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"For The Buckeye Fan Who Needs To Know More"

Jan. 13, 2024

Important Offseason On Deck For Day, Buckeyes After Cotton Bowl Loss

By **BRADEN MOLES**

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Editor

If it was not clear after Ohio State was left out of the College Football Playoff that the program had quietly started shifting focus to 2024, then it became crystal clear during the 14-3 loss to Missouri in the Cotton Bowl on Dec. 29 that the Buckeyes hoped to put this season behind them after a third consecutive 11-2 finish.

"I told them I thought a lot of guys played really hard in this game," said Ohio State head coach Ryan Day. "Nobody wanted to lose this game. You saw guys fighting."

During his postgame press conference, Day was flanked to his left by junior defensive end Jack Sawyer and true freshman quarterback Lincoln Kienholz, the latter forced into action after an early injury to starter Devin Brown left him out for the majority of the contest.

Kienholz finished with just 86 passing yards in the loss – just 203 total yards for the team as a whole – but few would blame him for not orchestrating a strong offensive outing against the Tigers, who had their own offensive struggles until breaking through with a pair of backbreaking, fourth-quarter touchdown drives.

Beyond missing Marvin Harrison Jr., who opted out of the Cotton Bowl, the Buckeyes' offense was further hampered by undoubtedly the worst performance by the offensive line this season as center Carson Hinzman was benched, resulting in Matt Jones sliding over from right guard and fifth-year reserve Enokk Vimahi starting in Jones' place.

Missouri took full advantage of Ohio State's new line, totaling 10 tackles for loss and four sacks between Brown and Kienholz. While the game remained within one possession until late in the fourth, Ohio State seemed outplayed and out-

coached from the gun, ending the season on a sour note for the second time in as many years.

An 11-2 record is nothing to sneeze at for most schools, but Day made clear after the Cotton Bowl – a game that both coaches and players claimed in the leadup to the contest they were not taking lightly – Ohio State is not most schools.

"We got put in a tough spot, and we didn't respond well enough," he said. "We didn't help the young kid at all. And that's why we lost the game. It hurts to finish the season like this, with two losses. That's not good enough at Ohio State, and we all know that."

And with the loss – the first time since 1999-00 that Ohio State has lost back-to-back games to end consecutive seasons – comes another offseason of tough questions, ones that Day had already begun to anticipate immediately after the Cotton Bowl.

"We're going to look at everything," he said. "Ultimately, this is an example of a game – nobody cares that you have a freshman quarterback in there. You've got to go win the game, and it didn't happen. Everything is going to get looked at. If it's what helps Ohio State go and reach our goals and win these games, then we'll make those changes."

The only significant change as Buckeye Sports Bulletin went to press was the transfer portal addition of former Kansas State quarterback Will Howard, who presumably will start for the Buckeyes under center next season with 25 career starts already under his belt, as well as the departure of safeties coach Perry Eliano.

Other changes are expected on the coaching staff – how many and to what degree remains unclear – but media reports have indicated that several other assistant coaches – including special teams coordinator Parker Fleming and quarterbacks coach Corey Dennis – could be on



SONNY BROCKWAY

LEFT HURTING – Ohio State's season ended on a sour note with a 14-3 loss to Missouri in the Cotton Bowl, in which starting quarterback Devin Brown was injured early in the contest and the Buckeyes were largely unable to move the ball.

the chopping block and that Day could be looking for a more experienced offensive coordinator who could take over play-calling responsibilities.

Those changes would reflect the shift that Day tried to create within the program this time last year. After the loss to Georgia last season and leading up to spring practice, Day revealed a plan to look at eventually giving partial or complete play-calling responsibilities to now-offensive coordinator/wide receivers coach Brian Hartline – who is not expected to go anywhere amid any potential staffing changes – that would help Day embrace a "CEO mentality," allowing him to extend more focus to other areas of the team in an increasingly complicated world of college football.

"When you, year after year, you sit down and you evaluate everything in the program, and evaluate where college football is and demands of the job the way it is now as opposed to two and four years ago," Day said last February, "I have to

look at time management.

"I think that during the offseason, no problem at all. Beginning of the season, you know, pretty good. As we get to the middle of the season, end of the season, I feel there's times when I have to manage my time a little bit better and make sure that as the head coach, there's enough presence going around the building late in the season.

"Just making sure that I'm evaluating myself as the head coach the right way. And there's a lot of different things that are changing on a daily basis. And so whether that's giving up the play calling and letting Brian do it or not, we'll decide that here in the next few months, probably. But I'm just trying to figure out how to do a better job of that."

It was a process that evidently did not last long, however, as Day admitted after the first spring practice leading into this

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Buckeye Leaves

Ohio State's season ended with a whimper as it suffered a 14-3 loss to Missouri in the Cotton Bowl on Dec. 29. Buckeye Leaves are never popular following a loss, but here are some choices from the Buckeye Sports Bulletin staff members and readers on the BuckeyeSports.com Fan Forum for the few players worthy of receiving Buckeye Leaves:

Patrick Engels, BSB: Denzel Burke made the difficult decision to play in the Cotton Bowl and finish off the season strong instead of opting out for the NFL draft, and that decision certainly paid off for the junior cornerback. Burke, who was projected to be a second-round pick in this year's NFL draft before this game, may have catapulted himself into the first round with a strong performance on the big stage in AT&T Stadium. He seemed to be all over the field for the Buckeye defense early and often, and he was particularly strong defending against the run and short passing game, where he delivered two bruising hits in the first half that were felt throughout the stadium.

Burke, who finished with five tackles and a tackle for loss, showed a level of physicality that is nothing new for him this season, as he had some other big hits on his résumé earlier this year. But it likely showed NFL scouts in attendance that he can take on bigger receivers and running backs at the next level, where he may very well be next season.

Braden Moles, BSB: Junior defensive end Jack Sawyer was a menace to Missouri throughout the Cotton Bowl and was arguably the most impactful player on either side of the ball in without a doubt his best game in three seasons with the Buckeyes.

Of his four tackles, three were sacks – a career high, and also tied for the most by an Ohio State player in a bowl game – including a 9-yard sack on the Tigers' first play of the second half. Sawyer said before the game that he was leaning toward a return to Ohio State next season, and a performance like that helps him build momentum heading into

next season.

Greg Wilson, BSB: In his last game as a Buckeye, Xavier Johnson showed up in a big way as possibly the most important feature of Ohio State's offensive attack. He showed up in the running game with 35 yards from just five rushes and caught two passes for 31 yards, the first for freshman Lincoln Kienholz' first completion of the game, taking a huge hit to the ribs after he brought it in.

He went down on the sideline after his catch, and it looked like Johnson's Ohio State career could possibly be over if he had to leave the game because of it, but he toughed it out and came back into the game to make an impact.

BSB Subscribers

Tiffin Buckeye: Jack Sawyer and Xavier Johnson.

Bob Cody: Even though we lost, which would ordinarily warrant no leaves, Buckeye Leaves to the entire defense for their stellar performance! In spite of the offensive ineptitude, the defense gave us hope until late in the fourth quarter.

BuckeyeScott: I agree the Buckeye defense played well. Even though we were without our All-American linebacker Tommy Eichenberg, I think we need to give some credit and Buckeye Leaves to linebacker Cody Simon, who led the defense with 12 total and six solo tackles. A job well done!

PeyoteBuck: Simon picked up the slack, a job well done.

Terrier Buck: I'm generally not in favor of Buckeye Leaves after losses but I thought Sawyer and Jesse Mirco played decently.

Mcarr: The obvious ones. Sawyer, Mirco, Denzel Burke. A lifetime achievement leaf for Johnson, who was great again in his special role. And I'll give one to Lincoln Kienholz, who was thrown into the fire and survived a barrage that even the toughest of the tough guys would have withered under.

From The Message Board

Ohio State's 2023 season is in the books following the team's 14-3 loss to Missouri in the Cotton Bowl. With an important offseason now on deck for head coach Ryan Day and the Buckeyes, we asked our readers at the BuckeyeSports.com Fan Forum what Day needs to do over the next few weeks and months as the focus shifts toward next season. Here are some of the responses:

"It's time for Ryan Day to take a serious look in the mirror and realize this next season is make or break. Let me say I do not think he should be fired at all but losing to Michigan for a fourth time in a row would be a back breaker. It's time to get with the times as far as the current state of college football. That means making NIL moves, firing guys that you don't want to fire and using the transfer portal to fill huge needs along the OL, safety and QB room. The time for not wanting to hurt feelings is over. Adapt or die, Ryan – it's your choice."

– Tiffin Buckeye

"We need coaching changes that may be tough but to be a winner you have to have great coaches. (Parker) Fleming out – special teams stink. Lack of coaching. Fair catch punt on the 4-yard line? Delay of game? come on. Corey Dennis out – neither backup quarterback was ready to play, what a joke. Justin Frye out – no real effort, lack of skill and poor recruiting and no strength to push defenders around and they can't play as TEAM. No need for the lame duck quarterback – teach the two we have. If they were no good why did we recruit them? And Air Noland will be good – did you watch other freshmen quarterbacks play in bowls? Show the team to play together and for each other! Yes I'm tough but we are THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY!"

– DWIGHT

"Day needs to adjust to the new landscape of NIL and the portal. I don't think he has a grip on it yet. Recruits were vacuumed away by unknown amounts of NIL money at the last minute. We need a defensive stance against these last-minute robbers."

– PeyoteBuck

"I'd like to see a running quarterback that can pass the ball to any eligible receiver, not just the one scripted for the play. It doesn't sound like Kyle McCord saw the entire field, just the neck of the woods where he looked for his receiver. A quarterback that can run out of the pocket and gain some yards would help. And more creative and imaginative play-calling on Day's part. I still can't believe he called a 52-yard field goal at the end of the first half against Michigan. That was a gutless call."

– slimjim

"First and foremost we need to bring in some top-notch offensive linemen and make sure we have a coach who can coach them – who may be Justin Frye. But he better start proving it or send him packing. With all the stud speedsters Brian Hartline brings in, we need to find someone who can return punts. Taking a fair catch every time is a defensive strategy, limiting mistakes but not playing aggressively. And finally, we need to catch up with the rest of the world in the implementation of NIL and using the portal."

– Poster That Harley Built

"No doubt there are coaching changes on the horizon. However one area that I think Day needs to focus on is a future replacement for Larry Johnson. Every year we hear about the negative recruiting that takes place with the statement 'Larry is going to retire, don't go to Ohio State.' We need to bring in some well respected young blood working with Johnson, before he retires, so that we have continuity in the defensive line recruiting process."

– BuckeyeScott

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Eyes Toward 2024

I'm an 89-year-old great-grandmother of 24, and I'm a Buckeye fan, win or lose! Some advice for the coming season: less emphasis on the "hate Michigan" mindset and more emphasis on the "let's play football!" Go Bucks!

**Angela Burdge
Hilliard, Ohio**

Bowl Game Disappointment

With players opting out, play-

ers entering the transfer portal and NIL, the bowl games are no longer worth watching in my opinion. Example: the Georgia-Florida State game (a 63-3 win for Georgia). Before the above, that game would have been a fun/great game to watch. Maybe with the playoffs expanding to 12 teams players will stay and play with their teams? Wait and see. Disappointed!

**Larry Huff
Dalton, Ohio**

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Beginning Of End For Day At OSU?

You will have to look elsewhere to find absolution for Ryan Day in the wake of Ohio State's embarrassing (to put it mildly) Cotton Bowl loss to Missouri on Dec. 29. To be certain, Day was without starting quarterback Kyle McCord and star wide receiver Marvin Harrison Jr., but those two absences cannot paper over what appeared to be a total lack of offensive preparation to play a football game against a top-10 opponent.

After such a disastrous turn of events, it might be worth remembering that an Urban Meyer-coached team suffered a 31-0 humiliation at the hands of Clemson in the 2016 Fiesta Bowl, a game in which Meyer had the full services of his starting quarterback and leading receiver.

In fact, the argument could be made that the College Football Playoff semifinal loss to Clemson seven years ago – the first time the Buckeyes had been shut out over a span of 294 games – was the beginning of the end of the Meyer era in Columbus.

Ohio State never again got into the four-team playoff with Meyer as head coach, suffering stunning blowout defeats to a five-loss Iowa team in 2017 and a seven-loss Purdue team in 2018 before Meyer begrudgingly retired following the 2019 Rose Bowl in the wake of the Zach Smith affair – a mess largely of the head coach's own making.

Even when Meyer rode off into a somewhat-shrouded sunset, he left behind a fan base that pined for him to stay. An exciting style of play, a national championship run in 2014 that included a takedown of mighty Alabama, and an unblemished 7-0 record against Michigan purchased a lot of emotional capital throughout Buckeye Nation, and there are those who continue to wonder why Meyer isn't still head coach at Ohio State to this day.

When Woody Hayes was fired in 1978 and the university began a nationwide search for his successor, the focus narrowed to a handful of candidates. Atop that list was then-Arkansas head coach Lou Holtz, who had coached defensive backs for Hayes during the 1968 national championship season. Holtz's interest in replacing Hayes was tepid at best, and he rather famously uttered something to the effect of "No one wants to be the guy that follows a legend. You want to be the guy who follows the guy who follows the legend."

Earle Bruce found out exactly what Holtz was talking about, and now Ryan Day is discovering much the same thing.

Despite four Big Ten championships, a 5-4 record against Michigan and five bowl victories, and one of the best winning percentages of all conference head coaches at the time, Bruce was unceremoniously fired the week before the 1987 Michigan game. The timing was atrocious, but it's worth mentioning the Buckeyes had lost three conference games in a row for the first time in 16 years. The university hierarchy, including influential donors and boosters, said winning records be damned. They were embarrassed and demanded a change.

Flash-forward 37 years, and while the 2024 version of the Ohio State football program bears very little resemblance to the 1987 model, the dark clouds seem to be gathering over the Woody Hayes Athletic Center just the same. "Ol' 9-3 Earle" has given way to "Ol' 11-2 Ryan."

Day has a 56-8 record, an .875 winning percentage that is not only the best among current Big Ten coaches, it's the best among all active coaches at the Football Bowl Subdivision level. But among those eight blemishes are bothersome end-of-the-season defeats,

including postseason failures against three straight SEC opponents and three consecutive losses to archrival Michigan.

EDITOR'S NOTEBOOK Mark Rea

There are those who will tell you that no Ohio State head coach has ever survived three straight losses to Michigan without getting fired, and that assertion is more myth than fact.

John W. Wilce suffered six straight losses to Michigan between 1922 and 1927 but then celebrated a 19-7 win against the Wolverines in 1928 before retiring from coaching after 16 seasons with the Buckeyes.

Francis A. Schmidt, the first OSU head coach ever to beat Michigan in his first four tries, also lost three in a row to the Wolverines and then resigned following the 1940 season rather than try to negotiate a new contract. The same fate befell Wes Fesler a decade later after the Snow Bowl loss to Michigan marked the third straight year he had failed to beat the Wolverines. (The 1949 game ended in a 7-7 tie.) Fesler resigned his post following the 1950 season, saying he was eager to get out of college football although he resurfaced a short time later as head coach at Minnesota.

Hayes was fired after the 1978 season, one in which he had absorbed a third straight defeat against Michigan. But I don't think even the most creative of revisionists believe mounting losses to the Wolverines were the reason for the legendary coach's dismissal.

John Cooper was 0-5-1 against Michigan before getting his first taste of victory in the series, a 22-6 win in 1994. But that was followed by another three-game losing streak to the Wolverines, after which Cooper coached the Buckeyes three more years before being fired following the 2000 season amid allegations that he had lost control of his program.

So, if you think a third straight loss to Michigan is grounds for an Ohio State head coach's automatic dismissal, think again. Still, there are other factors that will ultimately determine how much longer Day's tenure in Columbus will continue.

Age-Old Question

It is my opinion that Day faces a far bigger challenge than the likes of Wilce, Schmidt, Fesler, Hayes, Bruce or Cooper. NIL money and the transfer portal present their own set of problems, but continuing to recruit the very best of the best high school talent to restock your roster each year remains a daunting task. And by almost every indicator, Day and his staff are recruiting and signing players at an elite level.

However, going to the four corners of this country to lure those elite players to Columbus is a bit of a double-edged sword. If you think the head coach at Ohio State must have Ohio ties in order to fully understand the meaning of the rivalry with Michigan, then do you believe the same must be true for a defensive end from Washington ... or a wide receiver from Texas ... or a quarterback from New Jersey?

Former OSU quarterback Kirk Herbstreit perhaps summed it up best Jan. 5 as a guest on longtime sportscaster Rich Eisen's eponymous podcast. After suggesting Day might want to retool his coaching staff with some

younger assistants, and perhaps recruit more speed at some key defensive positions, Herbstreit focused on the current Ohio State roster and compared it to the one assembled by Jim Harbaugh in Ann Arbor.

"Is everybody pulling the rope together?" Herbstreit wondered. "When recruiting, is it a bunch of individuals they're trying to talk to about understanding Ohio State and understanding Ohio State's history? Or is it just a landing spot for three years to propel them into the NFL? That's what (Day and his staff) have to face."

"Recruiting great talent is one thing, but getting them to buy into being a great team and playing for Ohio State has got to be the No. 1 thing. The NFL should be the goal, and that's great. But it's not in front of what they're doing as a team. That's what I think (Day has) got to figure out. If you're playing backyard football, no doubt you'd pick a lot of Ohio State players. But right now at Michigan, they have (more of) a team concept."

The ability to recruit talent from anywhere on the map has always separated the elite teams in college football. During the mid-1960s, Hayes figured out that he had to expand his base outside the Midwest in order for his program to continue to compete for national honors. Still, his 1968 team that marched to a national championship capped by a Rose Bowl victory against a star-studded USC team featured 17 starters from Ohio.

Jim Tressel's 2002 team that shocked defending national champion Miami (Fla.) in the Fiesta Bowl featured 13 starters from Ohio. Even Meyer's team that stomped its way through Wisconsin, Alabama and Oregon on the way to the 2014 national title had 14 starters who played their high school football in Ohio.

The Ohio State team that squared off against Michigan in this year's rivalry game? The Buckeyes featured only five homegrown players – tight end Cade Stover, defensive end Jack Sawyer, defensive tackle Ty Hamilton, linebacker Tommy Eichenberg and safety Sonny Styles – in the starting lineup.

Against Missouri in the Cotton Bowl, the Ohio contingent was diminished even more with Eichenberg missing the game due to a lingering elbow injury and Stover severely limited with recurring knee problems.

Let me be clear. No matter where they were born or went to high school, there is no one on the Ohio State coaching staff or roster who doesn't care about beating Michigan. As competitors, they want to beat every opponent. But the difference in a rivalry game isn't measured by game plans or 40 times or how much you can bench press. Those games have to be felt in your gut, and the cold truth is that you can't manufacture that feeling. You either have it or you don't, and as much as it pains me to say it, Michigan has it right now and Ohio State does not.

Is that Ryan Day's fault? That's not for me to say. Gene Smith's successor as director of athletics will get to make that assessment along with this one. Which is more important for the Ohio State football program? To beat Michigan or win a national championship?

The expansion of the College Football Playoff to 12 teams beginning next year will at least make the path to playing for a national championship somewhat easier for a program the likes of Ohio State.

But another loss to Michigan, and anything resembling the embarrassment of what went down in Dallas, and the discussion we'll be having this time next year will undoubtedly focus around the guy who is going to follow the guy who followed a legend.

OHIO STATE INSIDER

Buckeyes Add Veteran QB Howard Through Portal

Ohio State made a significant transfer portal splash on Jan. 4, securing a commitment from former Kansas State quarterback Will Howard. The senior has one season of eligibility remaining, which he will spend in Columbus with head coach Ryan Day and the Buckeyes.

Howard's commitment came just days after he took an official visit to Ohio State. While he had also taken visits to Miami (Fla.) and USC after entering the portal, he ultimately saw Ohio State as the overall best opportunity for him to compete and thrive under center.

"I'm glad I took my time with this decision," Howard told ESPN. "Through it, I got to learn a lot about myself and college football in general. It was a great process. I'm really glad I ended up choosing Ohio State. ... I knew that if I passed this up, I'd regret passing up the chance to go be the quarterback at Ohio State."

The 6-5, 242-pound Howard has thrown for 5,786 yards, 48 touchdowns and 25 interceptions over the last four seasons and 27 starts with the Wildcats while rushing for 921 yards and 19 additional scores. A former three-star recruit out of Downingtown (Pa.) West, Howard was a member of Kansas State's 2020 recruiting class and ended up starting seven games his freshman season.

He started just three games the following year but returned to the starting lineup for the Wildcats in 2022 and 2023, culminating in his most recent campaign in which he completed 61.3 percent of his passes (219 of 357) for 2,643 yards and 24 touchdowns to 10 interceptions while also rushing for 351 yards and nine scores, earning second-team All-Big 12 honors. Howard also helped Kansas State win the Big 12 Championship Game in 2022, throwing for 1,633 passing yards and 15 touchdowns to four interceptions in seven

games that season.

Howard figures to immediately factor into the starting quarterback discussion for Ohio State, which is looking to replace Kyle McCord under center following his transfer to Syracuse. The Buckeyes had hoped to see more from rising redshirt sophomore Devin Brown in the Cotton Bowl, but he suffered a high-ankle sprain early in the loss, while true freshman Lincoln Kienholz completed just 6 of 17 of his passes for 86 yards in relief of Brown, with both struggling due to poor play on the offensive line.

In addition to Howard, Brown and Kienholz, Ohio State's quarterback room will also include incoming five-star freshman Air Noland. While there may be a public competition for Ohio State's starting quarterback next season, Howard is likely to enter the offseason and spring practice as the expected starter for the Buckeyes given his experience and dual-threat ability.

"The goal I have, I want to go win a national championship," Howard said. "At the end of the day, I want to go be a starting quarterback in the NFL. I feel like the best place to stick as a quarterback in the NFL is as a first- or second-round pick in the NFL draft. Going to Ohio State gives me a chance to make a jump and leap into that conversation."

Howard also acknowledged the importance of Ohio State's rivalry with Michigan, stating that – after talking with Day and those within the program – he feels beating the Wolverines and snapping the program's three-game losing streak is a top priority.

"We definitely talked about (the rivalry)," Howard said. "That game means so much. The pressure is on. Beating that Team Up North is priority No. 1 on the way to the national championship and all our other goals. That's huge, and it's everything when it comes to playing for Ohio State. I know the implications and what it means to the fan base and everyone in the program. That's The Team Up North now."

McCord, Fleming Find New Homes Out East

On the flip side of the transfer portal for Ohio State, two of the Buckeyes' most surprising and impactful transfers – McCord and wide receiver Julian Fleming – have both found their new homes, with McCord committing to Syracuse on Dec. 17 and Fleming pledging to Penn State on Jan. 3.

McCord, who announced his transfer from Ohio State on Dec. 4 after starting all

2023 Ohio State Football Schedule

| Date | Opponent | Result/Time (ET) | TV | Record, Last Result |
|----------|------------------|------------------|---------|-------------------------------------|
| Sept. 2 | at Indiana | W, 23-3 | CBS | 3-9, 35-31 loss to Purdue |
| Sept. 9 | YOUNGSTOWN STATE | W, 35-7 | BTN | 8-5, 45-28 loss to Villanova |
| Sept. 16 | WESTERN KENTUCKY | W, 63-10 | FOX | 8-5, 38-35 OT win over Old Dominion |
| Sept. 23 | at Notre Dame | W, 17-14 | NBC | 10-3, 40-8 win over Oregon State |
| Oct. 7 | MARYLAND | W, 37-17 | FOX | 8-5, 31-13 win over Auburn |
| Oct. 14 | at Purdue | W, 41-7 | Peacock | 4-8, 35-31 win over Indiana |
| Oct. 21 | PENN STATE | W, 20-12 | FOX | 10-3, 38-25 loss to Ole Miss |
| Oct. 28 | at Wisconsin | W, 24-10 | NBC | 7-6, 35-31 loss to LSU |
| Nov. 4 | at Rutgers | W, 35-16 | CBS | 7-6, 31-24 win over Miami (Fla.) |
| Nov. 11 | MICHIGAN STATE | W, 38-3 | NBC | 4-8, 42-0 loss to Penn State |
| Nov. 18 | MINNESOTA | W, 37-3 | BTN | 6-7, 30-24 win over Bowling Green |
| Nov. 25 | at Michigan | L, 30-24 | FOX | 14-0, 27-20 win over Alabama |
| Dec. 29 | vs. Missouri | L, 14-3 | ESPN | 11-2, 14-3 win over Ohio State |

12 regular-season games and throwing for 3,170 passing yards and 24 touchdowns for the Buckeyes this season, will have one year of eligibility left with the Orange.

He will join a Syracuse program that is coming off a 6-6 season in 2023 and will be led by first-year head coach and former Georgia defensive backs coach Fran Brown, who was hired by the university on Nov. 28 after it parted ways with eight-year leader Dino Babers.

McCord was seen supporting his new team from the Syracuse sideline during the team's 45-0 blowout loss to South Florida in the Boca Raton Bowl on Dec. 21. The junior, who is expected to start next season, said Brown and the Orange compelled him to commit when they told him that his addition to the team could elevate them to new heights in 2024.

"They said that with the guys they're going to bring in and some of the guys they're bringing back, we're going to be able to make a serious run at it," McCord said Jan. 3 on "The QB Room" podcast. "Their recruiting pitch was, 'Listen, we're a quarterback away from being a serious contender in the ACC this year.' I looked at the schedule and I saw it and I think it's true. There's definitely an opportunity for us to go out and win some games."

Fleming entered the transfer portal the same day as McCord and will have one year of eligibility left with the Nittany Lions. While Fleming was in line to assume a larger role in Ohio State's wide receiver room in 2024, he ultimately chose to play his last collegiate season under head coach James Franklin to return to his hometown state.

"I wanted to be close to home," Fleming told 247Sports on Jan. 5. "I wanted to be

close to my people, and I want to win a Big Ten championship with another team."

This is not the first time the now-former Buckeye was heavily pursued by Franklin and Penn State. As a five-star product out of Catawissa (Pa.) Southern Columbia, he was offered a scholarship by the Nittany Lions before his sophomore season in high school.

Fleming, who racked up 26 catches for 270 receiving yards and no touchdowns for the Buckeyes this season, was also reportedly contacted by Nebraska, even taking a visit to head coach Matt Rhule's program in December.

Fleming will now look to play a significant role in a Nittany Lions offense that will be led by first-year offensive coordinator Andy Kotelnicki and sophomore quarterback Drew Allar. Under Allar this season, Penn State scored 36.2 points per game, leading the Big Ten and ranking 13th nationally.

Harrison Among Three Key Buckeyes Out For Cotton Bowl

Ohio State was without three impactful starters for its 14-3 Cotton Bowl loss to Missouri on Nov. 29, after wide receiver Marvin Harrison Jr., linebacker Tommy Eichenberg and safety Lathan Ransom were all ruled inactive prior to kickoff.

Harrison was expected to sit out for the Cotton Bowl as he prepares for the NFL draft, where he will likely be a top-three pick. He did make the trip to Texas, though, where he was seen on the sidelines at AT&T Stadium both during the game and at practice.

In three seasons with the Buckeyes, Harrison racked up 155 catches for 2,613 receiving yards and 31 touchdowns, totals that rank sixth, sixth and third in program history.

Eichenberg was also expected to miss the Cotton Bowl due to an arm injury he suffered against Rutgers on Nov. 4 that limited him the rest of the season. He missed the Buckeyes' games against Michigan State on Nov. 11 and Minnesota on Nov. 18 but returned against Michigan on Nov. 25, registering seven tackles.

Like Harrison, Eichenberg's Ohio State career is likely over, having already accepted an invitation to the Senior Bowl on Dec. 5. He registered 258 tackles (20½ for loss), three sacks, two interceptions, a forced fumble and a fumble recovery in his five seasons with the Buckeyes.

Ohio State was also without the services of safety Lathan Ransom, whom Day declared inactive when he first arrived in Arlington, Texas, on Dec. 23. The safety was out ever since being carted off the field with a lower-leg injury against Wisconsin on Oct. 28, an ailment that required him to use a knee scooter to get around. Before his injury, Ransom had 34

Ohio State Parting Ways With Eliano

Ohio State announced on Jan. 8 that safeties coach Perry Eliano will not return to Columbus in 2024 after two seasons with the program.

Eliano's contract expired at the end of the current season, and a search for his successor is ongoing, according to a statement from an Ohio State spokesperson.

Eliano was hired by head coach Ryan Day for the 2022 season from Cincinnati – one of three new defensive assistant coaches that offseason, along with defensive coordinator Jim Knowles and cornerbacks coach Tim Walton – where he had served as cornerbacks coach for two seasons prior to his arrival at Ohio State. Eliano also had coaching stints at New Mexico and Bowling Green, among others, in a coaching career dating back to 2001.

Eliano had worked closely with Knowles over the past two seasons

in Knowles' system that utilizes three safeties on the field. He helped the passing defense – led this year by Lathan Ransom, Josh Proctor and Sonny Styles at safety – finish first nationally in passing defense at 145.9 yards allowed per game.

But while Eliano had mostly helped Ohio State's defense improve on the field, the same could not be said for his recruiting efforts.

The Buckeyes signed just two safeties in this last cycle – West Orange (N.J.) Seton Hall Prep four-star Jaylen McClain (6-0, 185) and Fort Myers (Fla.) Bishop Verot three-star Leroy Roker (6-1, 170) – as Eliano missed on several high-profile targets, including Buford, Ga., five-star safety KJ Bolden (6-1, 187) – a relative of Eliano – who signed with Georgia.

— Braden Moles

Players in the Transfer Portal

| Name | Position | Cl./Elig. | Destination |
|-------------------|----------|-----------|--------------------|
| Omar Abor | DE | Jr./So. | Southern Methodist |
| Jyaire Brown | CB | Jr./So. | Louisiana State |
| Reid Carrico | LB | Sr./Jr. | West Virginia |
| Victor Cutler Jr. | OL | Gr./Sr. | Louisville |
| Julian Fleming | WR | Sr./Sr. | Penn State |
| Willtrel Hartson | RB | So./Fr. | Undecided |
| Jakob James | OL | Sr./Sr. | Toledo |
| Parker Lewis | K | Sr./Sr. | Arizona State |
| Max Lomonico | LS | Sr./Jr. | Undecided |
| Cameron Martinez | SAF | Sr./Sr. | Boston College |
| Kyle McCord | QB | Sr./Sr. | Syracuse |
| Jaden McKenzie | DL | Gr./Sr. | Undecided |
| Jesse Mirco | P | Sr./Sr. | Vanderbilt |
| Evan Pryor | RB | Sr./Jr. | Cincinnati |
| Bryson Rodgers | WR | So./Fr. | Undecided |
| Noah Rogers | WR | So./Fr. | NC State |
| Joe Royer | TE | Sr./Jr. | Cincinnati |
| Kye Stokes | SAF | Jr./So. | Cincinnati |
| Chip Trayanum | RB | Sr./Sr. | Kentucky |
| Ryan Turner | CB | Jr./So. | Boston College |

tackles, including 1½ tackles for loss, along with an interception, two pass breakups and a forced fumble.

Wide receiver Nolan Baudo and offensive tackle Miles Walker were also ruled inactive, along with several other mainstays on the injury report, including tight end Zak Herbstreit, wide receiver Reis Stocksdale, running back Miyan Williams and linebacker Kourt Wil-

liams II.

Four Key Defensive Buckeyes Announce Return To Program

Speaking of Ransom, the safety was one of four defensive contributors to announce their return to the program for next season since Buckeye Sports Bulletin went to press.

