so close to doing what the Boilermakers and Spartans couldn’t.

“We just need to get better,” Holtmann said. “We just have to finish games and play with a little more force offensively. I just didn’t think we played with enough force. I thought their activity bothered us late. You have to play with force on the road. We just weren’t able to finish the plays we needed to.”

A Justin Ahrens’s three-pointer sent the Buckeyes into the under-12-minute break up one point at 17-16 in the first half, but Ohio State would find only 14 more points in the final 11:07 of the half after the timeout, thanks in large part to more than four scoreless minutes after a Malaki Branham layup to extend the lead to three points with 10:27 to play. E.J. Liddell finally snapped the cold spell with a jumper at the 6:04 mark to cut Rutgers’ lead to 23-21 in

the game played before 8,019.

It was nearly another two minutes before Ohio State scored again to take a 24-23 lead on a Cedric Russell three-pointer. Thankfully for Holtmann’s squad, it wasn’t alone in the poor shooting. Rutgers managed only seven points between the media timeout and Russell’s triple.

That bucket seemed to take the lids off the baskets, as the two teams combined for 16 points in the final 3:33 of the half, with the Scarlet Knights taking the narrowest of leads into the half after a buzzer-beating Aundre Hyatt jumper at the buzzer left the score 32-31.

Ohio State shot 42.9 percent in the half (12 of 28), while Rutgers shot a solid 50 percent, but got off only 24 shots.

A trip to the locker room seemed to do the trick for both offenses. Both sides exploded out of the break, trading baskets nearly at will for the first eight minutes of second-half play.

Ohio State was perfect on its first six three-point tries – but Rutgers rattled in eight of its first 12 shots to reclaim the lead for the first time since the 17:01 mark of the second half at 52-50 with a Paul Mulcahy and-one through some serious contact from Ahrens at the rim with 10:46 to play.

The Buckeyes answered with a quick Zed Key tip-in to knot the game back up, and Branham followed with his fourth triple of the contest. A Liddell pull-up jumper a possession later gave the Buckeyes their largest lead yet at 57-52 with 8:49 showing. Clifford Omoruyi threw down a monster dunk to quell the OSU momentum, though he didn’t do anywhere near as much damage as the next offensive possession would to the Buckeyes.

As they set up off that dunk, Meechie Johnson Jr. – already donning a protective face mask because of a facial injury suffered in January – badly rolled his ankle, knocking him out of the remainder of the game and forcing an already shorthanded Buckeye team into a serious search for depth beyond Jamari Wheeler at point guard. Jimmy Sotos filled some space, but it was Wheeler who led the way for the Buckeyes.

It was Wheeler who restarted the Buckeye offense after Johnson’s injury, rattling in his second three-pointer of the half to extend Ohio State’s lead to six points. It would grow as large as 64-56 with 3:48 to play after a pair of Key free throws, but Rutgers showed off what makes a win in Piscataway such a rare commodity down the stretch.

The Scarlet Knights, carried by six points from Geo Baker, rattled off eight unanswered points, culminating in another Omoruyi dunk that tied the game at 64 and forced an OSU timeout with 1:02 left.

Ohio State generated a good look for Branham out of the break, but his jumper came up short, and it was again Baker on the other end, drawing a foul on Key and knocking down two free throws to take a 66-64 lead for RU. The Buckeyes drew up a play for Branham out of another timeout with 15 seconds left that looked promising for a split second before Ron Harper Jr. flew in for a block with just over three seconds to play, and Rutgers again blocked Ohio State’s final attempt – an Ahrens three-point try – to close out the game on its 10-0 run.

Branham led the Buckeyes with 19 points, Liddell chipped in 16, and Key had 10 points and 12 rebounds but did so on 4-of-12 shooting. Baker’s 25 points – eight of which came in the final 3:07 of play – led all scorers.

Rutgers shot 53.2 percent from the field (25 of 47), while holding the Buckeyes to just 40.4 percent (23 of 57), though Ohio State – fueled by its 6-of-7 mark in the second half – was 10 of 18 from long range (55.6 percent).

Buckeyes Topple U-M, Earn Critical Road Win

Ohio State and Michigan produced as entertaining and close a pair of matchups as anyone could possibly ask for a season ago. The two matched up just once in the regular season but drew each other again in the Big Ten tournament semifinals, splitting the series with one win apiece and only four points of difference in the aggregate. The Wolverines won the first matchup in a top-10 92-87 barnburner – one of the best games of the college basketball season – while Ohio State earned its revenge in Lucas Oil Stadium, 68-67.

Both games were defined by battles in the paint between Michigan center Hunter Dickinson and Ohio State’s Liddell, All-America candidates who made their presences felt throughout those games. Dickinson scored 43 points and grabbed 17 rebounds in the two games, while Liddell notched 41 points and 15 boards. Their mini rivalry was reactivated as the Buckeyes traveled to the Crisler Center to take on Michigan on Feb. 12 – even after an offseason that saw the two become friends as they went through the NBA pre-draft circuit.

Dickinson notched 14 points with seven rebounds, but it was Liddell and the Buckeyes who got the better of the Wolverines (13-10, 7-6), claiming a much-needed road win 68-57 to improve to 15-6 and 8-4 in the Big Ten on the season behind 28 points and five rebounds from Liddell before 12,707.

Though the stars down low were just as important in this matchup as they were in those games last season, this most recent iteration offered nowhere near the firepower that the two mustered in Columbus a season ago. Ohio State shot 50.0 percent from the field (24 of 48) but hit only four three-pointers (4 of 11), while Michigan managed to shoot only 41.4 percent (24 of 58) and was even weaker from beyond the arc, hitting just 4 of 17 (23.5 percent).

Neither team could find a basket until an Eli Brooks layup after more than two minutes of misses. They combined for just 23 points before a Dickinson dunk made it 14-11 Wolverines with 8:45 showing, though 38 points from there helped generate a more respectable 33-30 halftime score in favor of the Buckeyes, thanks largely to 11 points from Liddell and seven from Russell, the two shooting a combined 7 of 14 before intermission.

The switch to the second half did no favors for either group, although Michigan absorbed a bit more offensive damage than Ohio State. The Wolverines separated each of their first five scoring possessions in the second frame by at least 1:30 of game time and went scoreless from the 11:40 mark until a DeVante’ Jones layup with 7:41 on the clock, but the Buckeyes struggled to take advantage.

As the Wolverine offense stagnated with only 12 points in the first 12:19 of the half, Ohio State generated only 15 in that same span, expanding its lead to 48-42 into a media timeout with 7:17 left but no further, squandering what had only shortly before been a 46-36 margin.

The difference would hold right around that margin for the next three minutes before a Liddell three-pointer gave Ohio State a 55-47 lead

Rutgers 66, Ohio State 64									
Feb. 9, 2022 Jersey Mike's Arens • Piscataway, N.J.									
		1	2	F					
Ohio State (14-6, 7-4)		31	33	64					
Rutgers (14-9, 8-5)		32	34	66					
Ohio State	Total	FG	FT	Reb.					
	Min	M-A	M-A	O-D	A	PF	Pts.		
Key	31	4-12	2-2	4-8	1	3	10		
Liddell	35	6-13	3-6	4-2	4	0	16		
Johnson Jr.	20	1-4	0-0	1-1	1	2	3		
Branham	36	7-13	1-2	1-2	2	2	19		
Wheeler	25	2-3	2-2	0-2	3	3	8		
Ahrens	10	1-3	0-0	0-0	0	1	3		
Russell	9	1-3	0-0	0-0	0	0	3		
Young	25	1-5	0-1	2-2	0	1	2		
Brunk	5	0-1	0-0	1-0	0	1	0		
Sotos	2	0-0	0-0	0-0	0	0	0		
Totals	200	23-57	8-13	14-18	11	13	64		
Percentages: FG: 40.4%. FT: 61.5%. Three-point field goals: 10-18 (Branham 4-5, Wheeler 2-2, Ahrens 1-2, Liddell 1-2, Johnson Jr. 1-3, Russell 1-3, Young 0-1). Team rebounds: 2. Blocked shots: 4 (Branham, Johnson Jr., Key, Liddell). Turnovers: 8 (Key 2, Team 2, Young 2, Ahrens, Liddell). Steals: 5 (Liddell 2, Brunk, Johnson Jr., Key).									
Rutgers	Total	FG	FT	Reb.					
	Min	M-A	M-A	O-D	A	PF	Pts.		
Omoruyi	33	6-6	1-2	1-4	0	3	13		
Baker	38	9-14	4-4	0-3	6	1	25		
Mulcahy	37	4-8	3-3	2-4	6	3	12		
McConnell	29	2-5	0-0	0-4	0	4	4		
Harper Jr.	35	1-8	3-5	0-4	0	2	6		
Mag	8	0-1	0-0	0-0	0	0	0		
Hyatt	13	2-3	0-0	1-0	0	0	4		
Reiber	7	1-2	0-0	1-0	0	1	2		
Totals	200	25-47	11-14	5-21	12	14	66		
Percentages: FG: 53.2%. FT: 78.6%. Three-point field goals: 5-15 (Baker 3-7, Mulcahy 1-2, Harper Jr. 1-4, Hyatt 0-1, McConnell 0-1). Team rebounds: 2. Blocked shots: 9 (Harper Jr. 3, Baker 2, Omoruyi 2, McConnell, Mulcahy). Turnovers: 8 (Mulcahy 3, Hyatt 2, McConnell, Omoruyi, Reiber). Steals: 4 (McConnell 4). Officials: Boroski, Simpson, Garrison. Attendance: 8,019.									

Ohio State 68, Michigan 57									
Feb. 12, 2022									
Crisler Center • Ann Arbor, Mich.									
		1	2	F					
Ohio State (15-6, 8-4)		33	35	68					
Michigan (13-10, 7-6)		30	27	57					
Ohio State	Total	FG	FT	Reb.					
	Min	M-A	M-A	O-D	A	PF	Pts.		
Key	17	2-5	0-0	0-1	0	4	4		
Liddell	36	8-17	11-11	0-5	1	2	28		
Brown III	27	1-1	0-1	0-8	0	1	2		
Branham	31	3-7	0-0	0-3	1	2	6		
Wheeler	27	2-4	2-2	0-1	1	3	7		
Russell	24	5-8	0-0	0-0	1	0	12		
Young	26	2-4	3-4	2-3	2	1	7		
Ahrens	10	0-1	0-0	0-1	0	0	0		
Brunk	2	1-1	0-0	0-0	0	0	2		
Sotos	1	0-0	0-0	0-0	0	0	0		
Totals	200	24-48	16-18	2-24	6	13	68		
Percentages: FG: 50.0%. FT: 88.9%. Three-point field goals: 4-11 (Russell 2-2, Wheeler 1-2, Liddell 1-5, Ahrens 0-1, Branham 0-1). Team rebounds: 2. Blocked shots: 4 (Liddell 3, Young). Turnovers: 8 (Branham 2, Wheeler 2, Brown III, Key, Russell, Team). Steals: 3 (Branham, Russell, Wheeler).									
Michigan	Total	FG	FT	Reb.					
	Min	M-A	M-A	O-D	A	PF	Pts.		
Diabate	28	4-5	1-2	0-1	0	4	9		
Dickinson	36	7-17	0-0	2-5	0	4	14		
Jones	32	3-11	2-2	5-5	8	3	8		
Houston	34	2-5	0-0	0-2	1	0	5		
Brooks	39	6-16	2-2	2-2	5	2	17		
Collins	8	2-3	0-0	0-2	0	3	4		
Johns Jr.	10	0-0	0-0	0-2	0	0	0		
Williams II	12	0-1	0-0	0-1	2	2	0		
Bufkin	1	0-0	0-0	0-0	0	0	0		
Totals	200	24-58	5-6	10-22	16	19	57		
Percentages: FG: 41.4%. FT: 83.3%. Three-point field goals: 4-17 (Brooks 3-7, Houston 1-4, Williams II 0-1, Dickinson 0-2, Jones 0-3). Team rebounds: 3. Blocked shots: 2 (Collins, Diabate). Turnovers: 11 (Collins 3, Dickinson 3, Diabate 2, Jones 2, Brooks). Steals: 3 (Brooks, Collins, Jones). Technical Foul: Howard. Officials: Carstensen, Szelc, Cruz. Attendance: 12,707.									

Ohio State 70, Minnesota 45							
Feb. 15, 2022							
Value City Arena • Columbus, Ohio.							
		1	2	F			
Minnesota (12-11, 3-11)	25	20	45				
Ohio State (16-6, 9-4)	23	47	70				
Minnesota	Total	FG	FT	Reb.			
	Min	M-A	M-A	O-D	A	PF	Pts.
Curry	22	1-5	0-0	0-2	3	3	2
Battle	35	4-13	1-2	1-4	1	1	11
Willis	34	2-11	1-2	0-7	1	0	5
Loewe	34	5-9	0-0	1-2	0	1	12
Stephens	25	0-5	0-0	0-0	1	1	0
Daniels	13	1-2	1-1	2-2	0	1	3
Sutherlin	23	1-3	5-6	0-5	0	2	7
Thompson	11	2-3	0-0	1-0	0	3	5
Thiam	3	0-1	0-0	0-0	0	0	0
Ramberg	2	0-0	0-0	0-0	0	0	0
Totals	200	16-52	8-11	6-23	6	12	45
Percentages: FG: 30.8%. FT: 72.7%. Three-point field goals: 5-19 (Loewe 2-5, Battle 2-6, Thompson 1-2, Stephens 0-1, Thiam 0-1, Willis 0-4). Team rebounds: 2. Blocked shots: 2 (Daniels 2). Turnovers: 13 (Willis 5, Curry 2, Stephens 2, Daniels, Sutherlin, Team). Steals: 8 (Sutherlin 3, Curry 2, Battle, Loewe, Willis).							
Ohio State	Total	FG	FT	Reb.			
	Min	M-A	M-A	O-D	A	PF	Pts.
Key	23	4-7	1-2	2-5	1	0	9
Liddell	35	6-11	2-2	3-7	2	3	16
Brown III	28	2-4	0-2	0-4	1	2	4
Branham	30	4-7	1-2	0-1	2	2	11
Wheeler	23	5-8	0-0	0-3	3	4	13
Russell	23	4-8	0-0	0-3	0	0	9
Young	16	1-4	0-0	0-2	0	2	3
Ahrens	11	1-4	0-0	0-3	1	1	3
Brunk	3	0-0	0-0	0-0	0	0	0
Sotos	5	0-2	2-2	0-1	0	0	2
Hookfin	2	0-0	0-0	0-0	1	0	0
Totals	200	27-55	6-10	7-29	11	14	70
Percentages: FG: 49.1%. FT: 60.0%. Three-point field goals: 10-23 (Wheeler 3-6, Branham 2-2, Liddell 2-3, Young 1-1, Ahrens 1-4, Russell 1-5, Brown III 0-1, Sotos 0-1). Team rebounds: 2. Blocked shots: 5 (Key 2, Branham, Liddell, Young). Turnovers: 10 (Branham 3, Liddell 3, Wheeler 3, Brunk). Steals: 3 (Key 2, Wheeler). Officials: Eppley, Pfeifer, Oglesby. Attendance: 12,360.							

with 4:20 to play.

“We’ve been up eight in the last couple minutes before but yes, that was a big-time shot by a big-time player,” Holtmann said of the Liddell three-pointer. “(Michigan) was changing their defenses. They bothered Purdue with their changing defenses. They had changed their defense, and we were able to space them with 5-out in the corner and he was able to make a play.”

Dickinson answered with a quick layup to cut the lead back down to two scores. Russell knocked down a jumper to push the Buckeyes back up to eight-point leaders into another timeout with 3:32 to play, but Michigan again refused to let OSU separate.

Brooks hit a three-pointer of his own out of the break to bring the Wolverines again within five, but unlike on their last road trip when the Buckeyes froze down the stretch and failed to extend a late lead, Ohio State found its knock-out punch in Ann Arbor. Kyle Young hit a pair of free throws to extend the lead back to seven points, Branham delivered a high-arc jumper and pushed it to nine at 61-52 with 2:03 to go and Michigan came up empty on a trio of trey tries as the clock drained under one minute remaining, effectively ending the game when Eugene Brown III snagged a defensive rebound and forced U-M into fouling.

The Buckeyes missed their first two free-throw tries with Brown at the line for a one-and-one and Young on the stripe a possession later in the double bonus, but they cashed in on their next seven to coast to victory in the face of two Brooks free throws and a Caleb Houston three-pointer with 18 seconds remaining.

Beyond Liddell, it was Russell whom the Buckeyes turned to for points, as he chipped in 12 with a pair of three-pointers and 5-of-8 shoot-

Iowa 75, Ohio State 62								
Feb. 19, 2022								
Value City Arena • Columbus, Ohio.								
		1	2	F				
Iowa (18-8, 8-7)		39	36	75				
Ohio State (16-7, 9-5)		38	24	62				
Iowa	Total	FG	FT	Reb.				
	Min	M-A	M-A	O-D	A	PF	Pts.	
Rebraca	16	2-3	1-2	2-3	0	4	5	
Ke. Murray	36	10-17	2-3	3-2	2	3	24	
P. McCaffery	20	2-8	3-5	4-1	2	0	7	
Bohannon	30	3-9	2-3	1-0	1	2	10	
Perkins	10	2-6	0-0	1-2	0	2	4	
Toussaint	23	2-4	0-0	0-2	1	3	4	
Kr. Murray	27	4-13	2-2	3-5	2	1	11	
C. McCaffery	21	1-1	0-0	1-2	2	3	3	
Ulis	17	1-3	5-6	2-2	2	2	7	
Sandfort	1	0-0	0-0	0-0	0	0	0	
Totals	200	27-64	15-21	20-20	12	20	75	
Percentages: FG: 42.2%. FT: 71.4%. Three-point field goals: 6-21 (Ke. Murray 2-5, Bohannon 2-7, C. McCaffery 1-1, Kr. Murray 1-5, P. McCaffery 0-1, Toussaint 0-2). Team rebounds: 4. Blocked shots: 3 (P. McCaffery, Ke. Murray, Kr. Murray). Turnovers: 8 (Rebraca 3, P. McCaffery, Kr. Murray, Sandfort, Toussaint, Ulis). Steals: 3 (Kr. Murray 2, Bohannon).								
Ohio State	Total	FG	FT	Reb.				
	Min	M-A	M-A	O-D	A	PF	Pts.	
Key	16	1-1	4-6	1-4	0	3	6	
Liddell	35	6-13	2-5	3-5	1	3	15	
Brown III	19	0-2	2-2	0-0	0	0	2	
Branham	35	9-13	3-4	3-5	0	3	22	
Wheeler	27	1-6	1-2	0-2	3	4	3	
Young	24	4-6	2-2	4-1	3	2	10	
Ahrens	10	0-0	0-0	0-1	0	0	0	
Brunk	2	0-0	0-0	0-0	0	1	0	
Russell	18	2-6	0-0	0-1	0	0	4	
Johnson Jr.	13	0-2	0-0	0-0	0	1	0	
Totals	200	23-49	14-21	12-19	7	17	62	
Percentages: FG: 46.9%. FT: 66.7%. Three-point field goals: 2-11 (Branham 1-2, Liddell 1-2, Brown III 0-1, Johnson Jr. 0-2, Russell 0-2, Wheeler 0-2). Team rebounds: 1. Blocked shots: 6 (Liddell 5, Key). Turnovers: 14 (Branham 3, Liddell 3, Brown III 2, Team 2, Ahrens, Johnson Jr., Key, Young). Steals: 7 (Wheeler 3, Branham 2, Liddell, Young). Officials: Riley, Ek, Beaver. Attendance: 15,876								

ing. Brooks paced Michigan with 17 points, and Jones pulled down 10 rebounds. Michigan held a 32-26 edge on the boards.

Second Half Sinks Gophers In VCA

Ohio State (16-6, 9-4) again proved itself superior in the paint against Minnesota (12-11, 3-11), riding the same game plan that it had used to torch Minnesota in Minneapolis only a month prior to earn a 70-45 victory Feb. 15 over the Golden Gophers.

The Buckeyes won the rebound battle 36-29 and scored 28 points in the paint to Minnesota’s 14, but they faced more resistance at home before 12,360 in Value City Arena than they had on the road for at least one half.

Despite Ohio State’s presence down low and a 33.3 percent field-goal percentage (10 of 30) in the first half for Minnesota, the Buckeyes turned the ball over eight times and missed on all but one of eight three-point tries to not only keep their foes in the game but to outright cede the halftime lead, trailing 25-23 at the break. The first 20 minutes of play had Ohio State face a three-minute scoring drought within the first 10 minutes and one-up that in the last 10 minutes, going entirely scoreless from the 9:22 mark to the 2:33 mark while Minnesota rattled off 10 points to claim a 23-17 lead, its largest of the game.

The Buckeyes must have solved whatever ailed them in the bowels of Value City Arena, because they came out firing from the opening seconds of the last 20 minutes and never really stopped. OSU opened with a 17-4 run to leap out to a 40-29 lead with 14:59 to play, bolstered by a Wheeler three-pointer rattling in to open the scoring, a pair of Key jumpers and back-to-back Branham triples that brought the home crowd to a fever pitch and forced Minnesota

into a timeout. Wheeler capped that run the way he started it with another three-pointer.

“I thought our guys, really in the second half, were able to make some shots, and I think that opened the defense up a little bit,” Holtmann said after the game. “We played with a little more purpose on the offensive end there and a little bit cleaner in the second half. Some of it was we had to adjust to how they were doing some things.”

A Luke Loewe triple on the other end did at least temporarily halt the stampede into a media timeout, but not for long. Liddell broke the break with a jumper, Minnesota came up short on its next two possessions and Wheeler stayed hot, converting a fastbreak layup and knocking down another three-pointer after a Loewe jumper to push the OSU lead to 47-34.

That run all but ended the game. Minnesota scored only 20 points in the second half to Ohio State’s 47 and never drew any closer than 13 points in the last nine minutes of the game. The Gophers got it to 56-42 with 4:40 on the clock, but Liddell knocked down consecutive three-pointers to answer, pushing the lead to 20 points.

Liddell led the Buckeyes with 16 points and 10 rebounds, both game highs, Wheeler finished with 13 points, including 3 of 6 from beyond the arc, and Branham added 11. Loewe was at the front of the Minnesota attack with 12 points.

Home Streak Snapped By Iowa

It was not quite March in Columbus, but the weather outside Ohio State’s Value City Arena and the fans inside it on Feb. 19 as the Buckeyes played host to the Iowa Hawkeyes said differently. The crowd – not quite full at 15,876, but well above the season average – poured in as the sun chipped away at the snow that had covered the ground since the last time these two were slated to play this game, all the way back on Feb. 3, when it was Ohio’s inclement weather that kept Iowa’s plane grounded and forced a postponement.

That reception, working in tandem with the intensity on the floor, offered what often felt like the full March experience more than a week before the calendar flipped and college basketball enters overdrive. And for Ohio State, at the end of an extremely physical 40-minute donnybrook, it offered what could have been a critical win to stay afloat in the Big Ten title race. But foul trouble, issues on the boards and turnover woes were too much for the Buckeyes, previously unbeaten at home, to overcome as they fell 75-62 and dropped to 16-7 on the season and 9-5 in league play.

The Value City Arena crowd was not on its feet for the full 40 minutes, picking its spots in the first half before finding some emotional investment in the second half, but the Buckeyes, donning the gray Jimmy Jackson-era throwbacks with the 1990-91 Big Ten championship squad in attendance (and recognized at the half), brought the energy from the tip-off. Ohio State stormed out to 21 points in the first seven minutes of the game, using a 14-3 run in just over three minutes to earn an 11-point edge, 21-10 with 13:14 before the break.

The high-powered Hawkeye offense had plans of its own, though, rattling off 10 straight points across the next 2:15, drawing within one point at 21-20 before Key broke the OSU dry spell with three points the old-fashioned way and some finger guns to celebrate.

Neither team created more than four points of separation through the rest of the half, and the Hawkeyes headed into the break with a 39-38 lead. Ohio State knocked down 15 of its 29

first-half shots (51.7 percent) to Iowa’s 15 of 36 (41.7 percent), but the Hawkeyes secured 14 offensive rebounds worth 11 second-chance points and benefited from seven Buckeye turnovers to overcome OSU’s edge in marksmanship.

The two sides showed no signs of slowing down out of the break. Ohio State found points on four of its first five possessions out of the break and had the chance to make it five of the first six possessions when Liddell went to the stripe, but he missed both tries. That was all the space Iowa needed, erasing a 45-42 deficit in less than a minute with a Jordan Bohannon three-pointer to knot the game at 45 into the first timeout of the half.

The teams might have agreed on an all-out barrage of offense, but they didn’t run that by the striped crew officiating the game. An electric start slowed to a crawl out of that 16-minute media timeout with five foul calls – four against the Buckeyes – in less than four minutes, each one drawing the Buckeye crowd out of its first-half slumber more than the last, culminating with a whistle on Wheeler that all but brought the house down around. Only seconds away from forcing a shot-clock violation with the game tied at 49, Wheeler was dinged for a foul on a Bohannon three-point try. He knocked down a pair from the line.

If there was one single turning point in the game, it was that foul. Ohio State succumbed to more than four scoreless minutes with as many attempted shots (two) as turnovers. Iowa expanded its lead to 58-49 in the interim before Key finally snapped the funk with 8:59 to play, converting a pair of free throws. Brown did the same a possession later to cut the deficit back to five points and reanimate the crowd briefly, but Iowa’s offense proved too much to handle.

The Murray brothers, who had been largely quiet after Keegan Murray rattled off 20 points in the first half, delivered a 10-2 run on their own (Kris with six), to push the Hawkeyes back into control with a 68-55 lead at the 4:52 mark. Ohio State drew within as few as six points, 68-62, when Liddell knocked down a three-pointer at 2:40, but Iowa secured its 19th and 20th offensive rebounds on the following possession, drained nearly a full minute off the clock and emptied the stands with a Connor McCaffery three-pointer. The Buckeyes would not score again.

Keegan Murray led all scorers with 24 points while brother Kris snared eight rebounds to go with his 11 points. Branham led the Buckeyes with 22 points and eight rebounds while Liddell chipped in 15 points, eight boards and five blocks.

The teams combined for 37 fouls and 42 free throw tries.

Branham Lifts Bucks Over IU

There was a time in the not-too-distant past that an opportunity to see Ohio State and Indiana square off on the hardwood was one of the hottest tickets in the Big Ten.

But on Feb. 21, with the Buckeyes still well in contention for strong seeding in the Big Ten tournament and Indiana battling to stay on the right side of the NCAA Tournament bubble, Columbus had its eyes elsewhere.

Given the content of the game, perhaps those who opted against attendance were correct as Ohio State (17-7, 10-5) and Indiana (16-10, 7-9) engaged in a brutal slog of stops and starts on the offensive side of the ball before a patchy lower bowl and an announced Value City Arena crowd of 13,744. At the end of 45 game

Branham Stars Against Indiana, Illinois

Continued From Page 27

minutes and well over two real-time hours, the Buckeyes emerged on top 80-69.

The offensive struggles started early for both sides, as the Buckeyes faced 4:28 of scoreless basketball around the midpoint of the first half. But Indiana managed only two baskets – both three-pointers from Parker Stewart – from the start of Ohio State's drought at the 11:14 mark through the end of it, when Johnson knocked down a three-pointer of his own with 6:46 to play, reclaiming the lead for the Buckeyes in the process at 20-18. The two sides combined to hit 23 of 54 shot attempts (42.6 percent) in the first 20 minutes of the game while generating 13 turnovers and 16 personal fouls, as Ohio State took a 33-28 lead into the break.

They shook off some of the rust to open the second frame, but the pace didn't change – granted, Indiana entered the game at 157th nationally in adjusted tempo, and Ohio State was all the way down at No. 280. Here, the tortoise led the race out of the break as the Buckeyes knocked down their first seven shots, while Indiana hit four of its first six.

With its suddenly steady flow of points after the streaky first frame – and with more than three minutes without an IU field goal – Ohio State cracked open a lead as large as 11 points at 50-39 at the 13:32 mark.

That flow of points would not last, with over six minutes between the seventh field goal and the eighth for the Buckeyes. Meanwhile, Indiana's Miller Kopp rattled off seven points in a row to bring the Hoosiers within two possessions, 53-48, which dwindled to one after two free throws by Xavier Johnson on a Liddell flagrant foul at the 9:15 mark.

A Branham layup – then his 18th and 19th points of the game – snapped the slump and returned the Buckeyes to a two-score perch. That would not halt the IU run, though. Several lengthy reviews and multiple "I-U" chants from the traveling Hoosiers in attendance later, and IU had stormed all the way back, riding an 18-4 run to claim a 59-55 lead with 5:09 to play.

Two perfect trips to the line by Branham and Liddell kept Ohio State within fighting range,

61-59, offering it just enough of a window for when that breakthrough from the field finally came. After a Tamar Bates jumper with 2:47 to play put the Hoosiers ahead by four points at 63-59 and more empty OSU possessions, it looked like it never would come.

But as the clock crept under one minute, Branham added two more free throws, Bates bricked a three-pointer on the other end and Ohio State finally found its shot.

With only six seconds to play Branham connected with Liddell, who made sure his shot stayed true by slamming it home to knot the game at 63 and send it to overtime.

In that extra frame, as he had pretty much all game, Branham led the charge for the Buckeyes. Working almost exclusively as the primary ball-handler, he helped to set up Johnson for a trip to the free-throw line after he was fouled on a three-pointer, converted a tough layup on OSU's next possession and completed the trifecta with an assist to Wheeler, whose corner three-pointer gave Ohio State its first lead since the 7:20 mark of the second half, 70-67.

"We've asked (Malaki) to do a lot more than we did earlier in the year," Holtmann said. "And he's responded at times when he's struggled. He struggled at Michigan early and he struggled defensively at times guarding (Eli) Brooks, and then he responded in the second half and was better on both ends. I think we're going to continue to have those kinds of moments from him. He's not going to be this every night. It's too much to expect of a kid. But he's been phenomenal."

After Indiana pulled back within one, it was Liddell's turn, knocking down a midrange jumper to push the Buckeyes back in front by three points with 2:00 remaining. Not to be outdone, Branham found his own midrange touch after another defensive stop, giving Ohio State a 74-69 edge.

That, with free throws from Liddell, Wheeler and Young down the stretch, proved sufficient as the Buckeyes held Indiana to only six points and one field goal in overtime, narrowly dodging what could have been a disastrous loss.

Branham led all scorers with 27 points, while Liddell chipped in 16 with seven re-

bounds. Johnson, who fouled out in overtime, had 16 points for Indiana, hitting all 10 of his free throws. Trayce Jackson-Davis and Race Thompson added 13 points and nine rebounds each.

Big Run Enough For Road Win

Ohio State's 86-83 win over Illinois (19-8, 12-5) on Feb. 24 can be split cleanly into two sections. The first section had the game play roughly to the anticipated script. The Buckeyes (18-7, 11-5), who had played four games in the 11 days prior to this road trip out to Champaign, looked sluggish and overwhelmed by the Fighting Illini, who have flashed elite potential all season and entered the game in a tie for first in the Big Ten standings.

Illinois scored 21 points to Ohio State's eight in the first 9:28 of game time, knocking down four three-pointers (all from Alfonso Plummer) while the Buckeyes knocked down only three field goals in 13 tries. Shot after shot for the Buckeyes went begging short of the hoop from players with weak legs, and Illinois looked about ready to blow the roof off its home arena as Plummer lined up what would have been his fifth three-pointer to give Illinois a 14-point edge after Liddell knocked down a midrange jumper.

His shot missed, launching the game into its second section.

Ahrens connected on a three-pointer of his own on the next possession to slice the lead down to eight points, a critical piece in what would become a 12-2 run in Ohio State's favor, drawing it within one point at 23-22. The two stuck closely together for much of the remainder of the half, but it was another quick Buckeye scoring burst to end the period that ultimately helped to define the game.

Trailing by seven, 35-28, with 3:00 to play, Ohio State rattled off eight of the last 10 points of the half, entering the break down by only one point, 37-36.

That was no 8-2 run, as the Buckeyes weren't done surging. They returned from the rest with a vengeance, bolstered by their stars, Branham and Liddell, and a surprising offensive outburst from Young. Ohio State scored 16 of the first 18

Ohio State 80, Indiana 69								
Feb. 21, 2022 Value City Arena • Columbus, Ohio.								
		1	2	OT	F			
Indiana (16-10, 7-9)	28	35	6	69				
Ohio State (17-7, 10-5)	33	30	17	80				
Indiana	Total	FG	FT	Reb.				
	Min	M-A	M-A	O-D	A	PF	Pts.	
Kopp	29	2-8	2-2	2-1	1	2	7	
Jackson-Davis	38	3-9	7-13	4-5	2	3	13	
Thompson	40	6-12	0-0	2-7	1	2	13	
Johnson	39	3-12	10-10	1-2	4	5	16	
Stewart	31	4-9	0-0	1-2	1	4	11	
Bates	25	3-11	0-0	2-3	1	1	7	
Durr	9	0-1	0-0	0-0	0	2	0	
Leal	10	0-1	0-2	0-1	2	1	0	
Geronimo	3	1-1	0-0	0-0	0	1	2	
Totals	205	22-64	19-27	15-23	12	21	69	
Percentages: FG: 34.4%. FT: 70.4%. Three-point field goals: 6-19 (Stewart 3-4, Thompson 1-2, Bates 1-4, Kopp 1-5, Leal 0-1, Johnson 0-3). Team rebounds: 5. Blocked shots: 4 (Thompson 3, Jackson-Davis). Turnovers: 11 (Johnson 6, Kopp 2, Thompson 2, Jackson-Davis). Steals: 6 (Johnson 2, Thompson 2, Bates, Leal).								
Ohio State	Total	FG	FT	Reb.				
	Min	M-A	M-A	O-D	A	PF	Pts.	
Key	18	3-6	0-1	3-1	1	4	6	
Liddell	43	6-15	3-4	0-7	2	4	16	
Brown III	29	4-7	0-0	0-6	0	2	10	
Branham	39	9-13	8-8	0-5	3	2	27	
Wheeler	30	2-6	3-4	0-3	1	3	8	
Russell	11	0-0	0-0	0-1	0	2	0	
Young	29	1-3	6-8	2-4	0	4	8	
Ahrens	8	0-0	0-0	0-0	0	1	0	
Johnson Jr.	18	1-4	2-3	0-0	1	0	5	
Totals	205	26-54	22-28	7-31	8	22	80	
Percentages: FG: 48.1%. FT: 78.6%. Three-point field goals: 6-19 (Brown III 2-2, Branham 1-2, Johnson Jr. 1-4, Liddell 1-5, Wheeler 1-5, Young 0-1). Team rebounds: 6. Blocked shots: 6 (Branham 2, Brown III 2, Young 2). Turnovers: 12 (Key 3, Liddell 3, Branham 2, Johnson Jr., Russell, Wheeler, Young). Steals: 4 (Brown III 3, Liddell). Officials: Scirotto, Walton, Daily. Attendance: 13,744.								

points in the second half – a 24-4 run spanning nearly eight minutes back into the first half, culminating in a 52-39 lead at 14:35 that stunned the sold-out Illini crowd of 15,544 at the State Farm Center.

That trio proved nearly unstoppable for much of the evening. Young slowed down after a dominant first half, contributing only five points in the second frame after he was a perfect 5-of-5 shooting for 13 points in the first 20 minutes and had five points in the big run, but his defensive effort against Kofi Cockburn – whom the Buckeyes largely solved with primary defense from Key, Liddell and Young and frequent double-teams – was just as important as his scoring touch.

Liddell wasn't quite his usual self, but he snapped into form in the second frame and was strong on defense as well – despite spending time in the hospital with the flu only days prior to the game.

"My man needed fluids the night after the IU game," Holtmann said of Liddell after the game. "He was in the hospital for a little bit just because of – it turned out it was just the flu – but he had a lot of fatigue. He's a tremendous talent and a tremendous kid. He was fine, he was good enough to play. If he wouldn't have played well, he'd have said, 'Hey, it's on me.' There would have been no excuses."

But it was Branham who gave the Buckeyes the biggest boost. He was averaging 16.8 points per game since the start of 2022 through this contest, shooting better than 50 percent from both three-point range and the field at large. In Illinois, he may have delivered his best performance yet. After missing three of his first four attempts, he knocked down nine of his last 10.



SONNY BROCKWAY

STILL FAN FAVORITES – Ohio State honored the 1990-91 Buckeyes, winners of the Big Ten crown, during its Feb. 19 matchup against Iowa. The current Buckeyes even donned their gray 1990s throwback uniforms.

OHIO STATE MEN'S BASKETBALL

Ohio State 86, Illinois 83

Feb. 24, 2022
State Farm Center • Champaign, Ill.