Ransom, who announced his decision to

return on Jan. 5, stated on Twitter that “It’s not easy to leave a team. It’s much harder to leave a Brotherhood.” He was joined by linebacker Cody Simon, defensive tackle Tyleik Williams and defensive end Jack Sawyer, who declared their returns on Dec. 12, Jan. 3 and Jan. 5, respectively.

Sawyer revealed his decision over Twitter by posting a highlight tape of him that was captioned, “I’m back. #ReloadTheClip.” The defensive end hinted at making a return to the program throughout the Cotton Bowl week, even saying on Dec. 27 that he was “more than likely” coming back next season.

The former five-star out of Pickerington, Ohio, experienced a breakout season for the Buckeyes in 2023. After a slow start to his career, as well as the beginning portion of this season, Sawyer racked up 48 tackles (10 for loss), forced two fumbles and led the team with 6½ sacks, all of which were career highs. He also saved his best performance for last, dominating Missouri in a losing effort with a team-high three sacks among his four tackles.

Simon revealed he is returning to the Buckeyes for a fifth and final season during a media availability at the Woody Hayes Athletic Center. The linebacker told the media that there is more he thinks he can accomplish before he leaves the program, mainly defeating Michigan and winning a Big Ten championship.

“There’s a lot that goes into it,” Simon said. “Wanting to complete your goals that you set for yourself. There are so many team goals that I still want to complete, and we haven’t done a great job of completing them these past couple of years. I want to be able to go and accomplish those goals, and win a Big

Ten championship, and beat The Team Up North. I think we have a lot of unfinished business.”

Simon turned in one of his more productive seasons for the Scarlet and Gray in 2023. Appearing in all 13 games for the Buckeyes, he finished the year ranked fourth on the team in tackles with 57, while also adding three tackles for loss and two pass breakups. His efforts also earned him starting reps at linebacker alongside Eichenberg and Steele Chambers. With Eichenberg and Chambers both expected to depart, Simon will likely be thrust into a full-time starting role.

Like Sawyer, Williams announced his decision over Twitter, saying “I’ll never forget the memories I have created. That’s because...I ain’t done making them yet, year 4 let’s do it!” He will reclaim his starting role on Larry Johnson’s defensive line after producing a dominant junior season with the Buckeyes, registering 53 tackles and a team-high 10 tackles for loss in addition to three sacks, five pass breakups and a fumble recovery. Williams’ efforts were recognized nationally, where he was named second-team All-Big Ten and received second-team All-American honors by the Walter Camp Football Foundation.

Ohio State Adds Two More Offensive Portal Commitments

Howard is not the only addition Ohio State made through the transfer portal since Buckeye Sports Bulletin last went to press. The Buckeyes also secured commitments from former Alabama center Seth McLaughlin and

Continued On Page 6

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OHIO STATE INSIDER

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former Ohio University tight end Will Kacmarek, who pledged to the Buckeyes on Jan. 6 and Dec. 31, respectively.

McLaughlin joins the program with one season of eligibility left after spending the last four seasons with Nick Saban and the Crimson Tide. The Buford, Ga. native started 25 games under center for Alabama from 2021-2023, including all 14 games for the Tide this season.

McLaughlin was part of an Alabama offensive line that allowed 49 sacks this season and ranked 46th in the nation in rushing offense

BSB Starts Biweekly Printing Schedule

This issue of Buckeye Sports Bulletin marks the start of our winter/spring biweekly publishing schedule. The next print issue of Buckeye Sports Bulletin will be mailed Jan. 23. But there is bound to be plenty of Ohio State sports news in the interim, including portal news, recruiting news, men's and women's basketball news, along with action by the hockey and wrestling teams. There is no reason to wait for your next Buckeye Sports Bulletin to get the latest stories. All the news is available in real time at the electronic BuckeyeSports.com, free to all subscribers.

BuckeyeSports.com also offers plenty of additional content not found in your paper. The Buckeye Sports Bulletin staff mans BuckeyeSports.com, reporting on the breaking stories, plus posting additional features.

Along with daily posts, we offer reprints from the Buckeye Sports Bulletin archives as part of our popular Reprint Thursdays. Also, staff members man the Fan Forum, where the discussion is bound to be lively after the Ohio State football team's interesting last few weeks.

We want to remind readers that the complete edition of each BSB is posted at BuckeyeSports.com immediately upon completion of the paper, making the site a must for the readers having continuing mail problems. This service, while not a substitute for your print edition, is a stopgap as your paper winds its way through the postal system and is also free to subscribers.

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56 Student-Athletes Earn OSU Degrees

Ohio State's fall graduate list included 56 current or former student-athletes. They celebrated with commencement on Dec. 17 at The Schottenstein Center.

Within the football team, 15 players earned their degrees, including offensive lineman Harry Miller, safety Lathan Ransom, tight end Cade Stover and wide receivers Emeka Egbuka and Julian Fleming, among others.

In total, 21 different programs at Ohio State had student-athletes earn their degrees. A complete list of the graduates can be found below, divided by sport and in alphabetical order.

Baseball — Tyler Kean, finance; Blayne Robinson, consumer and family financial services.

Women's Basketball — Jacy Sheldon, kinesiology.

Cheerleading — Kyle Rodriguez, construction systems management; Rachel Sorge, exercise science; Alexander Ward, finance.

Men's Fencing — Jack Price, information systems.

Women's Fencing — Jewelia Smith, material sciences and engineering.

Field Hockey — Megan McKenna, health sciences.

Football — Emeka Egbuka, marketing; Julian Fleming, human development and family science; Jakob James, sport industry; Trey Leroux, finance; Mitchell Melton, communication; Harrison Miller, mechanical engineering; Jesse Mirco, sport industry; Quinn Pitcock, consumer and family financial services; Lathan Ransom, communication; Joseph Royer, sport industry; Cody Simon, finance; Cade Stover, agricultural systems management; Grant Toutant, human development and family science; DeaMonte (Chip) Trayanum, consumer and family financial services; Enokk

Vimahi, human development and family science.

Women's Gymnastics — Zoe Schwietzer, kinesiology.

Men's Hockey — Matthew Miller, logistics management; Tommy Nappier, sport industry.

Women's Hockey — Jenna Buglioni, sport industry.

Men's Lacrosse — Carter Hilleary, communication; Justin Inacio, sports coaching; Colby Smith, bioethics; Scott White, human development and family science.

Women's Lacrosse — Bryn Fitzkee, international studies; Sarah Johnson, political science.

Mascot — Patrick Steyn, communication.

Rowing — Katherine Castaneda, electrical and computer engineering; Jennifer Fourney, computer science and engineering.

Men's Soccer — Reed Davis, kinesiology; Braden Durbin, sport industry; Sean Ryan, accounting; Owen Sullivan, accounting; Peter Van Euwen, finance.

Women's Soccer — Christin Baumbick, health sciences; Caitlin Foley, communication; Nina LeFlore, public management, leadership and policy; Ariella Pitty, sport industry; Haley Roberts, health sciences; Katherine Robinson, bioethics; Emma Sears, health sciences.

Softball — Mariah Rodriguez, hospitality management.

Men's Track & Field — Kashawn Baptiste, economics; Evan Matthews, air transportation.

Women's Track & Field — Bryannia Murphy, psychology.

Men's Volleyball — Samuel Clark, mechanical engineering.

Women's Volleyball — Emily Londot, sport industry; Rylee Rader, sport industry.

at 172.6 yards per game. The center, unfortunately, may be best known for his struggles in the Tide's 27-20 overtime Rose Bowl loss to Michigan, where he delivered a number of errant snaps to quarterback Jalen Milroe, in-

cluding a low snap on the last play of the game that contributed to the Wolverines stopping Milroe on a fourth-and-goal rush attempt from the 3-yard line.

Despite the rocky end to his Alabama career, McLaughlin will likely get the chance to compete for the starting center job at Ohio State with Carson Hinzman, who was benched for the Cotton Bowl, though McLaughlin could also be moved to guard if needed.

Kacmarek comes to Ohio State with two seasons of eligibility left after spending three seasons with the in-state Bobcats. After redshirting his freshman season in 2020, he collected 42 receptions for 507 receiving yards and two touchdowns over the last two seasons.

"Very excited for this new opportunity," Kacmarek wrote on Twitter on Dec. 31. "Thank you friends, family, and coaches (for helping me get to this position!)"

The former Bobcat will provide depth in an Ohio State tight end room that will undergo significant change in 2024. Keenan Bailey's group is expected to lose team captain Cade Stover, who finished with 41 receptions for 576 yards and five touchdowns this season and is slated to enter his name into the NFL draft.

Ohio State will also be without the services of Joe Royer, who entered the transfer portal on Dec. 7, but will return veteran Gee Scott Jr. and the promising Jelani Thurman, among others, and welcome incoming freshman Damarion Witten and Max LeBlanc.

Mirco Transfers To Vanderbilt

Ohio State punter Jesse Mirco announced on Jan. 3 that he was transferring to Vanderbilt just four days after entering his name into the transfer portal.

Mirco joined Ohio State in the 2021 recruiting class out of Fremantle, Australia, and averaged 43.9 yards per punt on 130 attempts during his three-year career at Ohio State, with a long of 77 yards during Ohio State's wind-filled game against Northwestern on Nov. 5, 2022.

His best season came in 2022, where he averaged 45.4 yards per punt on 49 attempts, sixth most in single-season program history, and had 20 punts land inside of the 20-yard line, becoming a semifinalist for the Ray Guy Award for college football's top punter.

Mirco's last game as a Buckeye was one of his best. In the Buckeyes' Cotton Bowl loss to Missouri, he punted a career-high eight times for a total of 386 yards (48.2-yard average), and helped pin Missouri inside the 20-yard line on three occasions, an effort that was needed in what turned out to be a low-scoring, field-position game.

Mirco's departure leaves Ohio State with one punter on its current roster in true freshman and fellow Australian Joe McGuire, who has yet to kick for the Buckeyes, though Ohio State will likely look to add either a scholarship punter or another walk-on for depth.

Mirco is the second special teams player to depart the program, joining kicker Parker Lewis, who entered the transfer portal on Dec. 3 after spending one season with Ohio State as a backup to Jayden Fielding and announced his pledge to Arizona State on Jan. 6.

Three Buckeyes Entering NFL Draft

Ohio State's still-young offseason has not come without some NFL draft declarations, though, as Chambers and defensive tackle Mike Hall Jr. announced in the days after the Cotton Bowl that they will forgo the rest of their collegiate eligibility to test the professional waters.

Chambers, a former running back and three-year starting linebacker with the Buckeyes, announced his decision to leave on Jan. 2.

"It has been a privilege and honor to be a part of a Brotherhood and community that I now call my home and family," he said in a post on Instagram. "I want to thank Coach Day, Coach (Jim) Knowles, Coach (James) Laurinaitis, the entire coaching staff and athletic department for believing in me and providing me with the tools to be successful. ... After many conversations with my family, I have decided to declare for the NFL draft."

Since making the switch to linebacker in 2021 after arriving to the program as a four-star running back out of Roswell, Ga., Chambers has served as a consistent force on Ohio State's defense. He started every game at linebacker over the past two seasons and accounted for 190 tackles (11½ tackles for loss) with two sacks, three interceptions and eight pass breakups in his five-year Buckeyes career. He also racked up 28 carries for 221 yards and a touchdown.

According to [NFLMockDraftDatabase](https://www.nfl.com/draft/mock).

com, Chambers is not expected to be selected in the draft and would become an undrafted free agent.

Hall declared for the draft just one day after the Cotton Bowl after spending three seasons with the program and registering 45 tackles (10 tackles for loss), six sacks and one fumble recovery. He leaves with one year of eligibility left.

"It's time to start the next chapter of my life and make the one dream that never died in me come true," Hall wrote on Twitter. "I have decided to enter my name in the 2024 NFL draft, always will be a buckeye for life...O-H!"

A four-star prospect in 2021 out of Streetsboro, Ohio, Hall broke onto the scene in 2022 after redshirting the season prior and finished with 4½ sacks and 7½ tackles for loss, efforts that earned him third-team All-Big Ten honors.

Although he registered just two tackles for loss this season, he still put together a solid stat line, racking up 24 stops, 1½ sacks and two quarterback hurries. Hall is expected to go in the second round of the draft.

Offensive lineman Matthew Jones, who has exhausted his eligibility, also confirmed he will enter his name into the draft after six years at Ohio State to pursue a professional career.

"I would like to extend my thoughts to Coach Day, Coach (Justin) Frye, (graduate assistant Mike Sollenne), Coach Mick (Marotti) and the entire coaching staff for allowing me to be a part of something special," he wrote on Twitter. "Not only did I learn the tools of football, but I also gained insights into what it means to be a man...With that being said, I am

excited to announce that I will be declaring for the NFL draft.

After getting mixed playing time in his first four seasons with the program, the right guard became a fixture on Frye's offensive line at the back end of his career, starting 12 of 13 games for the Buckeyes in 2022 – when he was named second-team All-Big Ten – and then for each contest this season. Jones is projected to go undrafted.

Knowles Happy With Current Position At OSU

Knowles garnered some head coaching interest this winter after transforming Ohio State's defense into a top-two unit nationally, securing an interview with Duke brass for the position in December, which was later filled by former Penn State defensive coordinator Manny Diaz. Despite the interest, Knowles said he is more than content with staying at Ohio State, as it is a position he had always hoped for throughout his coaching career.

Speaking with reporters for the first time since the Michigan loss at AT&T Stadium on Dec. 26, Knowles said that while he is appreciative of the opportunity Duke gave him, his current position with the Buckeyes – one that gives him the chance to compete against top notch opponents at the highest level – is something that he does not take for granted.

"I've really worked my whole career to get to a place where you're expected to win all the time, where you're given the resources, where you have a shot to play for the national championship every year," Knowles said. "So any of those (head coaching) opportunities, while you're always grateful, I try to look at it from,

'This is where I always worked to be.' And you have to judge that against the benefits of being a head coach vs. being at a place that's top-five, premier all the time with high expectations and talent.

"From where I started to get here, I don't take that lightly. That's not something you leave easily for any job, head coach or not. I mean, I see myself as being at the best place right now. So I have to always look at that and say, 'Why would I want to go anywhere else?' Ohio State is the top of the top."

Knowles has worked his way up the coaching ladder since first breaking into the industry at Cornell in 1988. The Philadelphia native spent nine years at his alma mater before spending six years as a defensive assistant for Western Michigan (1997-2000) and Mississippi (2003) before getting his first – and only – head coaching experience with Cornell, where he led the Big Red to a 26-34 record from 2004-09.

This experience then led him to other more high-profile opportunities, becoming a defensive coordinator at both Duke (2011-2017) and Oklahoma State (2018-21) before accepting his current position with the Buckeyes for the 2022 season.

"I couldn't imagine anything better when I was a young coach," Knowles said. "You look at all those things, and all those opportunities, but I really appreciate where I am at."

Day Sees DL Coach Johnson Staying For 2024 Season

Despite rumors swirling around the program that Johnson was on the verge of retiring for the 2024 season – a common rumor this

time of year in Columbus – Day said on Dec. 20 that his defensive line coach is here to stay.

Speaking with reporters during the first day of the early signing period, Day proclaimed that all signs point to Johnson returning for the 2024 season, citing the assistant's desire to mold his players and his still-youthful energy, among others, as reasons why he thinks that.

"I've had a number of questions about Larry Johnson, about whether or not he's retiring," Day said. "It's funny, guys have brought that up over the years in recruiting. But he's young, in terms of his approach every day. He has a lot of energy, and he wants to continue to coach, and the guys in the room love him."

"He has a lot of wisdom to him. So when you're going into a room every day with somebody, you're counting on them to mentor your young man. I think that's where families feel comfortable with that. When they hand their son over to Larry Johnson, they know what they're getting. They're going to get someone who's going to pour into him in all areas."

Johnson recently wrapped up his 10th season as Ohio State's assistant head coach and defensive line coach. In those years, the assistant has aided in the development of several future NFL star defensive linemen at Ohio State such as Joey and Nick Bosa and Chase Young while also setting up current rushmen such as J.T. Tuimoloau and Jack Sawyer to be top NFL draft selections when they depart the program.

The veteran Johnson also helped lead the way for the Buckeyes to secure the commit-

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OHIO STATE INSIDER

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ment and avoid a flip of Buford, Ga. five-star defensive lineman Eddrick Houston (6-3, 269), a successful recruitment that Day said Johnson had his fingerprints all over.

"Larry worked hard on this one," Day said. "It was a long process to get to signing day here, but we identified him early as somebody who was a difference-maker. And again, I give Larry a lot of credit for the relationships he built down there."

Johnson's current contract of approximately \$1.2 million is set to expire on Jan. 31. Prior to the date of publication, there have been no confirmed talks of a potential extension.

Harrison, Eichenberg Earn All-America Honors

Harrison and Eichenberg were both recognized for their stellar performances this year when Harrison was crowned a unanimous All-American for the second consecutive season on Dec. 14 and Eichenberg was selected as a Football Writers Association of America first-team All-American on Dec. 11.

Harrison became a unanimous selection after being named a first-team All-American by the American Football Coaches Association on Dec. 14. He was also selected as a first-team All-American by The Associated Press, the Football Writers Association of America, Sporting News and the Walter Camp Foundation, all required for unanimous status.

Harrison was one of just 11 players this season to earn unanimous All-American honors, joining fellow wide receivers Malik Nabers (LSU) and Rome Odunze (Washington); offensive linemen Joe Alt (Notre Dame), Cooper Beebe (Kansas State), Olu Fashanu (Penn State), Zak Zinter (Michigan) and Jackson Powers-Johnson (Oregon); tight end Brock Bowers (Georgia); quarterback Jayden Daniels (LSU); and running backs Ollie Gordon II (Oklahoma State) and Cody Schrader (Missouri).

He is also the fifth Buckeye to earn the accolade twice, joining offensive tackle Orlando Pace (1995-96), running back Archie Griffin (1974-75), fullback Bob Ferguson (1960-61) and halfback Howard "Hopalong" Cassady (1954-55).

Eichenberg's second-team FWAA All-American selection is also just one of many honors the linebacker has earned this season. He earned the Big Ten's Butkus-Fitzgerald Linebacker of the Year award on Nov. 28, and also took home first-team All-Big Ten honors that same day.

Harrison Wins Chicago Tribune Silver Football

Harrison added another trophy to his already-packed shelf on Dec. 14 when he was named the winner of the Chicago Tribune Silver Football, which the publication extends to

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Scarlet VIPs: William Adams, Willoughby, Ohio; Anthony Anantharayanan, Rochester, Mich.; Greg Brooks, Gahanna, Ohio; Marty Brumbaugh, Troy, Ohio; Joseph A. Cusma Sr., Massillon, Ohio; Dennis Dahm, Sandusky, Ohio; Julie Ellis, Apple Valley, Calif.; Mike Freeburn, Columbus; Tom Goila, Cincinnati; Dave Hamilton, Canton, Ohio; Richard G. Hannan Jr., Chillicothe, Ohio; Doug Harris, Lima, Ohio; Ed Helal, Ashland, Ohio; Phil Helal, Strongsville, Ohio; Dave Palmer, Washington, Mich.; Theodore Pegram, Eden Prairie, Minn.; Bob Redfield, Dublin, Ohio; Lawrence Romanoff, Powell, Ohio; Jim Shaw, Lake Forest, Calif.; Anonymous, Dallas; Anonymous, Gaffney, S.C.; Anonymous, Girard, Ohio; Anonymous, Norwalk, Ohio.

the best player in the Big Ten.

Harrison, who also was named Big Ten Offensive Player of the Year and Receiver of the Year, is Ohio State's first winner of the Silver Football since Justin Fields took home the honor in 2020, and the fourth Buckeye in six years to earn the distinction, joining quarterbacks Dwayne Haskins (2018) and Fields along with defensive end Chase Young (2019). All-time, 21 Buckeyes have taken home the honor since its establishment in 1924.

Harrison is also only the fifth wide receiver to secure the honor and the first to do so since Michigan's Braylon Edwards in 2004. Other wideouts to win include Michigan's Anthony Carter (1982) and Desmond Howard (1991) and Northwestern's Lee Gissendaner (1992).

Former Buckeye Grant Lands HC Job At St. Vincent-St. Mary

Former Buckeye cornerback Doran Grant was named the new head coach at Akron St. Vincent-St. Mary, his alma mater, on Dec. 14.

Grant, who started 30 games for Ohio State from 2011-2014 and was a team captain on the Buckeyes' most recent national championship team in 2014, previously served as defensive coordinator at Elyria (Ohio) Catholic, where he was part of a staff that also included former Ohio State offensive lineman Chase Farris and quarterback Troy Smith, who served as head coach and offensive coordinator, respectively. Prior to that role, Grant spent 2022 as defensive backs coach at Pickerington (Ohio) North High School.

St. Vincent-St. Mary athletic director Kyle

Sasala told the Akron Beacon Journal that it was these coaching experiences, coupled with his extensive Buckeye and professional career – where he spent four seasons on NFL practice squads before playing in the Canadian Football League – that made Grant a home-run hire.

"He has a wealth of experience," Sasala said. "Through his playing time here at St. Vincent-St. Mary, the college realm and being in a few different schools leading up to his time here, we're super excited about him coming back here. He's coming back home, as I like to say.

"He's a St. V guy. He understands our traditions. He understands the St. V way. Even though he graduated (from) St. V, he's stayed connected ever since he left."

Grant is taking over for longtime Irish head coach Terry Cistone, who retired this offseason after 42 seasons at the position. Despite having large shoes to fill, the former Buckeye said he is more than ready to take on the challenge and lead the program to new heights.

"Pressure is like hype," Grant said. "I don't think it's real unless you make it real. I understand where St. Vincent-St. Mary has been these last several years. I get it. I'm not going to say it's pressure, but it's responsibility. Who better to do it than myself? I'll be honest, it's more responsibility than it is pressure."

Guiton Hired As New Wisconsin WRs Coach

Grant is not the only ex-Ohio State player

to earn a coaching promotion this winter. Former Buckeye quarterback Kenny Guiton was named the next wide receivers coach at Wisconsin on Dec. 26.

Guiton will now serve on head coach Luke Fickell's staff after he played under the Columbus native from 2009-2013 at Ohio State. Fickell was also Guiton's head coach in 2011, but he did not appear in a game that season.

Guiton brings a strong coaching résumé to Wisconsin, having spent the last three seasons as Arkansas' wide receivers coach, and even assuming offensive coordinator duties for the last four games of this season after the program fired head play-caller Dan Enos. Guiton has nine total seasons of coaching experience under his belt, also serving as an assistant at Houston (2015-18), Louisiana Tech (2019) and Colorado State (2020).

Guiton will take over for former Wisconsin wide receivers coach Mike Brown, who accepted the same role at Notre Dame on Dec. 18. The former Ohio State quarterback will look to elevate a Badgers wide receiver room that had just one player – Will Pauling – record over 500 total receiving yards this season.

Four Lose Black Stripes During Cotton Bowl Practice

A quartet of Buckeyes became "official" members of the team since Buckeye Sports Bulletin went to press, including freshman safety Cedrick Hawkins in addition to a trio of walk-ons in cornerback Dianté Griffin, safety Ryan Rudzinski and tight end Jace Middleton.

Middleton lost his black stripe on Dec. 16. He joined the team this summer out of Lewis Center (Ohio) Olentangy after spending a season with Ohio State's baseball team.

Hawkins also lost his black stripe on Dec. 16. A former four-star prospect, the safety failed to see any action on the field as a true freshman this season, although he is expected to make a larger push to play in 2024.

Once the Buckeyes arrived in Arlington, Texas, both Griffin and Rudzinski lost their black stripes following a practice on Christmas. Griffin, the grandson of Ohio State football legend and two-time Heisman Trophy winner Archie Griffin, earned the distinction after spending two seasons with the program as a walk-on.

The Lima (Ohio) Senior product has yet to see the field for the Buckeyes since joining the program in June of 2022, but he did show promise in high school at cornerback, breaking up five passes and forcing a fumble during

his senior season in 2021.

Rudzinski, a true freshman walk-on and Columbus native, came into the program as an unranked prospect but did shine at the high school level as a two-way player, racking up 89 tackles and 10 interceptions as a safety, while also earning 2,098 all-purpose yards as a quarterback, wide receiver and kick/punt returner.

Like Griffin, Rudzinski also comes from a Buckeye family. His father, Jerry Rudzinski, played linebacker at Ohio State from 1994-1998 and served as a team captain as a senior on the 1998 team that went 11-1 and won Big Ten and Sugar Bowl championships.

Bosa, Ward Selected To NFL Pro Bowl

A pair of former Ohio State standout defenders were both recognized for their strong 2023 seasons in the NFL on Jan. 3 when Nick Bosa and Cleveland Browns cornerback Den-

zel Ward were selected as two of 88 players to represent their teams in the 2024 Pro Bowl.

Bosa will represent the NFC and the 49ers for the fourth time in his five-year NFL career, while Ward made his third Pro Bowl with the Browns and will play for the AFC.

Bosa, who was also selected as a starter and earned the most votes out of all NFL defensive linemen, had another spectacular season for San Francisco. After taking home the AP NFL Defensive Player of the Year Award last year – and earning a lucrative five-year, \$170 million extension that made him the highest-paid defensive player in league history before the 2023 season started – he started 17 regular-season games for the 49ers this season and totaled 10 ½ sacks, 53 tackles (16 for loss), 35 quarterback hits and a fumble recovery.

Bosa also gained the opportunity this season to reunite with former Ohio State teammate and fellow defensive end Chase Young,

who was traded to the franchise from the Washington Commanders on Nov. 1. Together, the tandem helped wreak havoc on the edge and led the 49ers to a No. 1 overall seed in the NFC and become the No. 3 scoring defense in the league at 17.5 points per game.

Like Bosa, Ward also put up gaudy numbers for the playoff-bound Browns in his sixth season with the franchise. Playing in 13 games, the former consensus All-American and first-team All-Big Ten Buckeye registered 34 tackles (one for loss), two interceptions and a forced fumble on the year, helping a dominant Browns defense finish the regular season ranked 14th in the NFL in points allowed per game.

The 2024 Pro Bowl Games will be held in Orlando, Fla., throughout the first week of February, starting with a skills showdown on Feb. 1 and followed by the Pro Bowl Games Championship flag football game on Feb. 4. Both events will be televised live on ESPN.

From The Pages Of BSB

40 Years Ago — 1984

The previous year's Fiesta Bowl proved to be a showcase for a then little-known Oklahoma freshman running back named Marcus Dupree. The swift former Sooner rushed for 239 yards on just 17 carries as his club ended up losing to Arizona State, 32-21.

Perhaps the most recent edition of the Fiesta Bowl, played on Jan. 2, 1984, introduced some of the nationwide television audience to the abilities of Ohio State sophomore tailback Keith Byars.

Byars, who rushed for 1,126 yards and a 5.4-yard average during the regular season and averaged 16.1 yards on 21 receptions, did not post the flash rushing numbers that Dupree did. But he turned in a solid effort, rushing 15 times for 73 yards (4.9 average) and a touchdown, grabbing two passes for another 21 yards and returning a kickoff for a touchdown as the Buckeyes defeated Pittsburgh, 28-23.

35 Years Ago — 1989

Fear of the unknown is a common human trait. But for Ohio State coach Gary Williams and his Buckeye basketball team, not knowing what lay ahead in the Big Ten season didn't appear that frightening.

Williams took stock of his team's chances in the 1989 Big Ten race following a 73-70 win over Wisconsin on Jan. 7.

"The last two years we've started the Big Ten season 0-2 and 0-3 and this year we're 1-1, so we're improving," Williams said. "This is the earliest we've ever been at .500 in the Big Ten, so I like that."

30 Years Ago — 1994

One was going and one was staying.

Just days after the Buckeyes defeated Brigham Young in the Holiday Bowl, 28-21, on Dec. 30, defensive tackle Dan Wilkinson could not hold his breath any longer. Word of his decision to turn pro became public even before a scheduled press conference.

"I pretty much knew this is what I'd do all year," he told BSB. "I knew if I didn't get injured and had a pretty good season I'd be ready. There was no question in my mind."

Many figured junior wide receiver Joey Galloway would join Wilkinson, but during his address, Galloway announced the unexpected. Dressed casually and seated alone without a written statement, he unveiled his thought process.

"I had an opportunity to go home and meet with my parents, sit down and weigh both sides of the decision," he said. "I think I'm in a great situation, since if I decided to come out there's a lot of money out there, and I think I could be very successful in the NFL. Also, this is a great place to play football, as everyone that's around here knows.

"It's a great place and hard to leave. Therefore, I've decided to return for my senior season."

25 Years Ago — 1999

Ohio State Buckeyes made its case for at least a piece of the national championship in the Sugar Bowl. It was too bad, though, the jury never got a chance to deliberate on the matter.

No. 3 Ohio State stopped Texas A&M 24-14 in the Sugar Bowl on Jan. 1, then held its breath as the nation's top two teams, Tennessee and Florida State, battled it out in the first-ever Bowl Championship Series title game in the Fiesta Bowl.

A shaky Florida State win might have opened the door for Ohio State (11-1) to back-door its way to at least a piece of the school's first national championship in 30 years. But that did not

happen as unbeaten Tennessee (13-0) cruised to a 23-16 win over the Seminoles (11-2) on Jan. 4 to stake its claim as the nation's undisputed champion.

"I think it all depends on what happens Monday night in the Fiesta Bowl," OSU coach John Cooper said after his team's win. "If Tennessee wins, I don't have an argument."

20 Years Ago — 2004

Mark Snyder couldn't help but feel a little tinge of déjà vu.

In 1996, after Snyder spent five years on the defensive coaching staff at Youngstown State, head coach Jim Tressel promoted him to the defensive coordinator position. Fast-forward to 2004 and move the venue to Columbus. When Tressel needed a new defensive coordinator after his third season at Ohio State, he chose a familiar face.

Snyder took over for Mark Dantonio, who left the Buckeyes for the head coaching job at Cincinnati. Although Ohio State had a larger nationwide following than Youngstown State, the Penguins set their standards extremely high by winning three Division I-AA national championships during Snyder's stay.

"It's an interesting feeling," Snyder said when asked to compare how he felt in 1996 with his mind-set now. "I guess I kind of feel the same. I mean, I know we're going to continue to do the things we've been doing.

"There really isn't any more pressure that I feel here than I remember feeling at that time. I don't believe I've ever felt anything other than a pressure to win wherever I've coached."

15 Years Ago — 2009

Considering that the Jan. 5 Fiesta Bowl loss to Texas was the last game for 28 seniors, including 11 that started at least one game this year, the Ohio State football team knew that turnover would be a major part of its offseason.

But just three days after that loss at the hands of No. 3 Texas, the Buckeyes found out that the retooling process would go deeper than replacing just those players who had exhausted their eligibility when star tailback Chris "Beanie" Wells declared he would skip his final season to enter the NFL draft.

Wells was just the first of a handful of Buckeyes who could call it a day in favor of chasing NFL dreams, and his departure was not a surprise given that many draft analysts expected the 6-1, 237-pound tailback to be chosen in the top half of the first round of April's NFL draft.

"This has been a difficult decision, but in the best interest of my family, I have decided to enter my name into the 2009 National Football League draft," Wells said in a statement. "I want to thank my teammates, my coaches, my teachers and the academic advisors for all they have done, and I definitely want to thank the Buckeye fans for all their sport.

"Ohio State has become like a family to me, and it will always be that way."

10 Years Ago — 2014

For the second time in as many series, Braxton Miller lay on the Sun Life Stadium field, clutching his side while being attended to by Ohio State trainers.

Nearby on the Buckeyes sideline, wide receiver Corey "Philly" Brown expressed his dismay, running back Carlos Hyde removed his jersey and shoulder pads and wideout Chris Fields headed to the locker room.