	1	2	F
Ohio State (18-7, 11-5)	36	50	86
Illinois (19-8, 12-5)	37	46	83

Ohio State	Total	FG	FT	Reb.	A	PF	Pts.
Min	M-A	M-A	O-D				
Key	14	1-2	1-2	1-1	0	2	3
Liddell	34	7-15	6-7	1-5	0	3	21
Brown III	22	0-2	0-0	0-3	1	3	0
Branham	33	10-14	10-11	1-1	1	0	31
Wheeler	28	0-4	2-2	0-3	3	1	2
Young	28	6-7	4-6	1-6	1	3	18
Brunk	3	0-0	0-0	0-1	0	1	0
Johnson Jr.	13	0-2	0-0	0-1	1	1	0
Russell	14	2-5	1-2	0-0	0	3	6
Ahrens	10	1-1	2-2	0-2	0	1	5
Totals	200	27-52	26-32	5-24	7	18	86

Percentages: FG: 51.9%. FT: 81.3%. **Three-point field goals:** 6-12 (Young 2-3, Ahrens 1-1, Branham 1-1, Liddell 1-2, Russell 1-2, Brown III 0-1, Johnson Jr. 0-2). **Team rebounds:** 2. **Blocked shots:** 5 (Liddell 4, Branham). **Turnovers:** 11 (Wheeler 4, Russell 2, Young 2, Ahrens, Brown III, Liddell). **Steals:** 3 (Branham, Brown III, Key).

Illinois	Total	FG	FT	Reb.	A	PF	Pts.
Min	M-A	M-A	O-D				
Grandison	31	5-10	2-2	0-2	3	1	14
Cockburn	24	5-15	2-4	2-1	0	5	12
Frazier	31	4-8	3-4	1-2	4	2	12
Plummer	30	9-15	0-0	0-3	2	2	26
Williams	26	1-1	0-0	1-1	0	4	2
Payne	5	0-0	0-0	0-1	0	2	0
Goode	8	0-1	0-0	0-3	1	0	0
Curbelo	18	3-8	0-0	1-2	3	1	7
Hawkins	25	3-5	4-7	2-2	2	5	10
Podziemski	1	0-0	0-0	0-0	0	0	0
Totals	200	30-63	11-17	12-18	15	24	83

Percentages: FG: 47.6%. FT: 64.7%. **Three-point field goals:** 12-25 (Plummer 8-10, Grandison 2-6, Curbelo 1-3, Frazier 1-4, Goode 0-1, Hawkins 0-1). **Team rebounds:** 6. **Blocked shots:** 0. **Turnovers:** 11 (Cockburn 2, Frazier 2, Plummer 2, Team 2, Curbelo, Grandison, Grandison). **Steals:** 7 (Hawkins 3, Grandison 2, Cockburn, Frazier). **Technical Fouls:** Underwood (2). **Officials:** Carstensen, Kimble, Dorsey. **Attendance:** 15,544.

When he was most needed, he took care of business, hitting all seven of his second-half attempts and all six free-throw tries (10 of 11 from the stripe on the game). He pitched nine points into that 24-4 run and rattled off six straight to push Ohio State ahead 74-58 with 5:58 to play.

"It was a challenging matchup," said Illinois head coach Brad Underwood, who was ejected in the second half. "In my opinion, they've got the best player in our league, and his name is not (E.J.) Liddell. That's no offense because he is terrific. But Malaki Branham is (the best)."

It was only when Ohio State's offense shifted away from the Akron product that Illinois clawed its way back into the game, drawing as close as 84-83 with 14 seconds remaining. It was not for a lack of effort to get the ball into Branham's hands, but more a larger issue the Buckeyes faced as the Illini shifted into a press-heavy defense that forced Wheeler turnovers on three consecutive possessions to allow the home team to pull to 78-76 and surrendered only two field-goal attempts in more than four minutes of play down the stretch.

As OSU floundered, Illinois stormed all the way back and had two opportunities to tie or win the game in its final nine seconds thanks to split trips to the line from Russell and Young, which gave the Illini the ball down 85-83 with nine seconds remaining and 86-83 seven seconds later. But after surrendering points on the last 12 possessions, Ohio State's defense finally tightened, contesting Illini guard Trent Frazier (who knocked down a three-pointer to bring the game within a point on the previous possession) at the hoop and forcing him into a wayward pass out of bounds. He again took the ball after Russell split his free throws, but a half-

Maryland 75, Ohio State 60

Feb. 27, 2022
XFINITY Center • College Park, Md.

	1	2	F
Ohio State (18-8, 11-6)	28	32	60
Maryland (14-15, 6-12)	32	43	75

Ohio State	Total	FG	FT	Reb.	A	PF	Pts.
Min	M-A	M-A	O-D				
Brown III	17	1-6	0-0	2-1	1	1	2
Branham	33	4-13	4-4	0-2	3	2	13
Key	11	0-4	1-2	2-2	0	4	1
Liddell	36	3-10	5-5	1-5	1	3	11
Wheeler	25	4-5	0-0	3-3	1	1	11
Johnson Jr.	13	1-4	0-0	0-0	0	1	2
Russell	19	4-6	0-0	0-1	0	2	12
Ahrens	16	0-2	0-0	0-3	0	1	0
Young	29	4-8	0-0	3-2	0	4	8
Brunk	2	0-0	0-0	0-0	0	1	0
Totals	200	21-58	10-11	12-20	6	20	60

Percentages: FG: 36.2%. FT: 90.9%. **Three-point field goals:** 8-28 (Russell 4-5, Wheeler 3-3, Branham 1-6, Young 0-1, Ahrens 0-2, Johnson Jr. 0-2, Brown III 0-4, Liddell 0-5). **Team rebounds:** 2. **Blocked shots:** 5 (Key 2, Liddell 2, Brown III). **Turnovers:** 11 (Branham 2, Russell 2, Branham, Brown III, Brunk, Johnson Jr., Key, Liddell, Wheeler, Young). **Steals:** 2 (Johnson Jr., Young).

Maryland	Total	FG	FT	Reb.	A	PF	Pts.
Min	M-A	M-A	O-D				
Russell	33	9-19	3-5	1-1	3	2	27
Ayala	36	8-17	5-5	0-6	2	1	23
Hart	24	2-4	1-1	0-2	2	3	5
Scott	37	5-8	3-3	5-4	2	1	14
Wahab	21	2-4	0-0	1-4	0	3	4
Reese	14	0-0	0-0	3-4	1	3	0
Green	27	0-2	2-4	0-4	0	2	2
Martinez	9	0-2	0-0	0-3	0	0	0
Totals	200	26-56	14-18	11-26	10	15	75

Percentages: FG: 46.4%. FT: 77.8%. **Three-point field goals:** 9-21 (Russell 6-10, Ayala 2-5, Scott 1-2, Green 0-1, Martinez 0-1, Hart 0-2). **Team rebounds:** 1. **Blocked shots:** 2 (Scott, Wahab). **Turnovers:** 9 (Reese 3, Hart 2, Russell, Scott, Team, Wahab). **Steals:** 8 (Ayala 3, Scott 3, Russell 2). **Officials:** Szelc, Pfeifer, Riley. **Attendance:** 15,842.

court heave clanked off of the backboard.

Branham led the Buckeyes with 31 points. Liddell added 21 points and six rebounds in his home state, while Young had 18 points and seven boards. Plummer, who hit eight three-pointers, led the Illini with 26 points, while Cockburn, who fouled out with 4:33 to play, was held to 12 points and three rebounds.

OSU Drops Final Road Game

Branham had been the story of the week in Columbus. The silky-smooth guard had led the Buckeyes in three consecutive matchups, helping deliver a critical road win over Illinois on Feb. 24 with 31 points and lifting OSU in overtime against Indiana on Feb. 21 as he pitched in another 27 points. He was rising fast on NBA draft boards and quickly evolving into a reliable second option next to Liddell, who had carried the load for much of the season but was able to take a bit of a break against the Fighting Illini and Hoosiers.

Unfortunately for the Buckeyes (and for Branham), it seemed on Feb. 27 that the story had spread from Columbus and that its final road game host of the season, Maryland, was well-versed in the new freshman phenom. The Terps made Branham a focus of their defensive efforts throughout the game, limiting him to 4-of-13 shooting for 13 points.

That game plan proved wise for Maryland (14-15, 6-12), which managed to force Ohio State (18-8, 11-6) into a role player-centric attack that was unable to keep up with the Terp offense on the way to an 75-60 defeat before 15,842 at the XFINITY Center.

Although Branham's struggles were the headlining story of the opening frame, it was Ohio State's struggles from downtown that played as large a role, if not even larger, in a 32-28 deficit at the half and to the eventual defeat.

The Buckeyes were just 3-of-16 shooting from three-point range in the opening frame, sustained only by a pair from Russell and one for Wheeler. Branham missed all four of his first-half tries, while Liddell and Brown each went 0 for 3.

Out of the break, those struggles persisted. Wheeler knocked down a pair to open the second set of 20 minutes, but the onslaught would not continue as the Buckeyes converted only three more on their next nine tries.

Ohio State was not alone in its efforts to drop this matchup, though. Maryland experienced a much hotter-than-usual showing from the field all game, leaning heavily on the guard pairing of Eric Ayala and Fatts Russell. Russell tallied 27 points with six three-pointers while Ayala put up a 23-point effort as Ohio State struggled to find any long-term solution defensively.

That was a bit of a new problem for Holtmann's squad. The Buckeyes have had problems with talented big men in the paint because of their lack of size down low, but Maryland is largely without that – starting center Qudus Wahab makes his presence felt more defensively. Instead, the Terps went right at Branham, Brown, Johnson, Cedric Russell and Wheeler and found frequent success. Forward Donta Scott played an important role offensively as well, finding opportunities against Liddell and totaling 14 points.

"We all have to be accountable for that – our captains, us as a coaching staff," Holtmann said. "We just didn't perform as well as we needed to. We've got to own it and take accountability for it. Clearly, (the players) didn't get the message that this was going to be a different game, much different game than when we played Maryland last."

Those three and Maryland's continued hot shooting ultimately provided the spark for an 11-3 run that spanned more than three minutes and gave Maryland its largest edge of the game, 64-53, with 4:17 to play. Ohio State had stayed within two possessions for much of the second half and never fell behind by more than eight points (early in the half, 36-28) before that run, but without output from its stars, the OSU offense just could not keep up.

Liddell chipped in only 11 points, among his lowest outputs for the season. It was Cedric Russell who led the Buckeyes behind Branham from the field with 12 points, all coming from three-pointers. Maryland let the Buckeyes back within single digits when Liddell hit a pair of free throws right after that run but expanded its lead to as many as 18 points before settling into its final 15-point winning margin.

With defensive issues, Branham's disappearance from the offensive attack – and Liddell's, as it turned out – and the tepid shooting from deep (8 of 28 total for 28.6 percent), Ohio State had a formula for an upset loss that, despite the frustration it inspired, really didn't sink any of its largest hopes for the season.

The possibility of a top-four seed was still fully intact. But for it to secure that bid, it's hard to imagine that another 36.2 percent shooting performance from the field would be acceptable, even with the lowly Nebraska Cornhuskers and bubble-sitting Michigan Wolverines on the docket, as well as Michigan State. The Buckeyes could need wins against all three to secure their position.

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OSU Claims Top Seed, Splits Big Ten Title

Following Ohio State's 77-72 loss to Maryland on Feb. 17, the prospects of a potential Big Ten regular-season championship looked grim for the Buckeyes with Indiana firmly ahead in the standings.

DOUBLE DRIBBLE Braden Moles

But suddenly, the Hoosiers had lost two of their last three after consecutive losses to Iowa on Feb. 19 and 21, and Ohio State was right back in the thick of it heading into the final week of the regular season. Five teams – Indiana, Iowa, Maryland, Michigan and Ohio State – all had legitimate paths (admittedly with varying degrees of difficulty) to claim a Big Ten title with just two or three games to go.

The Hawkeyes and Wolverines (who played Feb. 27 in a win for Iowa) each controlled their destinies, while Indiana and Ohio State each needed Michigan to drop a game. A Buckeye title also required the Hoosiers to lose, which they did on Feb. 21 against Iowa. Maryland was a significantly longer shot, needing to beat Indiana and requiring losses from Iowa, Michigan and Ohio State.

With the table set for the final week, all Ohio State needed to do was win its games and rely on a little bit of luck, and the good

fortune came through as the Buckeyes secured their first Big Ten regular-season championship (shared with Iowa) since the 2017-18 season.

It is the 16th regular-season title in Ohio State women's basketball history and the third under head coach Kevin McGuff, who has helped to lead the Buckeyes through some tumultuous seasons of late. In just the past three years, his teams have experienced a canceled NCAA tournament in 2020, a postseason ban in 2021 and a season-ending injury to Madison Greene, the team's starting point guard, just days before the 2022 campaign began that cast a shadow over the start of the season.

"I think it's a real testament to the kids in our program," McGuff said. "We have great leadership out of our upperclassmen. We had immense disappointment the last two years because of COVID cutting the season short and last year we had a postseason ban. We have great kids who just kept fighting and scratching and clawing, so I am super happy for them and couldn't be more proud."

Along with the Big Ten title comes the No. 1 seed in the Big Ten women's basketball tournament. Ohio State and Iowa are tied in the standings given the co-champion status the teams hold, but the Buckeyes held the tiebreaker for the top seed with their win over the Hawkeyes earlier this season.

As the No. 1 seed, Ohio State will take on the winner of No. 8 Michigan State and No. 9 Purdue (set for March 3) in the quar-

terfinals on March 4 at 11:30 a.m. on Big Ten Network. The Buckeyes defeated both these teams in the regular season, downing Purdue 70-53 on Dec. 5, 2021, in their only meeting, and sweeping Michigan State 89-83 and 61-55 on Jan. 12 and Feb. 27, respectively.

While Ohio State will enter the tournament as the top seed, it is not expected to be the favorite, with those honors belonging to either Indiana or Michigan. However, those teams recently have not played to their usual standards, meaning the bracket is relatively wide open. The Buckeyes were 2-1 against Maryland and Iowa, and against teams seeded No. 6-14, Ohio State was a perfect 12-0.

"(The keys are) staying focused mentally, making sure we're healthy, focusing on our things (like) defense, guarding the ball and just doing the little things. That's what it comes down to at the end of the day," graduate forward Tanaya Beacham said. "We can compete with anybody in the NCAA."

Hutcherson Utilizing NIL Opportunities

The conversation around NIL has mostly been focused on the top earners on the football team pulling in five- and six- (and seven-, in Quinn Ewers' case) figure deals. While it is true that most of the money and participation is happening at the top of the pyramid, there's still plenty of action taking place within other programs at Ohio State.

One of those is the women's basketball team, where multiple student-athletes are involved with NIL deals and starting to branch out as the new world of college athletics takes shape. Sophomore forward Gabby Hutcherson has already participated in several NIL activities, including a deal with the local car dealership Ricart Automotive in which she appeared in a video on social media with sophomore guard Kateri Poole.

"We did a few funny, goofy skits," Hutcherson told BSB. "Then I went to a really cool jersey unveiling with the Columbus Crew last week which was fun. I was super excited to be there, and it was super thoughtful of them to include us. I have a really good team that I've been working with to help me get out there, and it's been fun thus far."

Since the opportunity for student-athletes to capitalize on their name, image and likeness went into effect last year, Hutcherson said she immediately went to work.

"When it had first come out that they were thinking about doing this, I was just

thinking, 'I'm from Columbus, I'm an Ohio girl, it's going to be something a little bit easier for me than the out-of-state girls or even Ohio girls that just aren't from Columbus.'"

She also cited her outgoing personality as an advantage in securing some of these deals, of which she said she has both reached out to businesses and had businesses reach out to her.

"With some of my social media platforms blowing up, it gave me a lot more people coming out and trying to reach out to me and the people that I've been working with," she said. "It's been an exciting process."

While the process has been fruitful for Hutcherson, it hasn't come as easy for many female student-athletes who are still finding their way in this new era of college athletics.

"I think that it's hard because we don't see a lot of women athletes or female athletes getting as many deals as we'd like to see," she said. "I think it puts a damper on everybody else. They just don't think they're going to get anything. Nobody just wants to do things for a few bucks here and there. They want to be serious about all this stuff. That's kind of like what I've been talking about with them is, 'Don't just do anything for a few dollars here and there. Understand your worth and what you can give to people.'"

"It's been hard because you have your select few across the country that are getting their bigger deals," she continued. "After seeing what we can do, especially with me and a few other girls on the team, what we've been doing, I think it's kind of pushing them to get more and more out there."

According to a presentation to The Ohio State University board of trustees from the legal, risk and compliance committee on Feb. 10 outlining NIL deals made by Ohio State student-athletes, the women's basketball team accounts for just 1.3 percent of the over 600 reported NIL activities at Ohio State.

Football is the expected leader at 27.4 percent, but women's basketball trails several other women's programs, including volleyball (8.6), swim and dive (4.5), gymnastics (4.1), rowing (3.7), lacrosse (3.0), cheer and dance (1.6) and tennis (1.5).

Hutcherson said she is advocating for her teammates as they try to secure deals of their own and that the women's program and athletic department have helped assist student-athletes with information about NIL.

"The athletic department as a whole has

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2021-22 Ohio State Women's Basketball Statistics

22-5 Overall (14-4 Big Ten)
Statistics through games of Feb. 27

Player	G-GS	Min.-Avg.	FG-FGA	Pct.	3P-3PA	Pct.	FT-FTA	Pct.	Rebounds		PF-FO	A	TO	BS	ST	Pts.-Avg.
									O-D	T-Avg.						
Jacy Sheldon	27-27	890-33.0	187-369	.507	37-94	.394	114-134	.851	28-70	98-3.6	55-0	109	77	6	49	525-19.4
Taylor Mikesell	27-27	904-33.5	187-381	.491	99-210	.471	42-46	.913	9-83	92-3.4	31-0	53	44	4	24	515-19.1
Rebeka Mikulasikova	27-27	549-20.3	110-235	.468	18-62	.290	32-40	.800	28-114	142-5.3	53-1	21	45	5	12	270-10.0
Tanaya Beacham	26-0	479-18.4	81-150	.540	2-8	.250	24-37	.649	40-72	112-4.3	77-1	20	36	7	21	188-7.2
Rikki Harris	27-14	685-25.4	67-168	.399	28-79	.354	33-63	.524	35-78	113-4.2	58-1	71	28	16	45	195-7.2
Braxtin Miller	26-26	780-30.0	51-148	.345	22-64	.344	45-62	.726	25-77	102-3.9	55-1	81	42	9	32	169-6.5
Kateri Poole	20-13	363-18.2	37-94	.394	15-43	.349	27-48	.563	8-47	55-2.8	40-1	57	53	2	22	116-5.8
Gabby Hutcherson	18-0	184-10.2	23-59	.390	9-30	.300	5-8	.625	5-36	41-2.3	10-0	6	9	12	4	60-3.3
Hevyne Bristow	11-1	97-8.8	11-30	.367	1-3	.333	12-16	.750	11-15	26-2.4	9-0	4	12	6	3	35-3.2
Taylor Thierry	25-0	370-14.8	31-53	.585	1-5	.200	13-23	.565	40-46	86-3.4	43-0	24	13	24	26	76-3.0
Anyssa Jones	8-0	40-4.9	2-8	.250	0-0	.000	1-2	.500	1-4	5-0.6	3-0	2	0	0	0	5-0.6
Kaitlyn Costner	11-0	59-5.4	3-11	.273	0-4	.000	0-0	.000	1-10	11-1.0	6-0	5	4	0	2	6-0.5
Team									35-67	102			5			
Total	27	5400	790-1706	.463	232-602	.385	348-479	.727	266-719	985-36.5	440-5	453	368	91	240	2160-80.0
Opponents	27	5400	655-1625	.403	153-511	.299	321-432	.743	300-709	1009-37.4	462-10	351	509	68	141	1784-66.1

done a good job of keeping us informed of what we need to do," she said. "This is like serious stuff, like how to deal with your taxes at the end of the year and having to make sure you're being compliant with everything and all the rules."

McGuff said the main role he and his staff fulfill regarding NIL is education and that it's been a great opportunity for student-athletes.

"I think it's awesome," he said. "I love it for our kids being in Columbus, this is a community that supports women's athletics. Our kids are starting to get some deals that are going to be beneficial to them, and I think it will only continue to grow."

While numbers are low right now for the women's team, McGuff said he expects them to rise as student-athletes become more familiar with the process.

"They're out there trying to get them," he said. "Like I said, a few of them work with different NIL managers that are helpful in this process. I think it's just scratching the surface, and I think it's going to continue to grow around here."

Beacham, Miller Honored On Senior Day

Ohio State took time before its matchup with Wisconsin on Feb. 20 to recognize its two outgoing seniors, honoring Beacham and guard Braxtin Miller with jersey presentations with family by their sides.

Miller is in her third season at Ohio State, where she transferred after two seasons at Oklahoma State. The Dayton native is averaging just 6.5 points per game but is playing over 30 minutes per contest and is the heart of the Buckeyes' defense this season.

Though she was expecting to be part of a three-headed monster with guards Greene and Jacy Sheldon this season, Greene's injury and the rise of senior guard Taylor Mikesell led to a quieter role for Miller, who has embraced her spot this year.

"My teammates mean so much to me," Miller said. "We've had such a great year. We've had so much fun. They stood by me at times, and I've been with them and they mean a lot. I could not have done any of this without them – super grateful."

Beacham is in her second season with the Buckeyes following four seasons at Toledo. This year, she's averaging 7.2 points and 4.3 rebounds per game, which is second on the team behind junior forward Rebeka Mikulasikova.

"I'm the happiest I've ever been in my college career right now," Beacham said. "To end it off at a place like that, I'm so happy. It's the best feeling ever."

McGuff said Beacham and Miller have been the "heart and soul" of the team over the last two seasons.

"They play hard every day. They compete. They play to win," he said. "They're great teammates, and they have meant an incredible amount to us."

One notable omission from the Senior Day festivities was Mikesell, who has a year of eligibility remaining if she chooses to take it. After the win over the Badgers, McGuff said Mikesell was undecided on a potential fifth year.

"We'll probably get to the end of the year and make sure we get to give her some information, some feedback that we can get from the WNBA for her to make a decision," he said.

McGuff Earns 100th Conference Win

With Ohio State's 61-57 win over Rutgers on Feb. 7, McGuff joined an elite group

of coaches, earning his 100th conference win as head coach of the Buckeyes. McGuff is the 14th head coach in Big Ten history to accomplish this feat and the third coach for Ohio State to join this group.

The 2021-22 season is McGuff's ninth with the Buckeyes, and it took him 148 conference games to reach the mark with a 100-48 record in Big Ten games (and 185-88 overall). McGuff was preceded by Ohio State coaches Nancy Darsch (1985-96) and Jim Foster (2002-12), who also reached 100 conference wins.

Darsch hit 100 wins in her eighth season as head coach, with a 100-35 conference record at the time of her accomplishment. The record-breaking game was a 99-58 win over Indiana on Feb. 12, 1993, to move the Buckeyes to 15-3 on the season with a 7-3 record in conference play.

She finished her career with a 134-76 clip in Big Ten play and a 234-125 overall record in 12 seasons to go along with four regular-season championships and a runner-up appearance in the Big Ten title game. Darsch's Ohio State teams made seven NCAA tournament appearances, including

a runner-up finish in the 1992-93 season in which they fell to Texas Tech, 84-82.

Foster reached 100 wins slightly faster, doing so in 123 games (also in his eighth season). His 100th conference win also came against the Hoosiers in an 81-64 victory on Jan. 17, 2010.

He finished his Ohio State career with a 136-46 mark in conference play and a 279-82 overall record. Foster's Buckeye teams made 10 consecutive NCAA tournament appearances from 2003-11, but he was fired after Ohio State missed the tournament in the 2012-13 season.

The Buckeyes have made the tournament four times in six tries under McGuff, not including the canceled 2020 tournament (in which they were projected to make the field) and 2021, in which Ohio State was under a self-imposed postseason ban due to NCAA violations surrounding former assistant coach Patrick Klein.

Mikesell Is February's Lady Buck Of The Month

The Buckeyes finished up February with a 6-1 record and a shared Big Ten regular-season championship, and Mikesell has earned the Plank's Lady Buck of the Month award for helping lead the team to a strong finish to the regular season.

In seven games in February, Mikesell averaged 18.9 points on 40.2 shooting and threw in 3.6 rebounds and 2.7 assists per game. She continued her dominant season from beyond the arc, knocking down 27 triples and shooting 44.3 percent from deep.

For the season, she's shooting 47.1 percent from three-point range, which is just shy of the current school record of 48.1 percent in a season previously set by Brittany Johnson in the 2009-10 season. If Mikesell continues at her current pace, she would surpass the Ohio State career three-point field-goal percentage record (minimum of 80 makes) of 45.8 percent, set by Cheryl Perozek from 1988-91.

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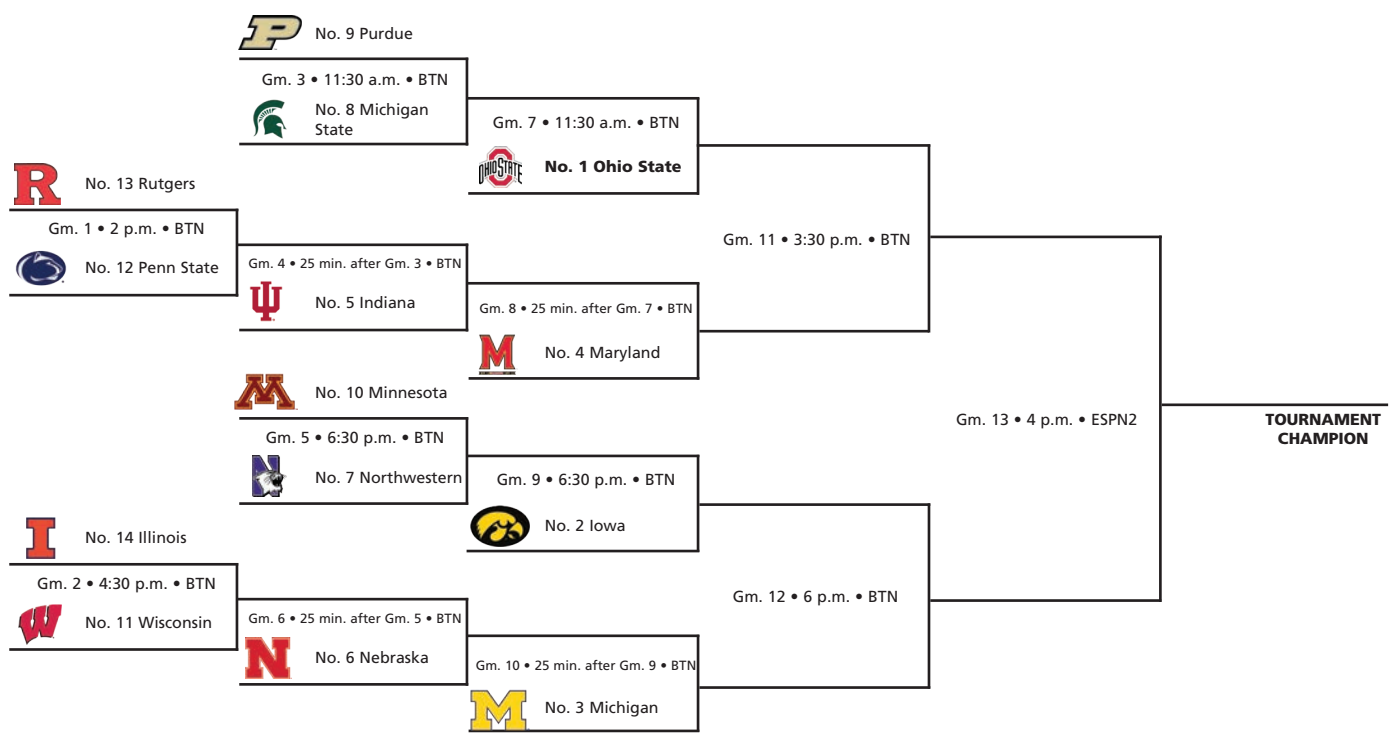
MARCH 3

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All Times ET



OSU's 6-1 Finish Leads To Big Ten Title

By **BRADEN MOLES**
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

Ohio State rode a 6-1 finish down the stretch to the program's first Big Ten regular-season championship since the 2017-18 season. While the Buckeyes needed some help down the stretch, requiring losses from some other schools on top of the standings, Ohio State did what it needed to do, finishing the regular season with a 22-5 record overall, and a 14-4 clip in conference play.

Since Buckeye Sports Bulletin last went to press, the Buckeyes won a pair of home contests against Rutgers and Nebraska, went on the road to defeat Illinois before falling to Maryland, and returned home in wins over Wisconsin and Penn State before finishing the season victoriously at Michigan State.

With Ohio State's win over the Spartans on the final day of the regular season and Michigan's loss to Iowa just hours later, the Buckeyes were named co-champions of the conference along with the Hawkeyes. Due to Ohio State's previous win over Iowa this season, the Buckeyes will be the No. 1 seed in Indianapolis for the Big Ten Women's Basketball Tournament.

OSU Survives Scare From Rutgers

After Ohio State's big win over Iowa on Jan. 31, the Buckeyes (17-4, 9-3) kept the momentum rolling with a 61-57 win over visiting Rutgers (7-17, 0-12) on Feb. 7 before 3,383 at Value City Arena.

Perhaps feeling slow after a pair of big games against Michigan and the Hawkeyes, the Buckeyes got off to a lumbering start, finding themselves down 8-7 early and eventually down 35-27 at the half to a Rutgers team that was winless at the time in conference play.

Despite the early deficit, Ohio State responded with a 13-0 run to open the second half and take a 40-35 lead, then maintained the lead for most of the contest – as well as survived a potential game-tying shot from Rutgers guard Victoria Morris in the game's final moments – in the team's 61-57 win.

“Not only me, but everybody sees us down, everybody is trying to make plays to try to bring us back up,” senior guard Braxtin Miller said. “That was a tough game. (Rutgers) is a tough team. They are super physical and a great team so it was just about us trying to make little plays that will change that negative difference, and that was my focus going into the second half.”

Ohio State was poor from the floor to begin the game, just 3 of 10 from the field as it fell behind just under five minutes into the game. The Buckeyes – or senior guard Taylor Mikesell, rather – responded with an 8-0 run, with the Oregon transfer knocking down two triples and connecting on a layup to give Ohio State a 15-8 lead with 2:24 remaining in the period.

Rutgers forward Osh Brown hit a free throw and a layup on the Scarlet Knights' final possessions of the quarter, but Ohio State sophomore guard Rikki Harris answered with a jumper to make it 17-11 at the end of the frame.

The Scarlet Knights opened the second quarter on an 8-2 run to tie things up at 19, and after trading three-pointers on four



SONNY BROCKWAY

GETTING COMFORTABLE - Freshman Taylor Thierry (right) has seen more minutes down the stretch, helping to knock off Nebraska with nine points, seven rebounds and three assists in one of her best games of the season.

straight possessions, Miller hit a layup to give Ohio State a 27-25 lead with 3:40 remaining, but Rutgers closed the second quarter out on a 10-0 run, forcing two turnovers by Ohio State and taking advantage of 0-of-4 shooting by the Buckeyes to lead by eight at the end of the half.

Ohio State shot just 23.5 percent from the field in the second frame (4 for 17) and was outscored 24-10. Mikesell, after 13 points in the first quarter, was held scoreless in the second.

Ohio State's 13-0 run to open the second half lasted for 6:50. During this time, Rutgers turnover the ball over seven times and was 0 for 6 from the field. Ohio State, meanwhile, was just 2 of 7 from the field during this run but made four trips to the free-throw line resulting in eight points, eventually ending the quarter up 46-45. Ohio State was a perfect 14 of 14 from the stripe for the game.

“We started playing defense (in the second half),” Ohio State coach Kevin McGuff said. “(Rutgers) was scoring too easily in the first half, which means we have to take the ball under the net and we can't get out in transition. We really turned up the defense, we got steals and defensive rebounds that allowed us to get in transition and get some things going.”

The Scarlet Knights made a push in the fourth quarter, at one point taking a 51-50 lead, but Ohio State was led through the turmoil by Mikesell and junior forward Jacy Sheldon, who combined for a 7-0 run to make it 57-51 with 3:37 remaining.

Rutgers then scored the next five points on a basket from Brown and a triple from guard Sayawni Lassiter to make it a one-point game, 57-56 with 44 seconds to play, forcing McGuff to call a timeout.

Out of the timeout, Rutgers began fouling Ohio State, and Mikesell and Sheldon were able to close things out at the free-throw line with two makes each to seal the win as Morris' potential game-tying three-pointer fell

short with just seconds to go.

Mikesell led the Buckeyes with 26 points on 9-of-17 shooting (6 of 11 from three-point range) in one of their lowest scoring outputs of the season. Sheldon finished with just nine points, but she had a team-high five as-

Ohio State 61, Rutgers 57							
Feb. 7, 2022 Value City Arena • Columbus, Ohio							
		1	2	3	4	F	
Rutgers (7-17, 0-12)		11	24	10	12	57	
Ohio State (17-4, 9-3)		17	10	19	15	61	
Rutgers	Total	FT	Reb.				
	Min	M-A	M-A	O-D	A	PF	Pts.
Singleton	29	0-3	1-2	3-8	0	4	1
Brown	37	5-13	1-2	4-5	2	1	11
Petree	16	3-4	1-2	0-2	1	1	8
Mason	22	0-2	0-0	0-1	2	2	0
Lassiter	32	5-13	0-0	1-6	3	5	15
Dickson	7	0-1	0-0	0-1	1	1	0
Sidibe	22	3-7	2-2	0-4	0	1	8
Morris	21	6-9	2-2	0-3	1	2	14
Cornwell	4	0-0	0-0	0-0	0	0	0
Lafayette	5	0-0	0-0	0-1	0	0	0
Guihon	4	0-1	0-0	0-1	0	0	0
Totals	200	22-53	7-10	10-33	10	17	57
Percentages: FG: 41.5%. FT: 70.0%. Three-point field goals: 6-14 (Lassiter 5-8, Petree 1-1, Mason 0-1, Morris 0-2, Sidibe 0-2). Team rebounds: 3. Blocked shots: 3 (Singleton 2, Brown). Turnovers: 20 (Lassiter 5, Singleton 4, Brown 2, Mason 2, Petree 2, Sidibe 2, Lafayette, Morris, Team). Steals: 3 (Lafayette, Lassiter, Sidibe).							
Ohio State	Total	FT	Reb.				
	Min	M-A	M-A	O-D	A	PF	Pts.
Mikulasikova	25	1-6	2-2	1-4	0	2	4
Harris	36	3-14	2-2	1-2	1	1	8
Sheldon	35	2-8	4-4	2-6	5	2	9
Miller	38	3-10	4-4	0-0	3	1	12
Mikesell	40	9-17	2-2	0-3	3	2	26
Thierry	10	0-1	0-0	0-2	2	1	0
Beacham	12	1-2	0-0	1-1	0	2	2
Poole	3	0-1	0-0	0-2	0	0	0
Totals	200	19-59	14-14	7-21	14	11	61
Percentages: FG: 32.2%. FT: 100.0%. Three-point field goals: 9-27 (Mikesell 6-11, Miller 2-4, Sheldon 1-3, Harris 0-6, Mikulasikova 0-3). Team rebounds: 3. Blocked shots: 1 (Miller). Turnovers: 9 (Sheldon 4, Beacham 2, Mikesell, Mikulasikova, Poole). Steals: 6 (Harris 2, Mikesell 2, Mikulasikova, Miller).							
Officials: Cruse, Garland, Hall. Attendance: 3,383.							

sists and eight rebounds, while Miller had 12 points, her third most this season.

Lassiter led the Knights with 15 points, while Morris added 14.

Bucks Stifle Huskers' In Win

Nebraska brought one of the nation's highest-scoring offenses into Value City Arena on Feb. 10, giving Ohio State (18-4, 10-3) everything it had in the Buckeyes' 80-70 win.

Even when Nebraska (17-6, 6-6) looked to be taking control, it was Mikesell who helped steady the Buckeyes, providing points at pivotal moments throughout the contest and helping Ohio State fight off an early deficit before a home crowd of 3,135.

The Buckeyes found themselves down early, 7-5, just over three minutes into the game, but Mikesell knocked down triples on consecutive possessions to give the Buckeyes an 11-7 lead.

She finished the game 5 of 8 from beyond the arc and ranked first in the country in three-point shooting percentage at 49.7 percent on 8.0 attempts per game.

After the Buckeyes regained the lead, the Cornhuskers closed the first quarter on a 15-8 run, taking advantage of 9-of-13 shooting after hitting just one of their first five tries, as well as a 13-4 rebounding advantage to lead 22-19 at the end of the first frame.

“Our defense wasn't very good in the first quarter, and we weren't getting loose balls or tough rebounds at all,” McGuff said. “They were getting all of those in the first quarter.