This wasn't the storybook ending to the season that any of them imagined. To be honest, Miami wasn't even where they

wanted to be in the first place, with the national championship game being played three days later in Pasadena.

But after a Big Ten Championship Game loss to Michigan State a month prior rerouted Ohio State to the Orange Bowl, the Buckeyes had a shot at redemption and to end the season on a positive note but ultimately found neither in their 40-35 loss to Clemson on Jan. 3.

"The loss is devastating for me," senior left tackle Jack Mewhort said. "I'm going to wake up tomorrow and I'm not going to be these guys' teammate anymore. That's the hardest part for me right now."

Five Years Ago — 2019

As head coach Urban Meyer celebrated on the field following Ohio State's 28-23 Rose Bowl win over Washington, he didn't seem any different than after any other big win in a career that included many. The difference was simply that when he woke up the next day he would no longer be the head coach at Ohio State, for better or for worse.

"This has always been very personal," he said. "I'm from the great state of Ohio, and I'm very proud of my state. I've been a Buckeye fan as long as I can remember.

"And I operated – it's not healthy all the time – but I operated under the sense of fear. When I would see our former players come around this program – and you know I was in the elevator yesterday with Archie Griffin, a dear friend, and John Cooper is a dear friend, and we lost Coach (Earle) Bruce recently and Jim Tressel is a dear friend of mine – and I just felt an obligation to not let them down."

Whether his coaching career was really over, nobody could know for sure. But his time as the head coach in Columbus was over, and Ryan Day found himself hitting the ground running after the win. For one night at least, though, Day was still Meyer's employee, and the Buckeyes wanted to celebrate one last win.

"There's a lot to go through and the focus is all about winning this game," Day said, "because if you don't do that, then you don't do a service to Coach Meyer and the seniors and this team."

One Year Ago — 2023

With Ohio State trailing Georgia 42-41 in the Peach Bowl on Dec. 31 with just under a minute remaining, long snapper Mason Arnold delivered the ball to holder Jesse Mirco, who spun the laces out as kicker Noah Ruggles approached. His right foot connected with the ball and sent it careening into the air, more reminiscent of a knuckleball than a technically sound, end-over-end kick, and it was at that moment that the ball dropped.

Ruggles' kick sailed left, landing closer to the pylon in the left corner of the end zone than it did the field-goal post, while the other ball – that being the nearly six-ton Times Square Ball in New York – dropped simultaneously, meaning that Ruggles' shank brought in perhaps the worst new year imaginable for the Buckeyes.

The miss left just three seconds remaining on the clock, and the celebration ensued for the defending national champions, surviving by the skin of their teeth as Ohio State's season came to a sudden and unthinkable end.

"It came down to one play," Day said. "It wasn't just the last play. There were a lot of plays in the game that you wish you had back as coaches and players. That's what happens in a game like this."

Changes In Store After Loss To Missouri

Continued From Page 1

season that he fell back into old habits.

"The first half of practice I was (hands off), and then before you knew it I was down there where I was most of the year last year," Day said. "I'm trying to do more of that the best I can and see it all. We actually have some technology where we're able to watch practice on a little bit of an iPad and then watch it. I was able to do a little bit of that and kind of bounce around a little bit. So the more I can do that, I think the better right now in spring."

While Hartline did get a stab at play-calling during the spring, there was little evidence that experiment continued into preseason camp, as neither Day nor Hartline would confirm who had their hand on the wheel. But in media interviews with Hartline before the Cotton Bowl, he admitted – while also acknowledging how beneficial a year it had been for him while learning under Day – that Day maintained responsibilities on game day.

"Coach Day is still head man and rolling," Hartline said on Dec. 27. "He's calling plays. Obviously, I'm a big part of that conversation. I would say the biggest role is probably putting it together throughout the week, and how it's called on Saturdays, that's Coach Day."

"I'm sure it will continue to grow. Coach Day can answer more of that for

you. I think the adjustments we make at halftime, the talking we're having between series and really during the series at times, I'm a big part of that. We really put it together, and then he calls it on Saturdays."

Despite talk ahead of the season that Day would try to take more off his plate, it instead sounded like it was fuller than ever as one of the few veteran voices among the team's offensive coaches, not to mention a head coach's usual responsibilities surrounding recruiting and now the transfer portal and name, image and likeness throwing another wrench into a bloated calendar.

But a new offensive voice at Ohio State who can take a load off Day and open him up to address wider aspects of the team – mainly how to improve in the trenches and get back to winning championships and beating Michigan – could be just what Day is looking for entering his most pivotal offseason yet with the Buckeyes.

If Day wants a firsthand account of this style of coaching and management leading to success, look no further than the coach on the opposing sideline during the Cotton Bowl. Missouri's Eliah Drinkwitz, in his fourth season with the Tigers, led them to an 11-2 season – the same record as Ohio State, though it came with a much different feeling – after making what he considered a significant change for this



SONNY BROCKWAY

DECISIONS, DECISIONS – Ohio State head coach Ryan Day faces an important offseason for the Buckeyes as he balances his involvement with the offense with wanting to be more involved with other parts of the team.

season in giving up his own play-calling responsibilities.

"I wasn't doing the best I could for our football team," Drinkwitz said on Dec. 28 during a press conference with Day. "We have a sign in our building that says, 'Do your job. Put the team first. Embrace your role. Put the team first.' I wasn't doing that. I wasn't embracing my role as the head coach. I was trying to hold on to my ego of being the play caller."

"I needed to step back and say, the job as a head coach is to build this team, empower other people to do their jobs and really build connections amongst our players from player to player, coach to player and from our team to our university and community."

"It begins with investing in your guys. I didn't have the time I needed to do that, so that became my mission: How could I support our strength and conditioning athletic performance? How could I be around our players more? How could I engage our coaches more in a real way? How could I engage our players more in a real way to create a more connected team?"

"It really just came down to me being more of living my integrity, not just talking about it but being about it and putting the

team first and embracing my role as the head coach."

Whether that future is in store for Day is up for debate, but what is not in question is that there will be changes at Ohio State this offseason.

Three consecutive losses to Michigan are a difficult pill for any Buckeye coach to swallow – and one that few have survived, at least long term – and building toward a successful 2024 season is paramount considering the talent expected back for Ohio State, not to mention that a new athletic director will be on the scene this summer.

Given all that, the next few months and leading into next season are among the most important for Day since he took over as head coach, and he's only concerned about one thing when it comes to what this transformational period might look like for Ohio State.

"I've got to really evaluate it the right way and make sure I'm doing it the right way," Day said, "and do what's appropriate and best for the program."

Dissatisfied 2021 Recruiting Class Looking For More

The changes that Day does or does not make for Ohio State are ultimately up to

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him, but what may make things easier for the Buckeyes next season is how many draft-eligible players decide to come back for one last season in Columbus.

As Buckeye Sports Bulletin went to press – ahead of the Jan. 15 deadline for underclassmen to declare for the NFL draft – junior defensive linemen Jack Sawyer and Tyleik Williams had already announced their return for their senior seasons, and if Sawyer’s comments after the Cotton Bowl are to be believed, they may not be the last ones from the 2021 recruiting class who have thoughts of coming back.

“You know, I think a lot of us all are on the same page about how we don’t want to end our Ohio State careers like this,” he said. “Two tough losses. We all love it here. We love Coach Day. We love the staff. Sometimes, unfortunate things happen and you don’t get the outcome you want. I think it’s going to play a big decision and big factor in our decisions.”

It’s a class that has provided no shortage of highlights for Ohio State. Featuring the likes of Sawyer and Williams in addition to wide receivers Marvin Harrison Jr. and Emeka Egbuka, defensive end J.T. Tuimoloau, cornerbacks Denzel Burke and Jordan Hancock, running back TreVeyon Henderson, and offensive lineman Donovan Jackson – plus defensive tackle Mike Hall Jr., who declared for the draft Dec. 30 – several will go down as greats for the Buckeyes.

But even though the group provided plenty of counting statistics and big wins

over their three years – at least so far – at Ohio State, the group has also been unable thus far to meet any of the Buckeyes’ three goals going into a given season: beat Michigan, win the Big Ten and win the national championship.

The third-year players have gone winless in three tries against the Wolverines – twice in Ann Arbor and one humiliating loss in Columbus – with each loss knocking the Buckeyes out of contention for the conference title. Losses to Michigan also helped to eliminate Ohio State from the College Football Playoff contention in 2021 and this past season, but even with a shot at the College Football Playoff in 2022, the group still came up short against Georgia.

So with plenty of individual accolades with All-American and All-Big Ten recognitions and some even greater accomplishments for Harrison in the form of a Biletnikoff Award and a fourth-place finish in the Heisman Trophy voting, the group as a whole has little to show beyond their 33-6 record over the last three seasons. It’s something that weighs on them when debating whether to return for another season.

“I guess it is a big part of it,” Burke said on Dec. 12. “My class – no Gold Pants, no Big Ten (championships). That plays a big part in it.”

That is a sentiment shared by many of his classmates, who Hancock said are each approaching things in a similar manner.

“It’s a group decision,” Hancock said

on Dec. 12. “We all want to win. So we’re all talking to everybody. Everyone’s situation is different, but we’re all talking to each other.

“It weighs a lot,” he added. “You know, it could be underwhelming, coming in here with a great class. My class was outstanding – a lot of future players who are going to play on Sunday. It’s just we kind of want something to show for when we all graduate, and we’re just stuck in between. So we just were talking to each other, communicating with each other.”

But while each player has a common bond in playing for Ohio State and coming to Columbus in the same recruiting class, not every decision is made equally. A return for someone like Burke or Tuimoloau may not do much for their draft stock since some already consider them first- or second-round talent, though a return for Jackson – a projected fourth-round pick – could do wonders for his stock.

Regardless of what each player decides, though – whether it’s joining the growing chorus of Buckeyes set on another year or departing for the draft – their teammates are going to support everyone’s decisions.

“Our class was pretty good coming in,” Jackson said on Dec. 12. “So, of course, we’ve talked about it – playing, not playing (in the Cotton Bowl), coming back, not coming back. By the end of the day, everyone has their own path. You know, everyone has their own responsibilities to do. Whatever the individual chooses, I’m going to be happy for them – proud of them – regardless.”



SONNY BROCKWAY

RELOAD THE CLIP – Several juniors have already announced their intent to return for their senior seasons at Ohio State, and others such as cornerback Jordan Hancock could be joining them shortly.

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Kienholz Takes Big Stage After Brown Injury

Going into the Cotton Bowl against Missouri on Dec. 29, the main storyline was Devin Brown as the new starting quarterback. Kyle McCord started all 12 regular-season games this year for the Buckeyes, and while Brown had limited work – mostly running read options in the red zone – there was the question of how he would handle the spotlight as the starter.

GAME NOTEBOOK Greg Wilson

Early in the game, Missouri brought a lot of pressure at him, forcing errant throws, scrambles and sacks, something that would be a theme throughout the entire game. On one of those sacks, Brown was hit and twisted down to the ground, a cleat getting caught on the turf at AT&T Stadium as he was falling, turning his left ankle.

After the play, he came up hobbling and attempted to stay in the game, though it didn't last long with him taking a big hit on another sack that ultimately would be the last time he saw the field before true freshman Lincoln Kienholz took over in the 14-3 loss. Brown finished with just 20

yards passing, completing four out of six throws, leading the only Buckeye possession that turned into points on a Jayden Fielding field goal with 3:12 left in the first quarter.

"We play sort of a barbaric, contact, rough, rugged sport," wide receiver Xavier Johnson said. "Sometimes that comes with the game. I wish (Brown) could have been out here and show what he was showing us at practice. The man that he was, the player that he was, the growth that he had this month off. My heart aches for him, but there's no doubt in my mind that Devin is going to be a great quarterback."

While Kienholz ended up throwing 17 passes in the game, it didn't seem like there was much trust in what the freshman was able to do with his arm given he did not have much time to get acclimated before being thrown into a bowl game in a top-10 matchup. Johnson, a sixth-year wideout who caught Kienholz' first completion of the game, said they believed in the young quarterback but became one-dimensional because they needed to get some offense going.

"Did we have any doubt in Lincoln, or any doubt in his talents? No," Johnson said after the game. "But in order to try to get some momentum going, we kind of were one-dimensional. I'm proud of Lincoln for the way he fought and the way he stepped up on a big stage and he didn't bat an eye.



SONNY BROCKWAY

FIRST SHOT — It was a night to remember for true freshman quarterback Lincoln Kienholz, who was forced to step into the Cotton Bowl following an injury to Devin Brown. Kienholz finished 6 of 17 passing for 86 yards.

There was a lot of pressure."

Kienholz said he felt he was prepared for the game and it didn't move too fast for him.

"It wasn't really that fast, honestly, because I go against the best defense every day in practice," he said. "I think the Missouri coaches were trying to speed me up, give me some zero looks, but other than that it was just another game. The big thing for me is you just have to slow down, focus on my mechanics and trust my eyes."

Kienholz didn't crumble under the pressure, but he didn't play particularly well, either. He completed only six of his 17 passes, throwing for 86 yards, and he failed to put any points on the board, though he didn't have much time to throw the whole night since the defense brought so much pressure, and got home once with a sack.

"Lincoln got put into a tough spot there to say the least," head coach Ryan Day said. "I thought he battled his tail off. Clearly, we didn't help him up front, didn't run the ball well enough. It's hard to get much of an evaluation coming out of the game when you can't get any balance. I felt like we could have helped him in certain areas, and we didn't."

New-Look Offensive Line Breaks Down

After starting the same five offensive lineman for every game in the regular season, offensive line coach Justin Frye's unit had a surprising change in the Cotton Bowl with Matt Jones at center and Enokk

Vimahi sliding in at right guard. Redshirt freshman Carson Hinzman had started every game at center for the Buckeyes, but he was on the sideline in Arlington.

"I don't want to get too much into it, but Carson was having a tough time the past couple weeks in practice, and we felt like this was the right thing to do at the time," Day said. "It's not that Carson won't ever play here again, but based on the last couple weeks of play, the decision was made that Matt gave us the best chance at center."

The new-look offensive line struggled the entire game, putting together one of the worst performances of any Ohio State line in recent memory. Missouri was bringing pressure all game, and it was something the unit couldn't handle.

"They were doing a great job bringing a lot of pressure from all over the place," Johnson said. "It ended up kind of giving us some trouble. We were trying to get some plays up, and the lack of time – every time you don't have time to throw the ball, or something doesn't have time to develop, that's an issue."

The Tigers were creative with the ways they were going after the quarterback, and it worked all night. They finished the game with four sacks, 10 tackles for a loss and eight quarterback hurries, forcing two fumbles along the way. Day was candid about the offensive line and the impact that had on the offensive performance as a whole.

"There was some zero pressure that came, and they were aggressive on (Kien-

Game Analysis

What Worked Well

Missouri quarterback Brady Cook was named the most valuable player on the offense for the Tigers in their 14-3 win over Ohio State in the Cotton Bowl, but his specific outing rarely looked like a dominant one due to the pressure the Buckeyes were throwing at him.

Ohio State was in Cook's face throughout the contest, finishing with six sacks of Missouri's signal caller and three courtesy of junior defensive end Jack Sawyer. It was arguably Sawyer's most dominant outing in three seasons with the Buckeyes, as his three takedowns of Brady tied an Ohio State bowl record, and it shattered his personal record as he had notched a high of only 1½ sacks in two previous games.

In addition to Sawyer, two other defensive linemen – juniors Ty Hamilton and J.T. Tuimoloau – finished with a sack, and the group in total registered the best outing of the season for defensive line coach Larry Johnson's unit with junior Tyleik Williams also totaling four tackles. Cook finished 11 of 18 passing for 128 yards and a touchdown and rushed 19 times for 66 yards, but none of those plays came easy as Sawyer and his fellow juniors made life difficult for Cook and his offensive linemen.

What Didn't Work

Nearly all of Ohio State's troubles in the Cotton Bowl – at least outside of special teams – were due to struggles on the offensive line that had a less-than-ideal cap to an already challenging season. Head coach Ryan Day and offensive line coach Justin Frye opted for a change in the final game of the season, shifting right guard Matthew Jones to center in his final career game and having fifth-year guard Enokk Vimahi step in for just his second career start at right guard. This sent regular center Carson Hinzman to the bench, a move that Day said was because of practice leading up to the Cotton Bowl.

Given that it was the first time this season that starting five had taken the field, it was of little surprise that the unit struggled throughout the contest. Missouri notched four sacks in the win and 10 tackles

for loss, making a living in Ohio State's backfield. It led to an early set of hits on quarterback Devin Brown that eliminated him from the game, and the quality of play did not improve once true freshman signal caller Lincoln Kienholz was thrown into the mix. Most of the issues came from blitzes and pass rushers sneaking around the edge, but there was plenty of open territory in the interior as left guard Donovan Jackson, Jones and Vimahi ceded their share of big defensive plays.

The offensive line also failed to find a rhythm in the rushing game. The Buckeyes averaged only 2.9 yards per attempt, and leading rusher TreVeyon Henderson had just 72 yards on 19 attempts (3.8 yards per rush) after totaling 39 yards in the first quarter. Penalties also remained an issue, with both tackles – Josh Simmons on the left and Josh Fryar on the right – hit with false-start flags, a troubling trend throughout the season that continued in the Cotton Bowl.

Play Of The Game

Either of Missouri's 7-yard touchdowns in the fourth quarter – running back Cody Schrader's rush with 14:55 left or Luther Burden III's reception from Cook with 5:12 left – would qualify as a big play, but perhaps the biggest shift in the game came on a big play by Missouri late in the third quarter.

Facing first-and-10 from their own 35-yard line, the Tigers provided the longest play of the game for either team when Cook hit wide receiver Marquis Johnson for a 50-yard gain, the longest play allowed this season by Ohio State. Cornerback Denzel Burke got lost in coverage as Johnson sneaked down the sideline, with fellow cornerback Jordan Hancock also trailing behind the play, and Johnson got Missouri down to Ohio State's 15-yard line. Then, after a penalty on each team over the next two plays and an 8-yard rush by Cook to end the third quarter, Schrader scored the Tigers' first touchdown of the game, one that turned out to be enough for victory over the Buckeyes. It was arguably the most exciting play of the contest outside of the scoring plays, and it doubled as the first major strike from either team, one for which Ohio State did not have a response.

— Braden Moles

holz),” Day said. “But in the run game, we have a young kid and you have to be able to run the football and take some pressure off of him, and we didn't do that well enough in order to win the game.”

Sawyer Ties OSU Bowl Sack Record

In the latter half of Ohio State's regular season, junior defensive end Jack Sawyer started to get into the backfield much more often than he was early on in the year, and he continued to show that dominance in the Cotton Bowl against Missouri.

The defense as a whole played a strong game for three quarters, and Sawyer led the charge, holding an offense that averaged 34.1 points per game to zero points in 45 minutes of action, which was the first time that had happened to Tigers head coach Eliah Drinkwitz since he arrived at Missouri.

“The defense played plenty good enough,” Day said. “They played their tails off and ran out of gas a little bit down the stretch, but to give up 14 points and 331 yards – they played great, good enough to win. We just couldn't put it together on offense, and that's the story of the game.”

Sawyer finished the game with four tackles, three of them sacks, tying an Ohio State record for a bowl game, and setting a career high for himself in the process. After the Buckeyes took a 3-0 lead into the half, he opened the second half with a 9-yard sack on the first play.

“Hell of a game,” linebacker Steele Chambers said. “He's just a competitor. He's a guy the entire team rallies around and a guy that everyone listens to. I know he played his ass off. I'm just upset we couldn't get it done for him and the team.”

Even though Sawyer played well, he was still focused only on the outcome of the game after it came to an end and didn't have anything to say about tying the Ohio State record for sacks in a bowl game.

“I'm not even really thinking about that right now,” Sawyer said. “I'm just upset about the game. I wanted to send the seniors out the right way, and we put so much work into it. It's tough when you don't get the outcome you want.”

But even with the impressive performance, Sawyer was not satisfied. He announced on Jan. 5 that he would return for his sneier season with the Buckeyes, but immediately after the Cotton Bowl, it sounded like he already knew what direction he was leaning.

“I think a lot of us all are on the same page about how we don't want to end our Ohio State careers like this with two tough losses,” Sawyer said. “We all love it here. We love Coach Day. We love the staff. Sometimes unfortunate things happen, and you don't get the outcome you want, and I think that's going to play a big factor in our decisions.”

Ohio State's Defense Wears Down Late

Missouri came into the game with a top-25 scoring offense, and a well-rounded one at that, with quarterback Brady Cook presenting a threat through the air and on the ground, wide receiver Luther Burden III displaying the talent of a future NFL wide receiver, and former walk-on Cody Schrader, who had run for almost 1,500

yards through 12 games.

Through three quarters of football, Ohio State shut out Missouri, forcing eight punts through the first 45 minutes of the game.

“We were just playing good ball,” Chambers said. “Everyone was playing well. The defensive line was getting after the quarterback, (defensive backs) were batting down balls with good coverage then just a couple plays here and there open it up. Then you have to have a bend-don't-break mentality. I feel like we didn't really show that once they got into the red zone.”

When the Tigers got the ball back with 4:25 remaining in the third, it looked like it would be more of the same since they were pinned on their own 5-yard line, their worst starting field position of the day. However, Missouri drove 95 yards in just eight plays to score the first touchdown of the game, helped along by a 50-yard completion from Cook to wide receiver Marquis Johnson to get into the red zone.

Schrader ended up breaking through for the Tigers, running 7 yards up the middle for the first touchdown of the game on the first play of the fourth quarter.

After Ohio State was forced to punt for the eighth time, Missouri was yet again stuck inside its own 10-yard line but for the second straight drive got out of bad field position and drove down the field for a touchdown. Cook fired a pass up the middle to Burden for the 7-yard score to

make the game 14-3, capping off the 13-play, 91-yard drive.

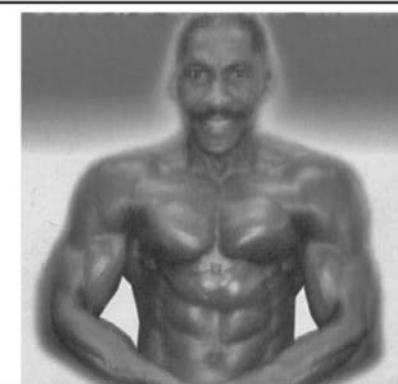
Missouri didn't exactly dominate possession time in the game, having the ball for 33:53 to 26:07 for Ohio State, but the Buckeyes' lack of extended drives didn't give the defense much of a break between its own drives, which ultimately led to defensive coordinator Jim Knowles' unit wearing down as the game dragged on. The offense had only two drives that lasted longer than four minutes and six that took less than two minutes. Chambers didn't use that as an excuse and said they could still improve.

“No matter how good you play, there's always room for improvement,” Chambers said. “We have to trust our coaches and we have to trust each other throughout four quarters of an entire game. We just have to do better on all cylinders.”

Despite the two touchdowns they gave up in the fourth quarter, there was still a feeling coming out of the game that the defense did as much as it could have against a solid offense. It was yet another game where the defense was relied on to win, and in most cases, it had come through, even if it fell short this time around. Chambers said the Cotton Bowl shows that the Buckeyes' defense is for real and can be even better when next season comes around.

“It's potential,” Chambers said. “That's a hell of an offense we played. We gave up 14 points and still didn't play our best ball.

I attribute that to Coach Knowles and all the preparation he puts in. I attribute that to guys like Jack, J.T. (Tuimoloau), Cody (Simon), (Davison Igbinosun). Everyone on that defense comes in day in and day out and works their ass off.”



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OSU Ends Disappointing Season With Whimper

By **CRAIG MERZ**

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

Undermanned and overwhelmed, Ohio State finished the 2023 season on a dour note with a sluggish 14-3 loss to Missouri in the Cotton Bowl at AT&T Stadium in Arlington, Texas, on Dec. 29.

With the Buckeyes' season-long starting quarterback Kyle McCord nowhere in sight and second-stringer Devin Brown injured in his first career start, freshman Lincoln Kienholz got little help from a porous offensive line as the Buckeyes (11-2) gained a miserly 203 total yards and could muster only a 44-yard field goal by Jayden Fielding in the first quarter.

Those points were enough to carry a 3-0 lead into the fourth quarter, but as in the 30-24 loss to Michigan on Nov. 25, the defense finally wore down with the game on the line and couldn't get the stops when absolutely needed.

Missouri (11-2) took a 7-3 lead on a 7-yard run by Cody Schrader five seconds into the fourth quarter, and Luther Burden III's 7-yard catch with 5:12 remaining sealed the win. The drives were 95 and 91 yards, respectively, and the Buckeyes had no answers before a pro-Missouri crowd of 70,114.

The Buckeyes were without McCord, who transferred to Syracuse, and receiver Marvin Harrison Jr., who opted not to play and is expected to be a high first-round pick in the 2024 NFL draft after finishing fourth in Heisman Trophy voting. Also, linebacker Tommy Eichenberg was injured and did not play.

Brown suffered an ankle injury and was replaced early in the second quarter by Kienholz, who for the season had completed 4 of 5 passes for 25 yards coming into the game. He was 6 of 17 for 86 yards and was sacked once against Missouri while Brown was 4 of 6 for 20 yards and was sacked three times.

Nothing To It

The Buckeyes punted the first two times they had the ball but on the third series took a 3-0 lead on a 44-yard field goal by Fielding at 3:12 of the first quarter.

Ohio State won the field-position battle to set up the score. The Buckeyes started from their 47 after a 61-yard punt by Jesse Mirco pinned the Tigers at the 10. A 43-yard punt by Riley Williams followed a three-and-out.

TreVeyon Henderson opened the scoring drive with rushes for 20 and 7 yards before Brown took a 4-yard sack and came up limping. On the next play, his pass to Carnell Tate on third down went for 4 yards, and Brown hobbled off the field before Fielding's kick.

On the next Ohio State series, Brown was strip-sacked for 7 yards but recovered his own fumble at the Ohio State 8 on third down, forcing a punt, and he soon after headed to the locker room to be examined.

A series later, after a 59-yard Mirco punt, Missouri took over at its 32. Quarterback Brady Cook gained 12 and 1 yards on consecutive runs and Schrader ran for 7 yards to the Ohio State 48, but an incompletion led to a fifth Missouri punt.

After an exchange of punts, the Buckeyes



SONNY BROCKWAY

RUNNING OUT OF STEAM — Ohio State running back TreVeyon Henderson provided the few highlights for the offense in the Cotton Bowl, rushing for 72 yards on 19 carries.

got the ball back at their 7 with 1:38 left in the half after a punt to the 14 and an illegal block infraction on Ohio State. Two runs by Henderson lost 6 yards to the 1 with 1:30 to go. On third down, Kienholz kept the ball for 1 yard, but an unsportsmanlike conduct penalty on Missouri put the ball at the 17.

Xavier Johnson ran for 17 on the next play, but three straight incompletions killed the drive, and Mirco punted 45 yards to the 21 with 28 seconds left. Cook ran for 9 yards and completed a 17-yarder to former Buckeye Mookie Cooper to the 47, and a pass to Burden went for 5 yards to the Ohio State 48. Missouri lined up for a 65-yard field goal but took a delay of game penalty, and Cook's long toss was incomplete to finish the half.

Defense ruled the first two quarters. Missouri had 112 yards (84 rushing, 28 passing) while Ohio State had 76 yards (56 rushing, 20 passing). Each team had five first downs and six punts, and they were a combined 1 of 16 on third down, the lone conversion belonging to the Tigers.

No Show

Missouri got the ball to start the second half. The Tigers went three-and-out, and a

38-yard punt and 2-yard return by Jayden Ballard gave Ohio State the ball at its 44. On the first play, Kienholz connected with Johnson for 24 yards to the 32 for his first completion in five tries.

A trick play with receiver Emeka Egbuka throwing to Tate was incomplete. Kienholz ran for 2 yards then threw an incompletion aimed toward Brandon Inniss, and Fielding's 48-yard field-goal try hit the left upright and stayed out to keep the score 3-0.

A Jack Sawyer sack of 8 yards forced the Tigers to punt on their next series, and the stagnant Buckeye offense showed some life. They moved from the 15 to the Missouri 48 with the aid of Johnson's 11-yard run and back-to-back rushes of 8 and 15 yards for Henderson.

That's where the drive died with an incompletion, Johnson's carry for nothing and an incompletion before Mirco's 43-yard punt to the 5 with 4:25 left in third.

With its back against the wall and showing little offense, the Tigers mounted the winning drive that took eight plays and 4:30.

Facing third-and-7 at the 8, Cook spotted Theo Wease Jr. for 7 yards to keep the series going. Schrader peeled off a 10-yard-

er and then, after a false start, got another first down with a 15-yard gain. From the 35, Cook went to Marquis Johnson for 50 yards to the 15. Schrader rushed for 5 yards, and Cook then ran for 8 yards on the final play of the third quarter. Missouri then took a 7-3 lead on a 7-yard run by Schrader on the first play of the fourth quarter.

The Buckeyes went to work from the 25 to try to regain the lead and immediately benefited from a 25-yard catch-and-run by Egbuka. An 8-yarder to tight end Gee Scott Jr. put the Buckeyes on the march at the Mizzou 42.

Henderson picked up a hard yard, and on third down Kienholz kept the ball and went up the middle for 2 yards to the 39 to move the chains, but the drive again fizzled. Kienholz carried for 2 yards, Henderson lost 3 and a short pass to Johnson was broken up. Mirco's 31-yard punt returned the ball to the Tigers at the 9 with 11:22 remaining.

The clinching drive was 13 plays and wiped 6:10 off the clock. A key play was on second-and-16 from the 14 when Cook went to Wease again, this time for 31 yards to the 45.

Critical play No. 2 was Schrader's rush of 8 yards on the next play and another 15 yards tacked on to the 32 for a personal foul against Josh Proctor.

Later, with a fourth-and-1 from the 23 with 6:38 left, Cook pushed his way for 2 yards. Schrader followed with rushes of 11 and 3 yards to set up the 7-yard touchdown pass to Burden for the 14-3 final with 5:12 left.

With the game on the line, the Buckeyes tried to rally. From the 25, Egbuka's 18-yard grab moved the ball to the 43. Egbuka would make a 4-yard reception on fourth-and-1 for a first at the Missouri 44. An offside against Missouri moved the ball forward, but two plays later, Kienholz was sacked for 7 yards. He fumbled, and the Tigers recovered at their 46 with 3:13 left for the last set of downs for the Buckeyes in 2023.

Missouri drove to the OSU 11, aided by a 20-yard run by Burden, and gained 40 yards on the next six snaps with Burden having a 20-yard run to the 11. From there, three kneel-downs lost 3 yards and the game ended with the ball on the 14.

Notes

Ohio State totaled 203 yards (106 passing, 97 rushing), its fewest since gaining 132 yards in its 17-14 loss to Michigan State in 2015. ... Missouri had 203 rushing yards and 128 passing for 331. ... Missouri led in first downs 19-12. ... Ohio State was 2 of 15 on third down, and the Tigers were 4 of 16. ... Each team punted eight times. Mirco averaged 48.2 yards, and Missouri's Riley Williams averaged 40.8 yards ... The Buckeyes had six sacks for 36 yards, led by Sawyer with three for 20 yards. The Tigers' four sacks totaled 19 yards. ... Henderson had 72 yards on 19 carries (3.8 average). ... Egbuka's six catches went for 63 yards. ... Schrader gained 128 yards and a touchdown on 29 attempts (4.4). Cook ran 19 times for 66 yards (3.5). ... The Buckeyes' Cody Simon had a game-high 12 tackles (six solo).

BSB Quotebook: Missouri 14, Ohio State 3

Head coach Ryan Day on how Devin Brown's injury affected the team's offensive scheme: "I felt like (Brown) was going to have nerves early on. I thought we were going to be able to play through it and figure out what that would look like going into the second half. He had a little bit of nerves, but you could see the athleticism. You see him break the pocket. He just missed the throw down the sideline. He missed the screen early on. I feel like he was going to have to play through that a little bit – this is his first start. And then we lose him. We had a lot of things in the game plan designed for his style of play, and we lost him. That was a little bit of a scramble, and we came up short."

Ohio State cornerback Denzel Burke on his reaction to Brown's injury: "It's tough, man. It's part of the game. We had to play a game with a true freshman quarterback who hasn't really gotten many reps, hasn't really been in a game. It kind of just flipped on us. But that's not an excuse. When your name is called, you still have to do your thing. But we didn't finish, we didn't win the game."

Freshman quarterback Lincoln Kienholz on his Cotton Bowl experience: "I think it's an awesome experience just going out there. Playing in the Cotton Bowl is crazy fun. I mean, I think being out there was hard at first, but the experience of playing a lot and just being out there throwing, running a little bit, it just helps me build my platform for the next four or five years."

Day on why he played Kienholz instead of seventh-year quarterback Tristan Gebbia: "We felt like Lincoln had been taking all the backup reps and, moving forward in the future, felt like this was the best thing. Lincoln also gave us a chance a little bit with the zone-read stuff, where that's really not Tristan's game. The game plan had more of that stuff in it, even more than what you saw, because that's what Devin can do. We felt Lincoln could at least do those type of things as opposed to Tristan. That's not really his style of game."

Ohio State wide receiver Xavier Johnson on how Missouri was able to get pressure on the quarterback: "In games when you prepare for a team, especially in bowl games, you see a lot of different things that we don't necessarily account for and they don't necessarily show up on film. They were giving us some different looks. They were doing a great job bringing in a lot of pressure and pressure from all over the place. It ended up giving us some trouble. We were trying to get some plays up, and the lack of time definitely was an issue. Every time you don't have time to throw the ball or something doesn't have time to develop, it is an issue. But I think that we handled it as well as we could."



SONNY BROCKWAY

THANKS, X – Ohio State's loss in the Cotton Bowl was the final career game for wide receiver Xavier Johnson, who has exhausted his eligibility after six years with the Buckeyes.

Johnson on his thoughts as he wraps up his six-year career at Ohio State and where he sees the program going in the future: "I've given a lot to this program, and a lot has been given to me, so I'm incredibly grateful. That's why I'm still (wearing my jersey after the game), really. It's surreal. I don't want it to end, in a way, but I'm thankful. It's kind of well-documented throughout the process. There was a lot of doubt, a lot of hard times, a lot of tears, but when I look back over my career, I just really see the faithfulness of the Lord. I pray that I left something behind – a spirit, a love, whatever that may be. I pray as we move forward that the team continues to grow. There are great leaders in that locker room. I'm not really sad. It's just a tough reality. It's been my life for six years, and I've given

everything I had. I'm eternally grateful for the Buckeyes."

Ohio State linebacker Cody Simon on what worked well for the Buckeyes' defense through the first three quarters: "Whenever we can stop the run, we can always dictate the game. It just got away from us at the end there. We tried to eliminate our penalties. Some penalties got in our way. I love all my guys though. They played their hearts out. It's not the way we want to go out, but I love those guys and we're going to come back next year."

Ohio State linebacker Steele Chambers on how Ohio State's defense can move forward heading into 2024: "There's (room for) improvement everywhere. I mean, no matter how well you play, there's always room for improvement. The defense has plenty to improve upon. But we have to trust our coaches. We have to trust each other throughout four quarters in the entire game, and we just have to do better on all cylinders."

Ohio State punter Jesse Mirco on if his punting performance was a step forward in his development: "Yeah, that was nice, on my end. I got to actually spiral (the ball when I punted) a few times, which is always nice to show what you can do there. Sometimes when you kick a brand-new football, it doesn't come off the foot how you like it. But it was nice tonight to get an opportunity to show what I can do on my end and help out. Because we know field position is pretty important in matchup games."

Missouri head coach Eliah Drinkwitz on how his team was able to pull away from Ohio State in the fourth quarter and come away with the victory: "Tonight was a testament to (the) brotherhood – a bunch of guys who have fought through adversity their entire careers. We're not blue bloods. We're a dirty, hardworking brotherhood that loves each other and fights for each other. We scored 14 points in the fourth quarter. We said, 'We're not giving in. We're faster, stronger, tougher than you are in the fourth quarter. We have an elite edge. And we're not going to be denied.' And now we're the Cotton Bowl champs."

Missouri defensive back Jaylon Carlies on if he thought the Cotton Bowl meant more to the Tigers than Ohio State: "Most definitely. We've been doubted for a long time since I've been here. Ohio State has always been at the top of the ranks for a long time throughout the years in college football. Mizzou has always been on the down end of SEC play. This means a lot. It's an improvement of the staff of where we were supposed to be and where we are now."

The Numbers Game

Missouri 14, Ohio State 3

Dec. 29, 2023 - AT&T Stadium, Arlington, Texas

| Score by Quarters | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | F |
|-------------------|---|---|---|----|----|
| MISSOURI | 0 | 0 | 0 | 14 | 14 |
| OHIO STATE | 3 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 3 |

First Quarter

OSU - Fielding, 44-yard field goal, 3:12.

Fourth Quarter

MIZ - Schrader, 7-yard rush (Mevis kick), 14:55.

MIZ - Burden, 7-yard pass from Cook (Mevis kick), 5:12.

Att. - 70,114

Weather - Indoor, 72 F

Team Statistics

| | MIZ | OSU |
|--------------------------|---------|---------|
| First Downs | 19 | 12 |
| Rushing | 13 | 6 |
| Passing | 5 | 5 |
| Penalty | 1 | 1 |
| Rushes-Yards | 53-203 | 33-97 |
| Passing Yards | 128 | 106 |
| Passes (Comp.-Att.-Int.) | 11-18-0 | 10-24-0 |
| Offensive Plays | 71 | 57 |
| Total Net Yards | 331 | 203 |
| Third Down Efficiency | 4-16 | 2-15 |
| Fourth Down Efficiency | 3-3 | 1-1 |
| Punts-Avg. | 8-40.8 | 8-48.2 |
| Fumbles-Lost | 1-0 | 2-1 |
| Penalties | 7-40 | 8-57 |
| Time of Possession | 33:53 | 26:07 |

Individual Statistics

RUSHING (Att.-Net Yds.) - MIZ: Schrader 29-128; Cook 19-66; Burden 1-20; Team 4-(-11). **OSU:**

Henderson 19-72; Johnson 5-35; Kienholz 6-2; Brown 3-(-12).

PASSING (Comp.-Att.-Int.-Yds.-TD) - MIZ: Cook 11-18-0-128-1. **OSU:** Kienholz 6-17-0-86-0; Brown

4-6-0-20-0; Egbuka 0-1-0-0-0.

RECEIVING (Rec.-Yds.) - MIZ: Wease 4-43; Burden 3-15; Cooper 2-18; Johnson 1-50; Norfleet 1-2.

OSU: Egbuka 6-63; Johnson 2-31; Scott Jr. 1-8; Tate 1-4.

PUNTING (No.-Avg.-Long) - MIZ: Williams 8-40.8-49. **OSU:** Mirco 8-48.2-61.

PUNT RETURNS (No.-Yds.) - MIZ: Abrams-Draine 1-1. **OSU:** Ballard 1-2.

KICKOFF RETURNS (No.-Yds.) - MIZ: None. **OSU:** None.

FUMBLE RECOVERIES (No.-Yds.) - MIZ: Moore 1-0. **OSU:** None.

INTERCEPTIONS (No.-Yds.) - MIZ: None. **OSU:** None.

SACKS (No.-Yds.) - MIZ: Carnell 1-7; Walker 1-7; Carlies 1-4; Robinson 1-1. **OSU:** Sawyer 3-20;

Tuimoloua 1-7; Hancock 1-6; Hamilton 1-3.

TACKLES FOR LOSS (No.-Yds.) - MIZ: Newson 2.5-7; Robinson 2-3; Walker 1.5-8; Carnell 1-7;

Carlies 1-4; Williams 1-3; Hicks 1-1. **OSU:** Sawyer 3-20; Hamilton 2-4; Tuimoloua 1-7; Hancock 1-6; Burke 1-1.

TACKLES (Solo-Asst.-Tot.) - MIZ: Carlies 8-3-11; Newson 8-2-10; Williams 2-3-5; Abrams-Draine

2-2-4; Hicks 1-3-4; Johnson 3-0-3; Carnell 3-0-3; Norwood 2-1-3; Williams 2-1-3; Robinson 2-0-2; Walker

1-1-2; Haddy 1-0-1; George Jr. 0-1-1; Charleston 0-1-1. **OSU:** Simon 6-6-12; Chambers 5-3-8; Igbinosun

5-2-7; Hamilton 3-3-6; Proctor 2-4-6; Burke 5-0-5; Styles 3-2-5; Sawyer 4-0-4; Tuimoloua 1-3-4; Williams

1-3-4; Hancock 3-0-3; Hall Jr. 2-1-3; Ballard 1-0-1; Jackson Jr. 0-1-1.

PLAYERS IN THE GAME - MIZ: Wease, Cook, Burden, Cooper, Tollison, Schrader, Delgado, Johnson,

Foster, Membou, Forfleet, Jernigan, Carlies, Norwood, Carnell, Newson, Walker, Charleston, Hicks,

Williams, Robinson, Abrams-Draine, Manning, Miller, Blood, Johnson, Hibbler, Clarke, Burks, Gaddy,

Norris, Wayne, McNeil, Roche, Willims, Kreh, Hayes, Johnson, Moore, Le Blanc, Flint, Heismeyer, Wilson,

Walters, Peat, Stephens, Muckey, Harris, Landry, Mevis, Bauer, Williams, George Jr. **OSU:** Thurman,

Tate, Egbuka, Henderson, Brown, Jones, Vimahi, Fryar, Simmons, Jackson, Scott Jr., Igbinosun, Burke,

Chambers, Simon, Sawyer, Proctor, Tuimoloua, Hall Jr., Styles, Hancock, Williams, Johnson, Inniss, Hicks,

Kienholz, Simpson-Hunt, Baudo, Mirco, Jones, Fielding, Styles Jr., Ferlmann, Lomonico, Montgomery,

Hamilton, Hinzman, Walker, Stover, Ransom, Hart, Adolph, Ballard, Kanu, Malone, Jackson Jr.

Season Statistics

| 2023 Game-By-Game | | | |
|-------------------|-----------------------|-------------|---------|
| Date | Opponent | Result/Time | Crowd |
| Sept. 2 | (3) at Indiana | W, 23-3 | 50,050 |
| Sept. 9 | (5) YOUNGSTOWN STATE | W, 35-7 | 102,897 |
| Sept. 16 | (6) WESTERN KENTUCKY | W, 63-10 | 100,217 |
| Sept. 23 | (6) at Notre Dame (9) | W, 17-14 | 77,622 |
| Oct. 7 | (4) MARYLAND | W, 37-17 | 104,974 |
| Oct. 14 | (3) at Purdue | W, 41-7 | 57,319 |
| Oct. 21 | (3) PENN STATE (7) | W, 20-12 | 105,506 |
| Oct. 28 | (3) at Wisconsin | W, 24-10 | 76,453 |
| Nov. 4 | (3) at Rutgers | W, 35-16 | 53,703 |
| Nov. 11 | (3) MICHIGAN STATE | W, 38-3 | 105,137 |
| Nov. 18 | (3) MINNESOTA | W, 37-3 | 104,019 |
| Nov. 25 | (2) at Michigan (3) | L, 30-24 | 110,615 |
| Dec. 29 | (7) vs. Missouri* (9) | L, 14-3 | 70,114 |

*Cotton Bowl

OSU's gameday AP ranking is in parentheses before the opponent, while the opponent's ranking is after the name.

Team Statistics

| | OSU | Opp |
|-------------------------|--------|--------|
| First Downs | 275 | 203 |
| Rushing | 91 | 88 |
| Passing | 161 | 95 |
| Penalty | 23 | 20 |
| Average Per Game/Rush | 138.8 | 119.5 |
| Average Per Game/Pass | 269.1 | 145.9 |
| Total Offense | 5303 | 3450 |
| Total Plays | 831 | 828 |
| Average Per Game | 407.9 | 265.4 |
| Average Per Play | 6.4 | 4.2 |
| Penalties-Yards | 74-579 | 62-529 |
| Fumbles-Lost | 10-6 | 11-4 |
| Third Down Efficiency | 72-165 | 54-189 |
| Percentage | 44% | 29% |
| Fourth Down Efficiency | 10-18 | 16-32 |
| Percentage | 56% | 50% |
| Sacks-Yards | 28-180 | 23-140 |
| Time Of Possession Avg. | 29:25 | 30:34 |

Score

| By Quarters | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | OT | Tot. | Avg. |
|-------------|----|-----|-----|----|----|------|------|
| Ohio State | 81 | 120 | 103 | 93 | 0 | 397 | 30.5 |
| Opponents | 27 | 38 | 31 | 50 | 0 | 146 | 11.2 |

Individual Statistics

| Rushing | Att. | Net | Avg. | TD | Long |
|---------------------|------------|-------------|------------|-----------|-----------|
| T. Henderson | 156 | 926 | 5.9 | 11 | 75 |
| Chip Trayanum | 85 | 373 | 4.4 | 3 | 40 |
| Xavier Johnson | 28 | 190 | 6.8 | 0 | 27 |
| Miyan Williams | 49 | 158 | 3.2 | 3 | 12 |
| Dallan Hayden | 19 | 110 | 5.8 | 1 | 19 |
| Evan Pryor | 19 | 49 | 2.6 | 0 | 6 |
| Marvin Harrison Jr. | 2 | 26 | 13.0 | 1 | 19 |
| Emeka Egbuka | 5 | 25 | 5.0 | 0 | 9 |
| Devin Brown | 22 | 23 | 1.0 | 1 | 8 |
| Jesse Mirco | 1 | 2 | 2.0 | 0 | 0 |
| Lincoln Kienholz | 6 | 2 | 0.3 | 0 | 2 |
| Cody Simon | 1 | -3 | -3.0 | 0 | 0 |
| Kyle McCord | 32 | -65 | -2.0 | 0 | 9 |
| Team | 6 | -11 | -1.8 | 0 | 0 |
| OSU Totals | 431 | 1805 | 4.2 | 20 | 75 |
| OPP Totals | 452 | 1553 | 3.4 | 6 | 45 |

| Passing | Comp. | Att. | Pct. | Yds. | TD-INT | Effic. |
|-------------------|------------|------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|--------------|
| Kyle McCord | 229 | 348 | 65.8 | 3170 | 24-6 | 161.6 |
| Devin Brown | 16 | 28 | 57.1 | 217 | 2-1 | 138.7 |
| Lincoln Kienholz | 22 | 45.5 | 111 | 0-0 | 87.8 | |
| Emeka Egbuka | 0 | 1 | 0.0 | 0 | 0-0 | 0.0 |
| Team | 0 | 1 | 0.0 | 0 | 0-0 | 0.0 |
| OSU Totals | 255 | 400 | 63.8 | 3498 | 26-7 | 155.2 |
| OPP Totals | 198 | 376 | 52.7 | 1897 | 9-7 | 99.2 |

| Receiving | Rec. | Net | Avg. | TD | Long |
|---------------------|------------|-------------|-------------|-----------|-----------|
| Marvin Harrison Jr. | 67 | 1211 | 18.1 | 14 | 75 |
| Cade Stover | 41 | 576 | 14.0 | 5 | 49 |
| Emeka Egbuka | 41 | 515 | 12.6 | 4 | 28 |
| Julian Fleming | 26 | 270 | 10.4 | 0 | 37 |
| T. Henderson | 19 | 229 | 12.1 | 0 | 65 |
| Carnell Tate | 18 | 264 | 14.7 | 1 | 55 |
| Xavier Johnson | 13 | 178 | 13.7 | 0 | 40 |
| Gee Scott Jr. | 10 | 70 | 7.0 | 1 | 14 |
| Chip Trayanum | 9 | 53 | 5.9 | 0 | 19 |
| Miyan Williams | 4 | 42 | 10.5 | 0 | 27 |
| Jelani Thurman | 2 | 18 | 9.0 | 0 | 14 |
| Patrick Gurd | 1 | 9 | 9.0 | 0 | 9 |
| Joe Royer | 1 | 5 | 5.0 | 0 | 5 |
| Evan Pryor | 1 | 2 | 2.0 | 0 | 2 |
| Dallan Hayden | 1 | -2 | -2.0 | 0 | 0 |
| Brandon Inniss | 1 | 58 | 58.0 | 1 | 58 |
| OSU Totals | 255 | 3498 | 13.7 | 26 | 75 |
| OPP Totals | 198 | 1897 | 9.6 | 9 | 50 |

| Scoring | TD | EPK | EPR | EPRC | FG | PTS |
|---------------------|-----------|--------------|-----|------|--------------|------------|
| Jayden Fielding | - | 49-50 | - | - | 16-20 | 97 |
| Marvin Harrison Jr. | 15 | - | - | - | - | 90 |
| T. Henderson | 11 | - | - | - | - | 66 |
| Cade Stover | 5 | - | - | - | - | 30 |
| Emeka Egbuka | 4 | - | - | - | - | 24 |
| Chip Trayanum | 3 | - | - | - | - | 18 |
| Miyan Williams | 3 | - | - | - | - | 18 |
| Josh Proctor | 1 | - | - | - | - | 6 |
| Gee Scott Jr. | 1 | - | - | - | - | 6 |
| Jordan Hancock | 1 | - | - | - | - | 6 |
| Tyleik Williams | 1 | - | - | - | - | 6 |
| Dallan Hayden | 1 | - | - | - | - | 6 |
| Devin Brown | 1 | - | - | - | - | 6 |
| Brandon Inniss | 1 | - | - | - | - | 6 |
| Carnell Tate | 1 | - | - | - | - | 6 |
| J. Mathews Jr. | 1 | - | - | - | - | 6 |
| OSU Totals | 50 | 49-50 | - | - | 16-20 | 397 |
| OPP Totals | 15 | 14-14 | - | - | 14-20 | 146 |

| FG Distance | 0-29 | 30-39 | 40-49 | 50+ | Total |
|-------------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|--------------|
| Jayden Fielding | 5-5 | 6-6 | 5-8 | 0-1 | 16-20 |
| OSU Totals | 5-5 | 6-6 | 5-8 | 0-1 | 16-20 |
| OPP Totals | 5-6 | 2-3 | 4-6 | 3-5 | 14-20 |

| Punting | No. | Yds. | Avg. | Bk | Long |
|-------------------|-----------|-------------|-------------|----------|-----------|
| Jesse Mirco | 49 | 2141 | 43.7 | 0 | 72 |
| OSU Totals | 49 | 2141 | 43.7 | 0 | 72 |
| OPP Totals | 75 | 3167 | 42.2 | 0 | 71 |

| Interceptions | No. | Yds. | Avg. | TD | Long |
|----------------------|----------|------------|-------------|----------|-----------|
| Jordan Hancock | 2 | 133 | 66.5 | 1 | 93 |
| Jermaine Mathews Jr. | 1 | 58 | 58.0 | 1 | 58 |
| Josh Proctor | 1 | 24 | 24.0 | 1 | 24 |
| Lathan Ransom | 1 | 15 | 15.0 | 0 | 15 |
| Denzel Burke | 1 | 0 | 0.0 | 0 | 0 |
| Steele Chambers | 1 | 0 | 0.0 | 0 | 0 |
| OSU Totals | 7 | 230 | 32.9 | 3 | 93 |
| OPP Totals | 7 | 53 | 7.6 | 0 | 19 |

| Punt Returns | No. | Yds. | Avg. | TD | Long |
|-------------------|-----------|------------|-------------|----------|-----------|
| Jayden Ballard | 9 | 49 | 5.4 | 0 | 18 |
| Emeka Egbuka | 7 | 23 | 3.3 | 0 | 8 |
| Julian Fleming | 1 | 3.0 | 3.0 | 0 | 3 |
| OSU Totals | 17 | 75 | 4.4 | 0 | 18 |
| OPP Totals | 11 | 136 | 12.4 | 0 | 35 |

| Kickoff Returns | No. | Yds. | Avg. | TD | Long |
|-------------------|-----------|------------|-------------|----------|-----------|
| Xavier Johnson | 11 | 250 | 22.7 | 0 | 32 |
| Chip Trayanum | 1 | 14 | 14.0 | 0 | 14 |
| Caden Curry | 1 | -5 | -5.0 | 0 | 0 |
| OSU Totals | 13 | 259 | 19.9 | 0 | 32 |
| OPP Totals | 14 | 251 | 17.9 | 0 | 30 |

| Def. Leaders | Solo | Asst. | Tot. | TFL-Yds. | Sacks |
|-------------------|------|-------|------|----------|-------|
| Steele Chambers | 41 | 42 | 83 | 1.5-3 | 0-0 |
| Tommy Eichenberg | 41 | 41 | 82 | 2.5-8 | 1.0-7 |
| Davison Igbinosun | 39 | 20 | 59 | 1.5-4 | 0-0 |
| Cody Simon | 24 | 33 | 57 | 3.0-6 | 0-0 |
| Sonny Styles | 32 | 21 | 53 | 4.5-13 | 2.0-6 |
| Tyleik Williams | 20 | 33 | 53 | 10.0-19 | |

McCord's Transfer Surprises His Teammates

By **PATRICK ENGELS**

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

Just nine days after Ohio State's season-defining 30-24 loss to Michigan, starting quarterback Kyle McCord sent shockwaves through Columbus and the entire college football landscape, announcing on Dec. 4 that he intended to transfer from the program and suit up for another school for his senior season.

"I'm extremely thankful for my time at Ohio State," he wrote on Twitter on Dec. 4. "Playing in the scarlet and gray was truly an honor. I'm grateful for all of the lifelong relationships I've made along my way here in Columbus. My teammates, my brothers, I'm appreciative for each and every one of you ... With that being said, I've decided to enter the transfer portal and explore other opportunities."

McCord's decision comes after the junior started all 12 regular-season games for the Buckeyes after sitting behind current Houston Texans quarterback C.J. Stroud in 2021 and 2022. He put together a strong statistical season, completing 65.8 percent of his passes (229 of 348) and ranking second in the Big Ten in passing yards (3,170) while throwing just six interceptions and leading Ohio State to a 11-1 regular-season record and top-seven finish in the College Football Playoff rankings.

But his relative inconsistency – and ultimately his two-interception performance in the loss to Michigan – cast a stain on an otherwise solid year, prompting the first-year starter to face criticism from fans and media throughout the season, while also causing head coach Ryan Day on Dec. 3 to remain noncommittal on naming him the starter for 2024, though it's possible Day knew at that point that McCord intended to transfer.

"That's kind of a long way away right now," Day said when asked if McCord was the starting quarterback for next season. "We're going to get back to work here. ... You know, I can't sit here and tell you I know for sure about any of those things right now."

The details of what compelled McCord – who committed to Syracuse on Dec. 17 – to finish out his collegiate career elsewhere are still unknown. But the quarterback's choice, one which he called "a business decision" for both sides, to leave Day and Ohio State after three seasons with the program left many who suited up with him in the Scarlet and Gray this season searching for answers.

"I wish the best of luck to Kyle," sophomore quarterback Devin Brown said on Dec. 12. "That's one of my closest friends, and I hope he does big things. It definitely caught me off guard. I wasn't expecting anything, so it was definitely a shock."

"I found out through Twitter," senior offensive lineman Josh Fryar said that same day. "I was surprised, too. I didn't know what to think about it. That's really all I can say about it."

McCord's decision to transfer may have sent players like Fryar into a frenzy after finding out through social media, but many of his other teammates said they heard the

news straight from the source himself. Defensive lineman Tyleik Williams – who announced on Jan. 3 that he is returning for his senior season at Ohio State – told the media on Dec. 12 that he was a part of a group of Buckeyes whom the starting quarterback brought together and delivered the news to, a conversation that helped lessen the shock when McCord publicly announced his transfer.

"He told us, I think, two days before it happened," Williams said. "We already knew it was going to happen. It was a couple of guys in the locker room. He told us that he was going to explore other opportunities. And we fully respect him. He's going to make his own decision, so we can't change that."

Aside from Fryar, it is unclear which players were and were not part of this meeting and which were left out. But regardless of how they heard the news, the consensus at the Woody Hayes Athletic Center is that they are fully supportive of their former quarterback's decision and, most of all, appreciative of the efforts he gave to this program for three seasons.

This sentiment starts at the top with Day. The head coach was asked by the media on Dec. 20 to evaluate the way both he and McCord handled the situation. While the coach declined to get into specifics regarding the types of conversations he had with his former quarterback, he was quick to offer his gratitude and respect to McCord, whom he watched develop into an eventual starter in three seasons.

"I'm just going to keep the conversation private," Day said. "I don't think it serves anybody well. I think Kyle was very well respected here. We wish him nothing but the best. He played some good football here. He spent three years here and made a lot of relationships. He's committed to another school now, and he'll do well there, he will. I don't think it's worth getting into it all right now. But I certainly wish him nothing but the best of luck, because a lot of guys in that room care about him a lot."

Day's feelings trickled down to the players, especially those who knew and were around the quarterback the most. Stand-out wide receiver Marvin Harrison Jr., who entered the program with McCord after spending three previous seasons with him at St. Joseph's Prep in Philadelphia, said he will have fond memories of playing football with McCord at both the high school and collegiate level. Harrison added that the many moments he spent with McCord both on and off the field allowed him to build a close friendship with his quarterback and gain respect for him as both a competitor and human being.

"I wish him nothing but the best," Harrison said on Dec. 7. "It's been great having him for these past three years in college and three years in high school together. He's a guy that, if I always wanted to throw some routes with, it will always be with him. I'm just so proud of him for all that he's been through and how he overcame all the adversity that he's had, dealing with injuries and things like that."

"Our relationship goes beyond football. That's one of the guys that I'll remember

for my life just as a friend more than anything, and I'm super proud of him. I wish him nothing but the best, but I'm definitely sad to see him go."

Fellow receiver Emeka Egbuka, who was roommates with McCord during their freshman seasons, also extended significant praise to his quarterback. He said that while McCord's departure from the program stung, he felt confident that his now-former teammate would make the right decision for both him and his family and be able to thrive in a new environment.

"Kyle is one of my best friends," Egbuka said on Dec. 12. "So in that regard, it kind of hurts to see him go. But on the other side, I'm so excited for him. He's going to have an amazing future. He's a competitor. Wherever he goes, he's going to make a direct impact. I couldn't be more happy for him, more excited for him for this step forward. Unfortunately, he won't be able to play with me. That kind of sucks because he's one of my best friends. I think he's a great quarterback. But I'm just super excited for him."

He credited Ohio State's successes this past season to McCord, who, in Egbuka's eyes, helped elevate the play of the Buckeye offense.

"People can say what they want about Kyle," Egbuka said. "We went 11-1. We had a great season. Unfortunately, we lost to The Team Up North, but you can't really discredit the things that he did. We had a Biletnikoff winner (in Harrison). You can't just have that with a terrible quarterback."

Both Egbuka and Harrison lauded McCord's impact on the field, but his teammates also made note of his ability to thrive off the gridiron, specifically with the way he dealt with adversity and – most of all – criticism from fans and media all season.

Defensive end Jack Sawyer – who has also received his fair share of flak from the Buckeye faithful during his career – acknowledged on Dec. 12 that being Ohio State's starting quarterback comes with a lot of pressure and baggage, a reality that he feels McCord was successfully able to navigate this season.

"I really felt bad for him, how he was treated after those games," Sawyer said. "I don't think it was fair. I understand that at Ohio State, the quarterback's expected to win games. And I don't think, at all, it was his fault that we lost that game in Ann Arbor. It was unfair, definitely. I love Kyle to death. I wish him nothing but the best. I just think it was unfortunate the way he ended his career here."

"I think he handled it as best as he could, being in that position. At Ohio State, all the eyes are on the quarterback. You're expected to throw for 4,000 yards, 50 touchdowns. It's a lot of pressure. Especially when you're a first-time starter and you're playing on a bad wheel all year, and you're battling through it. You're handling stuff like a professional, like he did all season. It's just hard to see. I feel bad for him as a friend, as a teammate."

"But I know Kyle is going to have success wherever he goes, and I wish him nothing but the best. We're always going to stay in contact."



FILE PHOTO

OFF TO THE ORANGE – The transfer of quarterback Kyle McCord caught several of his teammates off guard when he announced his decision on Dec. 4.

The Buckeyes' comments throughout the last month regarding the transfer of McCord suggest that the quarterback has made a positive impact on the program in his three seasons at Ohio State and will be largely missed by many of his teammates who have evolved into friends. But for those who are still a part of the program, they feel there is no time to dwell on the past.

That mentality was reflected through the program's actions this winter, as, exactly one month after McCord announced his transfer from Ohio State, the Buckeyes found another quarterback to likely replace him in former Kansas State signal caller Will Howard, who committed to play for Day and the Buckeyes on Jan. 4. McCord's presence seems to be missed throughout the program, but those within the Woody Hayes Athletic Center know it is time to quickly move forward and look toward 2024.

"We all wished Kyle the best when he departed," Egbuka said. "But there's no time to be sentimental or sad. It's always the next man forward mentality. And as far as who's going to be at the quarterback position, obviously, the wide receivers don't really have too much to say. That's going to be the coaching staff that does that. But whoever's back there, we know that they will have the ability to get the job done."

Offensive Line Play At Center Of Discussion

By **CRAIG MERZ**

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

An immaculate 75-yard touchdown drive to tie Michigan on its first series of the second half. The left guard stumbling over the leg of the center while pass blocking, helping lead to the game-sealing interception for the Wolverines. Allowing four sacks and the team rushing for only 97 yards for a 2.9 average per carry vs. Missouri in the Cotton Bowl during the 14-3 loss on Dec. 29.

Welcome to the good, the bad and the ugly for the 2023 Ohio State offensive line.

While scorn for a third straight loss to Michigan was directed toward quarterback Kyle McCord, who entered the transfer portal and landed at Syracuse, the main target for derision following the epic failure in the bowl game was the offensive line, which in the view of many Buckeye fans and some media was the culmination of a season of ineptitude.

The overriding feeling is that Justin Frye can neither coach the unit nor recruit for it, Carson Hinzman was a disaster in his first season at center, the rest of the line showed little improvement and the decision by head coach Ryan Day to shuffle the line for the Cotton Bowl, with a first-year quarterback at the helm no less, was curious at best and ill-fated at worst.

All the drama will make for an even longer offseason for those involved. Buckeye Sports Bulletin talked to a pair of beat writers, a former player and a recruiting analyst for their takes on what went wrong, right and what needs to be done looking ahead to the 2024 season.

Perception Vs. Reality

Those looking for Columbus Dispatch reporter Bill Rabinowitz to bury the offensive line, keep moving.

"Probably a C-plus or a C," is what he would give the line for the season.

He thinks the narrative that the line isn't tough is "B.S." to clean up his words, but his preseason concern that the offensive line was the biggest question mark proved to be accurate.

Marcus Hartman of the Dayton Daily News and a former BSB staff writer believes the line was above average the second half of the season but its problems were due in part to the replacements when running back TreVeyon Henderson was injured not being fast enough to the gaps, and McCord lacked the leadership needed to inspire the group protecting him.

Frye's inability to get a five-star commit in his two cycles with the Buckeyes has also drawn scrutiny.

"If you're not going to be able to coach up lower-rated guys and you can't recruit the higher-rated dudes, then you have a problem," Buckeye Scoop recruiting analyst Bill Greene said. "You either have to coach up what you have, or you've got to recruit higher."