Ohio State 80, Nebraska 70							
Feb. 10, 2022 Value City Arena • Columbus, Ohio							
		1	2	3	4	F	
Nebraska (17-6, 6-6)		22	9	15	24	70	
Ohio State (18-4, 10-3)		19	17	23	21	80	
Nebraska	Total	FT	Reb.				
	Min	M-A	M-A	O-D	A	PF	Pts.
Bourne	31	5-12	0-0	3-3	0	1	12
Markowski	24	9-17	5-5	8-7	1	4	23
Scoggin	28	2-9	0-0	1-4	2	3	5
Shelley	35	3-12	7-8	2-1	5	2	14
Haiby	21	0-6	2-2	1-2	3	2	2
Weidner	21	3-7	0-0	2-1	1	3	8
Porter	9	0-4	0-0	1-3	1	0	0
Cravens	18	2-6	0-0	0-3	0	1	4
Coley	7	0-0	0-0	0-0	0	2	0
Moriarty	5	1-1	0-0	0-1	0	1	2
Brown	1	0-0	0-0	0-0	0	0	0
Totals	200	25-74	14-15	21-27	13	19	70
Percentages: FG: 33.8%. FT: 93.3%. Three-point field goals: 6-23 (Bourne 2-4, Weidner 2-2, Scoggin 1-6, Shelley 1-5, Haiby 0-2, Markowski 0-1, Porter 0-3). Team rebounds: 5. Blocked shots: 4 (Porter 3, Shelley). Turnovers: 16 (Haiby 3, Markowski 3, Shelley 3, Cravens 2, Bourne, Moriarty, Porter, Scoggin, Weidner). Steals: 2 (Bourne, Shelley).							
Ohio State	Total	FT	Reb.				
	Min	M-A	M-A	O-D	A	PF	Pts.
Mikulasikova	28	6-16	0-0	0-7	1	2	15
Harris	27	2-2	3-6	0-3	4	2	7
Sheldon	31	4-9	6-6	0-3	4	4	14
Miller	37	1-5	5-6	0-3	4	1	8
Mikesell	38	7-13	2-2	0-3	1	1	21
Beacham	12	2-3	2-2	0-3	0	4	6
Thierry	27	4-8	1-1	3-4	3	2	9
Totals	200	26-56	19-23	6-28	17	16	80
Percentages: FG: 46.4%. FT: 82.6%. Three-point field goals: 9-21 (Mikesell 5-8, Mikulasikova 3-7, Miller 1-2, Sheldon 0-3, Thierry 0-1). Team rebounds: 5. Blocked shots: 5 (Thierry 3, Harris, Miller). Turnovers: 13 (Sheldon 3, Beacham 2, Mikesell 2, Mikulasikova 2, Miller 2, Harris, Thierry). Steals: 6 (Miller 2, Thierry 2, Beacham, Mikesell).							
Officials: Cross, Grinter, McConnell. Attendance: 3,135.							

We did a much better job the next three quarters of tracking down some of those 50/50 balls.”

Nebraska further increased its lead in the second quarter, taking an eight-point lead at two different junctures. After taking a 29-21 lead with 6:54 remaining, the Cornhuskers were held without a make from the field the rest of the quarter, and Ohio State eventually retook the lead on a pair of free throws from Mikesell, 32-31, with 2:03 left before the intermission.

The Buckeyes saw an important boost during this run from freshman forward Taylor Thierry, who had seen increased minutes in recent games. During the stretch, Thierry pulled down three rebounds and dished out two assists in addition to scoring her own basket and tallying a steal.

“I’m making sure I’m playing my role, whether that’s getting steals, getting blocks or playing really good defense,” Thierry said. “As long as I’m playing my role, getting stops on defense especially, then I know that we will succeed as a team and get our pace going so we can succeed offensively.”

Beyond the contributions of Mikesell and Thierry in the second quarter, junior forward Rebeka Mikulasikova continued terrorizing from beyond the arc, knocking down both of her three-point attempts in the second frame. In her last three games (including against Nebraska), Mikulasikova was 8 of 16 from beyond the arc, including a blistering 5 of 6 clip from deep against Iowa on Jan. 31.

The Buckeyes forced three turnovers and three missed shots on Nebraska’s final pos-

sessions of the half to lead 36-31 going into the break.

The Cornhuskers stuck around early in the third and trailed 40-36 with 7:44 left in the frame, but the rock once again went to Mikesell, who knocked down three-pointers on consecutive possessions (sandwiched around a triple from Nebraska) to give the Buckeyes a 46-39 lead. She later hit a jumper with 5:04 remaining to give Ohio State a 50-41 lead, its largest of the game to that point.

The Buckeyes then scored just once from the field over the next 3:30 on a bucket by Thierry (they did convert a free throw as well), but despite that, they still took a 59-46 lead into the fourth after late triples from Miller and Mikesell. The fourth saw Ohio State continue to clamp down, as the Cornhuskers never got the deficit to fewer than eight points and the Buckeyes led by as many as 16 in the final 10 minutes.

“I think our confidence is building, especially in practice,” Thierry said. “We are working on what we need to do so we’re not making the same mistakes. We want to work on being consistent so when we do play these teams that maybe (are not) ranked but they are still good in our conference, we’re probably going to have to beat them when we play in the Big Ten tournament.”

Mikesell led the Buckeyes with 21 points on 7-of-13 shooting, and Mikulasikova (15) and Sheldon (14) were also in double figures. Harris, Miller and Sheldon each had four assists. Thierry finished with nine points, seven rebounds, three assists, three blocks, two steals and only one turnover.

Nebraska center Alexis Markowski led the Cornhuskers with 23 points on 9-of-17 shooting.

The Buckeyes shot 46.4 percent from the field (26 of 56) while holding Nebraska to just 33.8 percent (25 of 74), including 6 of 23 (26.1 percent) from beyond the arc.

Visiting OSU Dominates Illini

Ohio State (19-4, 11-3) powered its way to a fourth consecutive win, going on the road to dominate Illinois (6-15, 1-9), 86-67, on Feb. 14 in front of 997 at the State Farm Center.

The 18th-ranked Buckeyes played close with the Fighting Illini through the opening minutes, knotted up at 11 with 4:16 remaining in the first quarter. Illinois guard Aaliyah Nye accounted for all of her team’s points to open the contest.

Ohio State missed its first four shots of the game but got on the board with a bucket from Mikesell and a triple from Harris.

After the Illini tied the game at 11, the Buckeyes took off on a 16-4 run to close the quarter. The run started with a jumper from Sheldon, and following a steal from Thierry, Sheldon scored again for the second time in just 10 seconds. Harris capped the run with a buzzer-beating three-pointer to give Ohio State a 27-15 lead at the end of the first.

“Shots were just falling,” Harris said. “The last couple of games I hadn’t really been hitting from the corner, so I knew one had to come eventually. I guess it was tonight.”

Ohio State outrebounded Illinois in the first 12-6, but the Fighting Illini responded with a strong effort on the boards, winning the battle 12-9 in the second frame as they attempted to stay in the contest.

Illinois shot slightly better in the second quarter than Ohio State, 6 of 14 from the field compared to just 5 of 15 for the Buckeyes, but Ohio State still led 42-30 heading into the locker room after five second-quarter points from Mikulasikova.

Ohio State was effective defensively in the first half, forcing 13 turnovers and turning those into 15 points, and the press worked to perfection early in the third as the Buckeyes increased their lead.

In just 2:20 of play to begin the second half, Ohio State stole the ball five times, four of which resulted in scores for the Buckeyes as Illinois had no answer for Ohio State’s swarming defenders. OSU scored the first 21 points of the half to lead 63-30, and Harris was one of the main benefactors of Illinois’ slippery ball-handling, knocking down two triples – including one that banked in after she faded away into the left corner – as she finished with a career-high 17 points.

“She’s supreme,” McGuff said. “She does a lot of things. She’s a really tough, scrappy defender. She dives on the floor to get loose balls and gets tough rebounds. And offensively, what I like about her is she very rarely ever forces anything. She kind of lets the game come to her on that end of the floor.”

The Fighting Illini finally broke through with a three-pointer at the 4:53 mark, but the game was well in hand by that point. In total, Ohio State outscored Illinois 33-13 in the third quarter, forcing nine turnovers and scoring 15 points off the miscues. The Buckeyes finished with a season-high 19 steals.

“I thought in stretches we were as good as we’ve been in a while, especially the third quarter,” McGuff said. “And it was nice to see Rikki really step up quite well on the offensive end. Taylor and Jacy are garnering so much attention, it’s great to see other people step up because they’re capable. When that happens, it gives us a little more space and puts a lot more pressure on the defense to have to guard us in different ways.”

The Buckeyes understandably slowed

things down in the fourth as Illinois outscored them 24-11, but it was no matter. It was the second-highest margin of victory in a Big Ten contest this season for the Buckeyes, just shy of their 21-point win over Illinois, 90-69, on Jan. 6.

Sheldon finished as Ohio State’s leading scorer, dropping 22 points on 9-14 shooting, and added a team-high seven assists. Mikulasikova and Mikesell joined Sheldon and Harris in double figures with 14 and 13 respectively. Harris, Sheldon and Miller led the steal barrage with four each. Nye led all scorers with 25.

The Buckeyes finished shooting 49.3 percent (33 of 67) from the field while holding Illinois to just 40.0 percent (26 of 65).

Win Streak Ends At Maryland

Ohio State (19-5, 11-4) was outscored 25-15 in the pivotal third quarter of its 77-72 loss on the road to No. 13 Maryland (20-6, 12-3) on Feb. 17.

The teams battled early in this contest, with Ohio State requiring a triple from Mikulasikova to tie things up at nine with 4:56 remaining in the opening frame. The Buckeyes then took a 13-9 lead on back-to-back scores from Mikesell, who finished the first quarter with eight points, and led 19-12 lead at the end of the first, with six points coming off six turnovers by the Terps.

Ohio State increased its lead to 10 early in the second quarter, 24-14, on a Harris three-pointer, but Maryland forward Chloe Bibby connected on a triple, and forward Mimi Collins scored two possessions later to cut the deficit to 24-19.

The Buckeyes would not be held at bay, however, as Sheldon and Mikesell would knock down three-pointers on consecutive possessions to push the lead back to 11, 30-19 at 6:01 before the break. Bibby hit a triple to make it 32-24, but Mikesell again responded from deep to keep the gap at 11 points, 35-24 with 4:46 to go.

Ohio State later led 39-30 after a layup from Sheldon, but Maryland scored the final four points of the half to make it a five-point game, 39-34, heading into the locker room.

Early in the third, McGuff was forced to call a timeout after Maryland began the half on a 6-0 run to take the lead for the first time since midway through the first quarter. Out of the timeout, the Big Ten heavyweights went blow-for-blow, and the Buckeyes led 50-49 with 5:37 remaining in the period.

Things began to unravel for Ohio State, however, as Maryland took off on a 10-0 run, due in part to a technical foul called on McGuff after he argued with the officials concerning a foul called on Mikesell and a no-call on contact against Sheldon.

After four successful free throws by Maryland following McGuff’s technical on top of a personal foul by Mikulasikova, and another free throw by Diamond Miller, Tanaya Beacham broke the streak with a layup, and after a turnover by the Terps, Sheldon hit a layup to make it 59-54, the eventual score heading into the fourth.

Ohio State continued getting in its own way in the fourth, turning the ball over twice in the first two minutes, and Sheldon picked up her fourth foul with 8:06 remaining. After Sheldon’s departure, Maryland increased its

Continued On Page 34

Ohio State 86, Illinois 67							
Feb. 14, 2022 State Farm Center • Champaign, Illinois							
	1	2	3	4	F		
Ohio State (19-4, 11-3)	27	15	33	11	86		
Illinois (6-15, 1-9)	15	15	13	24	67		
Ohio State	Total	FT	Reb.				
	Min	M-A	M-A	O-D	A	PF	Pts.
Mikulasikova	20	5-12	2-2	1-4	1	2	14
Harris	24	6-10	0-0	2-1	3	1	17
Sheldon	33	9-14	4-5	0-3	7	0	22
Miller	22	1-2	2-2	2-3	1	3	5
Mikesell	28	6-13	0-0	0-2	5	0	13
Thierry	21	1-2	0-0	0-3	0	2	2
Beacham	20	4-7	0-3	2-4	2	4	8
Poole	16	0-3	2-2	0-2	2	2	2
Hutcherson	12	0-2	1-2	0-6	0	0	1
Bristow	3	1-2	0-0	1-0	0	0	2
Totals	200	33-67	11-16	9-31	21	14	86
Percentages: FG: 49.3%. FT: 68.8%. Three-point field goals: 9-23 (Harris 5-7, Mikulasikova 2-7, Mikesell 1-3, Miller 1-2, Hutcherson 0-1, Poole 0-2, Sheldon 0-1). Team rebounds: 4. Blocked shots: 1 (Sheldon). Turnovers: 17 (Miller 5, Beacham 4, Harris 2, Sheldon 2, Bristow, Hutcherson, Poole, Thierry). Steals: 19 (Harris 4, Miller 4, Sheldon 4, Mikulasikova 2, Thierry 2, Beacham, Mikesell, Poole).							
Illinois	Total	FT	Reb.				
	Min	M-A	M-A	O-D	A	PF	Pts.
Bostic	30	6-8	0-0	5-11	3	2	12
Rubin	13	0-4	1-2	1-0	0	2	1
Oden	21	0-3	2-2	0-0	4	0	2
McKenzie	28	5-13	1-3	2-3	2	2	11
Nye	29	9-17	2-4	0-0	1	2	25
Brown	19	0-7	0-0	1-2	2	1	0
Lopes	16	1-1	2-2	1-4	0	1	4
Anastasieska	15	3-4	0-0	0-3	3	2	6
Peebles	23	2-7	0-0	0-3	2	0	6
Amusan	1	0-1	0-0	0-0	0	1	0
Porter	5	0-0	0-0	0-0	0	1	0
Totals	200	26-65	8-13	11-28	17	14	67
Percentages: FG: 40.0%. FT: 61.5%. Three-point field goals: 7-18 (Nye 5-12, Peebles 2-2, Amusan 0-1, Anastasieska 0-1, Brown 0-1, Oden 0-1). Team rebounds: 3. Blocked shots: 1 (Lopes). Turnovers: 24 (Bostic 5, Anastasieska 4, McKenzie 4, Nye 3, Peebles 3, Oden 2, Brown, Rubin, Team). Steals: 5 (Bostic, McKenzie, Nye, Oden, Peebles).							
Officials: Garland, Goode, Suffren. Attendance: 997.							

Maryland 77, Ohio State 72							
Feb. 17, 2022							
XFINITY Center • College Park, Md.							
	1	2	3	4	F		
Ohio State (19-5, 11-4)	19	20	15	18	72		
Maryland (20-6, 12-3)	12	22	25	18	77		
Ohio State	Total	FT	Reb.				
	Min	M-A	M-A	O-D	A	PF	Pts.
Mikulasikova	15	2-4	0-0	0-0	1	3	5
Harris	32	3-10	2-2	1-4	4	1	9
Sheldon	38	7-18	5-6	0-5	2	4	22
Miller	35	2-9	0-0	1-4	5	0	5
Mikesell	39	12-16	0-0	0-2	1	1	29
Thierry	16	0-2	0-0	2-2	0	2	0
Beacham	25	1-7	0-0	2-3	2	3	2
Totals	200	27-66	7-8	8-22	15	15	72
Percentages: FG: 40.9% FT: 87.5%. Three-point field goals: 11-25 (Mikesell 5-7, Sheldon 3-7, Harris 1-5, Mikulasikova 1-2, Miller 1-3, Beacham 0-1). Team rebounds: 4. Blocked shots: 6 (Miller 2, Thierry 2, Beacham, Sheldon). Turnovers: 11 (Sheldon 4, Mikesell 2, Miller 2, Thierry 2, Harris). Steals: 9 (Beacham 2, Miller 2, Sheldon 2, Harris, Mikulasikova, Thierry). Technical Fouls: 1 (McGuff).							
Maryland	Total	FT	Reb.				
	Min	M-A	M-A	O-D	A	PF	Pts.
Collins	19	4-6	4-4	1-3	1	0	12
Bibby	37	3-9	0-0	1-3	4	0	9
Sellers	37	2-3	0-0	0-5	3	3	4
Miller	38	7-22	4-5	1-5	2	1	18
Benzan	40	3-6	2-2	0-6	4	3	11
Kozlova	3	1-1	0-0	0-0	0	0	2
Reese	26	6-14	9-10	6-9	1	3	21
Totals	200	26-61	19-21	13-31	15	10	77
Percentages: FG: 42.6%. FT: 90.5%. Three-point field goals: 6-17 (Benzan 3-4, Bibbh 3-7, Miller 0-5, Sellers 0-1). Team rebounds: 4. Blocked shots: 6 (Miller 2, Reese 2, Sellers 2). Turnovers: 17 (Miller 5, Sellers 4, Benzan 3, Bibby 2, Reese 2, Team). Steals: 6 (Sellers 4, Benzan, Miller).							
Officials: Cross, Cruse, Tobin. Attendance: 4,987.							

Buckeyes Rebound From Loss, Close Strong

Continued From Page 33

lead to 67-57 with 7:32 remaining.

Trailing 69-61, Mikesell then knocked down her fifth triple of the night with 5:31 remaining to make it 69-64, but Maryland responded with a 6-0 run to nearly ice the game, taking a 75-64 lead with 3:08 to play. Ohio State cut the deficit to as few as five points at the end of the game but was unable to complete the comeback.

"I think our effort, intensity and will to win was there," McGuff said. "We fought and we played really hard. We didn't play quite good enough to win, but it was certainly a great measuring stick down the stretch here against one of the best teams in the country. I liked our fight and our spirit. We just have to be a little bit better."

Mikesell and Sheldon led the Buckeyes with 29 points and 22 points respectively. Forward Angel Reese led the Terps with 21 points and 15 rebounds, helping Maryland to a sizeable 44-30 margin on the boards.

The Terps were also 19 of 21 at the line (90.5 percent), while Ohio State went to the stripe only eight times, making seven (87.5 percent) in a game played before 4,987 in Maryland's XFINITY Center.

Bucks Hold Badgers To Season Low

Ohio State (20-5, 12-4) took care of business on Feb. 20, taking down the visiting Wisconsin Badgers (7-19, 4-12) in front of 5,683

on Senior Day, 59-42, at Value City Arena.

Sheldon dominated early, scoring six of Ohio State's first 10 points to lead and eventually finishing with 10 of the Buckeyes' 16 first-quarter points on 5-of-7 shooting. Ohio State collected six points off five forced turnovers in the first frame.

"When we're not making our shots or our offense isn't coming together on that end, getting some turnovers and some defensive stops in the press is big for us," Miller said. "Just something to get us going."

The Buckeyes appeared primed for a big lead at the end of the first, leading 16-9 with 1:10 to go on a Sheldon bucket, but the Badgers knocked down two triples in just eight seconds after turnovers by Sheldon and Beacham, and instead OSU led just 16-15.

The short-lived Badger rebellion did not last, however, as the Buckeyes opened the second quarter on a 9-0 run that lasted over four minutes to take a 25-15 lead, the highlight of which was a feed inside from Mikesell to Sheldon in which she scored despite a foul. Sheldon converted the free throw to make it 23-15, and Miller capped the run with a bucket at the 6:32 mark.

Ohio State continued making things difficult for Wisconsin on the offensive end, holding the Badgers to just seven points for the remainder of the quarter. After a miss from Mikesell with just 10 seconds remaining in the half, Harris intercepted Wisconsin forward Tara Stauffacher's pass down the court,

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Ohio State 59, Wisconsin 42							
Feb. 20, 2022 Value City Arena • Columbus, Ohio							
		1	2	3	4	F	
Wisconsin (7-19, 4-12)		15	7	7	13	42	
Ohio State (20-5, 12-4)		16	16	19	8	59	
Wisconsin	Total	FT	Reb.				
	Min	M-A	O-D	A	PF	Pts.	
Nelson	40	4-10	0-0	0-2	4	1	10
Schrame	32	3-13	1-4	0-6	3	5	7
Pospisilova	39	4-11	1-1	1-7	2	2	11
Douglass	33	1-5	1-2	2-2	1	2	3
Ellen	37	3-11	3-4	3-3	0	3	11
Stauffacher	11	0-0	0-0	0-3	0	1	0
Leuzinger	5	0-0	0-0	0-0	0	1	0
Stapleton	4	0-0	0-0	0-1	0	0	0
Totals	200	15-50	6-11	6-27	10	15	42
Percentages: FG: 30.0%. FT: 54.5%. Three-point field goals: 6-17 (Ellew 2-4, Nelson 2-4, Pospisilova 2-4, Douglass 0-4, Schramek 0-4). Team rebounds: 3. Blocked shots: 0. Turnovers: 18 (Douglass 5, Nelson 3, Pospisilova 3, Ellw 2, Stauffacher 2, Leuzinger, Schramek, Team). Steals: 3 (Leuzinger, Nelson, Pospisilova).							
Ohio State	Total	FT	Reb.				
	Min	M-A	O-D	A	PF	Pts.	
Mikulasikova	17	5-9	2-2	1-1	1	1	12
Harris	27	1-5	2-2	1-6	3	3	5
Sheldon	28	9-13	1-1	2-1	4	2	19
Miller	30	1-3	1-2	1-6	2	2	3
Mikesell	27	3-12	0-0	0-4	3	1	7
Thierry	17	0-0	0-0	0-3	1	1	0
Beacham	23	5-9	0-2	0-7	0	4	10
Poole	13	0-2	0-0	1-0	1	2	0
Hutcherson	6	0-1	0-0	0-1	0	1	0
Bristow	6	1-3	1-2	0-3	0	0	3
Jones	2	0-1	0-0	0-0	0	0	0
Costner	2	0-0	0-0	0-0	0	0	0
Totals	200	25-58	7-11	7-33	15	17	59
Percentages: FG: 43.1%. FT: 63.6%. Three-point field goals: 2-12 (Harris 1-1, Mikesell 1-10, Miller 0-1). Team rebounds: 2. Blocked shots: 1 (Harris). Turnovers: 11 (Beacham 3, Miller 2, Thierry 2, Bristow, Harris, Hutcherson, Mikulasikova). Steals: 7 (Sheldon 3, Miller 2, Harris, Mikesell). Officials: Enterline, Maxey, Thompson. Attendance: 5,683.							

and Beacham scored at the buzzer to give the Buckeyes a 32-22 lead at the intermission.

The lead for Ohio State came in spite of its three-point shooting, hitting 1 of 8 tries in the first half. Mikesell took seven of those shots, connecting on just one, while the Badgers were 3 of 9 from deep. Ohio State finished just 2 of 12 from beyond the arc (16.7 percent), by far its worst performance of the season from range.

The Buckeyes, even without the deep threat, continued dominating in the third quarter, beginning the frame on a 14-0 run to lead 46-22 with 5:49 remaining. Ohio State was 7 of 9 from the field during that run, forcing five turnovers by the Badgers.

Ohio State scored just five points in the final five minutes of the frame but also held Wisconsin to just seven total points for the second quarter in a row to lead 51-29 heading into the fourth.

The Buckeyes added just eight points in the fourth, but the Badgers could muster just 13 to fall by 17 points.

Sheldon (19), Mikulasikova (12) and Beacham (10) all hit double figures. Beacham, Harris and Miller all had seven rebounds to lead the Buckeyes, who had a 40-33 rebounding edge. Julie Pospisilova and Krystyna Elllew led Wisconsin with 11 points each.

This was one of Ohio State's stronger defensive performances of the season, holding the Badgers to just 30.0 percent from the field, 42 points (a season low) and the two seven-point quarters. The 42 points allowed by Ohio State was its fewest since an 89-38 win

Ohio State 78, Penn State 55							
Feb. 24, 2022 Value City Arena • Columbus, Ohio							
		1	2	3	4	F	
Penn State (11-16, 5-12)	13	9	14	19	55		
Ohio State (21-5, 13-4)	18	16	17	27	78		
Penn State	Total	FT	Reb.				
	Min	M-A	M-A	O-D	A	PF	Pts.
Camden	20	1-6	2-2	1-2	0	4	4
Beverley	36	5-9	1-2	0-3	2	1	12
Kapinus	28	4-10	2-4	1-11	3	2	10
Marisa	30	3-18	4-4	2-2	1	2	10
Jekot	28	1-5	0-0	0-4	0	0	3
Hagans	26	2-4	3-4	0-2	2	0	7
Brigham	10	1-2	1-2	2-2	1	3	3
Burke	16	1-6	0-0	0-2	0	2	3
Thomas	3	0-0	0-0	0-1	0	0	0
Sabel	2	1-2	0-0	1-0	0	0	3
Totals	200	19-62	13-18	11-31	9	14	55
Percentages: FG: 30.6% FT: 72.2%. Three-point field goals: 4-22 (Beverley 1-3, Burke 1-5, Jekot 1-5, Sabel 1-2, Camden 0-3, Marisa 0-4). Team rebounds: 6. Blocked shots: 5 (Brigham 3, Camden, Kapinus). Turnovers: 20 (Marisa 6, Burke 3, Kapinus 3, Team 3, Hagans 2, Brigham, Camden, Sabel). Steals: 7 (Kapinus 2, Burke, Camden, Hagans, Ekot, Marisa).							
Ohio State	Total	FT	Reb.				
	Min	M-A	M-A	O-D	A	PF	Pts.
Mikulasikova	16	4-10	0-1	1-4	2	2	8
Harris	27	3-11	0-1	3-6	1	2	6
Sheldon	30	3-9	2-2	1-1	2	0	8
Miller	25	1-8	2-2	0-4	6	1	5
Mikesell	34	8-18	0-0	0-7	3	1	19
Thierry	20	3-4	1-2	4-2	1	3	7
Beacham	24	7-10	4-5	3-2	1	2	18
Poole	16	2-2	0-0	1-1	3	2	5
Hutcherson	4	1-4	0-0	1-1	2	0	2
Costner	2	0-0	0-0	0-1	0	0	0
Bristow	2	0-0	0-0	0-0	1	1	0
Totals	200	32-76	9-13	16-32	22	14	78
Percentages: FG: 42.1%. FT: 69.2%. Three-point field goals: 5-25 (Mikesell 3-8, Miller 1-6, Poole 1-1, Harris 0-3, Hutcherson 0-2, Mikulasikova 0-4, Sheldon 0-1). Team rebounds: 5. Blocked shots: 7 (Thierry 6, Beacham). Turnovers: 14 (Sheldon 3, Harris 2, Mikulasikova 2, Poole 2, Beacham, Hutcherson, Mikesell, Miller, Thierry). Steals: 6 (Harris, Mikesell, Miller, Poole, Sheldon, Thierry). Officials: Broderick, Cross, McConnell. Attendance: 3,618.							

over Valparaiso Nov. 10, 2019.

"Jacy was really good today," McGuff said. "We had some good moments today, but we didn't sustain our best moments for long enough."

Strong Defensive Run Continues Against PSU

No. 17 Ohio State (21-5, 13-4) warded off high-scoring Penn State (11-16, 5-12) on Feb. 24, 78-55, securing a double-bye in the Big Ten tournament as 3,618 looked on at Value City Arena.

Penn State took an early 5-0 lead after scores on its first two possessions, but guard Kelly Jekot's three-pointer just 51 seconds into the game would be the Nittany Lions' only score for over seven minutes. When Makenna Marisa finally scored on a layup with just 1:59 remaining in the quarter, Ohio State was left with a 14-7 lead.

During that run, the Buckeyes forced six turnovers (20 for the game) as Penn State missed 12 consecutive shots. On the offensive end, Ohio State's 14 points came from Mikesell, Mikulasikova and Thierry (four points each), as well as a pair of free throws from Sheldon.

The Nittany Lions shook off the scoring drought, however, scoring six points in the final 1:22 to trail 18-13 at the end of the first quarter.

While Penn State had troubles on the offensive end in the first frame, it was Ohio

Ohio State 61, Michigan State 55

Feb. 27, 2022

Breslin Events Center • East Lansing, Mich.

	1	2	3	4	F
Ohio State (22-5, 14-4)	22	10	12	17	61
Michigan State (14-14, 8-9)	15	14	12	14	55

Ohio State	Total		FT	Reb.			
	Min	M-A	M-A	O-D	A	PF	Pts.
Mikulasikova	13	2-6	0-0	1-1	1	3	4
Harris	19	1-5	0-0	1-3	1	1	3
Sheldon	40	4-15	5-9	2-1	10	3	13
Miller	31	1-4	0-0	0-6	0	5	2
Mikesell	37	7-18	1-2	0-4	3	3	17
Thierry	24	2-2	3-3	4-7	0	2	7
Beacham	27	3-10	1-2	2-4	0	3	7
Poole	8	2-3	2-2	0-2	1	1	8
Totals	200	22-63	12-18	10-28	16	21	61

Percentages: FG: 34.9% FT: 66.7% **Three-point field goals:** 5-18 (Mikesell 2-7, Poole 2-3, Harris 1-3, Miller 0-2, Sheldon 0-3). **Team rebounds:** 0. **Blocked shots:** 4 (Sheldon 2, Harris, Mikesell). **Turnovers:** 9 (Sheldon 3, Miller 2, Thierry 2, Harris, Mikulasikova). **Steals:** 9 (Thierry 6, Beacham 2, Poole).

Mich. State	Total		FT	Reb.			
	Min	M-A	M-A	O-D	A	PF	Pts.
Smith	18	0-3	3-4	1-1	0	1	3
Hagemann	31	1-6	3-4	1-5	1	5	6
Farquhar	37	4-6	2-2	10-12	4	3	10
Jacqmain	3	0-0	0-0	0-0	0	0	0
Clouden	39	4-21	10-10	1-4	2	3	19
Ekh	31	1-14	0-1	0-2	3	2	2
Parks	24	6-10	3-5	8-5	0	3	15
James	12	0-2	0-2	2-3	0	2	0
Alexander	4	0-2	0-0	0-1	0	0	0
Totals	200	16-64	21-28	24-36	10	19	55

Percentages: FG: 25.0% FT: 75.0% **Three-point field goals:** 2-15 (Clouden 1-4, Hagemann 1-2, Ekh 0-9). **Team rebounds:** 4. **Blocked shots:** 4 (Farquhar, Hagemann, Parks, Smith). **Turnovers:** 15 (Hagemann 5, Team 3, Ekh 2, Farquhar 2, Alexander, Clouden, James). **Steals:** 5 (Hagemann 4, Clouden). **Officials:** Berger, Enlund, Hallead. **Attendance:** 7,124.

State that couldn't buy a basket to begin the second. The Buckeyes were held scoreless for over four minutes to begin the quarter (and even then, OSU scored on a pair of Miller free throws) as the Nittany Lions took a 20-18 lead with 6:05 before the break.

Ohio State later earned a 25-20 lead on an old-fashioned three-point play by Beacham, and Mikesell added a jumper and her first triple since the second quarter of the Buckeyes' win against Wisconsin on Feb. 20 to give Ohio State a 30-20 lead. The Buckeyes eventually finished the first half with a 34-22 lead, led by Beacham in the frame with seven points on 3-of-3 shooting.

"She plays as consistently hard as anybody on our team," McGuff said of Beacham. "She plays with intensity and toughness that we really need, and that's the thing I think she brings as much as anything. Tonight, she was scoring and did a great job finishing around the basket."

It was a slow start to the second half, with just three made baskets – two by Ohio State, one by Penn State – in the first three minutes as the Buckeyes took a 38-24 lead. The Nittany Lions then tallied a triple from guard Niya Beverley, but Ohio State proceeded on a 7-2 run to increase the lead to 45-29 with 4:57 remaining in the frame.

Ohio State closed the third quarter with a 51-36 lead, forcing five more turnovers in the quarter.

After a lengthy delay to begin the fourth due to an electrical outage with the game and shot clocks, Ohio State continued to dominate Penn State, outscoring the Nittany Lions 27-19 in the final quarter for the victory.

"We want to make a statement," Beacham said. "I think we were the underdogs going into the conference at the beginning of the season, so I think us winning it is a really good

statement, like 'You all should be scared of us too.'"

Mikesell led the Buckeyes with 19 points on 8-of-18 shooting. While Mikesell led the Buckeyes, it was Beacham's performance – a career-high 18 points on 7-of-10 shooting to go with five rebounds in her final game on her home court – that impressed.

"I was just going into the game just like, 'I've got to give it my all,' " she said. "This is my last time here. I just wanted to remember something for it."

Penn State, which was averaging 71.5 points per game heading into the contest, was held to 55 points, its third-lowest output of the season. The Nittany Lions averaged 43.9 percent shooting from the field before this game but were held to just 30.6 percent, a season-low, on 19-of-62 shooting.

Beverley led PSU with 12 points.

Win Over MSU Helps Secure Big Ten Title

The stakes were clear for Ohio State headed into this contest – win and have a chance at a share of the Big Ten regular-season championship, or lose and get relegated to either third or fourth in the conference standings.

For most of this season, the Buckeyes have won the games they were supposed to, and against a Michigan State team just one game above .500, Ohio State (22-5, 14-4) took care of business with a potential conference title on the line, taking down the Spartans (14-14, 8-9) on the road, 61-55, on Feb. 27 before 7,124 at the Breslin Events Center.

And just a couple of hours later, with Ohio State still in the air while traveling back from East Lansing, Iowa defeated Michigan to secure a shared Big Ten regular-season championship for the Buckeyes and Hawkeyes, the first for Ohio State since 2017-18. Both teams finished 14-4 in conference play, and the Buckeyes will assume the No. 1 seed in the Big Ten tournament due to their 92-88 win over Iowa earlier this season.

Returning to Michigan State, the Buckeyes led 22-15 after the first quarter, but the lead could have been more with a stronger rebounding effort. Ohio State was 9 of 17 from the field (52.9 percent) and forced six turnovers resulting in nine points, but the Spartans outrebounded the Buckeyes 12-6 in the first frame, pulling down six on the offensive end that resulted in five second-chance points.

Michigan State finished with a 60-38 rebounding advantage, by far the most given up by Ohio State this season.

"I knew that would be an issue for us," McGuff said. "They're big and strong and physical, and we need to be better. But I just think that the key is we got enough of them down the stretch."

Ohio State held a 28-20 lead with 5:57 remaining in the second after a Mikesell layup, but the Spartans took off on a 7-0 run, requiring just 39 seconds to get right back in the game. Michigan State appeared to be building momentum, but after guard DeeDee Hagemann's triple to pull within one, 28-27, with 3:44 remaining, the Spartans scored just two points for the remainder of the quarter on a pair of free throws from guard Nia Clouden and trailed 32-29 at the half after Kateri Poole had a pair of free throws of her own with nine seconds remaining.

Both teams struggled from the field to open the third quarter, combining to miss their first six shots before Tamara Farquhar

hit a layup with 7:47 remaining, cutting the deficit to one point, 32-31. It took until the 6:13 mark for Ohio State to get its first points of the half, a layup from Beacham on which she was fouled and converted the free throw to make it 35-31.

Michigan State threatened to take the lead just minutes later, tying things up at 37 with 3:23 remaining on a layup from forward Taiyier Parks after she secured an offensive rebound, but Miller responded on the other end with a layup as Sheldon assisted on her seventh basket of the game. Then the Spartans took a 41-39 lead after a layup by Farquhar and a pair of free throws from Clouden, their first lead since they led 2-0. Ohio State retook control heading into the fourth, when Poole knocked down a triple as the third quarter ended to lead 44-41.

Poole – who has been playing but has not seen significant action since being injured earlier in the season – continued building upon her best game in the second half of this season, knocking down another three-pointer to start off the scoring in the fourth, and after a free throw by Mikesell, the Buckeyes led 48-41 with 8:09 to play.

After Ohio State took the seven-point lead, the Buckeyes connected on just one of their next eight shots as the Spartans took a 51-50 lead with 3:33 remaining in the game on two free throws by Clouden. Beacham finally broke through the scoring wall when she connected on a jumper near the basket, giving the lead back to Ohio State, 52-51.

The Buckeyes forced a miss on the other end from Clouden, and Mikesell hit a jumper

on the other end. Then, after a steal from Thierry, Sheldon hit a layup to give Ohio State a five-point lead, 56-51, with just 2:27 remaining. Michigan State then cut the deficit to just two points, 56-54, forcing McGuff to call a timeout with under a minute remaining.

The Spartans had the ball with the chance to tie or take the lead, but after a miss from Clouden, they were forced to foul the Buckeyes, who closed things out at the free-throw line with Sheldon and Thierry, who pulled down a pair of huge rebounds in the final minute, for the 61-55 win.

"She was huge," McGuff said of Thierry. "She played so hard, and we might have won still, but I'm not sure if we win or not if she didn't grab that offensive rebound and get two more points. It was an absolutely huge play and just kind of encapsulates who she is in terms of the extra effort, the discipline to do offense on the rebound and then to be able to make the play."

Mikesell led the Buckeyes with 17 points in the win, while Thierry led with a career-high 11 rebounds and Sheldon dished out 10 assists, tied for a career best. Farquhar finished with 10 points and 22 rebounds, 10 of which came on the offensive end, while Clouden topped Spartan scorers with 19 points.

The Big Ten tournament began March 2, but the Buckeyes with their No. 1 seed were not scheduled to take the court until March 4 against either No. 8 Michigan State or No. 9 Purdue, which will play on March 3. The full schedule, including times and broadcast information, can be found on page 31 of this issue and the Big Ten's website.

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Familiar Faces Bring OSU To B1G Championships

When Ohio State head coach Tom Ryan speaks with the media, he doesn't hold his tongue while discussing his team's performance on the mat.

It's not out of character for him to criticize his own decision-making or hold his wrestlers accountable for lack of effort. But that's what makes Ryan one of college wrestling's most revered and respected coaches. He calls it like he sees it.

ON THE MAT Chase Brown

On Feb. 23, Ryan met with gathered reporters to discuss the upcoming Big Ten championships set for March 5-6 in Lincoln, Neb. He spoke passionately about his team, the strength of the conference this season, claiming the Big Ten is the "third-toughest country in wrestling" behind Russia and Iran.

Ryan was immediately asked if he thinks Ohio State stacks up against such opponents as Iowa, Michigan and Penn State in the conference tournament. The 16th-year head coach paused and leaned back in his chair before speaking.