But former Buckeye All-American guard Kirk Barton (2003-07), co-founder of Buckeye Scoop, said it's all about systems and coaching, not a number attached to a name.

"We just watched Michigan kick the s-t out Alabama," he said in reference to the



FILE PHOTO

NO HELP — Ohio State's offensive line struggled throughout the Cotton Bowl, allowing four sacks and 10 tackles for loss as Matthew Jones shifted from right guard to center and Enokk Vimahi started at right guard.

Wolverines' national semifinal win. "They had like 60 three-stars on their roster, and 'Bama had like 60 five-stars. You have to remember who assigns the stars — a lot of these guys are nerds, they've never coached, they've never played."

Of note, all interviews were done prior to the news on Jan. 6 that former Crimson Tide offensive lineman Seth McLaughlin, who started 25 games at center for Alabama over the past three years, announced his transfer commitment to Ohio State

McLaughlin (6-4, 305) started all 14 games this season. His last game against Michigan in the College Football Playoff may have been his worst with numerous poor snaps, but he had earned the trust of Crimson Tide coach Nick Saban, so that should be worth something.

He might be the Buckeyes' answer at center but could also play at guard.

Wypler-Lashed

So, how did it get to the point that the offensive line was the albatross?

Those interviewed agreed the woes began when the Buckeyes lost three linemen to the 2023 NFL draft: Paris Johnson Jr. went sixth overall to the Arizona Cardinals, and the Cleveland Browns tabbed Dawand Jones in the fourth round (111th) and Luke Wypler in the sixth (190th). Johnson and Jones were All-Americans, and Wypler was an All-Big Ten honoree.

The Buckeyes reconfigured the line and began the season with returning starters Donovan Jackson and Matthew Jones at left guard and right guard, respectively, the sophomore Hinzman at center, transfer Josh Simmons at left tackle and fourth-year Josh Fryar at right tackle. Jones has exhausted his eligibility, but Jackson has not announced whether he will return for 2024.

Logic would suggest that the departures of Johnson and Jones created the largest void, but the unexpected move by Wypler was the biggest of the many blows.

"Look who they lost? They lost three NFL players," Rabinowitz said. "They lost Paris Johnson. They lost Dawand Jones, who started for the Browns this year, so you lose your tackles, and they lost Luke Wypler. Losing Luke Wypler is a really underrated

thing because it forced them to play Carson Hinzman. If they didn't have that happen it's a different team.

"Nobody talks about losing Luke Wypler. That was a huge loss, a loss they weren't counting on."

Hartman said former offensive line coach Greg Studrawa was not a great recruiter, so the cupboard was getting bare even before Wypler's move.

"Luke Wypler going pro just really screwed them," Hartman said. "I mean, there's no way around it. That was obviously a bad decision. It was a decision that made no sense when he did it, and it didn't work out for him because he got drafted later than I'm sure he expected."

"They weren't ready to not have him and they would have probably won the national championship if Luke Wyler doesn't go pro because that would have made the offensive line slightly better, which make the quarterback's job easier. Everything else comes into focus."

Barton said the Buckeyes never overcame Wypler's departure. The staff knew there was the likelihood of Johnson and Dawand Jones opting for the NFL but were blindsided by Wypler.

"This room was decimated in an advanced way because we had three guys leave early," Barton said. "And that's never happened in history of Ohio State football in the offensive line room. I don't know how many times it's happened in the history of college football for another line that was so good to have three guys go pro early, and two of them are third-year guys."

"Luke Wypler was the guy that I knew he was leaving in the middle of last year, but I don't think the staff did and that was kind of shocking because imagine this line if we had Luke in the middle of it between (Donovan) and Matt and they've got those veterans."

What Worked

To the all-knowing social media, the offensive line was the worst in the history of college football. Yes, there were plenty of disappointing performances, but the Buckeyes did put up 24 points on a stout Michigan defense and engineered a do-or-die

drive to win at Notre Dame.

Jackson was all-conference first team, and Jones made the second team in voting by the coaches and media. Fryar was on the media's first team.

"I think that Simmons has improved as the year went on," Rabinowitz said. "He still had his penalties, but he showed a lot of potential, a lot of talent. He got better. Donovan Jackson is an above-average player. I don't think he played great, but he's still a good player. Matt Jones was very solid at right guard. Josh Fryar is a guard. I don't think he's a tackle. I don't think he has quick enough feet. If you move him inside, I think he can be OK."

"Carson Hinzman's trouble. There's no getting around it at center. He didn't play in the Cotton Bowl, so that tells you something."

Barton agrees that Fryar is better suited elsewhere.

"Josh Fryar, I think is going to move to right guard next year," Barton said. "But you know, he was all-Big Ten on the media's first team yet everyone says he sucks. Matt Jones was good and Donovan Jackson was OK, although I don't think he lived up to how good he's supposed to be because I do think he's got first-round talent."

"The only guy that never really looked good at all to me was Hinzman, the center, and he's just physically not big enough. But I'll give him a pass on that because you never really want to play a redshirt freshman and he was small for a redshirt freshman."

Barton said it was unfortunate that Hinzman's season will be remembered for two things: tripping up Jackson on the play that led to Kyle McCord's pick vs. Michigan and being benched for the Cotton Bowl.

"Carson struggled at times," Barton said, "That Michigan game at the end when he trips Donnie and gives them the pressure on the last pass was tough, and our fans are kind of nasty towards our players when we lose, which is to be expected."

"But I think we've got a lot of talent. That's the thing that kills me is people saying that everybody, all these guys, all suck. I genuinely think that we have a talented room."

The Drive

If there was a drive that showed the potential of what Barton was saying, it was the Buckeyes' opening series of the third quarter in Ann Arbor. Michigan had just extended its lead to 17-10 when the Buckeyes got the ball on the 25 at the 11:43 mark.

The storyline of the past two seasons was the Buckeyes were a soft program and got kicked around by more physical Michigan teams. While directed to the team in general, most criticism landed on the offensive line.

The issue reached a boiling point for Day after the last-second win at Notre Dame with his infamous rant against Lou Holtz for his challenging the Buckeyes' toughness.

"That's bulls-t. I mean, I'm sorry, they're tough," Rabinowitz said. "First of all, these fans criticizing their toughness couldn't last 10 minutes in a workout."

"They're trying. It's not a matter of toughness, it's a matter of talent and execution. I

just think the toughness excuse is a cop-out. Now, if you say the team's not tough enough to get third-and-1s consistently? OK, but to say they are weak physically or mentally? No."

Now, this was a chance in Michigan Stadium to put up or shut up. The drive started ominously when McCord was sacked for 3 yards and Buckeye fans worldwide went, "Uh, oh. Here we go again."

But over the next 11 plays, Ohio State bullied its way 78 yards for the tying score, with the last eight plays on the ground starting from the U-M 46 going as such: Henderson rushed for 4, 5 and 3 yards. Chip Trayanum ran for 12, 6, and 5 yards to the 11. Henderson then got 8 yards before scoring from the 3.

"That was incredible as far as moments of the season go," Hartman said. "They go down and tie the game and then you think 'Wow, if they get a stop here, they could just take over the game from here on out.' And that's the most incredible narrative you can imagine for this game, that all of a sudden, they have the better offensive line and the defense did its job and then the offensive guys were just able to excel. That was like a Hollywood script."

Of course, it didn't work out that way, and Michigan responded with a go-ahead touchdown and the Buckeyes played catch-up the rest of the way. But for a few fleeting moments the offense was in high gear and Michigan could do nothing.

"That was crazy," Hartman said. "They got things right. They had them. They were calling those inside runs that sometimes they, maybe, didn't call enough, and they were working and you had them hitting the hole with different backs."

"That was kind of what it was supposed to be all year and was about the only drive where it really looked like that."

Rabinowitz said that series summed up the season.

"At times they looked good," he said. "There was the one drive against Michigan, their first drive of the second half. They ran right down the field on them but it wasn't consistent throughout the year."

Hartman blames Day for the inconsistency.

"Running the ball is much easier for the young guys to build confidence because linemen don't like to pass block, they love to run block and they like to be physical," Hartman said. "Something that Michigan is great about is that they run the ball a lot and they're not always huge gainers, especially early in the game, but it's like the running game is a boxing match or a UFC fight where the cumulative damage that you inflict on people, it adds up."

"By the time they're in the fourth quarter, those guys (on defense) can barely walk because they're getting hammered. And that's something that you get when you run the ball. I think Ryan, one of his issues is sometimes he goes away from the run too quickly because he doesn't get an explosive gain or they might only get 2 yards and then they turn into Texas Tech and just run the chuck-and-duck offense where you throw it all the time."

Group Effort

As much as Hartman criticized Day, he acknowledges the coach had a plan to run more but execution was a problem.

"The tight ends were an abject, 100 percent, complete disaster in blocking, which prevented them from doing what they wanted to do," Hartman said. "They wanted to be a more traditional Jim Tressel play downhill offense, make life easy on the quarterback, and the blocking wasn't near good enough to do that. Aside from that they also wanted McCord to just be Craig Krenzel, who didn't do anything spectacular but didn't do anything wrong either and he wasn't that at all."

The running backs other than Henderson were to blame as well, especially when he was out of the lineup because of an injury.

"I thought there were a lot of plays where you could say, 'Man, it looked like there was a hole there and the running back didn't get to it' or he got to it a half a step slow," Hartman said. "When he came back, that pretty much confirmed it because he was hitting the hole faster."

A bigger problem affecting the entire offense was a lack of an authoritative voice. Hartman said the team needed a leader like former quarterback J.T. Barrett, and Barton said an offensive line needs players who can inspire but also offer constructive criticism. He assumed that role in 2007 after the Buckeyes' devastating 41-14 loss to Urban Meyer's Florida Gators in the previous season's national championship game.

"My senior year I had to be a more vocal guy in that room. My first three years I didn't have to say anything because we had good veteran captains like Troy Smith. Nick Mangold, our center was a captain," Barton said. "I just went about my business, doing my thing, but when I became a senior, basically all my friends were gone. We lost a ton of experience on offense."

"I was pretty hard on guys. I'm not going to lie. I was pretty nasty and some guys didn't like it. But I didn't care because like I told them, 'I'd rather be feared than liked.' I just wanted to set the tone that we're going to be a blue-collar, we're going to be a chain-gang mentality. We're not going to be white-collar. We're not going to be flashy."

Hartman said the Buckeyes needed a winner take-all mentality from a leader or leaders.

"They needed an ass kicker at quarterback," he said. "They either needed ass kickers on the offensive line or at quarterback. They didn't have either. One of them needed to pick up the other one, and they didn't aside from the Notre Dame game-winning drive, which people have pointed out, there were a couple of near disasters even on that drive."

Hartman said McCord had to take charge.

"You needed a little more chutzpah from the quarterback," Hartman said. "If that's as good an offensive line as he was going to have, they weren't good enough. There were times where he just needed to say, 'I don't care. I'm the quarterback. I'm going to get it done here' and he didn't do that."

Bowled Over

Day made a change for the Cotton Bowl when he replaced Hinzman with Jones and put senior Enokk Vimahi at right guard.

With McCord out of the picture, redshirt freshman Devin Brown started, but he was forced out of the game early in the second quarter with an ankle injury. Freshman Lincoln Kienholz took over and was just as

ineffective. The Buckeyes couldn't create running lanes or pass block and totaled just 203 yards for the game.

"I think their decision to bench Carson was curious, but I get it because he did develop the yips during practice where he couldn't snap the ball," Barton said. "It was just kind of like a mental block. That happens sometimes. I think Corey Linsley had that before, and it's like when a catcher can't throw the ball back to the pitcher."

"I think Carson's got a really bright future. I think he's a kid that he cares. He's prideful, but yeah, he was a redshirt freshman."

Rabinowitz wondered about the switches as well.

"If Enokk Vimahi is planning on coming back for an extra year, then it makes sense because maybe that's who you play next year at guard," he said. "If he's leaving, I'm not sure it does. I don't know that. Maybe it was intended to be a wake-up call for Carson Hinzman."

Barton criticized the coaches for not replacing Vimahi because he appeared overmatched against the Tigers.

"I was just surprised they didn't get him out of there," Barton said, "because he clearly wasn't ready to go and he was struggling."

Hartman questioned why the coaches waited until the Cotton Bowl to move Hinzman off center. As for the game, "I'm guessing that the No. 1 issue in the Cotton Bowl was they had no idea who they were blocking. Sometimes you look like you're getting overpowered simply because the other guy got the first step on you."

Frye And Future

The Buckeyes need to shore up the offensive line but haven't pulled in the big fish in Frye's tenure. Adding to the woes are exits via the portal of backup center Victor Cutler Jr. and Jakob James. They didn't contribute much this season, but depth continues to be a problem.

Rabinowitz, for his part, does not think Frye is on the hot seat.

"I don't think he is, not as much as other coaches, because he's fairly new and the guys really like him," he said. "The problem is that Justin Frye is the line coach, but he didn't recruit most of these guys and the reason that he's there is because Greg Studrawa wasn't doing a good enough job recruiting so they're trying to make up for lost time."

Five-stars who had Ohio State on their final lists but went elsewhere included Kady Proctor (Alabama commit) and Samson Okunlola (Miami (Fla.)) in the 2023 class and Jordan Seaton (Colorado) and Brandon Baker (Texas) in the 2024 cycle. The last five-star offensive lineman commit was Jackson in 2021 under Studrawa's watch.

The 2024 signees are all three or four stars: Deontae Armstrong (6-6, 280) and Devontae Armstrong (6-5, 297) from Lakewood (Ohio) St. Edward, Ian Moore from New Palestine, Ind. (6-6, 317) and Gabe VanSickle from Coopersville, Mich. (6-5, 283). Greene said whoever is in the trenches, the emphasis has to be on improving the running game.

"If you look at the stats, Ohio State was (87th) in the country in rushing. They averaged 4.2 (yards per rush). The last four years, I think, they were 5.3, 5.1, 6.0 and 5.6. You drop off to 4.2, that's falling off a

cliff," Greene said. "They can't run the ball. Now pass protection was fairly good all year until what we saw (in the Cotton Bowl), that was a jailbreak, so I don't know."

Hartman feels the line has a bright future.

"I know a lot of people are really down on Frye. I think he did a fine enough job coaching them," he said. "I think it's fair to say he needs to do better and more, but it's more important that he needs to recruit better. They had a decent start to that this year, and now he needs to have another good class and then I think things will be going in the right direction. ... I think the offensive line should be a strength next year, assuming Donovan Jackson returns."

Barton is not overly concerned.

"The last time we won a national championship (2014), we started Darrell Baldwin, he was a three-star defensive tackle, and Jacoby Boren was a three-star center and Pat Elflein was a three-star guard," he said. "None of those guys had Alabama offers or Georgia offers or Clemson offers or USC offers, Texas offers."

Hartman said the overall recruiting philosophy needs rethinking because they swing for the fences for five-stars and don't adjust if they don't get them.

"They need to have a better idea of what Plan B is because you can win with a lot of Plan B's," he said.

Final Thoughts

Rabinowitz: "I went into this season thinking the quarterback and the offensive line were the biggest questions, more so of the offensive line. That was the bigger question than quarterback, and that proved to be correct."

"Kyle McCord did OK. He was fine but he wasn't great, and that's why he's not here anymore. But he was certainly above average, especially with the offensive line."

"If you don't have an offensive line, I don't care how good you are. If you don't have an offensive line, you have no chance. It wasn't that bad a line. I'm not going to say it's the worst I've ever seen, but it wasn't up to Ohio State's standards."

Barton on the Cotton Bowl: "I think that something that people haven't talked about enough is that Matt Jones really didn't know the calls in the game. I could tell that, then I got that confirmed that he didn't really know some of the pass protection calls and some of the run blocking calls. It made everything look way worse because he didn't know what to do because he'd never done it before."

"So that's, again, on the coaching staff because if the guy doesn't know the calls it's hard because it makes everything else worse."

Greene on Frye: "Next year, you're probably going to have four of the five starters back. So, with a year's experience, they should be better. Next year will be a real testament to his coaching ability. He's going to have experienced guys back, experience in his system. Next year what they put on the field is going to be pretty telling."

Hartman on the O-line: "I do think that in the second half of the year, it was at least above average. Even in the Michigan game, they weren't bad. I think the coaching staff could have managed things a little bit better and the offensive line could have been better all year."

Trayanum's Touchdown Highlights Top Plays

By **GREG WILSON**

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

It was another unfulfilled season for Ohio State, losing to Michigan for the third straight year and missing out on playing in the College Football Playoff because of it. Even though the Buckeyes weren't able to complete any of the goals they set out to achieve, there was still a large collection of impressive plays to look back on with the season coming to an end.

As Ohio State transitions into the off-season, here are Buckeye Sports Bulletin's rankings of the top 10 plays from this past season, as voted on by the BSB staff.

10. Reverse To Harrison (Michigan State - Nov. 11)

On the first drive of the game against Michigan State, the Buckeyes gained positive yardage on nearly each play, working down the field quickly and also getting help from a pass-interference penalty.

When they got down to the Spartans' 19-yard line, TreVeyon Henderson lined up in the backfield and took off to the left on the snap, faking the handoff from McCord which drew the middle of the defense to that side of the field. By the time the linebackers realized Henderson didn't have the ball, it was too late.

Harrison had already come from the left side of the field and taken the handoff from McCord, weaving through blocked Michigan State defenders to get into the end zone for the first rushing touchdown of his career, to put Ohio State up 7-0.

"We've called that play three times in my career so far, and I've come up short the other two times," Harrison said. "I finally got in the end zone this time, and it was my first rushing touchdown of my career. So that's definitely going to be a special one for me."

9. Harrison's Over-The-Shoulder Grab (Michigan State - Nov. 11)

After the rushing touchdown on the first drive of the game, Michigan State was able to take a drive down to the Buckeyes' 39-yard line, where it missed a 56-yard field goal, putting Ohio State there to start its next drive.

It took only four plays to score again, starting with a 12-yard completion to Cade Stover, a 4-yard rush for Henderson and a 19-yard catch for Stover to get the Buckeyes to the Spartans' 26-yard line. With the ball on the left hash mark, Harrison lined up as the only receiver on the right side of the field, giving him room to work and a safety shading toward him but still in the middle of the field.

Harrison faked a cut to the inside about 10 yards deep and ran a fade route to the outside, creating just enough separation for McCord to get the ball over the top of Spartan cornerback Chance Rucker for an over-the-shoulder grab on the right edge of the end zone for 26 yards. Harrison was able to tap his left toe inbounds and get his entire right foot down while holding on to the ball through a fall to complete the catch.

He finished the game with seven catches for 149 yards, a run for 19 yards and three combined touchdowns while playing just

over one half of football, and he crossed the 1,000-yard receiving mark for the season in this game, making him the only Buckeye receiver to do it twice.

"To be the first-ever to do something in Ohio State history, especially as a receiver, if you know how many receivers have come through this place, that means a lot," Harrison said. "I'm just super blessed."

8. Henderson Goes Big In 2nd Half (Minnesota - Nov. 18)

In the first half against Minnesota, there were questions about whether Ohio State might have been caught looking ahead to Michigan the following week. There was never any real threat to lose to Minnesota, but scoring only 13 in the first half a week after putting up 35 in the same span against Michigan State was somewhat surprising.

Henderson answered early in the second half when he ran 75 yards on the first play of the third quarter for a touchdown, a career-long score. He took a handoff on the right side and made a hard cut back to the left to get around the Minnesota defenders, and he was able to outrun the Gophers' secondary, putting the Buckeyes up 20-0 just 12 seconds into the second half.

"Tre did his thing again today, which was huge," quarterback Kyle McCord said. "He springboarded the momentum in the second half with that big run and getting us going. It doesn't surprise me what he does. The work he puts in is really starting to show."

That was Henderson's last carry of the game, finishing with 146 yards and two touchdowns on 15 attempts while hauling in two catches for 26 yards.

7. Stover Goes Over King (Penn State - Oct. 21)

Ohio State was holding on to a four-point lead with under five minutes remaining in the third quarter against Penn State. With the ball at the Nittany Lions' 39-yard line and just 1 yard needed on second down, the Buckeyes elected to take a shot downfield and sent three pass catchers streaking, one down each sideline and tight end Cade Stover down the middle.

Stover was McCord's first read on the play, and he threw a dart high over linebacker Kobe King, who tried to pick it off, but it was just out of his reach and landed in the extended arms of Stover who fell to the ground, keeping control of the ball for a 30-yard gain.

That play brought the Buckeyes down inside the Penn State 10-yard line, leading to a fourth-and-2 that Ohio State went for but couldn't get into the end zone.

Even though Stover's catch didn't ultimately lead to a score, it was another impressive catch in a season in which he cemented himself as one of McCord's most reliable options when he got into trouble. He finished the game with four catches for 70 yards, the second-leading receiver on the Buckeyes during the big win behind Harrison. Head coach Ryan Day said Stover deserved a lot of credit for how the Buckeyes performed offensively against the Lions.

"Cade is probably one of the most valuable guys on our offense," Day said. "Cer-



SONNY BROCKWAY

THE PROCTOR WILL SEE YOU — Ohio State safety Josh Proctor provided one of the biggest plays of his career when he returned an interception 24 yards for a touchdown against Maryland.

tainly, Marvin is Marvin, but after that, Cade's right there. Cade does so much of the dirty work. He's such a great leader. He's such a tough player, and he's become a really good receiver. Four catches for 70 yards, some big-time plays. We have to keep finding ways to get him the ball."

6. Tuimoloau's Big 4th-Down Stop (Penn State - Oct. 21)

The entire Ohio State defense played an outstanding game against the Nittany Lions, but one play stood out above all the others when looking back.

Defensive end J.T. Tuimoloau played an overall great game against the Nittany Lions, but in a one-score game more than halfway through the fourth quarter, the Lions had their backs against the wall facing fourth-and-4 on their own 43-yard line. With only two field goals to show to that point, quarterback Drew Allar was attempting to lead a drive down the field for a touchdown to tie the game up facing a 13-6 deficit.

Lined up against Penn State's Olumuyiwa Fashanu, who is projected to go in the first round of the 2024 NFL draft, Tuimoloau used his speed to get an advantage on the outside and pushed through to get to Allar just in time as he attempted a pass. Tuimoloau was able to get to Allar's back arm and knock the ball out, forcing the incompleteness and a turnover on downs.

Tuimoloau said being lined up against a player of Fashanu's caliber made the defensive performance he and the team had feel even better.

"It feels great. Olu is a great player," Tuimoloau said. "He has great feet, great hands. It was going to be a battle, and it was. But just to come out with the win, it's a true

blessing. Not too many people are granted and gifted this opportunity to play in a top-10 matchup game but play against a top-10 (player) across from you."

5. Proctor Turns Tables On Terps (Maryland - Oct. 7)

Fresh out of an off week, the Buckeyes came out against Maryland slow, not putting up any points in the first quarter and allowing the Terrapins to score the first 10 points of the game.

After a four-play possession and a punt at the beginning of the second quarter from Ohio State's offense, the defense took the scoring into its own hands on a pass up the middle that was picked off by safety Josh Proctor, which he took to the house, untouched by any defenders for 24 yards.

"My eyes were just in the backfield, and I was just reading and reacting, anticipating," Proctor said. "We knew the route concept. I think it was third down. They usually sit right at the sticks like a little curl route. I knew it was coming. I didn't expect him to throw it, but when he threw it, I knew then jumped right in front of it."

It was one of Proctor's best games in his six-year career at Ohio State in which he struggled to hold a starting spot for multiple reasons including injuries, and it was his first interception since the Big Ten Championship Game against Northwestern on Dec. 19, 2020.

Proctor's touchdown was the beginning of a 37-7 run for Ohio State in the final three quarters over what was then an undefeated Maryland team.

"To see Josh make that play and then run down on the kickoff, stick the guy inside the 20-yard line, there's a lot of that play going



SONNY BROCKWAY

HANDY HANCOCK — Ohio State cornerback Jordan Hancock offered up one of the biggest highlights of this season when he had a 93-yard interception return for a touchdown against Rutgers, helping turn the tide in the 35-16 win.

on,” Day said. “It’s an exciting team to be around.”

4. Henderson Races For 61-Yard TD (Notre Dame - Sept. 23)

Both defenses shone in the first half of the game between Ohio State and Notre Dame, with the Buckeyes heading into the third quarter with a slim 3-0 lead.

The Fighting Irish drove down the field to begin the second half, getting to the Buckeyes’ 39-yard line and going for it on fourth-and-1, but safeties Sonny Styles and Lathan Ransom combined to stuff quarterback Sam Hartman at the line of scrimmage and give the ball to Ohio State with a turnover on downs. After that, all Henderson needed was one play.

He took a handoff from McCord, juke around the left side of the line and avoided a tackler at the Ohio State 45-yard line, along with an expert block from Harrison, before he was off to the races for 61 yards and a score to put Ohio State up 10-0. He was almost caught inside the 20 by a shoestring tackle but kept his balance moving down the left sideline at full speed and charged into the end zone for the first touchdown of the game from either team.

3. Hancock’s Pick-Six In Piscataway (Rutgers - Nov. 4)

With Rutgers on Ohio State’s 20-yard line in the third quarter with the Buckeyes down 9-7, it was looking like they were on upset watch with an undefeated season on the line in November. The Knights had

gotten to the 20 with a couple of long Kyle Monangai rushes, along with a couple of pass-interference penalties.

With a possible two-score game on the line if Rutgers were able to find the end zone, quarterback Gavin Wimsatt faked a rush and threw a quick pass to Monangai who was streaking up the middle alone inside the 10-yard line. Proctor spotted the running back looking for a pass and met him and the ball at the 7-yard line, delivering a violent blow to Monangai.

The ball bounced off of Proctor’s hip into the air and directly at cornerback Jordan Hancock, who snatched the ball out of the air and immediately turned and ran the ball down the left sideline with blockers ahead for 93 yards and a touchdown.

The score put the Buckeyes up 14-9 and completely flipped the momentum of a game that felt like it was in question up until that point.

“They did a little pop pass, he was open a little bit, but Proctor came down and smacked the dude,” Hancock said. “You’ve got to have those.”

“That’s all the props to Josh Proctor. A great player, he’s been through this program for so many years. I’m just so proud of him. I’m thankful for him. I just had to find a way, but I’m thankful to my lead blockers out there blocking their tails off.”

2. Harrison Gets Foot In Despite Big Hit (Wisconsin - Oct. 28)

Going on the road to Camp Randall Stadium is always a challenging task, known

as one of the tougher places to play in the Big Ten. It proved to be true for the Buckeyes this season with the game tied 10-10 midway through the third quarter after McCord had thrown two interceptions and lost a fumble.

After Wisconsin scored a touchdown to tie it up with 12:30 left in the third, the Buckeyes drove down the field with help from a 16-yard catch by Harrison and a 25-yard gain by Henderson but were stuck with second-and-12 on the Wisconsin 19 after a 2-yard loss.

Harrison already had one touchdown in the game, and not wanting to settle for another field goal, he set up wide right and got past Badger cornerback Nyzier Fourqurean at the line of scrimmage. He was able to create enough space with his elite speed for McCord to place the ball over the top of Fourqurean and into Harrison’s chest as he was hit and knocked out of bounds by the cornerback at the right edge of the end zone.

Immediately as Harrison caught the ball, he touched his right foot down in the end zone with his back to the sideline, and he was able to hold on to the ball through the impact to the ground to put the Buckeyes ahead 17-10.

“We knew it was man coverage, and we liked the matchup,” Harrison said after the win. “Coach Day and Kyle gave me a chance to make a play, and I just did my best to do that.”

With a safety also shading to that side of the field on that play and closing in on the catch, Harrison was still able to bring it in and had 123 yards on six catches in the game despite the extra attention he got from the defense.

“I say it every week, it’s just tremendous,” Day said. “I believe he’s the best football player in the country. What a catch he made down there – my goodness. For him to get a foot inbounds and hang on to it. I was like, ‘Man, that’s going to be a hard one.’ Then I saw the replay, and it didn’t move. Just an unbelievable catch.”

1. Trayanum Wins It In South Bend (Notre Dame - Sept. 23)

Notre Dame scored with 8:22 left on the clock to take a 14-10 lead against the Buckeyes, putting them on their heels for the first time on the season. After dueling defensive stops, Ohio State had just 1:26 to go 65 yards for a touchdown to win the game.

McCord got the Buckeyes down to the 1-yard line with conversions on third-and-10, fourth-and-7 and third-and-19, but only seven seconds remained on the clock. After an incomplete pass to Harrison in the right side of the end zone, there was time for one more play.

Chip Trayanum set up to the right of McCord, took the handoff and thrust himself into the end zone, extending the ball over the goal line just enough to score and take a 17-14 lead after a long review of the play with just one second remaining on the clock.

“I knew I was definitely in,” Trayanum said after the game. “It was close, but as a running back, you live for runs like that. The nitty gritty runs, the runs where you’re fighting with your body to stay up and making sure nothing touches the ground. You practice that and envision that as a running back.”



Chip Trayanum

Although Ohio State didn’t end up making the College Football Playoff when the season ended, this touchdown and win over Notre Dame was a big one for the Buckeyes, keeping them undefeated with a top-10 win at a time when there were questions about whether they were tough enough to make a run late in the season and beat the best teams in college football.

“It was a great win for Ohio State,” Day said after the win. “It’s always been Ohio against the world, and it continues to be to this day, and I hope everybody in Buckeye Nation enjoys that win. I think it’s going to go down as one of the big wins in Ohio State history. It was one of the clutch comebacks on the road in a top-10 environment.”

Honorable Mentions

A play worth mentioning is from the 63-10 blowout of Western Kentucky on Sept. 16 when Denzel Burke forced a fumble, knocking the football backward into the end zone. Linebacker Steele Chambers had the chance to pick it up off of a bounce but couldn’t, and a dogpile formed with defensive tackle Tyleik Williams coming out of it with the football and the touchdown.

Next, in a tie game in the third quarter against Maryland on Oct. 7, quarterback Taulia Tagovailoa completed a short pass to Tyrese Chambers on a second-and-7, but Burke stopped the Terrapins short of the first down with a forceful blow during a time in which it felt the momentum could be swinging back to the Buckeyes after being down early on. They wouldn’t allow Maryland to score any more points in the 37-17 win.

Additionally, in the fourth quarter of the Buckeyes’ 20-12 win over Penn State on Oct. 21, Harrison lined up on the right side and ran a crossing route that got the Nittany Lions tangled up, allowing Harrison to get open for a blazing 18-yard touchdown.

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Inconsistent Offense Hurt Buckeyes In 2023

By **PATRICK ENGELS**

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

Ohio State entered the 2023 season with perhaps the most uncertainty on offense since head coach Ryan Day took over the reins from Urban Meyer in 2019. After quarterbacks Justin Fields and C.J. Stroud helped cement Day's unit as one of the more explosive and dominant in the nation – one that finished with a top-three scoring offense in three of the last four seasons – the group was met with multiple question marks at several critical positions all year.

Those questions started under center, where the Buckeyes relied on first-year starter Kyle McCord to lead the offense. He didn't earn the full-time job until three weeks into the regular season after a quarterback competition with redshirt freshman Devin Brown. The uncertainty continued into the trenches, where Ohio State welcomed three new starters – left tackle Josh Simmons, center Carson Hinzman and right tackle Josh Fryar – into the starting front five.

With the offense filled with inexperienced starters, as well as key contributors such as wide receiver Emeka Egbuka and running backs TreVeyon Henderson and Miyan Williams missing time with injuries, the unit experienced its worst statistical season since 2011. A far cry from the dominance of the previous four seasons, Ohio State averaged 30.5 points and 407.9 yards per game, good for 44th and 47th in the country, respectively.