"I don't know if we have a chance this year to win it, but we are gonna fight like animals when we try," he said. "This team is tough, but we need to be tougher if we are going to win this thing. There's a new saying in the program: We want men who are tougher than woodpecker lips."

Ryan explained there are eight current wrestlers he thinks possess the toughness necessary to win a Big Ten title. Those wrestlers are No. 7 (seed for the Big Ten Championships at 141 pounds) Dylan D'Emilio, No. 4 (125) Malik Heinselman, No. 1 (165) Carson Kharchla, No. 8 (285) Tate Orndorff, No. 3 Kaleb Romero (184), No. 1 Sammy Sasso (149), Fritz Schierl and No. 5 (174) Ethan Smith – Ohio State's "black shirts."

"Those guys were all unanimously picked as the leaders of our program," Ryan said. "They value putting their money where their mouth is, finding toughness, using the right body language and being a warrior. They encourage the rest of the team to be better and to fight for every single point in every single match. We have eight black shirts. I'd like to have 15 or more."

"We should have more. We need men

who work hard and commit themselves to living good, clean lives. It's hard to win tournaments like this if you don't have an entire lineup full of wrestlers like that. We will need those guys to lead us."

Sasso took home a Big Ten championship last season after running the table in the conference tournament. He earned a first-round bye as the No. 1 seed after finishing the regular season undefeated. Sasso defeated Michigan State's Peyton Omania and Michigan's Kanen Storr before facing Nebraska's No. 7-seeded Ridge Lovett in the final round.

He toppled Lovett to become the first Buckeye to win a Big Ten title at 149 pounds since Lance Palmer in 2010. After the match, he told the Big Ten Network that he is proud to be a Buckeye and asked future recruits to join the Ohio State wrestling program so they can win a team championship together.

"I love this program and I love everybody in it," he said. "I'm going to keep trying to do my best and start a new legacy here at Ohio State and start winning team titles, so I'm always trying to get young savages from high school to come be a part of what we got here. It's something special at Ohio State."

The "young savages" heard Sasso's call to wrestle in Columbus – proven by Ryan's No. 1-ranked 2022 recruiting class, headlined by the nation's top three recruits. Until those recruits arrive, Sasso continues to hold up his end of the deal, remaining one of the NCAA's best wrestlers regardless of weight class.

Sasso was 19-1 during the 2021-22 season with a 12-0 record in duals. He led all Ohio State wrestlers with seven wins against Intermat top-25 opponents and was third on the team behind Kharchla (plus-83) and Smith (plus-67) with a plus-59 point differential over his 20 opponents. He earned the top seed in the 149-pound class of the conference.

When asked about Sasso's mentality this season, Ryan said the fourth-year junior has displayed a newfound contentment in his life that has led to positive results on the mat.

"Sammy has such a passion to win," Ryan said. "I think the most important thing that he's doing this season compared to others is that he's finding some sort of tranquility in his life. He was the best guy last year, and he proved that in the Big Ten. He should've won the national tournament, too."

"He's learning to enjoy life. His life isn't solely winning this tournament or the next

one. He has said that a lot to the team (in the past), but I'm not sure he ever believed that. Now he is starting to believe that. He has every intent to win the postseason tournaments. If he doesn't, he will be very disappointed, but he's more than that. I think life's been good for him."

Ohio State will also rely on the top-seeded Kharchla (165), Smith (174) and Romero (184) to bolster the middle of the lineup, with No. 9-seed Gavin Hoffman (197) and Orndorff (HWT) closing out the final two weights.

Kharchla entered the starting lineup for the first time as a Buckeye after suffering a torn ACL before last season began. Ryan said he has been impressed with Kharchla's ability to bounce back from his injury and perform at a high level.

"We'll never know what would have happened last year, but I believe he would have won the nationals if he didn't tear his ACL," Ryan said. "He's one of the best wrestlers that I've ever had in this program. He's an amazing finisher. He lives a really good life. He loves wrestling, and he's extremely talented. He's got power, speed, skill. He'll fight for a Big Ten title and a national championship this season."

Smith held down the 165-pound division last season while Kharchla recovered. He secured the No. 3 seed in the 2021 Big Ten championships and defeated Wisconsin's Josh Otto, Maryland's Jonathan Spadafora and Nebraska's Peyton Robb to reach the finals.

The Latrobe, Pa., native faced defending champion Alex Marinelli of Iowa in the title bout in what some considered the match of the tournament. The two wrestlers battled back and forth, trading shots and takedown attempts. Marinelli held a one-point advantage late into the third period as Smith continuously clawed and reached for a takedown. However, Smith's final efforts fell short, and Marinelli claimed another Big Ten title with a 3-2 decision.

Smith gained nine pounds during the offseason to wrestle at 174 this year, a move that Ryan said has benefited the team in several ways.

"Ethan did a fantastic job cutting weight and showing discipline to wrestle at 165 last season," the coach said. "He was close to being a national finals guy last year. He was in it until the end with (Marinelli), too. Moving back to 174 was more natural for him."

Ryan also commended Romero for making a transition to 184 pounds this season after wrestling at 174 in 2021. He claims it was another change that has worked well for Ohio State, allowing Romero to perform closer to his natural body weight and giving the Buckeyes a top contender in the weight class.

"He's someone who we will count on to go out and win matches," Ryan said. "He is the ultimate professional. He's done a really good job, and he is incredibly committed. You never have to question his commitment."

"If these guys – Sasso, Kharchla, Smith, Romero – can perform at the Big Ten tournament, then we'll be in a good position. Everyone will be in heaters to win the tour-

namment. If we get them, we'll all celebrate. If not, we'll cry together and get back to work."

Rounding out the lineup for the Buckeyes at the Big Ten Championships, Dylan Koontz is the No. 14-seed at 133 pounds while Bryce Hepner is No. 9 at 157 pounds.

NIL Adds New Layer To Camps

Ryan said that collegiate wrestlers have always used training sessions and camps as a chance to work with young athletes who desire to improve their ability on the mat. However, before recent NIL legislation passed in July 2021, those student-athletes couldn't benefit from their participation.

"Camps are nothing new in the wrestling space," Ryan said. "Camps and clinics are a great opportunity for our wrestlers to see the sport from a new perspective. They allow them to work with younger athletes and teach them the game. Now, with NIL, they can make a few bucks here and there to support themselves."

Ryan claims that NIL hasn't broken through into the sport in many other areas. Still, he thinks wrestling is a sport on the rise, and as more athletes choose to hit the mat over other such winter options as basketball and swimming, Ohio State's new NIL Edge Team might be working with more wrestlers in the future.

"It's boiling," Ryan said. "We aren't quite to the point where companies and donors are looking to sponsor our athletes. But when it blows up, we will be ready. We will know where to go and how to handle it because the university has done a great job setting the student-athletes up for success. We will be ready."

According to Ryan, the Ohio Regional Training Center, which partners qualified youth athletes and Olympic hopefuls with elite-level coaches, will begin sponsoring collegiate wrestlers soon.

RTCs are located around the country and provide world-class facilities in a local environment. There are multiple RTC sites in Ohio, including Columbus, Cleveland and Cincinnati branches. Ohio State athletes would primarily work with the facility located in Columbus, but they could choose to operate from a site closer to their hometowns.

If a Buckeye wrestler chose to partner with an RTC, he would become an official member of the United States wrestling program and align himself in the cooperative efforts to strengthen the sport of wrestling at the collegiate and global levels.

"The RTC board is putting together a budget proposal for some elite athletes that they want to highlight," Ryan said. "The (Ohio State) athletic department board has acted quickly to make sure that we can engage with them. We want the best of the best, which would be a sign that we are doing some good things here. We look forward to seeing our athletes work with them."

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OSU Icers Hit Reset With Season On The Line

The Ohio State men's hockey team is in a position it couldn't have imagined after the first weekend in February.

With four consecutive losses, albeit to two of the best teams in the nation, the Buckeyes have gone from a seemingly sure bet to make the NCAA tournament to one needing to win its conference quarterfinal series vs. Penn State the first weekend in March just to keep their dream alive.

IN THE CREASE Craig Merz

In other words, the No. 4 seed Buckeyes (21-11-2, 13-9-2 Big Ten) will be under immense pressure when they host the fifth-seeded Nittany Lions in a best-of-three series at Value City Arena on March 4 (7 p.m.), 5 (7 p.m.) and, if necessary, March 6 (8 p.m.).

"From my experience it's not the best place you want to be in but there's a good chance to get into the (NCAA) tournament," graduate defenseman Will Riedell told BSB.

Having played at Lake Superior State last season when the Lakers won the Western Collegiate Hockey Conference title and the automatic bid to their first NCAA tournament in 25 years, he understands the situation facing the Buckeyes.

"I think one thing that I can bring to the team is not looking out too far, not worried at all about making the tournament," he said. "It's just focusing on one single game at a time and ultimately even just focusing on each shift."

"If we can do that, play the right way, there shouldn't be any doubt in anybody's minds we'll be fine in the quarterfinals and ultimately making the NCAA tournament."

When the Buckeyes took five of six points from visiting Wisconsin on Feb. 4-5, they were in first place in the Big Ten and tied for No. 10 in the PairWise rankings, the statistical formula the NCAA selection committee uses to pick the 10 at-large bids for the 16-team field (there are six automatic qualifiers). They rarely deviate from the mathematics.

The losses to Minnesota on Feb. 11 and 12 dropped the Buckeyes into a tie for 12th in the Pairwise with Notre Dame.

Since then, the Fighting Irish have been on a roll and ended the regular season by sweeping Michigan on Feb. 25-26 to climb to safety by being tied for seventh in the Pairwise.

The Buckeyes are 13th, which is equivalent to being on the bubble. Penn State, by the way, is 25th. Losing the playoff series to the Nittany Lions (15-18-1, 6-17-1) would likely end OSU's heretofore remarkable season.

After a 7-19-1 record (6-22 Big Ten) in 2020-21, the Buckeyes were picked for last in the seven-team conference in the coaches' preseason poll, so holding the top spot heading into the final month of the regular season was a notable achievement.

However, anything less than a return to the NCAA tournament would be bitter.

Ohio State was on pace to earn an appearance for a school-record fourth straight season in March 2020 – the Buckeyes were 10th in the PairWise heading into a Big Ten semifinal against Michigan and the metrics had OSU at a better than 90 percent chance of reaching the NCAAs – when the COVID-19 pandemic hit and the world shut down.

Gut Punch

How did the Buckeyes get here?

Ending the season at home against Minnesota (tied for fourth in the PairWise) and at Michigan (second) was never going to be easy, but each of those teams was missing four of its top players to the Winter Olympics tournament in China.

But the Gophers prevailed 3-2 in the opener, ending OSU's 16-game point streak, and followed with a 5-1 win that marked the first time this season the Buckeyes did not earn at least three Big Ten points in a series.

It was a particularly galling second loss as the seven seniors – Eric Cooley, Grant Gabriele, Ryan O'Connell, Quinn Preston, Riedell, Gustaf Westlund and Jake Wise – were recognized pre-game, then the Buckeyes went out and allowed a goal in the first 45 seconds.

Ohio State coach Steve Rohlik summed up the game but might as well have been talking about the series when he said, "For the first time this year we just didn't look like ourselves."

Riedell noted the Buckeyes were hit by injuries, notably star freshman defenseman Mason Lohrei, who missed the final three games of the season.

"Obviously, it was a tough series," Riedell said. "It's not an excuse but we had guys banged up. ... It was kind of deflating, I guess is the right word. It was definitely not a fun way to kind of go out, especially on Senior Night."

The Buckeyes went to Ann Arbor on Feb. 18 and 19 and were defeated 5-3 and 3-0 to fall to third in the conference. Worse, they were idle the following weekend and could only watch as

Notre Dame (44 points) swept Michigan to move past the Buckeyes (43) into third. Minnesota (54) won its final eight games to finish first, four points ahead of the Wolverines.

"I've actually never been in a situation like this before," Riedell said of not playing the final weekend of the season. "It's kind of weird, especially the way the last four games have gone. You just want to get back out there, but I think it will be good for us to reset and get ready for the playoffs."

Up Next

In the season series against Penn State (which had 20 conference points), OSU won 5-2 and 4-1 on Nov. 5-6 in Columbus. At Penn State on Jan. 28, the Nittany Lions took two of three points in the opener with a shootout win after a 2-2 tie through regulation and overtime. The next night the Buckeyes won handily, 6-0.

The last time the schools met in the postseason was the 2019 Big Ten semifinals hosted by OSU after the Buckeyes won the regular-season title. The Nittany Lions pulled the upset in the single-elimination game, 5-1.

Michigan (No. 2 seed) hosts No. 7 Michigan State in the other series. The highest-seeded team advancing from the quarterfinals will host the second-highest advancing seed, while the lowest-seeded advancing team will play at Minnesota on March 12.

Czech Mate

Jakub Dobeš is one of 11 semifinalists for the Mike Richter Award, the Hockey Commissioners Association's annual award for the top goalie in Division I men's hockey. They were chosen from an original watch list of 35 netminders.

The only true freshman among the semifinalists, the native of Ostrava, Czech Republic, is 20-10-2, with a 2.22 goals-against average, a .933 save percentage and three shutouts.

Dobeš is the third Buckeye to be named a Richter Award semifinalist, joining Sean Romeo (2018) and Tommy Nappier (2019).

Three finalists will be announced in mid-March, and the winner will be announced in April during the NCAA Frozen Four in Boston.

NIL Nil

While college athletes are able to earn money through sponsorships and promotional events under the recently enacted Name, Image and Likeness (NIL) legislation, the hockey program hasn't taken advantage of the opportunities. Only 2.9 percent of the NIL activities for OSU athletes since July 2021 include the men's hockey players.

"I don't think a lot of guys on our team have really taken to it," Riedell said. "I just feel like it takes a lot of time and there's a lot that goes into it. Sports like football and basketball, they have agents that are kind of helping them get these deals, telling them what they need to do. In hockey, I know some players around the country get some decent deals but ultimately – this is my opinion – I don't really think it was created for hockey and many other athletes. I think it was mainly centered for football, basketball, big-time college stars that get a lot of TV time."

Several of his teammates have deals with Gopuff food delivery services, but Riedell has not jumped into the NIL waters.

"There are loopholes and ins and outs," he said. "It's complicated enough where you've got to really pour time into it and when you're a full-time student and trying to focus on that side of it as well as being an athlete it adds up to being a lot, so I didn't mess with it."

He's concerned how NIL deals are changing the landscape in terms of recruiting both high school prospects and transfers.

"They're leveraging NIL deals almost like contracts for players," Riedell said. "You see that in the college football game right now, people transferring. That kid we had here, (quarterback) Quinn Ewers, he was making a million dollars and hadn't even played a college snap."

Having transferred from Lake Superior, Riedell is worried about the imbalances NIL could create.

"The smaller schools are going to have trouble getting a million dollars for a quarterback who doesn't step on the field," he said. "It's sad to say but going to school there for four years and

BIG		Men's Hockey				
	Pts.	W	L	T	OTL	
Minnesota	54	18	6	0	0	
Michigan	48	16	8	0	0	
Notre Dame	44	16	6	0	0	
Ohio State	43	13	9	2	1	
Penn State	18	6	17	1	0	
Michigan State	18	6	18	0	0	
Wisconsin	18	6	17	1	0	

slowly immersed in seeing that side of it and budgeting and different things like that, these NIL deals, if it gets big into the hockey side of things, it could definitely hurt your smaller programs that just don't have as much to offer."

Still, Riedell admitted if he were a freshman now, he would go after a deal, particularly with a car dealership.

"I haven't seen Porsche or Ferrari setting up deals," he joked. "It probably would be a truck. Something not too crazy. You don't want too much bling going around campus."

Perseverance

Michael Gildon has struggled through injuries and a lack of playing time, but when he got on the ice in February, he made the most of it to earn the Varsity Club Icer of the Month.

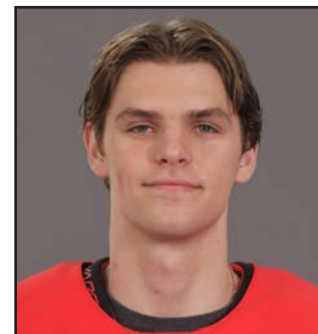
The redshirt sophomore forward has just 12 points (three goals, nine assists) in 41 career games, but he helped the Buckeyes to a pair of wins over Wisconsin to extend his point streak to four games.

It began Jan. 8 at Wisconsin with an assist. He didn't play again until getting two helpers Jan. 29 at Penn State. On Feb. 4, his third-period goal cut the OSU deficit to 3-2 against the Badgers in a 4-3 overtime victory. It was his first goal since Nov. 19, 2019, vs. Michigan.

"It's been a long process to get back into the lineup, and it feels really good," Gildon said. He liked it so much he had a goal and an assist the next night in the 6-2 win. For the season he has seven points (two goals, five assists) in 13 games.

For a full recaps of the Minnesota and Michigan series, go to the BuckeyeSports.com website, free to all Buckeye Sports Bulletin subscribers.

VARSITY CLUB ICER OF THE MONTH For February



Michael Gildon
Sophomore Forward
Plano, Texas

Bucks Have Questions, Answers Heading Into Spring

If the calendar is turning to March, it must be time for that always-anticipated event that gets hearts racing and people talking – spring football practice.

What, you thought I was going to say March Madness? Ha.

THE FACTS MAN Mike Wachsman

While many find the tournament a rollicking good time, yours truly has come to figure out that it's a bloated exercise that often doesn't uncover the best team. And that's what championships should be about, rewarding excellence. The Big Dance is about letting in elites and peasants, throwing them into a 68-ingredient recipe pot and seeing what the final product turns out to be. Sometimes it's a Kentucky or a North Carolina, but sometimes it's a Villanova or North Carolina State – teams that weren't deserving of a berth based on the regular season but who got hot at the right time.

This is why March Madness has become an “I'll watch when Ohio State is playing but little else” event for me. I prefer to focus on sports that have an important regular season and reward teams for playing well in that season.

Which is why there's football – specifically Ohio State football.

The Buckeyes head into spring practice with most eyes focused on shoring up a defense that was a liability on the biggest stage last season, so much so that Ohio State lost to the two best teams on its schedule in 2021. OSU was pushed around and looked at times like a bunch that had never seen an offense before. The Buckeyes were out of position, played a poor scheme and in certain areas lacked difference-making talent.

Head coach Ryan Day took a big step in attempting a fix when he wrested Jim Knowles away from Oklahoma State. The Cowboys had a defense ranked in the top 10 in nearly every important category, and most importantly, they were physical. Knowles likes to play aggressive football, so the Buckeyes will need to start at square one and take to his style quickly if they are to succeed. And that's why this spring will be fascinating to watch.

Who exactly will step up and take a leadership role? Will it be someone up front – maybe Zach Harrison? Will young lions Jack Sawyer and J.T. Tuimolou take the first steps toward breakout sophomore campaigns?