These numbers may look impressive to an outside observer, but for those closely associated with the program – starting with Day himself – the overall offensive performance fell short of the lofty expectations set by the program.

"When you come up short, the bottom line is that you have to look at everything," Day said on Dec. 3. "Because you didn't get it done. It's just sobering here, at 11-1, you come up short on the last possession (at Michigan), it's just not good enough. You have to look at everything, and we will look at everything."

Despite the sluggish season on offense, Day's unit did show some signs of success, particularly in the second half of the regular season. Spearheaded by the efforts of Heisman Trophy finalist Marvin Harrison Jr., the renewed explosiveness of Henderson and the overall play of McCord, the Buckeyes had at least 35 points in three of their last four regular-season contests, including back-to-back home throttlings of Michigan State on Nov. 11 and Minnesota on Nov. 18 where they combined for 75 points and 964 total yards.

It was this promising late-season stretch that had Ohio State believing the offense was hitting its stride – and more importantly, getting healthy – when it mattered most. But that optimism took a back seat in the biggest game of the year, when the offense reverted to its bad habits in the team's season-defining 30-24 loss against Michigan on Nov. 25.

The Game was bookended by crucial turnovers by the Buckeyes' offense, starting with an interception from McCord on the team's third drive of the day that led to a Blake Corum touchdown, and ending with

another McCord pick on the game's final drive.

"You prepare all offseason, you prepare all year long," McCord said after the Michigan game. "And your season really comes down to a handful of plays, whether you make them or you don't. That just goes to show that the margin of error, especially in games like this, is so slim. So it's not the result we wanted."

Ohio State – albeit severely undermanned with the opt-out of Harrison and transfer of McCord, among others – saved its worst offensive performance for last in the Cotton Bowl against Missouri. With Brown starting the first game of his career – followed by true freshman Lincoln Kienholz replacing him in the first half due to injury – the offense was disjointed all game, scoring just three points and totaling 203 yards.

All in all, the Buckeyes' offense can be described just as Day described it after the very first game – a "mixed bag" that showed glimpses of excellence, but ultimately faltered when it mattered most. And with the talented Harrison leaving and the quarterback position still in question, even with the transfer addition of former Kansas State signal caller Will Howard, things could get more uncertain heading into 2024. With all that in mind, here are Buckeye Sports Bulletin's grades for the second half of the season and final grades for each offensive position for the 2023 season.

Quarterbacks

Regardless of how McCord's Ohio State career ended in December, the junior turned in an admirable year in his first and only season as the Buckeyes' starting quarterback.

The now-Syracuse signal caller – who was already tasked with replacing Stroud – was put into a difficult situation early in the season when Day declined to name a starting quarterback for the first two games of the regular season, yet gave McCord the majority of starting reps in wins against Indiana on Sept. 2 and Youngstown State on Sept. 9. With the pressure mounting to continue the string of record-breaking Ohio State quarterbacks and also stave off the younger Brown from taking his job, McCord struggled to find his rhythm and develop a cohesiveness with his playmakers against the Hoosiers and Penguins. These developments were on full display when he threw across his body on fourth down and delivered an errant toss to an Indiana defender for his first interception of the season.

But McCord seemed to turn it around once Day publicly named him the full-time starter on Sept. 12. With his job secure, McCord delivered a sparkling performance against Western Kentucky on Sept. 16, leading the Buckeyes to a 63-10 rout over the Hilltoppers by completing 19 of his 23 passes for 318 passing yards and three touchdowns.

"I think (being named the starter) is definitely a little bit of a confidence boost,"

McCord said. "When (Day) gives you the official nod that you're the guy, whether it was subconscious or not, I really didn't think of it that way, but I felt just a little more confident I would say."

McCord's increasing comfort then shone on the grandest of stages against Notre Dame on Sept. 23. He delivered one of the more impressive performances by an Ohio

State quarterback in recent memory, leading the Buckeyes on a clutch 15-play, 65-yard game-winning touchdown drive that included several third- and fourth-down conversions.

"To win the game in a two-minute drill, that's what great quarterbacks do,"

Day said after the game. "For his first top-10 road game, to be put in that situation and come through, that says a lot about his future. There were some big-time throws in there, he hung in there, and he's poised. What a great win for our program. But for Kyle to come into that spot, that's big."

McCord carried that positive momentum into October, tacking on two more impressive outings in convincing wins against Maryland on Oct. 7 and Purdue on Oct. 14, combining to complete 35 of his 57 passes (61.4 percent) for 596 passing yards, five touchdowns and zero interceptions. But that efficiency soon took a hit toward the middle of the season.

Plagued by slow first-half starts and some poor decision-making, he took a small step back in his development in consecutive games against Penn State on Oct. 21, Wisconsin on Oct. 28 and Rutgers on Nov. 4, turning the ball over four times and averaging just 233.7 passing yards in each of those narrow wins. McCord's struggles slowed down Ohio State's offensive efficiency and forced the Buckeyes to rely mostly on their defense to win, a midseason development that the quarterback said was not up to his standard.

"No one is going to hold me to a higher standard than I am myself," McCord said on Nov. 8. "I know that myself, and this offense and this team, the sky is the limit. It's a quest every single day to try to tap into that potential. At some points it's frustrating, because I feel like we can put a better product out there in the field. But at the same time, just taking everything in stride and being 9-0 and right where we want to be is good."

McCord's "rookie wall" appeared to end in the middle of November after he put forth arguably his two most complete performances of the season. He shone early and often in the Buckeyes' two blowout wins against Michigan State and Minnesota, completing a crisp 72.1 percent of his passes (44 of 61) for 547 passing yards, five touchdowns

and no turnovers. But those triumphs were quickly marred by his last outing as a Buckeye against the Wolverines, where he threw the two costly interceptions.

"It's tough," McCord said. "To be honest, there really aren't a lot of words to say in a moment like this. It's one of those games where you put everything in. It hurts to come up short."

The two interceptions were a disappointing finish to an otherwise positive season for McCord, who finished his season completing 229 of his 348 passes (65.8 percent) for 3,170 yards, 24 touchdowns and six interceptions.

As for the other quarterbacks on the roster, both Brown and Lincoln Kienholz' performances in the Cotton Bowl – a combined 10 of 23 for 106 passing yards and no touchdowns – jumped off the screen for mostly the wrong reasons, making the status of Ohio State's quarterback room murky at best for 2024.

BSB Midterm Grade: B+

BSB Second-Half Grade: B

BSB Final Grade: B

Running Backs

Before the regular season started, running backs coach Tony Alford extended high praise to his group of tailbacks, calling them on Aug. 5 "without question" the deepest and most talented group he has ever led. That unique depth did not necessarily come to fruition for the unit this season, however, mostly due to injury and some puzzling lack of usage.

Ohio State's running back production this season was dominated by Henderson, who regained his speed and explosiveness after an injury-riddled 2022 campaign. The junior still was unable to play a full season, missing three games against Maryland, Purdue and Penn State after an injury he sustained against Notre Dame. But when healthy, he was one of the Buckeyes' most impactful and game-changing skill players.

Henderson, who led the team with 926 rushing yards and 11 touchdowns on 156 totes, displayed his big-play ability throughout the season, rushing for two scores of 60 or more yards.

"It's great to have him back," Harrison said after Henderson returned from injury. "He's such an explosive playmaker, and he has a chance to take the ball to the end zone no matter where he is on the field. So having a guy like that on the offense definitely benefits us a lot."

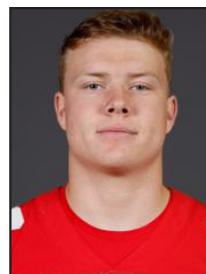
Next in line in Ohio State's stable of tailbacks this year was Chip Trayanum. The now-Kentucky Wildcat stepped up for Ohio State throughout the season with his brute running style, totaling 373 rushing yards and three touchdowns on 85 carries. No rush, however, was more impactful than his 1-yard game-winning score against Notre Dame.

After Henderson and Trayanum, though, the Buckeyes' once-vaunted depth was almost a nonfactor. The group's lack of depth started with the regression of senior Miyan Williams, who looked like a shell of his 2022 self – where he led Ohio State in rushing yards and carries – recording just three scores and 158 rushing yards on 49 carries

Rating The Offense

Here is where the OSU offense ranked among the Big Ten and nationally through Jan. 1.

| Category | Stats | NCAA | Big Ten |
|-----------------|-------|------|---------|
| Rushing Offense | 138.8 | 87th | 8th |
| Passing Offense | 269.1 | 30th | 2nd |
| Total Offense | 407.9 | 47th | 1st |
| Scoring Offense | 30.5 | 44th | 3rd |
| Turnovers Lost | 13 | 18th | 4th |
| Third Down Con. | 43.6 | 32nd | 3rd |



Devin Brown

(3.2 average) before being ruled out for the season with an undisclosed injury on Oct. 31 and later declaring for the NFL draft.

"I feel really bad for Miyan," Day said after revealing the injury. "That's a big hit for that room and our team, but Tony has done a great job building depth in that room."

Williams' lack of usage in the running game was overshadowed by the limited playing time given to sophomore Dallan Hayden, however, who logged just 110 rushing yards and one touchdown on 19 carries (5.8 average) this season despite all signs pointing to him being healthy and available all year. Hayden even showed Day and his staff what he was capable of while filling in for the inactive Henderson and Williams against Purdue, using his impressive vision and change of direction to rush for a team-high 76 yards and a score.

The sophomore appeared in just one more game after that, logging 34 rushing yards on eight carries against Minnesota. Although the decision to play him in just three games preserves his redshirt for 2024, Day and the staff's decision to limit the talented tailback was a puzzling one given the lack of depth in the room.

All in all, the running back room still finished with solid numbers – ranking eighth in the conference with 138.8 rushing yards per game – but the unit never fully reached its potential, setting up an interesting offseason for the squad.

BSB Midterm Grade: B

BSB Second Half Grade: A-

BSB Final Grade: B+

Wide Receivers

Ohio State's wide receivers room has been among the nation's best positional groups since Day took over in 2019, mostly due to its revolving door of NFL-ready players. This season's group of wideouts did not display the same level of dominance as years past – partly due to the injury of Egbuka – but it still turned in a strong overall season in large part due to the brilliance of Harrison.

Harrison followed up his sensational sophomore season with another special year in 2023, racking up another 67 catches for 1,211 receiving yards and 14 touchdowns, all leading the team. He wowed spectators each week with his acrobatic catches and crisp route-running ability, which allowed him to record 100 or more receiving yards and at least one touchdown score in eight of his 12 appearances.

Harrison's traits were most evident in his dominant outing over Michigan State, where he reached the end zone on Ohio State's first three offensive possessions and finished with 149 receiving yards. This performance, along with his clutch second-half scores against Penn State and Wisconsin, among others, propelled him into the Heisman Trophy conversation.

"I can't really quantify how impactful he is to this offense," McCord said after the Michigan State game. "There's one-on-one situations he wins, there's situations where he takes two defenders with him if they want to double him and somebody else is open. He does a good job blocking, too. He does so much for the offense. If it's truly the award that goes to the best player, he has to be right there in contention."

But behind Harrison, the Buckeyes' wide receiver production dropped off, with the

next-leading wideout, Egbuka, finishing the season with 515 receiving yards. Ohio State came into the season hoping that Harrison and Egbuka, who had 74 receptions for 1,151 yards 10 TDs last season, would once again present a formidable one-two punch. But that did not necessarily materialize with the slot receiver missing three games with a foot injury which he suffered against Maryland.

Ohio State received some production out of Julian Fleming, who had 26 catches for 270 yards in his fourth and final season with the program. The same can be said for Xavier Johnson, who was used sparingly in the offense but provided depth and versatility at the position with 13 catches for 178 yards.

Offensive coordinator and wide receivers coach Brian Hartline and the Buckeyes also got a glimpse of what some of their younger receivers are capable of, starting with true freshman Carnell Tate. The former five-star showed off his raw talent and athleticism this season, totaling 264 receiving yards and a score on 18 catches.

"(Carnell) is somebody who the moment is not too big for," Day said on Oct. 24. "That's really encouraging for his future."

Fellow freshman Brandon Inness also showed his potential in the middle of the season when he broke past a Purdue defender and caught a 58-yard touchdown pass from Brown, his only catch of the season. Tate and Inness' performance this season – both in games and in practice – impressed Day and Hartline, providing the program with some optimism for a wide receiver room that will likely look a lot different in 2024.

"Brandon is doing everything he needs to do," Hartline said on Dec. 27. "His future is very bright. He's showing day-in and day-out that he's a football player. He's making a lot of good plays and communicating and learning. We're very happy to see what Brandon is doing."

BSB Midterm Grade: A

BSB Second-Half Grade: A-

BSB Final Grade: A

Tight Ends

Day's promotion of Keenan Bailey to tight ends coach appears to be one of the better decisions he made for this season. Bailey helped guide both Cade Stover and Gee Scott Jr. to career years in 2023.

Stover, a Mansfield, Ohio, native, had another stellar season in the passing game, serving as McCord's safety blanket all season with a strong 41 catches, 576 receiving yards and five touchdowns, marks that all ranked second on the team behind only Harrison.

Stover, who took home first-team All-Big Ten honors and the conference's Kwalick-Clark Tight End of the Year award, showed up in big moments this season when the team needed him most. Whether it was his 49-yard catch against Indiana that essentially sealed the game or his acrobatic 30-yard contested reception over Penn State's Kobe King, he proved time and time again that he could be trusted to make big plays. But Stover also made an impact this season with his improved blocking, taking steps toward eliminating a weakness in his game.

These types of efforts, along with his pass-catching and run-after-catch ability,

compelled Hartline to publicly praise Stover before the Cotton Bowl for the significant impact he makes on the program on a daily basis.

"Cade, he's the backbone of this offense at times," Hartline said. "He's tough. He plays tough. He wants his teammates to play tough. He sets that standard offensively. Having Cade in the lineup and playing the way he's played and as productive as he's been, how consistent he's been, has been a huge part for our offense."

Scott also had a notable campaign, finishing with 10 receptions and 70 receiving yards in relief of Stover, as well as in two-tight end sets. But besides those two, the Buckeyes received little production from the rest of the tight end room. Senior Patrick Gurd took on an expanded role near the end of the season, and the same can be said for emerging freshman Jelani Thurman, who got his first career start in the Cotton Bowl to help build momentum for next season. But the two combined for just three receptions for 27 yards.

BSB Midseason Grade: A

BSB Second-Half Grade: A+

BSB Final Grade: A

Offensive Line

There's no sugar-coating it – Ohio State's new-look offensive line was a work in progress for a large chunk of the season, and it's one that never really seemed to come together.

Featuring three new starters, Justin Frye's unit showed an obvious overall lack of cohesion early on. This led to the group missing several assignments that caused key turnovers and negative plays, while also committing a number of penalties that often stymied McCord and the offense's momentum.

The front five's lack of chemistry was most apparent in the team's first four games of the season, where the unit gave up a combined 13 tackles for loss and four sacks against Indiana, Youngstown State, Western Kentucky and Notre Dame.

These issues – along with the group's short-yardage and red-zone struggles – compelled Frye to challenge the team on Sept. 13 to "play more violent," but the words did not seem to resonate with the unit as the first half of the season progressed. After an encouraging performance against Notre Dame where they netted 126 rushing yards and flexed their muscles on Traynum's game-winning touchdown score, the offensive line took a step back against Maryland, allowing the Buckeyes' backs to register just 62 yards on 33 carries while also allowing five tackles for loss and three sacks.

The lackluster performance prompted many concerns about the state of Frye's unit

among fans and media, leading Day to answer some tough questions about the effectiveness and future of his team's front five.

"Do I think we can do a better job with our hands? Yes," Day said on Oct. 10. "Do we need to do a better job with our pad level? Yes. But then between the line and the running back and just the overall execution, it just wasn't there."

"I don't know if I have a word for it, other than we're just going to keep swinging on this thing. And it's one of those things where if you can solve it, it's going to be rewarding because we're working so hard at it. But everybody has to take responsibility."

Day's words seemed to flip a switch in his offensive line for the second half of the year. This change started in the Purdue win, where they allowed the Buckeyes' backs to record 152 rushing yards on 39 attempts. Then, after another subpar outing against Penn State, the unit found their groove again in the final five games of the regular season, where they paved the way for Ohio State to average 163.8 rushing yards per game and give up seven sacks, only three in the final four regular-season games.

Both Day and left guard Donovan Jackson said in December that they saw major improvements from the offensive line as the season progressed, a development that they both said stemmed from an improved chemistry and understanding of the offense.

"I think we found our identity in the run game probably about midway through the season," Day said on Dec. 28. "Certainly getting TreVeyon back made a huge difference. But I feel like that last third of the year, we started to pick it up in that area. We understood what we were up front, what our backs could do, so then I think we grew from there."

"I'm really proud of the offensive line and how we progressed every week," Jackson added on Dec. 12. "I felt like we got better every week in terms of running the ball and in terms of putting hats on hats."

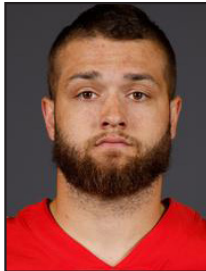
Jackson and his group may have seen major improvements as the season progressed, but they did revert to some old habits in the biggest game of the season. The Buckeyes successfully established the rushing game with 107 yards on the ground against Michigan, but their inability to block proved to be the deciding factor in the defeat, leading to the game-deciding interception.

This sequence – along with a puzzling finish to the season at the Cotton Bowl where Day benched Hinzman for Matt Jones at center and inserted Enokk Vimahi at right guard and the unit allowed 10 tackles for loss and four sacks – marked a disappointing end to a difficult, topsy-turvy season for the offensive line.

BSB Midseason Grade: C-

BSB Second-Half Grade: C+

Final Grade: C



Cade Stover

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Defense Was Strong Point For 2023 Buckeyes

By **GREG WILSON**

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

The 2022 season featured a tough finish for defensive coordinator Jim Knowles and his unit, giving up 117 combined points in its final three games of the year. Those came after the defense had seemingly improved from the year before, putting together a very solid first half of the season.

Knowles' squad started the 2023 season even stronger, looking like one of the best defenses in the country even against top teams such as Notre Dame and Penn State, holding the top-20 squads to just 26 combined points.

The question of whether it would be able to hold up against Michigan and beyond loomed over the near-top ranks that the defense was boasting in almost every category, including giving up just 9.3 points per game entering the final game of the regular season.

But when Thanksgiving weekend came around, the Buckeyes ended up having their worst defensive game of the season, giving up 30 points and 338 yards of offense. The improvements from the year before were obvious, as Ohio State was able to limit the explosive plays that had cost it in previous years by bending but not breaking.

It was a largely a successful game plan, but when the season was on the line in Ann Arbor, the defense was unable to get a key stop and the Wolverines took seven minutes off the clock on a plodding 13-play, 56-yard drive that resulted in a field goal and left the offense with 1:00 to respond in the eventual 30-24 loss.

Also in that game, the Wolverines had nine drives – not including after the final interception when they kneeled out the clock – and scored on six of them, including the last four of the contest. After the game, Knowles said the strong performances throughout the year did not matter since the defense was not able to win when it mattered.

“Not enough,” he said. “Ultimately, you’ve got to win this game, and I certainly feel like we were a play short, so that’s something that I’ve got to keep working on.”

Against Missouri in the Cotton Bowl, the defense allowed just 14 points, but all of them in the fourth quarter, though few would blame the defense considering Ohio State's offense was unable to stay on the field, resulting in a tired defense by the end of the game.

While there were some lapses at the end of the year, the defense overall turned in an impressive campaign for the Buckeyes, led by several future NFL players who made names for themselves with Ohio State this season.

The following are BSB's second-half and final grades for each defensive position, taking into account the final seven games of the Buckeyes' season.

Defensive Line

Ohio State's defense impressed through the first six games of the season, but if there were any questions on that side of the ball, they existed on the defensive line.

Most of the questions came from the Buckeyes' mentality of preventing the big

Rating The Defense

Here is where the OSU defense ranked among the Big Ten and nationally through Jan. 1.

| Category | Stats | NCAA | Big Ten |
|-----------------|-------|------|---------|
| Rushing Defense | 119.5 | 27th | 5th |
| Passing Defense | 145.9 | 1st | 1st |
| Total Defense | 265.4 | 3rd | 3rd |
| Scoring Defense | 11.2 | 2nd | 2nd |
| Sacks/Game | 2.15 | 64th | 10th |
| Third-Down Def. | 28.6 | 5th | 1st |

play. The defense wasn't blitzing as much, so offensive lines had to deal with only the front four most of the time, leading to a lack of sacks.

After just nine sacks in the first six games of the year from the defensive linemen – three of those against Purdue on Oct. 14 – the unit finished the season with a combined 23 sacks, led by defensive end Jack Sawyer, who had 6½ throughout the full season and five of them coming in the final three games.

After the win over Minnesota on Nov. 18, Knowles said it was because Sawyer finally had a full understanding of the defense and that he was more focused.

“Jack's been on a great streak,” Knowles said. “He's really embraced his role. He's consistent. He understands the scheme. He knows when he can take chances. He's been really effective in the running game, which I think sometimes goes unnoticed. But he's just a guy we count on, and he's a stalwart for the defense.”

“Jack's always been a great team guy, but I see a steely-eyed focus. He's a nice young man, he really is, but he's turned into a cold-blooded gentleman, which is what we like.”

The four players who got the most time on the defensive line were edges Sawyer and J.T. Tuimoloau, and Tyleik Williams and Mike Hall Jr. on the interior. Ty Hamilton played in spells on the interior, earning a start when Hall was dealing with an injury, and both Caden Curry and Kenyatta Jackson Jr. got time on the outside.

Williams put together his best season at Ohio State and has already decided to return for another. He became an honorary member of the secondary with five pass breakups, as many as cornerbacks Davison Igbinosun and Jordan Hancock each had over the year. Williams also had 53 tackles, including a team-high 10 for loss (tied with Sawyer), as well as three sacks, a quarterback hurry and a fumble recovery for a touchdown in the blowout win over Western Kentucky.

Tuimoloau, meanwhile, registered five sacks – second most behind Sawyer – and had seven tackles for loss, while Hall – who has declared for the NFL draft – had 1½ sacks and two tackles for loss. Hamilton also had 4½ tackles for loss, all coming in the final seven games.

While the pressure ramped up over the second half of the season – and that is the ultimate goal for a defensive line – the same cannot be said for how the interior of Ohio State's defensive line handled opposing rushing attacks.

Most of Michigan's runs went to the out-



FILE PHOTO

SILVER BULLETS – Linebacker Tommy Eichenberg (left) and defensive end Jack Sawyer (right) helped lead an impressive defense this season for Ohio State.

side, absolving Williams and Hall of most of the blame in that loss, but Missouri ran plenty of action between the tackles in the Cotton Bowl that the Buckeyes were unable to stop, and the Tigers finished with 203 rushing yards, the second-most allowed by Ohio State's defense this season. Rutgers had 232, also in the second half of the season.

But the defensive line was not all quiet in the Cotton Bowl, with Sawyer posting a career-high three sacks, tying Ohio State's record for a bowl game, and the unit helped the defense as a whole limit the Tigers to no points through the first three quarters.

All told, the first half of the season was a strong one for the line, but there were some question marks. Those questions were largely answered in the second half of the year with strong performances across the board, setting the stage for a big year by the defensive line in 2024.

BSB Midterm Grade: B

BSB Second-Half Grade: A-

BSB Final Grade: B+

Linebackers

Tommy Eichenberg has been called the quarterback of the defense by his coaches

and teammates, and he lived up to that title this season both on and off the field for the Buckeyes.

Before he sat out of the Cotton Bowl because of an injury he had been dealing with since the win over Rutgers, he led the team in tackles despite missing two games. He fought through the injury to play against Michigan – an injury that showed, considering it was a down game for the linebackers – but Steele Chambers' eight tackles against Missouri were enough to pass him and become Ohio State's leading tackler for the season with 83.

But Eichenberg still finished the campaign with 82 tackles (2½ for loss), one sack and a forced fumble in 10 games. He was as consistent as any player on Ohio State's defense and won the Big Ten's Butkus-Fitzgerald Linebacker of the Year award due to his efforts, and he accepted an invite to the Senior Bowl where he will showcase himself to pro scouts for the 2024 draft.

When he played in the game against Michigan with his injury, Knowles said it showed how much his leadership meant to the team.

“Tommy will bring every single ounce of his person to this game, and he will fight to

FINAL GRADES: DEFENSE

defend our honor," Knowles said. "That's just the kind of guy that he is."

Chambers finished the year with 83 tackles (1½ for loss), one pass breakup and an interception. He played in all 13 games and will be seeing what kind of interest the NFL has this offseason, declaring his intent to enter his name into the 2024 draft after the Cotton Bowl.

Senior Cody Simon, as he did last season, continued to work his way into the rotation this year, stepping in when Eichenberg was injured and also playing during the occasional three-linebacker sets that Knowles would employ. He had 57 tackles (three for loss) and two pass breakups throughout the season, playing in all 13 games.

With Eichenberg not coming back, his absence will be felt since he was the most vocal, but Knowles said Simon sees the game in the same way Eichenberg does, so when he returns for the 2024 season, he will be able to take on that role as he did so effectively in the games he started in Eichenberg's place this season.

"He's really a Mike linebacker at Will, and he sees the field the same way Tommy does," Knowles said. "He thinks a lot like I do. He and Tommy, they understand how I think and why I'm calling things. He's really an extra quarterback out there for us."

The unit steadily improved throughout the season – even if it did not have the best showing in either of Ohio State's last two games – and turned into a strength for the defense after several years of subpar play at the position.

BSB Midterm Grade: B+

BSB Second-Half Grade: A-

BSB Final Grade: B+

Safeties

At the beginning of the season, there was some uncertainty at the safety position. Senior Lathan Ransom was slotted in as the bandit, and Josh Proctor started the first game as the adjuster safety, but Proctor was quickly moved back to the sideline and replaced by a rotation of freshman Malik Hartford and senior Ja'Had Carter.

Proctor didn't play in the second game against Youngstown State, and Carter took the majority of the snaps before the game was out of reach, but the sixth-year was back against Western Kentucky and secured his spot as the adjuster for the rest of the year.

In what turned out to be his best year for the Scarlet and Gray, he finished with 47 tackles (four for loss), eight pass breakups and an interception he returned for a touchdown, culminating a long journey for Proctor – including a broken leg in 2021 and his benching in 2022 – in his final season with the Buckeyes.

"I've grown a lot mentally," Proctor said. "This offseason I looked at myself in the mirror for ways I could get better on the field and off the field."

Ransom was also turning in a solid season for the Buckeyes before he was injured against Wisconsin on Oct. 28, costing him the rest of the season. In nine games, he had 34 tackles (1½ for loss), two pass breakups, a forced fumble and an interception and will look to build on that performance next season, as he has already announced his return for 2024.

With Proctor and Ransom both familiar faces, the new blood at safety was sophomore Sonny Styles, who filled in wherever

he was needed this season for the Buckeyes.

He started playing at nickel but ended up playing at all three positions with Proctor and Ransom in and out of the lineup. That versatility was a key for Knowles, who was happy to utilize Styles all over the field this season.

"He's taller. He has range," Knowles said. "He has a lot of experience covering the slot at the nickel position, which is difficult to do as that translates into the boundary. He has a lot of versatility. He can be a real factor in the blitz game."

The game plan of not allowing explosive plays is a job that every defender is responsible for, but as the last line of defense, the safeties have a big responsibility in not letting anything by them or over their heads, and it was a major focus after lapses last season. That emphasis showed, as Ohio State allowed just one gain through the air of more than 40 yards, the fewest in the country, though that gain did come in the final game of the season.

BSB Midterm Grade: A

BSB Second-Half Grade: B+

BSB Final Grade: A-

Cornerbacks

After the 2022 season, the confidence in the Ohio State cornerbacks was at a low point since they were seemingly giving up big plays left and right, leading to teams putting up big point and yardage totals throughout the season.

But the first half of the 2023 season was a completely different story, and it was obvious early on when cornerback Denzel Burke had an interception against Youngstown State, the first for an Ohio State cornerback since Burke himself in 2021, showing that a down year for Burke — and the group of cornerbacks as a whole — was in the past.

Burke finished this season with 24 tackles (three for loss), the previously mentioned interception, a forced fumble and nine pass breakups. After what was a rough sophomore season, Burke came back ready to prove himself in 2023.

"I'm more hungry," he said. "I feel like coming out of my freshman year, going into my sophomore year, I got a little complacent in the offseason. I wasn't getting the extra work I needed to get in. But you learn from those moments. Going into my third year, I have this whole different mindset, a whole different approach. I know what I can do on the field, it's just a matter of me taking care of the little things and working hard every single day."

There were few plays that Burke was on the wrong side of this season, though the most controversial one was in the loss to Michigan. In the second quarter, Burke was covering Wolverine receiver Roman Wilson when both jumped for a long pass in the end zone, which ended up in the hands of both as they fell to the ground. Burke came up with the ball, and he thought he had the interception, but it was called a touchdown for Michigan.

"I'm thinking he's going to give me the pick like we got a pick in the red zone," Burke said. "And then I turn around, and I see his hands go up, and I'm like, wow. It was blatant. He didn't have control of the ball."

But those types of plays were few and far between. The Buckeyes allowed more than 150 passing yards in just six games and

held three opponents to under 100 passing yards. And the cornerbacks were able to excel outside of Burke, as well, with junior Jordan Hancock and sophomore Davison Igbinosun also turning in impressive seasons.

The depth shone against Penn State on Oct. 21 when Burke was out. Hancock and freshman Jermaine Mathews Jr. both got starts alongside Igbinosun and they did not miss a beat, forcing Nittany Lions quarterback Drew Allar to look lost all game and holding him to 18-of-42 passing (42.9 percent), 191 yards and just one touchdown.

Hancock finished with 41 tackles, two sacks, five pass breakups, two forced fumbles and two interceptions, one of which he took back 93 yards for the touchdown to turn the tides against Rutgers in Piscataway when the offense was struggling to put points on the board.

Before the season, it wasn't much of a question that he would be back with Ohio State next year, but he was good enough that his name has been floated in the draft conversation. While he hasn't announced anything publicly as BSB went to press, it's

likely he will return even if he did give himself a decision to make.

Early in the season, cornerbacks coach Tim Walton had high praise for Hancock.

"He brings a tenacious attitude," Walton said. "He'll put his face in the fan in the run game. He gives you a complete player in there. He understands – being a high football IQ guy – things happen fast but he can handle the thinking of it."

Igbinosun was a very strong addition from Ole Miss through the transfer portal last offseason, and he was a constant throughout the whole season. He had 59 tackles – third on the team – with 1½ tackles for loss, five pass breakups and two fumble recoveries.

Hancock and Igbinosun have the makings of a strong cornerback pairing – not to mention Mathews lurking behind them – but if Burke decides to return, it has the makings of being Best In America by the time August comes around.

BSB Midterm Grade: A

BSB Second-Half Grade: A

BSB Final Grade: A

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Special Teams Problematic Throughout Season

By **BRADEN MOLES**

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Editor

Ohio State's special teams were a concern entering the season, remained one throughout the season and continue to cause worry entering the offseason.

Coordinated by Parker Fleming since 2021, the Buckeyes' third phase has made headlines for all the wrong reasons – missed field goals as time expired instead of game winners, fake punts getting blown up instead of succeeding and a general lack of the formidability that has been present with past special teams units in Columbus.

There was no shortage of mistakes this year, ranging from fake punts gone awry to turnovers to ill-timed penalties. Fleming acknowledged in November that the unit was not up to snuff, relative to either his expectations or those of past units at Ohio State.

"There are a lot of plays that we wish we had back for one reason or another," he said. "There's some we're really excited and happy with. Ultimately, the special teams, our job is to put our team in the best position to win, and there's some spots that we have not done that, clearly."