The back end will benefit from the return of a healthy Josh Proctor, a veteran at safety, as well as emerging star Denzel Burke at one corner spot. The return of talented but oft-injured Cameron Brown on the other side helps, as does maturation from a group that was very green in 2021.

The biggest question mark is at Ohio State's hallmark position – linebacker. This is the school that has turned out Tom Cousineau and Marcus Marek and Chris Spielman and A.J. Hawk, among many others. And yet for the past three seasons that group has been a discernable weakness. It was more noticeable in 2021 as the front couldn't generate the type of pressure fans have gotten used to, leaving the linebackers exposed. Knowles has deep knowledge of the position, so you can bet he will whip them into shape and play only those who deserve to be on the field.

From this view only two guys appeared to know what they were doing last season – Cody Simon and Steele Chambers. Both showed tenacity and aggression but also were often where they were supposed to be and showed an ability to make plays. It says something for the overall room that Chambers was one of the best, despite coming to Ohio State as a running back.

Those two are an OK start, but the Buckeyes need depth. Fortunately, there appears to be a return to the talent level to which fans

are accustomed, with the addition of incoming freshmen C.J. Hicks and Gabe Powers. I've also been impressed with Cade Stover, who could be a candidate for Knowles' Leo spot – a hybrid of standup linebacker and hand-in-the-dirt pass rusher – so there appear to be players ready to step up.

There are few such questions on offense as the Buckeyes should have one of the most lethal attacks in college football. Quarterback C.J. Stroud will be one of the favorites for the Heisman Trophy, TreVeyon Henderson showed what he could do in his freshman campaign (rush for over 1,000 yards despite not playing many full games) and the receiving corps will once again be the best in the game, led by Jaxon Smith-Njigba. Throw in Marvin Harrison Jr., who has the look of an absolute matchup nightmare, Emeka Egbuka and incoming freshman Caleb Burton and it's obvious the only thing capable of stopping the Buckeyes is the Buckeyes.

Even the offensive line should be better as it returns to a more standard look, rather than the four tackles who played last season. Paris Johnson Jr. and Dawand Jones will be award candidates, so if the interior guys hold up their end of things, the offense should be a thing of beauty to watch.

One sidelight to the spring is wondering who might enter the transfer portal after the April 16 spring game.

Ohio State is currently at 91 scholarship players, a touch over the 85 allowed, so there's no doubt a few will look for new homes if they are down the depth chart.

“It's going to take care of itself, just by the way things go right now with the portal,” Day said. “What I don't ever want to do is be caught without 85 guys. It puts us in a little bit of a tough spot, but we'll keep managing it and try to figure it out as we go.”

But that stuff will work itself out.

For now, the focus should be on watching the defense and how evident improvements are. If they are plenty, then there is little doubt that the Buckeyes will open the 2022 campaign as one of the top choices to win a national championship.

And right now, that's the only thing Day hasn't been able to put on his résumé.

Growing Up Fast

The transformation of Malaki Branham from nice little role player to solid second option (and sometimes most talented player on the floor) has been a welcome one for the Buckeye men's basketball team.

The Akron product has really stepped up for Ohio State, which is still fighting to nab a double-bye with a top-four seed in the league tournament. He has averaged 17.1 points in the month of February and is helping OSU play some of its best basketball of the season – at the perfect time.

Branham has gone from a rookie taking tentative steps to a confident, silky-smooth presence on the court. He can handle the ball, find the open man and take it to the hole with authority. He has the most well-rounded game for a young player at Ohio State since Evan Turner, and if he decides to stick around a while (more on that in a minute) he could rival Turner for achievement.

This shouldn't have been completely unexpected as Branham entered Ohio State

with all kinds of praise. He was the player of the year in Ohio as a senior at Akron St Vincent-St. Mary and rated among the top 50 prep stars nationally. Branham appeared to be a man among boys at times in high school, but OSU fans felt it might take some time for him to make a real impact, mainly because of his size. He has plenty of height (6-5) but is skinny – listed at 180 pounds, not necessarily the ideal weight for physical Big Ten battles.

Even with the slight frame, Branham has shown himself to be very strong – after all, he has literally carried the Buckeyes on his shoulders the last few games. Branham tallied 22, 28, 31 and 13 points in Ohio State's last four contests before press time against Iowa, Indiana, Illinois and Maryland. He has given the Buckeyes a reliable second option and taken some of the pressure off veteran E.J. Liddell. Last season, if Liddell didn't have a big night, the Buckeyes didn't win. Now, the big man doesn't have to do it alone. He has a reliable sidekick.

The question for many is how long will that “sidekick” be around? And how long will he be the sidekick? A case can be made now that Branham is the best player on the team. Liddell will always be the most valuable, but Branham can do several things well, to the point that defenses can't just decide to play him close (he'll drive right past) or dare him to take the three-pointer (he's hitting over 44 percent). While the view from here is that it would be wise for Branham to stick around for another season, it is completely understandable if he wants to strike while the iron is hot and make the jump to the NBA after the season is completed.

A couple of mock drafts have both Liddell and Branham as first-round picks, but you must believe that pro scouts would want to see Branham's game continue to grow before investing a high pick – and big dollars – into him. Leading the Buckeyes deep into the postseason, a la Carmelo Anthony in his one season at Syracuse, might be all Branham needs to make the confident leap to the next level.

Complicating matters a bit is NIL – Branham could still make money at Ohio State while working on his game. True, it isn't guaranteed first-round money, but it is money just the same. And while there is something to be said about on-the-job training against the best in the world, there's also the thought that going into a volatile situation such as the professional ranks means a player should be as skilled as possible. There won't be much time for on-the-job training and development once arriving in the NBA, so having a variety of skills is a huge benefit. Whether Branham has all those skills at this moment can be debated.

No matter what Branham eventually decides, OSU fans should enjoy what he has brought to the team. This group has the ability to advance past the first weekend, something that hasn't been done in Chris Holtmann's first four years on the job. It's a hurdle that needs to be cleared, and by beating teams such as Duke and Illinois, OSU has shown it can hang with anyone.

How far Ohio State advances will be largely dependent on Branham continuing his high level of play. Fortunately for all involved, he isn't afraid to do the heavy lifting.

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Fierce Debate Still Rages Over 2018 Quarterback Battle

"Let me ramble a little bit," I asked the readers in the June 2018 issue of Buckeye Sports Bulletin, speaking about quarterbacks Dwayne Haskins and Joe Burrow. "Rambling is really all I can do because I have so many thoughts on this it is hard to organize."

I said that then and I am asking you to allow me to ramble on the same thing now, though I will come back to that fateful spring of 2018 and my thoughts about the quarterback battle that played out in Columbus.

There has been a lot of chatter in the past few weeks and months about the two QBs, as Burrow led his Cincinnati Bengals to the Super Bowl, while Haskins languished on the bench with the Pittsburgh Steelers (see story on page 16 of this issue). "Did Urban Meyer and his trusted lieutenant and quarterback guru Ryan Day make the right choice at quarterback?" many are asking.

I maintain that people are questioning the Buckeye brain trust's decision not on what was happening then, but on what has happened since the two quarterbacks moved on to the NFL. I am going to look back at the battle in Columbus, not what has happened since the two began to play for pay.

To do that, you must go back to the Ohio State-Michigan game in 2017. No, you may have to go back even farther to the fall of that year when Burrow – who was J.T. Barrett's backup in 2016 and appeared to have won the backup role to Barrett again – broke his hand late in fall camp before the start of that season, paving the way for Haskins to get the majority of the backup reps in the '17 season.

Haskins had strong numbers that redshirt freshman season, completing 40 of 57 passes (70.2 percent) for 565 yards and four touchdowns with one interception and – this may come as a surprise – he also ran 24 times for 86 yards. Burrow, meanwhile, appeared in just five games, completing 7 of 11 passes for 61 yards without a score or a pick. This came after a promising showing as a redshirt freshman the year before, completing 22 of 28 passes (78.6 percent) for 226 yards with two TDs and no interceptions and running for 58 yards on 12 carries for a 4.8-yard average and a score.

While Haskins played in eight games in 2017, there is really only one that Buckeye fans truly remember, and that is that game in Ann Arbor. Playing on the biggest of stages, Haskins came in for an injured Barrett with the Buckeyes trailing 20-14 in the third quarter. On that first drive, he ultimately faced a third-and-13 near midfield. He threaded the tiniest of needles on a 27-yard completion to roommate Austin Mack and two plays later called his own number for a 22-yard run to the 1-yard line. J.K. Dobbins punched it in from there, and the Buckeyes were back in business.

Haskins led the Buckeyes to 10 more points and the 31-20 victory.

For the game he was 6 of 7 passing for 94 yards, and most importantly, he did not turn the ball over. From that game on, Burrow was probably fighting an uphill battle to win the starting job in 2018. In boxing terms, he probably needed to win by a knockout.

The two battled tooth and nail through the spring game. Burrow actually had the better of it during the popular fan-friendly scrimmage. He completed 15 of 22 passes for 238 yards and two scores without an interception, while Haskins was 9 of 19 for 120 yards with two scores of his own without a pick.

While nearly everyone conceded that if it was a rifle arm you were looking for Haskins was your guy, Burrow capped the spring game off with 50- and 42-yard scoring strikes

THE VIEW FROM 15TH & HIGH Frank Moskowitz, Publisher

to Demario McCall (yes, that Demario McCall) to remind everyone that he could throw the ball too.

"Both Haskins and Burrow appear stronger going deep than J.T. Barrett, the man they hope to replace," I wrote in this space at the time.

After the game, Haskins believed that his superior arm strength would likely put him over the top, saying that it added a "really great dimension" to Ohio State's offense.

But Burrow wasn't conceding anything, saying that such intangibles as toughness and leadership would make his case.

"If they were to go with me, I think that would be the area that put me over the top," Burrow said. "Dwayne has an arm you don't see a lot. I have a pretty good arm, too, but I think my leadership and my intangibles really came alive this spring."

To this day, I truly believe that Meyer and Day wanted the battle to continue into the fall, but there was a wrinkle to the situation. Burrow was graduating in a matter of weeks following the spring game after only three years on campus. According to the rules of the day, that gave him the right to transfer to another school without having to sit out a year.

"Let's say Burrow and Haskins are equal," I wrote in the April 21, 2018, issue of BSB. "Burrow is set to graduate this spring – a feather in his cap as it demonstrates work ethic and organizational skills. As any Buckeye fan knows, that would make him eligible to transfer and play at another school right away. Haskins has less flexibility.

"Would Meyer and staff be better off giving the starting position to Burrow, which might leave a better chance of keeping Haskins, making the Buckeyes as strong as possible in the quarterback room?"

"If Haskins gets the nod, is there any chance that Burrow would stay?"

BSB managing editor emeritus Mark Rea was more willing to make a prediction.

"If I were a betting man, I would wager that Burrow will be a starting quarterback in the fall, but it will be with a different program – possibly the University of Cincinnati, where he has a relationship with Bearcats head coach Luke Fickell," Mark wrote.

In a roundtable discussion, other BSB staffers checked in on the race.

Then-BSB editor Tim Moody predicted that Haskins would be the starter, "but I don't agree that he should. While Haskins brings a stronger arm and the ability to make a few throws that Burrow can't, the junior from Athens, Ohio, can still make all the throws necessary to run the offense, and he does so more accurately and more consistently from what I've seen.

"Burrow is also a better runner, and he makes better decisions when throwing the ball. At the end of the day, though, Ohio State will have a star at quarterback next season, and whoever doesn't win the job will have success on the football field eventually – whether it be in Columbus or at another school," Moody concluded.

Staff writer Ryan McGlade was flexible but leaned toward Haskins.

"I certainly think Haskins will get the nod, largely because of what he did at Michigan last year," he said. "I also would probably say Haskins should get the starting job. You can't

deny Haskins' cannon of an arm. But like Tim said, Burrow can make all the necessary throws to the run the offense.

"I thought it was important that Urban Meyer said after the spring game that intangibles such as leadership and toughness will play a large role in the coaches determining the starting quarterback. I would say Burrow has the edge in that department. But in the end, I think Haskins' performance at the Big House last fall and his ability to take the top off the defense with his arm will lead to the coaches going with him."

If you think about it, it was ultimately Burrow who made the decision as to who would be the starting quarterback at Ohio State in 2018. Apparently without assurances that he would be the starter, he exercised the right he had earned by graduating and chose to move on, ultimately landing at LSU.

Where did Buckeye fans stand after Burrow's decision, which cleared the way for Haskins to take the place behind center? That brings me back to my ramble in the June 2018 issue of BSB, which I mentioned way back at the beginning of this column.

"Buckeye fans seems to fall into any number of camps when it comes to Haskins and Burrow," I wrote.

"There is the one group that decided that fateful day last November when Haskins threaded that needle to Austin Mack to put the Buckeyes back on track to beat archrival Michigan, Haskins was their man. After four years of watching J.T. Barrett and what they perceived was – rightly or wrongly – a weak arm, they were ready for Haskins – the next Cardale Jones and the key to a wide-open, vertical offense.

"There was another group that, in the limited look it had at Burrow and Haskins, was comfortable with either QB. Let them battle it out and may the best man win.

"Then there were those who believed that losing Burrow was the worst thing to happen in Urban Meyer's tenure at Ohio State. A coach's son, Burrow was the best suited to run Meyer's offense. He offered the ideal combination of passing and running skills. And don't forget, his backers remind, he was Barrett's backup until injuring his hand, and who's to say he wouldn't have led the Buckeyes to victory over the hated Wolverines.

"And there was the group that figured, if Burrow and Haskins were close in the competition, go with Burrow because Haskins' situation was such that he would be more likely to stay in Columbus if he didn't win the starting job, giving the Buckeyes a stacked quarterback room.

"Which leads into the last group, those Buckeye fans who can't figure out why Burrow would take his talent elsewhere, even if he might never have a chance to start. This is Ohio State. If you were a player even on the scout team at OSU and had a chance to start at, say, an SEC power, surely you would stay in Columbus and get your brains beat out in practice every day just for the pride of being able to say you wore the scarlet and gray."

Do you recall which group were you in?

As it turned out, whether the decision to start Haskins was made by Meyer and Day, or by Burrow through his transfer, things worked out well for the Buckeyes.

Haskins would go on to have a season for the ages. He broke numerous Ohio State and

Big Ten records by completing 373 of 533 passes for a 70.0 completion percentage, 4,831 yards and 50 touchdowns with only eight interceptions. For his efforts he won the Chicago Tribune's Silver Football Award as the best player in the Big Ten, as well as the conference's own Graham-George Offensive Player of the Year award and the Griese-Brees Quarterback of the Year award, among other trophies. He was named MVP of both the Big Ten Championship Game and the Rose Bowl.

It is doubtful the Buckeyes could have done much better than their 13-1 season and a Rose Bowl victory over Washington with Burrow at the controls. As I am sure you painfully remember, the Ohio State defense was abysmal that 2018 season. Unless Burrow was able to play defense and cover Rondale Moore, it is unlikely he could have reversed the Buckeyes' lone loss of that season at Purdue.

At a football power such as Ohio State, coaches have to go with the quarterback who can win now. Rebuilding is not an option, and Burrow may have proved to be not quite as advanced as Haskins in 2018. He completed 219 of 379 passes for 2,894 yards and a 57.8 completion percentage with 16 touchdowns against five interceptions, as LSU went 10-3. A solid season, but nothing like that of Haskins.

Of course, Burrow would have a season for the ages of his own in 2019. He completed 402 of 527 passes, good for a dazzling 76.3 percentage, 5,671 yards, 60 touchdowns and only six interceptions, adding another five TDs on 115 carries and 368 yards. All this led to a national championship for LSU and the Heisman Trophy for Burrow, making him the No. 1 pick in the following NFL draft by the Bengals.

Once Burrow left for LSU, I asked this question of the readers:

"Do you ever wonder if the quarterback situation would be different if Haskins had not threaded the needle to Austin Mack for that key completion against Michigan? If Brandon Watson had swatted the ball away or, worse yet, intercepted it, would we be having the same conversation right now? Watson and fellow DB Tyree Kinnel were that close to possibly altering the course of OSU football history?"

And LSU football as well.

Finally, one more item from the June 2018 edition of The View From 15th & High:

"Now I am of the school that says that Burrow took care of business, graduated from Ohio State, and earned the right to do whatever was best for him and his family. He determined that to be to move on. It's hard to argue against his choice. By virtue of his college degree he will always be a Buckeye. He never did anything to embarrass Buckeye Nation, and we should wish him the best and be proud of what he accomplishes going forward. I hope he beats Alabama any chance he gets and hope, by luck of the postseason draw, he never faces Ohio State. Awkward!"

"Which brings up an interesting thought.

"Haskins will still be competing with Burrow, even though the Athens, Ohio, product has moved on to the Bayou. Buckeye fans will be watching how their wandering quarterback does and comparing it with Haskins' play, each and every week. I personally hope they both do well. But if Burrow shines and Haskins struggles, Ohio State message boards, including ours at BuckeyeSports.com, will light up all across the Internet."

So true, so true.

HEADS UP CONCUSSION IN YOUTH SPORTS

FOR ATHLETES

WHAT IS A CONCUSSION?

A concussion is a brain injury that affects how your brain works. It can happen after a bump, blow, or jolt to the head that causes your brain to rapidly move inside your skull.

CONCUSSION SYMPTOMS

- Headache, nausea, vomiting,
- balance problems, dizziness,
- double or blurred vision,
- sensitivity to light or noise, feeling
- sluggish, hazy, foggy, or groggy,
- just not "feeling right" or
- "feeling down," memory
- problems, confusion, and
- trouble sleeping.

WHAT SHOULD I DO IF I THINK I HAVE A CONCUSSION?



REPORT IT. Tell your coach, parent, and athletic trainer if you think you or one of your teammates may have a concussion. It's up to you to report your symptoms. Your coach and team are relying on you. Plus, you won't play your best if you are not feeling well.

GET CHECKED OUT. If you think you have a concussion, do not return to play on the day of the injury. Only a healthcare provider can tell if you have a concussion and when it is OK to return to school and play. The sooner you get checked out, the sooner you may be able to safely return to play.

GIVE YOUR BRAIN TIME TO HEAL. A concussion can make it harder to do everyday activities, such as concentrating at school. You may need extra help getting back to your normal activities. Be sure to update your parents and doctor about how you are feeling.

WHY SHOULD I TELL MY COACH AND PARENTS ABOUT MY SYMPTOMS?

Playing or practicing with a concussion is dangerous and can lead to a longer recovery.

While your brain is still healing, you are much more likely to have another concussion. This can put you at risk for a more serious injury to your brain and can even be fatal.

GOOD TEAMMATES KNOW: IT'S BETTER TO MISS ONE GAME THAN THE WHOLE SEASON



<http://www.odh.ohio.gov/concussion>

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