The mistakes put Fleming in the cross-hairs throughout much of the season, with many speculating that it could be his last season with the Buckeyes due to the lack of performance by the special teams over his tenure. But head coach Ryan Day – while acknowledging that the special teams needed to improve – also offered some support for his coordinator, and took his share of the blame.

"I can just tell you that he works as hard as anybody in the building," Day said. "But we're all being evaluated every single time we're out there. It's everybody that's involved in special teams. It's not just the coordinator, although he's ultimately in charge and I'm ultimately in charge, so you can put it back on me."

"But clearly, everybody who's in charge of special teams, because there's a lot of coaches that are involved with that in the meetings, can all do a better job. And so, we'll just keep pushing to make it better. But we know what the expectation is."

Here are Buckeye Sports Bulletin's final grades for Ohio State special teams.

Kicking Game

Sophomore Jayden Fielding was nearly perfect for the Buckeyes through the first six games of the season, but the same cannot be said for his second half of the season. After connecting on all seven field-goal attempts and all but one of his 28 extra-point attempts through the first six games, he was just 9 of 13 down the stretch, including misses from 45 yards, 42 yards, 52 yards and 48 yards, with the 52-yarder coming in the loss to Michigan.

He did, however, connect on a career-long 47-yarder against Minnesota and hit from 43 yards out against the Wolverines. And in Ohio State's Cotton Bowl loss against Missouri, Fielding hit from 44 yards but missed from 48 yards out, finishing the season 16 of 20 on field goals and 49 of 50 on extra points, with a long of 47 yards against the Gophers. His final field-goal percentage of

Rating The Specialists

Here is where the OSU specialists ranked among the Big Ten and nationally through Jan. 1.

| Category | Stats | NCAA | Big Ten |
|------------------|-------|-------|---------|
| Net Punting | 40.51 | 34th | 5th |
| Punt Return Avg. | 4.41 | 111th | 11th |
| KO Return Avg. | 19.92 | 67th | 9th |
| Punt Return Def. | 12.36 | 113th | 14th |
| KO Return Def. | 17.93 | 36th | 6th |

80.0 is nothing to sneeze at, tied for 37th in the country, but the Buckeyes will surely be looking to extend his range next season.

And while this section usually focuses on the escapades of Ohio State's kickers, it is worth pointing out that the Buckeyes nearly had a pair of shutouts this season in the 38-3 win over Michigan State and 37-3 victory against Minnesota, but the shutout was broken in each contest due to field goals in excess of 50 yards.

Michigan's Jake Turner also hit from 50 yards out in the Wolverines' win, so the kicking game of the opposition did come back to hurt the Buckeyes in the second half of the season.

BSB Midterm Grade: B+

BSB Second-Half Grade: B-

BSB Final Grade: B

Punting Game

A mysteriously down season for junior punter Jesse Mirco did not get any less confusing over the final half of the season, as he continued an overall weak performance relative to his two previous seasons with the Buckeyes before turning in his best performance in what we later learned was his last game for Ohio State.

Mirco averaged 42.3 yards per punt in 2021 but saw his total increase to 45.4 yards per punt last season. This year, however, he finished with just 43.7 yards per boot (43.8 over the final seven games) and Ohio State's net punting of 40.5 yards finished 34th nationally, down from 25th last year.

These issues wound up rearing their ugly heads at a pivotal moment, as Mirco averaged a season-low 36.7 yards per attempt against Michigan on three punts, with none inside the 20, while the Wolverines in turn averaged 52.0 yards on three punts, the second most allowed by the Buckeyes behind Indiana's 54.2-yard average in the season opener.

Mirco responded to the down performance with arguably his best game in three seasons with the Buckeyes, punting eight times for a 48.3-yard average in the Cotton Bowl with three inside the 20. But, unfortunately for the Buckeyes, he entered the transfer portal just days after the game and will instead punt for Vanderbilt next season.

The punting unit also took some lumps following yet another pivotal special teams mistake against Rutgers. With the Buckeyes holding just a 7-3 lead over the Scarlet Knights midway through the second quarter and facing a fourth-and-5 from their own 30-yard line, Mirco – whether he called his own number or was told to do so by Fleming – took off, and was stopped 3 yards short of the line to gain, resulting in a field goal by Rutgers.



FILE PHOTO

NOT SO SPECIAL – Ohio State's special teams were a negative for the Buckeyes this season, even with a mostly positive kicking performance (16 of 20) from Jayden Fielding.

"The ball should have been punted," Day said. "It never should have been run in that situation. Ultimately, I'm the head coach, so it comes back on me. But it needs to be communicated better, and it's unacceptable."

BSB Midterm Grade: C-

BSB Second-Half Grade: C+

BSB Final Grade: C

Return Grade

At the midway point of the season, Ohio State's punt and kick return units simply existed – they offered little benefit but had also avoided pivotal mistakes that had been experienced elsewhere in the third phase of the game. The same cannot be said for how the return game impacted Ohio State over the final seven games of the season.

Starting with the Buckeyes' own kickoff returners, they went from averaging 23.1 yards on nine attempts over the first six games to just 12.8 yards on only four attempts over the last seven games. The punt return unit, meanwhile, averaged just 5.0 yards per return over the second half of the season – up slightly from the midway point of 4.0 yards, but still finishing 111th in the country at 4.4 and 11th in the Big Ten.

Ohio State's punt return defense also remained among the worst in the country over the second half of the season. After allowing 12.4 yards per return at the midway point, the Buckeyes matched that in the second half, and ended up ranking 113th in the country and dead last in the Big Ten.

Ohio State fared slightly better when it came to defending kickoffs, allowing just 17.9 yards per return and ranking 36th nationally. But the Buckeyes did allow 100 yards on four returns over the final seven games compared to just a 15.1-yard average

on 10 returns over the first six games, a notable decline as the season rolled on.

At the crux of many of these issues was when a player should or should not have called a fair catch. All too often, kickoff returners would have no problem returning a ball from inside their own 10-yard line only to inevitably be stopped short of the 25-yard line, where the ball would have been placed had a fair catch been called for.

The traditional coaching on punt returns – heels on the 10-yard line and letting it go if it's over your head – went out the window, with notable gaffes in the Cotton Bowl that included two fair catches on punts inside the 10-yard line, and Day acknowledged the problem after the loss.

"We shouldn't (fair) catch the ball on the 4-yard line," he said. "Our heel should be on the 8. I think (Jayden Ballard) felt like in that moment, they were right behind him and they were going to pin it inside the 4. But still, you have to stick to your rules in that situation."

Ohio State also had a miscue on special teams when a punt bounced off Lorenzo Styles Jr. against Penn State, resulting in a turnover in a tight game with the Nittany Lions, though it ultimately did not hurt the Buckeyes in the 20-12 win. It's difficult to say if special teams mistakes ultimately cost Ohio State against either Michigan or Missouri, but improved play in the third phase certainly could have provided a difference.

BSB Midterm Grade: D+

BSB Second-Half Grade: D+

BSB Final Grade: D+

Remembering Buckeyes We Lost In 2023

By **DAVID BREITHAUP**
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Contributor

Many Buckeyes, some great and some not as well known, passed away in 2023. The following is a list of and tribute to those Buckeyes in order of their passing.

Eddie Beamon died in his hometown of Cincinnati on Jan. 5 at the age of 67. The former Ohio State defensive tackle participated in football and track at Withrow High School, and he chose to play football at Ohio State over Michigan and Notre Dame before becoming a four-year letterman for the Buckeyes beginning in 1974.

He cracked the starting lineup as a sophomore in 1975 and started all 12 games in both 1975 and 1976, though his 1977 campaign was cut short by an ankle injury.

Dimitrios Stanley passed away on Feb. 9 at the age of 48 after a four-year battle with prostate cancer. The former Ohio State wide receiver played for the Buckeyes from 1993-96, amassing 1,136 receiving yards and 13 touchdowns on 63 receptions during his career.

His final season in Columbus was his most notable campaign, leading the Buckeyes with 43 catches for 829 yards and eight touchdowns. Following his time with the Buckeyes, Stanley played in the Canadian Football League and Arena Football League.

After his prostate cancer diagnosis in 2019, Stanley began a nonprofit organization, Brave Men Inc., with the aim of advocating prostate cancer research while also aiding those affected by the disease with financial help.

Larry Coyer, who was in charge of defensive backs on John Cooper's football staff in 1991 and 1992, died Feb. 10 at the age of 79.

Coyer was a native of Huntington, W.Va., and stayed home to play his college ball at Marshall. He was a three-year starter at defensive back for the Thundering Herd and was later inducted into the school's football hall of fame.

After graduating in 1964, Coyer began a coaching career that spanned six decades and included stops at the high school, college and professional levels. In addition to Ohio State, he also coached at Marshall, Bowling Green, Iowa, Oklahoma State, Iowa State, UCLA, Houston, East Carolina, Pittsburgh and New Mexico State, his final coaching job in 2014.

He spent three seasons in the old USFL with the Michigan Panthers and Memphis Showboats from 1983-85 and 13 seasons in the NFL with the New York Jets, Denver Broncos, Tampa Bay Buccaneers and Indianapolis Colts. He also spent one year as a scout for the Washington Redskins.

Ron Althoff, a former Ohio State public address announcer, passed peacefully on March 29 at the age of 89. He was the public address announcer for Ohio State football and basketball games and earned the moniker of the "Voice of the Buckeyes" for 17 years.

Althoff was also a pioneer in track and field officiating on a global scale and was named to the USA Track and Field National Hall of Fame and Ohio Track and Field Hall of Fame. He founded and grew the Jesse Owens Track and Field Classic, which is still run annually at Ohio State. He was also an official at the 1984 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles and the 1996 Summer Olympics in Atlanta.

John Brockington, an integral member of the "Super Sophomore" class that led Ohio State to the 1968 national championship, died March 31 at the age of 74 due to complications from cancer.

Brockington helped the Buckeyes win 27 of 29 games from 1968-70 at fullback. He finished his Ohio State career with 1,663 yards and 24 touchdowns, including his 1970 season in which he was named an All-American after rushing for 1,142 yards and 17 touchdowns, then single-season records at Ohio State.

He was drafted ninth overall in the 1971 NFL draft by the Green Bay Packers and was the first player in league history to rush for 1,000 yards in each of his first three seasons. Brockington's seven-year pro career included three trips to the Pro Bowl as well as NFL Offensive Rookie of the Year honors in 1971.

He received a 2001 kidney transplant from his then girlfriend, Diane, who later became his wife. They partnered to form the John Brockington Foundation to provide financial and resource support for those in need of kidney transplants.

Denman "Sonny" Gordon, a four-year letterman and three-year starter at rover for Ohio State from 1984-86, died April 26 at the age of 57 after suffering from amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), also known as Lou Gehrig's disease.

Gordon was born in Lynn, Mass., but grew up in Middletown, Ohio, where he was coached by future Ohio State assistant Bill Conley. Gordon was a team co-captain with the Buckeyes in 1986, the same year he earned first-team All-Big Ten honors.

He was a sixth-round draft pick by the Cincinnati Bengals in 1987 but never played for the Bengals, instead playing in seven games for Tampa Bay in 1987. He later played professionally in Canada, and after his playing career, he earned a degree in business from the University of Phoenix and had an extensive career in sales.

Gordon is the second member of Ohio State's starting defensive backfield in the 1980s to succumb to ALS. William White passed away in 2022 from the disease at the age of 56.

Bob Kennedy, known as "The Voice of the 'Shoe" after over 20 years of public address announcing at Ohio State, passed away at age 59 on April 30.

He worked as a midday air personality at WDLR Radio in Delaware, Ohio, and was an active PA announcer for the Buckeyes, serving as "The Voice" for the past 23 years up until his passing. He also announced baseball, field hockey, women's hockey, men's and women's

volleyball, soccer and swimming and diving for the university.

Kennedy was also a PA announcer for the Columbus Clippers and his alma mater, Otterbein University.

Kyle Brown, former Ohio State baseball captain and ESPN director, died on June 10 at age 42 after suffering a medical emergency.

A Washington Court House native, he pitched in 55 games for Ohio State with an 11-3 record from 2000-04, helping the Buckeyes to a Big Ten championship in 2001. Brown then went into broadcasting and won two Emmy Awards during his 16 years at ESPN. He also served as a lead producer for "Morning Drive" on The Golf Channel.

Ronald Lee "Ron" Cook died at age 87 on Sept. 16 in Lima, Ohio. After graduating from high school in 1954, he accepted a football scholarship from Woody Hayes to play tackle.

His oft-told tale was about the 1957 Rose Bowl. During a party the night before the game, Hayes secretly arranged for Bob Hope to call Cook up on stage to meet actress Jayne Mansfield, who gave Cook a kiss he never forgot.

He worked for Panhandle Eastern Gas Co. after college and later opened his own firm in Kansas City.

Kurt Schumacher died Sept. 29 at age 70 in North Carolina. He started playing for Ohio State in 1971 and was a two-year starter at left tackle as a junior and senior under Hayes with two Big Ten titles and a Rose Bowl victory during that time.

In 1974, he was named a consensus All-American while blocking for running back Archie Griffin, who won his first Heisman Trophy that season.

After graduation, Schumacher was a first-round NFL draft pick by the New Orleans Saints and played from 1975-78, splitting time with the Saints and Buccaneers. After his professional career, Schumacher went on to start his own business.

Frank Howard, a four-time MLB All-Star, former World Series champion and two-sport athlete at Ohio State, died Oct. 30 at age 87 following complications from a stroke.

Howard was a native of Columbus and attended Ohio State, where he played both baseball and basketball for the Buckeyes from 1956-58 and was named an All-American in both sports. He averaged 20.1 points and 15.3 rebounds in 1957 when he was named a first-team All-American, and he also holds the team's single-game rebound record, collecting 30 boards against BYU on Dec. 29, 1956.

Following his graduation from Ohio State, he was drafted by the NBA's Philadelphia Warriors, but instead he opted to play baseball at

the professional level.

He signed with the Los Angeles Dodgers, where he played from 1958-64 – winning the World Series in 1963 – and also played for the Washington Senators (1965-72) and Detroit Tigers (1972-73). Following his playing career, he was manager for the San Diego Padres (1981) and New York Mets (1983), and he held several coaching positions until his retirement from coaching following the 1999 season.

Bob Knight, a forward on Ohio State's 1960 national championship team as well as a three-time national champion as head coach of Indiana's men's basketball team from 1971-2000, died Nov. 1 at age 83.

Knight, a native of Orville, Ohio, stayed in state to begin his collegiate career, playing at Ohio State from 1959-62 under head coach Fred Taylor. During that span, Taylor and Knight helped the Buckeyes to still their only national championship in men's basketball, winning it all in 1960 alongside teammates such as Dick Furry, John Havlicek, Jerry Lucas, Mel Nowell, Joe Roberts and Larry Siegfried.

After graduating from Ohio State, he began coaching at Cuyahoga Falls High School for one year, and after enlisting in the army, he became an assistant coach and later head coach of Army's men's basketball program.

After six seasons with the Black Knights, he was hired at Indiana, where he would remain for 29 seasons, accumulating a 662-239 record with 24 NCAA Tournament appearances and three national championships in 1975-76, 1980-81 and 1986-87. Knight was later dismissed from the Hoosiers after several controversies, and retired from coaching following seven seasons at Texas Tech.

Knight had since appeared on television as a studio analyst and occasional color commentator. He made his first return to Indiana on Feb. 8, 2020, where he was honored during a game, and it was the first time he had been to Assembly Hall since his dismissal from the program.

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Buckeyes Manage To Finish '98 On High Note

Buckeye Sports Bulletin has offered a variety of historical pieces this fall, including a look back at the 1998 Ohio State football team, one of the better teams in school history, upon that team's 25th anniversary. The following is the final installment in our 2023-24 historical series.

By **MARK REA**

BSB Managing Editor Emeritus

The eighth of November in 1998 was a cold, blustery Sunday morning in Columbus – the kind of weather that fit the somber mood of the Ohio State football team as it made its way to the Woody Hayes Athletic Center.

Dissection of game film from the previous afternoon was the order of the day on Sundays during football season, but nearly no one connected with the Buckeyes wanted to relive the nightmare from the day before. Ranked No. 1 in the nation and favored by 28 points to beat a Michigan State team that had already lost four games, Ohio State squandered a 15-point lead early in the second half and lost a 28-24 decision in one of the most crushing upset losses in program history.

"Nobody wanted to go to the facility that day," OSU running back Joe Montgomery told BSB. "The night before – that was not a good night. You just lay in bed, staring at the ceiling, rolling over and over in your mind what you could have done differently. It just tears you up. I didn't get much sleep that night, and I'm sure I wasn't the only one."

The Buckeyes held edges in the game in nearly every category except the one that mattered – the final score. But they lost four fumbles, were intercepted once, and twice turned the ball over on downs.

One of the fumbles came early in the third quarter during a Michigan State punt. Standing on his own goal line, MSU punter Craig Jarrett managed to field an errant snap and get his kick away, a short punt that landed just short of midfield. But the ball hit OSU gunner Tony Locke in the rear end – technically an Ohio State fumble – and the Spartans pounced on the loose ball at their own 49. The turnover resulted in a Michigan State touchdown, and the Buckeyes never regained momentum.

"Watching film after a loss was always a necessary evil," OSU quarterback Joe Germaine said. "But that one was terrible. We didn't need to see it again. I mean, we lived it. We didn't want to relive it. Burning that film would have probably done us more good."

For the Ohio State players, it seemed their 1998 season of promise was over in the blink of an eye. They had gone from racing toward the program's first consensus national championship in 30 years to becoming just another piece of roadkill on the college football landscape.

But there were still two regular-season games to play, including a home game against archrival Michigan, and sometime between that sullen Sunday morning and the middle of the week of preparation for a road game at Iowa, the team's woeful mood turned back into one of purpose.

"Teams that suffer those kinds of losses



FILE PHOTO

FINISHING STRONG - Former Ohio State running back Joe Montgomery was among the Buckeyes in 1998 that were able to finish the season on a high note with wins over Iowa, Michigan and then Texas A&M in the Sugar Bowl.

can go one of two ways," said former OSU recruiting coordinator and tight ends coach Bill Conley. "You can fold up and just go through the motions for the rest of the season, or you can circle the wagons and come out fighting. Our players and our coaches knew we had too much talent to just mail it in those last couple of games."

Iowa was perhaps the perfect opponent for a pride-wounded Ohio State squad, which had been dropped unceremoniously to No. 7 in the national rankings. The Hawkeyes had lost three games in a row on the way to their worst record under Hayden Fry, who was in his 20th and final season as head coach. But Fry was coaching his final home game and had been undergoing treatment for prostate cancer for much of the season, and sentiment was certainly on his side.

Current Iowa running backs coach Ladell Betts was a freshman in 1998, and he earned All-Big Ten honorable mention while setting school records for rushing yardage in a game and in a season by a freshman. On defense, the Hawkeyes were led by consensus first-team All-America defensive end Jared DeVries, still the program leader in career sacks (43) and tackles for loss (79).

Clear, blue skies and an unseasonably warm 61 degrees greeted the teams as they took the field at Kinnick Stadium, typically a wind-swept icebox in mid-November. Inside the cramped and notoriously pink-colored visitors' locker room, Ohio State players received last-minute instructions and the traditional pregame pep talk before storming out to prove the loss to Michigan State was an aberration.

But actions always speak louder than words, and the Buckeyes' actions early on spoke volumes about where their heads really were.

Iowa took the game's opening kickoff and managed one first down before being forced to punt. Then, it was Ohio State's turn, and a ground attack featuring tailback Michael Wiley and fullback Matt Keller punched the ball past midfield. On the ninth play of the drive, facing third-and-11 at the Iowa 27, Germaine tried to connect with wide receiver Dee Miller on a sideline pattern, but Hawkeyes cornerback D.J. Johnson jumped the route and intercepted the pass at his own 16-yard line. Johnson then streaked down the sideline before Wiley finally caught him and brought him down at the OSU 11.

The 73-yard interception return not only

brought the Senior Day home crowd of 69,473 to its feet, it so stunned the Buckeyes that Iowa quarterback Scott Mullen ran a simple counter over right tackle on the next play for an 11-yard touchdown. After the PAT from kicker Zach Bromert, the Hawkeyes had a 7-0 advantage at the 8:32 mark of the first quarter while the Buckeyes were experiencing more than a little bit of *déjà vu*.

"I remember standing there on the sideline just shaking my head," Montgomery remembered. "You talk about a kick to the stomach. But maybe that's exactly what we needed."

The capacity crowd had barely enough time to catch its breath when Montgomery took a handoff from Germaine on Ohio State's next play from scrimmage. The backup tailback rumbled straight through a hole in the center of the Iowa defense, ran out of a couple of arm tackles, and broke free into the open. After that, he received a downfield block from split end David Boston and outraced the rest of the Hawkeyes to the end zone.

The 80-yard touchdown romp, accentuated by Montgomery briefly kneeling in the end zone in celebration, was exactly what the Buckeyes needed to snap out of their malaise.

From that point forward, it wasn't much of a game. Boston scored a 54-yard touchdown on a bomb from Germaine in the closing seconds of the first quarter, and barely more than a minute into the second period, freshman defensive tackle Mike Collins returned an interception 22 yards for a touchdown to give Ohio State a 21-7 lead.

The Buckeyes eventually ran away with a 45-14 victory that included a season-best 627 yards of total offense. Germaine threw for 319 yards and a pair of touchdowns, both to Boston, who finished with five receptions for 163 yards. Montgomery led the ground attack with 144 yards and a touchdown on just 12 carries.

"It was exactly the kind of game we needed," Montgomery said. "We shook off a slow start and then got back to playing the kind of football we knew we were capable of playing. It put us in the frame of mind we needed going into the final game against that team up north."

Exorcising Demons

No one needed to remind John Cooper of his record against Michigan. Heading into the 1998 version of The Game, Cooper had only one victory and one tie to show for 10 games against the Wolverines, a stretch that included excruciatingly narrow defeats, a couple of blowout losses, and an underlying dread that every bounce would eventually go Michigan's way.

"I know people got tired of me saying it, but no one wanted to beat Michigan more than I did," Cooper said. "But for whatever reason, it just didn't happen often enough."

Ohio State was installed as a 10-point favorite to beat Michigan in 1998, but that didn't mean much. The Buckeyes had been favored by nine points in 1995 and by a whopping 17 points in 1996, and managed to lose both of those contests.

The Wolverines, defending their share of a 1997 split national championship with

Nebraska, had lost the first two games of the 1998 season to drop out of the national rankings. But they had rebounded with eight consecutive victories on the strength of a withering defense. Michigan had allowed an average of just 7.5 points in its most recent six games, and the team had no illusions about stopping the potent Ohio State offense.

"They know about us," said All-America safety Marcus Ray, a Columbus native who had never tasted defeat against the Buckeyes during his three previous seasons as a starter. "We know they're favored, but we'll see about that. They've been favored against us before and you all know how that turned out."

In addition to his team's record against its archrivals, Ray had an additional reason to be confident. The Wolverines were coming off a dominant performance against eighth-ranked Wisconsin, a 27-10 upset victory during which they had held Badgers running back Ron Dayne to only 53 yards rushing. Dayne was on his way to 1,525 yards on the ground in 1998 and would win the Heisman Trophy the following season after rushing for 2,034 yards.

"We knew what kind of team they had, and we knew beating them wasn't going to be easy because it never was," said Boston, who admittedly let the pregame hype of the contest get the better of him the previous year. "We just tried to block everything out and concentrate on the business at hand."

A crisp, clear morning gave way to overcast skies at kickoff when 94,339 fans jammed into Ohio Stadium to watch the two rivals butt heads for the 95th time. Like two heavyweight boxers, the teams traded punches in the early going with nothing of any substance landing.

That changed during Ohio State's second possession when Wiley took a second-down handoff into the teeth of the Michigan defense for a 15-yard gain and two plays later caught a pitch from Germaine and scooted quickly to his right. Getting a key block from Keller, who wiped out blitzing U-M linebacker Dhani Jones in the backfield, and another from right guard Ben Gilbert, who collapsed a hard-charging Ray, Wiley broke a tackle at about the 45-yard line and then outraced the rest of the Michigan defense to the end zone.

As the Horseshoe crowd exploded into a frenzy, legendary sportscaster Keith Jackson told the nationwide television audience watching from home, "Matt Keller, the first big block, then Ben Gilbert opened the door, and ... have a nice trip, Michael!"

The 53-yard touchdown romp gave the Buckeyes a 7-0 lead at the 12:30 mark of the opening period, and the Buckeyes were just getting started.

After forcing a three-out series against the Wolverines, the football finally bounced Ohio State's way against its archrivals. U-M punter Jason Vinson failed to cleanly field a high snap, and although he eventually got off a kick under pressure, it was partially blocked and went for a loss of 13 yards to the Wolverine 16. Three plays later, Germaine found Miller in the back of the end zone for a 16-yard touchdown strike, giving the Buckeyes a 14-0 lead with 9:44 remaining in the first quarter.

Michigan showed a fleeting sign of life by getting a 27-yard field goal from kicker Jay Feely during the opening minute of the sec-

ond period, but Ohio State extended its lead when Boston leapt high to snag a sideline pass from Germaine and then spun away from cornerback Andre Weathers and linebacker Tommy Hendricks before eluding Ray's attempt at a shoestring tackle at the goal line.

Boston earned himself a 15-yard unsportsmanlike conduct penalty for pointing at Ray as the Michigan defender nipped at the OSU receiver's heels, but the 30-yard catch and run for a touchdown was still sweet redemption for Boston, who had been limited to only three catches against the Wolverines the year before during a 20-14 loss in Ann Arbor. This time, he had already caught seven balls for 142 yards while giving his team a 21-3 lead with 3:15 remaining until halftime.

Michigan managed to narrow its deficit to 21-10 just before the break when quarterback Tom Brady connected with wideout Tai Streets for a 3-yard touchdown pass. But OSU linebacker Jerry Rudzinski picked off Brady early in the third quarter, and another Germaine-to-Boston touchdown – this one good for 43 yards – gave the Buckeyes a 28-10 lead, and they never looked back, winning 31-16.

Ohio State's constant pressure rattled Brady into pitching two interceptions and he was sacked seven times in the game. The future seven-time Super Bowl champion wound up with 375 yards through the air, but he was forced to throw the ball 56 times, a Michigan single-game record that still stands. Part of the problem was the lack of any kind of running attack for the Wolverines. A total of 28 rushing attempts netted a season-low of just 4 yards.

In sharp contrast, Wiley rushed for 122 yards and a touchdown on only 12 carries while Germaine completed 16 of 28 attempts for 330 yards and three touchdowns. Most of that production came courtesy of Boston, who reeled in 10 catches for 217 yards and a pair of scores. The yardage total remains a single-game program record against Michigan.

"This win is monumental," said Rudzinski, a senior co-captain who finished the game with four tackles, including a sack, and his third-quarter interception. "This might be the sweetest win I've ever had. Being a senior, going out with a win over Michigan in my last home game at Ohio State, that's very special. I'll always have this memory."

In another part of the home locker room, Cooper looked like a man who had just extracted a 500-pound boulder from his back. Still, he looked reporters in the eye and claimed, "I felt like we were going to win this game all week. The assistant coaches did a great job preparing our football team (and) I was probably as relaxed as I've been in a long, long time – particularly for Michigan."

The victory raised Cooper's record against the Wolverines to 2-8-1, and although the Buckeyes missed out on a chance to play in the first BCS National Championship Game – finishing fourth in the final rankings behind Tennessee, Florida State and Kansas State – the team was on a mission to beat Michigan and win its bowl game in the same season for the first time in more than a decade and a half.

Finishing On High Note

While undefeated Tennessee and

once-beaten Florida State headed to the Fiesta Bowl to decide the BCS championship, and one-loss Kansas State got ready for an Alamo Bowl date with unranked Purdue, Ohio State prepared to play in the Sugar Bowl for the third time in program history and the second year in a row.

Each of the previous two trips to New Orleans to play in its impressive Superdome had ended in disaster – a 35-6 loss to Alabama at the end of the 1977 season, and a 31-14 thrashing at the hands of Florida State to finish the 1997 campaign.

This time, the opponent was Texas A&M, a two-loss team that had taken a 36-33 upset win against Kansas State in the Big 12 Championship Game. The Aggies were led by R.C. Slocum, who had been in College Station as an assistant since 1972 and was in the 10th of his 14 seasons as head coach.

Depending upon which poll you were using, A&M was ranked somewhere in the bottom half of the top 10 – sixth in the final BCS standings, eighth in The Associated Press writers' poll and ninth in the USA Today/ESPN coaches' poll.

What was not in dispute was the fact Slocum had plenty of offensive star power with quarterback Brannndon Stewart, a stable full of running backs that included Ja'Mar Toombs, Sirr Parker and Dante Hall, and reliable targets in wide receiver Chris Taylor and tight end Dan Campbell. But where the Aggies excelled most was on defense, a unit spearheaded by future College Football Hall of Fame linebacker Dat Nguyen.

Special teams were also a strength for A&M with Hall returning kicks and All-America punter Shane Lechler averaging 43.6 yards on 80 attempts. Lechler went on to enjoy an 18-year career in the NFL, punting for the Oakland Raiders (2000-12) and Houston Texans (2013-17).

Ohio State and Texas A&M had faced one another on three previous occasions with the Buckeyes winning each time. Woody Hayes led his team to a 17-0 home win against the Aggies in the 1963 season opener as well as a 56-13 win in Columbus in the first game of the 1970 season, and then the Earle Bruce-led Buckeyes had rolled to a 28-12 upset of the eighth-ranked Aggies in the 1987 Cotton Bowl.

For a time, it seemed that the Buckeyes would be without the services of one of their offensive stars. While visiting his Texas home during Christmas break, Boston had slipped on a patch of ice and sprained his ankle. He practiced only lightly and was said to be a game-time decision on whether or not he would play.

But Boston told BSB last fall there was never any doubt in his mind.

"I knew it was probably going to be my last college game, but I never thought about not playing," he said. "I just wanted to go out there and have fun like we did all year."

Texas A&M drew first blood with a 9-yard touchdown run from Hall early in the first quarter, but most of the rest of the game belonged to Ohio State.

Before the opening period had ended, the Buckeyes had crossed the goal line three times – an 18-yard pass from Germaine to split end Reggie Germany, a 10-yard run by Montgomery, and a 16-yard return by Kevin Griffin of a blocked punt by teammate Derek Ross.

OSU tacked on a 31-yard field goal from Dan Stultz just before the end of the first

half, and the Aggies scored a meaningless touchdown late in the third period before Buckeyes ran away with a 24-14 victory.

Montgomery and Wiley led a punishing ground attack for Ohio State, combining for 184 yards and a touchdown on 25 carries. Germaine was an efficient 21 of 38 for 222 yards and a touchdown, and Boston shook off his bad ankle to grab a season-high 11 receptions for 105 yards to earn game MVP honors.

The victory marked the first time since 1982 that Ohio State had beaten Michigan and won its bowl game in the same season. That year, the Buckeyes took a 24-14 win against the Wolverines and followed with a 47-17 whipping of a Steve Young-led BYU team in the Holiday Bowl.

Three days after the Buckeyes' win in the Sugar Bowl, Tennessee capped its undefeated season with a 23-16 win against Florida State in the first-ever Bowl Championship Series title game and wrapped up the 1998 national championship. Ohio State finished No. 2 in both the writers' and coaches' polls with Florida State slipping to third. Kansas State was dropped all the way to ninth by the coaches and 10th by the writers after absorbing a last-second, 37-34 upset loss to Purdue in the Alamo Bowl.

Cooper, who before the Tennessee victory in the title game held out hope that his team could capture at least a share of its first national championship in 30 years, was pragmatic about falling just short.

"Obviously, I'm very, very happy for our football team," the coach told reporters after the win against Texas A&M. "The senior football players leave Ohio State as the winningest class ever in school history, so I'm very proud of those guys. I think you can make an argument that the Buckeyes are as good as anyone in the country."

At the same time, All-America cornerback Antoine Winfield lamented the loss to Michigan State even as his teammate celebrated their Sugar Bowl victory.

"We had our opportunity to finish No. 1," Winfield said. "All we had to do was run the table. But we slipped up and we didn't do that. Don't get me wrong. I'm happy with No. 2 and I'm happy to go out with a win, but hopefully next year, the guys will be back here and win a national championship."

That was not to be, of course.

The 1998 season proved to be the high-water mark for Cooper during his 13-year tenure in Columbus. The Buckeyes dropped to a 6-6 record the following year, and although they rebounded to 8-3 during the 2000 regular season, Cooper was fired following a dismal 24-7 loss to unranked South Carolina in the Outback Bowl.

"Ohio State has suffered through a lot of near-misses over the years," longtime OSU football historian Jack Park told BSB. "But in my opinion, I don't think there has been a more disappointing season than 1998. That team had so many great athletes, won 11 games, and finished No. 2 in the national rankings. By almost any measure, that would be remembered as an overwhelming success.

"But because of one game – one half of one game, actually – a season that held so much promise, a season that would have gone down in the history of the program as one of the greatest, wound up being a disappointment. And isn't that a shame?"

OSU Resists Flips During Early Signing Period

What was shaping up to be a fairly quiet first day of the early signing period for Ohio State on Dec. 20 – just a few targets it continued to pursue, and maybe one or two prospects it was keeping an eye on in regard to keeping in the Buckeyes' class – turned out to be perhaps the most chaotic yet under head coach Ryan Day.

RECRUITING OUTLOOK Braden Moles

Things went smoothly in the early morning hours, as letters of intent started to fax in at 7 a.m. and Ohio State began announcing the newest Buckeyes as official signees with the program. But some early-morning news threatened to shake the foundation of Ohio State's recruiting class, with the top-ranked player committed on each side of the ball in jeopardy.

Alabama was reportedly making a late push for Buford, Ga., five-star defensive end Eddrick Houston (6-3, 269) – and came close to sealing the deal – while Miami (Fla.) and Florida State continued fighting to keep Hollywood (Fla.) Chaminade-Madonna Prep five-star wide receiver Jeremiah Smith (6-3, 214) in his home state.

Things were so unsettled, in fact, that Day was forced to begin his annual signing day press conference – scheduled for 12 p.m. at the Woody Hayes Athletic Center – with just 18 players signed, still awaiting word from the gems of the class in Houston and Smith. And some bad news had already rolled in, as Saint Louis

Christian Brothers College four-star wide receiver Jeremiah McClellan (6-0, 190) had already flipped and signed with Oregon.

But around 13 minutes into his press conference, Day was interrupted by Ohio State general manager Mark Pantoni to tell him that Smith had signed his letter of intent. Day looked to another team spokesperson to confirm the news, and when he was satisfied that he was hearing the truth, buckled in relief at the podium.

"I just want to go up there, build my own legacy up there in Ohio, be a first-round draft pick and be developed not only as a player, but as a man as well," Smith said at his signing ceremony. "It's been crazy. I just took it day by day. I just kept God first, prayed he'd lead me in the right direction. It was Ohio for me this whole time, so that's where I'm going."

Then, about 20 minutes later, Day was forced to step away to take a phone call, with athletic director Gene Smith informing him that it was urgent. After about 15 minutes, Day returned – donning an unmistakable smile – as it was reported within a few minutes that Houston would also sign with Ohio State. Day later confirmed his phone call was with Houston, where he received the good news.

"The first beer is going to taste good, I can tell you that," Day joked. "This is a signing day and when you have really good players, it's going to come down to the wire. That's how it goes. It's the most competitive environment there is."

With that, the Buckeyes had officially signed 20 members of the 2024 recruiting class. It features five five-star signees – including Smith and Houston in addition to New Haven, Ind., five-star wide receiver Mylan Graham (6-1, 170), Fairburn

OSU Football 2024 Commitments

Players in the class of 2024 who have signed to play football at Ohio State.

| Player | Pos. | Ht. | Wt. | Stars | High School |
|--------------------|------|------|-----|-------|---|
| Deontae Armstrong | OL | 6-6 | 280 | ★★★★ | Lakewood (Ohio) St. Edward |
| Devontae Armstrong | OL | 6-5 | 297 | ★★★ | Lakewood (Ohio) St. Edward |
| Mylan Graham | WR | 6-1 | 170 | ★★★★★ | New Haven, Ind. |
| Eddrick Houston | DL | 6-3 | 269 | ★★★★★ | Buford, Ga., |
| Max LeBlanc | TE | 6-4 | 222 | ★★★★ | Chattanooga (Tenn.) Baylor School |
| Miles Lockhart | CB | 5-10 | 185 | ★★★★ | Chandler (Ariz.) Basha |
| Jaylen McClain | SAF | 6-0 | 185 | ★★★★ | West Orange (N.J.) Seton Hall Prep |
| Eric Mensah | DL | 6-3 | 290 | ★★★ | Stafford (Va.) Mountain View |
| Ian Moore | OL | 6-6 | 317 | ★★★★ | New Palestine, Ind. |
| Air Noland | QB | 6-2 | 195 | ★★★★★ | Fairburn (Ga.) Langston Hughes |
| James Peoples | RB | 5-10 | 200 | ★★★★ | San Antonio Veterans Memorial |
| Payton Pierce | LB | 6-1 | 225 | ★★★★ | Lucas (Texas) Lovejoy |
| Leroy Roker | S | 6-1 | 170 | ★★★ | Fort Myers (Fla.) Bishop Verot |
| Aaron Scott | CB | 6-2 | 195 | ★★★★★ | Springfield, Ohio |
| Jeremiah Smith | WR | 6-3 | 214 | ★★★★★ | Hollywood (Fla.) Chaminade-Madonna Prep |
| Garrett Stover | LB | 6-0 | 21 | ★★★★ | Sunbury (Ohio) Big Walnut |
| Gabe VanSickle | OL | 6-5 | 283 | ★★★★ | Coopersville, Mich. |
| Bryce West | CB | 5-11 | 177 | ★★★★ | Cleveland Glenville |
| Sam Williams-Dixon | RB | 5-11 | 203 | ★★★ | Pickerington (Ohio) North |
| Damarion Witten | TE | 6-4 | 215 | ★★★★ | Cleveland Glenville |

(Ga.) Langston Hughes five-star quarterback Air Noland (6-2, 195) and Springfield, Ohio, five-star cornerback Aaron Scott (6-2, 190) – and 12 other four-star prospects.

Ohio State's class ranked fifth in the country, according to the 247Sports composite rankings, behind No. 4 Miami (Fla.), No. 3 Texas, No. 2 Alabama and No. 1 Georgia, though the Buckeyes were second nationally (behind Georgia) with a .9292 average player rating.

"There were some pieces that we felt like we needed to get coming out of this," Day said. "Did we get the whole wish list? No, but we got a lot of things covered and that's really good moving forward. Now onto the next phase of putting together this roster."

While Ohio State has no shortage of wide receivers, Smith's addition is a significant one for the Buckeyes. He is the highest-rated receiver to ever sign with Ohio State, and expectations will be high for Smith once he arrives on campus.

"I will say this about Jeremiah, he never wavered," offensive coordinator/wide receivers coach Brian Hartline said. "His family never wavered. He can say what he wants two minutes before the hat came out. He always told me the same thing. His parents always told me the same thing. So from his family to him, the reality of college football is (the media sees) it, and (the media sees) the clicks and you see the conversations and all those kinds of things.

"Yeah, that's all I can say. His family is loyal. They always did what they said, and I can't thank them enough. I'll tell you, I'm really excited for him, and we'll see him here in a couple of weeks, if that. Very excited."

If it were not for Smith, Graham would be more than enough to be considered the key haul of a recruiting class, but the pairing together makes for a dynamic future duo.

"Mylan, one heck of a football player," Hartline said. "Talk about a guy that knew where he wanted to go, came and saw us a lot. He made no gripe about going

anywhere else or whatever. His process was very different from Jeremiah, which is fine."

Ohio State's other strengths in the class lay at tight end, where it signed Chattanooga (Tenn.) Baylor School four-star tight end Max LeBlanc (6-4, 222) and Cleveland Glenville four-star tight end Damarion Witten (6-4, 215), as well as cornerback, where it signed an impressive trio of Scott, Cleveland Glenville four-star cornerback Bryce West (5-11, 177) and Chandler (Ariz.) Basha four-star cornerback Miles Lockhart (5-10, 185).

The Buckeyes hit their numbers at linebacker and running back as well, signing two each, though the rest of the position groups bring some questions for the Buckeyes. Ohio State signed just two safeties – West Orange (N.J.) Seton Hall Prep four-star safety Jaylen McClain (6-0, 185) and Fort Myers (Fla.) Bishop Verot three-star safety Leroy Roker (6-1, 170), the latter just inside the top 1,000 nationally – after expecting to land at least three.

Things were more troubling on the defensive line. While Houston is a significant get for the Buckeyes, the only other signee was Stafford (Va.) Mountain View three-star defensive tackle Eric Mensah (6-3, 290) following the decommitment in November of Chicago St. Ignatius five-star defensive lineman Justin Scott (6-4, 310). It's a group where Ohio State could have signed at least three or four prospects, leaving the transfer portal a likely option to build depth at the position.

On the other side of the trenches, the Buckeyes signed four offensive lineman – including New Palestine, Ind., four-star tackle Ian Moore (6-6, 317); Coopersville, Mich., four-star interior Gabe VanSickle (6-5, 283); and four-star tackle Deontae Armstrong (6-6, 280) and three-star interior Devontae Armstrong (6-5, 297) from Lakewood (Ohio) St. Edward – but missed on all of their big swings at offensive tackle, including Santa Ana (Calif.) Mater Dei five-star Brandon Baker (6-5, 285) and Bradenton (Fla.) IMG Academy five-star Jordan Seaton (6-5, 287), who

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TIMPOND, member of both the Bishop Watterson High School and the Otterbein University Basketball Halls of Fame, recently offered his publication entitled "Coaching Youth Basketball: Coaching the Coaches" for sale on Amazon.com. Access to this instructional manual was previously limited to attendees of his basketball clinics and camps only.

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BUCKEYE GAMEDAY Memories: A new book of short stories about humorous gameday experiences in the 1960s through the 2010s by Tim Sullivan. Available on Amazon.com.

OSU Football 2025 Commitments

Players in the class of 2025 who have issued a verbal commitment to play football at Ohio State.

| Player | Pos. | Ht. | Wt. | Stars | High School |
|------------------|------|------|-----|-------|-------------------------------|
| Jayvan Boggs | WR | 6-0 | 188 | ★★★★ | Cocoa, Fla. |
| Eli Lee | LB | 6-3 | 215 | ★★★ | Akron Hoban |
| Devin Sanchez | CB | 6-2 | 170 | ★★★★★ | Houston North Shore |
| Tavien St. Clair | QB | 6-4 | 210 | ★★★★ | Bellefontaine, Ohio |
| Blake Woodby | CB | 5-11 | 175 | ★★★★ | Baltimore St. Frances Academy |

OSU Football 2026 Commitment

Player(s) in the class of 2026 who have issued a verbal commitment to play football at Ohio State.

| Player | Pos. | Ht. | Wt. | Stars | High School |
|-----------------|------|-----|-----|-------|--------------------|
| Chris Henry Jr. | WR | 6-5 | 185 | ★★★★★ | Cincinnati Withrow |

signed with Texas and Colorado, respectively.

Lyle, McClellan Flip In December

Ohio State suffered a pair of flips in December, including McClellan and Fort Lauderdale (Fla.) St. Thomas Aquinas four-star running back Jordan Lyle (6-0, 180), though one came as more of a surprise than the other.

Lyle, the No. 145 overall prospect and No. 10 running back in the class, formally flipped to Miami (Fla.) on Dec. 18, though he had seemingly spent more time with the Hurricanes than he had the Buckeyes in the weeks leading up to his signing, so it was a loss that did not catch Ohio State

off guard.

The Buckeyes still had a successful haul at running back, including a top-100 prospect in San Antonio Veterans Memorial four-star running back James Peoples (5-10, 200) as well as Pickerington (Ohio) North three-star running back Sam Williams-Dixon (5-11, 203), both of whom will have the opportunity to contribute next season for the Buckeyes.

"He's a dynamic running back who had a very good high school career," Day said of Peoples. "He can do multiple things, he's strong, he's got great change of direction and can catch routes out of the backfield. He's going to be a dynamic player, and I think he's going to make an impact his freshman year."

McClellan, however, was a bit more out of nowhere. While Oregon had lurked in the background throughout his recruitment, the Ducks and head coach Dan Lanning made a late push for the four-star prospect and were ultimately able to land him.

"I'd probably say what made the difference for me was the relationship with the coaching staff that I had (at Oregon)," McClellan told 247Sports. "I didn't know where I was going until I'd probably say the day of. That's when I knew where I was going."

McClellan did take the time to call and inform Hartline, and he said that Ohio State's coaching staff appeared to expect the flip.

"I called Coach Hartline and told them I was parting ways, and they weren't happy about it. They weren't excited at all. I just had to (do) what's best for me," McClellan said. "His reaction was – how do I say this – I think he kind of expected it coming."

"He was very subtle with it and really tried to get me back. He kept on trying to get me back, see if there was anything I needed to get me back. I told them it was my relationship with the coaching staff, with Coach Lanning, Coach (Junior) Adams, the whole entire staff over there. I liked that a lot."

While just two receivers is fewer than normal for the Buckeyes, a class of Smith

and Graham is still better than most schools are bringing in, leaving little for the Buckeyes to worry about in the class.

OSU Fails On Flip Attempts

Ohio State lost a pair of prospects to flips in December and was unsuccessful in its own pursuit of prospects committed to other schools.

Three recruits pursued by Ohio State – including Bay City, Texas, four-star defensive lineman Carlton Jones (6-3, 285); Esko (Minn.) Lincoln Secondary four-star safety Koi Perich (6-1, 199); and Clinton, N.C., four-star defensive lineman Amaris Williams (6-2, 257) – wound up with other schools, as Perich kept his commitment to Minnesota while Jones flipped from Nebraska to USC and Williams flipped from Florida to Auburn.

Jones' decision appeared to come down to NIL, while Williams said after the fact that Ohio State had led for most of his recruitment, but he ended up at Auburn because of concerns about whether defensive line coach Larry Johnson was retiring.

"It was one thing that really made a difference between Ohio State and Auburn," Williams told 247Sports. "People were saying Coach Johnson was retiring and he had a contract that ended in January but he had never signed a new one,

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A Look Back At Recruiting From The Pages Of BSB

35 Years Ago — 1989

With only a precious 25 scholarships to offer incoming freshmen, schools like Ohio State ordinarily do not offer those grants to kicking specialists early in the recruiting season. But Tim Williams of Waynesville (Ohio) High School was no ordinary kicking specialist.

With a powerful leg that belied his rather diminutive 5-9, 160-pound stature, Williams verbally committed on Dec. 15 to kick footballs for the Buckeyes.

"It's a great opportunity for me," Williams said. "Ohio State is a great school which is respected around the country for academics and sports. It's national television, it's big-time football. It has the best facilities in the country. It's like a dream come true to be able to play at Ohio State."

30 Years Ago — 1994

Ohio State moved into the midway stages of its recruiting efforts by landing one of the top offensive line prospects in the country.

The verbal commitment of Eric Gohlstein, a 6-5, 295-pounder from Cleveland St. Ignatius, made nine total players who had indicated they would sign with the Buckeyes.

"It has everything I'm looking for," Gohlstein told BSB of Ohio State. "I like the blend of athletics and academics you get at Ohio State. I don't think it's been any big secret that I've been thinking about Ohio State for a long time. I'm happy to make the commitment."

"The academic side of things is something that can't be overlooked. You know, something could happen and your football playing days could be over tomorrow. You have to look at the future in terms other than football."

25 Years Ago — 1999

With just a month left before national signing day, the Ohio State football staff was looking to close out its 1999 recruiting campaign on a high note.

The Buckeyes took two big steps forward Dec. 19 when OSU head coach John Cooper secured verbal commitments during visits from Shaker Heights, Ohio, offensive lineman Adrien Clarke (6-5, 315) and Park Forest (Ill.) Rich East defensive back Richard McNutt (6-0, 170). That pair gave Ohio State 15 verbal commitments in the class.

20 Years Ago — 2004

On the first official visit weekend following Ohio State's 35-28 Fiesta Bowl triumph, the coaching staff welcomed in no fewer than seven prospects who projected as defensive linemen at the

college level. So it was no surprise that was the position that got the greatest boost as a result of the visits.

Following the official visit weekend, the Buckeyes picked up verbal commitments from two defensive linemen – Vernon Gholston of Detroit Cass Tech and Alex Barrow (6-4, 250) of Dublin (Ohio) Coffman.

Gholston (6-3, 240) was the higher-rated of the two prospects. He was a member of BSB's "Hot 25," and Rivals.com ranked him the nation's No. 10 weakside defensive end prospect. He visited Michigan, Michigan State and Iowa before officially seeing Ohio State the second weekend in January.

15 Years Ago — 2009

The Under Armour game on Jan. 4 featured eight more prospects with Buckeye ties. His Black team did not earn a win, but Duron Carter certainly helped his own case.

After the White squad's 27-16 victory in the game televised by ESPN and played at the Citrus Bowl in Orlando, Fla., the OSU verbal commitment and son of former Buckeye great Cris Carter drew raves from analysts across the country for his play.

Duron, a 6-3, 185-pound wideout from Fort Lauderdale (Fla.) St. Thomas Aquinas, made plays in multiple ways. Early in the game, Duron threw a nasty block that knocked linebacker Tom Wort – a verbal commitment to Oklahoma – out of the game for a few plays.

"Carter may not be explosive, but he'll catch anything and everything thrown to him," Scout analyst Brandon Huffman wrote. "He will go up the ladder for the tough catch. He will make the catch in traffic and can make the diving catch. He runs crisp routes."

10 Years Ago — 2014

In the days leading up to the U.S. Army All-American Bowl on Jan. 4, drama ruled when it came to an Ohio State perspective.

Thought to be Buckeye locks for a long time, Cleveland Glenville defensive backs Marshon Lattimore (6-1, 180) and Erick Smith (6-1, 195) were set to announce where they'd be spending their college careers at the game but were suddenly wavering when it came to making their decisions known to the public.

The smokescreens, rumors and innuendos, however, proved to be just that. As they were expected to, both Lattimore and Smith publicly committed at the game, announcing that they'd be taking their talents to Columbus to play for Ohio State.

"Ohio State was the right school for me because it was home away from home and the place I always wanted to go," Smith said. "Throughout the recruiting process I always had my eye on Ohio State, but other schools were great too."

Added Lattimore, the No. 8-rated cornerback in his class: "I always wanted to go to Ohio State, and it was the right place for me. I always felt like it was home, and I felt the most comfortable there."

Five Years Ago — 2019

From sunrise to sunset, early signing day took twists and turns – some expected and others unexpected – as Ohio State inked 15 letters of intent in the 2019 class, headlined by the five-star trio of Austin (Texas) Lake Travis wide receiver Garrett Wilson (6-1, 180); Buford, Ga., center Harry Miller (6-4, 310); and Lewis Center (Ohio) Olentangy Orange defensive end Zach Harrison.

The 6-5, 243-pound Harrison was among two signing-day commitments. Harrison and Wake Forest, N.C., three-star defensive tackle Jaden McKenzie (6-3, 285) announced pledges to Ohio State during ceremonies at their respective high schools.

Harrison, who chose to stay home at Ohio State over finalists Michigan and Penn State, shared his decision in an event kept private from outsiders at Olentangy Orange. In comments streamed live online by Olentangy Orange's student-run broadcast club, he was brief.

"It's been a long process," he said, "but I've decided to continue my academic and football career at the Ohio State University."

One Year Ago — 2023

The early signing period came to a close, and with it, likely Ohio State's entire 2023 recruiting class. The Buckeyes earned signatures from 20 prospects over the three-day period from Dec. 21-23, and while Ohio State would continue to scout the transfer portal for talent, it was likely that the last scholarship had been handed out to a high school prospect for this recruiting cycle.

Ohio State's 20-man group ranked sixth in the country, according to the 247Sports composite rankings, and had the third-highest average player rating in the nation (.9357) behind Georgia (.9375) and Alabama (.9490), which also had the second and first overall composite classes, respectively. While the Buckeyes' class was not lacking in quality, it was in quantity, as it had at least four fewer commitments than every school that finished higher in the rankings.

The Buckeyes' class featured one five-star commitment in Fort Lauderdale (Fla.) American Heritage wide receiver Brandon Inniss (6-0, 190), and he was one of seven top-100 prospects for Ohio State.

"It's a great group," Day said on Dec. 21, the first day of the early signing period. "And I think when you look at the quality of the people that we're bringing in, I think that's the focus right now. These are guys who want to be Buckeyes."

Buckeyes Not Done In 2024 Recruiting Class

Continued From Page 31

so I didn't think he was actually going to stay, because if he stayed, he would have signed a new contract."

As for Perich, the Buckeyes made a strong push near the end of his recruitment, but the allure of playing for his hometown team kept him locked in with his initial pledge.

"This one obviously is well documented about his recruiting battle towards the end," Minnesota head coach P.J. Fleck said. "I think some things kind of get blown out of proportion at times, and some people say they have this and they really don't. This was very real. It came down to the last minute with this young man. He wants to make a massive impact here in the state of Minnesota, at the University of Minnesota."

OSU Still Pursuing UW DL Commit Kirks

Ohio State has mostly wrapped up high school recruiting for 2024, but the one exception is Painesville (Ohio) Riverside four-star defensive lineman Dominic Kirks (6-4, 255), a Washington pledge who is extending his recruitment to national signing day on Feb. 7.

Kirks is the No. 251 overall prospect and No. 33 defensive lineman in the class, and he is also in communication with

Ohio State, Syracuse and USC, according to 247Sports, while he balances his current commitment to the Huskies.

The delay in Kirks' signing was caused by the departure of Washington defensive ends coach Eric Schmidt for the defensive coordinator position at San Diego State, leaving Kirks to consider his future.

"He got a good opportunity for him and his family," Kirks told 247Sports of Schmidt. "I'm happy for him, but it was a shocker. It messed my mind up a little bit."

Kirks said it is still "pretty likely" that he signs with Washington in February, but he said he has spoken to Johnson about an official visit and potentially receiving an offer.

"Championships and coach Larry Johnson," he said of what stands out about Ohio State. "You know how legendary he is, how many guys he developed and got into the league. That's an amazing program as well."

Former OSU QB Commit Raiola Signs With Nebraska

The never-ending story known as Buford, Ga., five-star quarterback Dylan Raiola (6-3, 230) took yet another turn just ahead of the early signing period, when the former Ohio State pledge flipped once again, switching his commitment from Georgia to Nebraska and eventually

signing his letter of intent with the Cornhuskers.

Raiola – the No. 6 overall prospect and second-ranked quarterback in the class – had been committed to Georgia since last December after flipping from Ohio State. But he continued to show interest in Nebraska, and with about a week to go until the early signing period, whispers started up that a flip was imminent.

Of course, it's of little surprise when one considers that Raiola's uncle, Donovan Raiola, is the offensive line coach and his father, Dominic, was a two-time All-Big 12 selection and former Rimington Trophy winner with the Cornhuskers.

Beyond Raiola's talent – he threw for 2,819 yards and 34 touchdowns his senior season to just one interception – he also marks a significant milestone for Nebraska. He is the first five-star prospect to sign with the Cornhuskers in over a decade.

"I think anytime that you feel good about the guy you bring in at quarterback, it's special," Nebraska head coach Matt Rhule said. "Obviously, for us, even this year, we know we're going to play great defense, so to have a guy behind center that we believe in, we know we can win championship games. I think it means a lot."

"Probably on a more macro level, to have one of the best players in the coun-

try choose Nebraska maybe signals to people, 'Hey, there's something special happening here.' "

OSU Adds Five-Star CB Sanchez At AA Bowl

Ohio State received a significant win on the recruiting trail on Jan. 6, when Houston North Shore five-star cornerback Devin Sanchez (6-2, 170) announced his pledge to the Buckeyes at the All-American Bowl.

Sanchez is the sixth-ranked player in 2025 and the second overall cornerback in the class, and he chose Ohio State over Alabama and Texas A&M.

"The relationship I've built with Coach (Tim) Walton," Sanchez said when asked why he chose Ohio State. "They make it feel like home every time I'm down there. From the first day I get there on campus, I think I'll make a big impact."

He was offered by the Buckeyes last January and has since taken several visits to Columbus while building a relationship with Walton, and he looks forward to competing – likely at outside cornerback – once he arrives on campus.

"An Ohio State cornerback, he's good at everything," Sanchez said this past summer. "You can press, play off, that's what they like to do. If you can do all of that and be great at it, you've got a chance to be on that cornerback wall and you've

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ASK AN ANALYST

With BuckeyeScoop's Bill Greene

With the early signing period behind us, what positions do you view as the most important for Ohio State to target either in the transfer portal or from the high school ranks ahead of National Signing Day in February?

"Signing day, there's not a lot left out there. You have to get somebody on that defensive line. If you have to take a chance on someone, then that's what you have to do at this point. Portal wise, you can see that they're trying. They kicked the tires on (former Duke quarterback) Riley Leonard, didn't get him. They're getting (former Kansas State quarterback) Will Howard. They're bringing in offensive lineman to visit, so you can see how they think they need to attack this roster right now.

"Another thing is they really don't know exactly what they're losing in terms of the NFL right now. I think things are pretty buttoned up right now in terms of what these guys are going to do. That kind of creates an issue, too. Now, they're going to have that answer here real soon. (By Jan. 15), they're going to have decisions on every one of these guys, whether they're leaving or staying, but right now that puts you in kind of a quandary. How do you go about, if you're looking at a defensive end in the portal and he asked you his chance to start next year, 'What is (J.T. Tuimoloau) doing?' You can't really give that answer. Until he makes his NFL decision, who's back and who's leaving, it really puts them in a tough spot to attack that portal."

Speaking of the transfer portal, what are your thoughts on how Ohio State has approached the portal over the last few years? What changes, if

any, would you make?

"We're going to see, but I think they're in a better position regarding NIL right now than they have been since NIL was first instituted. I want to see how this all works out. We saw some things on signing day with (Jeremiah) Smith and Eddrick Houston, where the OSU NIL people had to step up there, and they did. You had Miami (Fla.) who spends like drunken sailors coming after Smith, and Alabama coming after Houston.

"There's a lot of different tentacles to NIL about getting kids out of the portal. Absolutely, those kids are looking for money. (Chip) Trayanum got a great deal from Kentucky. That played a part in his decision to leave Ohio State. Your NIL people, you have to keep the guys on your roster satisfied. You've got to present some sort of a plan to any portal kid you're talking to. Then, like right now they are trying to devise plans for (Tuimoloau), (TreVeyon) Henderson, Emeka Egbuka. You've got so many tentacles right now with NIL that you've never had in the past, where you're trying to keep your roster intact, you're trying to bring in new guys and then we've got to try to appeal to these high school kids.

"The NIL people at Ohio State, I think they finally have kind of figured it out. I was encouraged by what I saw with Houston and Smith. Those are guys that could have been lost. We'll see going forward how they do with some portal guys.

"I don't think I'd make any changes. They got (Josh) Simmons last year, he ended up being a starter. Victor Cutler Jr. didn't work out. I think they're OK there. The thing is at Ohio State, you don't really need to overhaul

the whole roster. You're really looking like Georgia does it, like Alabama does it. You're just looking to plug and play in an area where you're weak. You don't need to bring in 10 to 15 every year, but you've got to get two or three."

With the focus beginning to shift to 2025 for recruiting, what do you view as the most important positions for Ohio State to pursue?

"It has to be offensive line and defensive line. If Ohio State has fallen short in the past couple of years, those are really the areas that have fallen short. That's where things have to get better. They fired Greg Studrawa and brought in Justin Frye looking for an uptick there. So far the recruiting is the same, maybe a little worse, and performance on the field is probably the same. That's where football always has to start. They really need to start recruiting offensive linemen the way (Brian) Hartline recruits wide receivers. That's what you need.

"Instead of Smith – and I love Smith, I was the first one to ever write about him in Ohio and he's tremendous, and so is Mylan Graham. But I'd rather have (five-star offensive tackles) Brandon Baker and Jordan Seaton. That's where the focus really has to be, and that's where they have to do better. Then (defensive line coach) Larry Johnson, people are using his age against Ohio State, and I think that's a tough one to overcome. But people use it against Alabama all the time with Nick Saban and they find a way. I'm always more of a trench guy than the skill guys."

got a chance to be DBU here.

"There's not that many schools where you can call it DBU, but Ohio State's probably the No. 1 school. Just look at the guys in the league. It speaks for itself."

Sanchez is the fifth commitment in Ohio State's 2025 recruiting class and the second in the secondary, joining Baltimore St. Frances Academy four-star cornerback Blake Woodby (5-11, 175). The Buckeyes also continues to pursue Birmingham (Ala.) Parker five-star Na'eem Offord (6-1, 185) and Indianapolis Ben Davis four-star cornerback Mark Zackery IV (5-11, 164), among others.

2025 OT Target DeBose Backs Off UGA Pledge

Mobile (Ala.) CF Vigor four-star offensive tackle Micah DeBose (6-5, 315) is back on the market after he backed off his pledge to Georgia on Dec. 22.

DeBose is the No. 26 overall prospect and fourth-ranked offensive tackle in his class, and he holds additional offers from Alabama, Auburn, Florida, Florida State, LSU, Michigan, Penn State, Tennessee and USC in addition to the Buckeyes.

He was born in Cleveland and visited Ohio State for the first time this past season, taking in the Buckeyes' 38-3 win over Michigan State on Nov. 11. It was one of several visits DeBose took to other schools throughout the fall, indicating his initial commitment to the Bulldogs was not a particularly strong one.

DeBose confirmed to 247sports that he planned to return to Ohio State soon, so the Buckeyes seem firmly entrenched in the second round of his recruitment.

Ohio State's other targets at offen-

sive tackle in the class include Charlotte (N.C.) Providence Day School five-star David Sanders Jr. (6-6, 270), Toledo Whitmer four-star Carter Lowe (6-5, 290) and Franklin (Mich.) Wylie E. Groves four-star Avery Gach (6-5, 275), among others.

Top-Ranked 2026 QB Curtis Has Buckeyes In Top Six

Ohio State continues to be in the pole position for Nashville (Tenn.) Christian School five-star quarterback Jared Curtis (6-3, 210), a 2026 prospect, as he included the Buckeyes among his top six schools on Dec. 23.

Curtis is the No. 20 overall player and second-ranked quarterback in the class, and he included Ohio State along with Alabama, Florida State, Georgia, Tennessee and Texas A&M.

"I really like the game plan they go into each game with," Curtis told 247Sports about Ohio State, "and the way they use their players is what makes them special."

He threw for 2,285 yards and 27 touchdowns as a freshman, finishing as a runner-up for Tennessee's Mr. Football, and followed it up by throwing for 2,522 yards and 25 touchdowns as a sophomore.

The Buckeyes have offers out to just three quarterbacks in 2026, including Curtis, Carrollton, Ga., five-star Julian Lewis (6-1, 185), who is committed to USC, and Tampa (Fla.) Jesuit four-star Will Griffin (6-3, 215), who was offered after a camp session this past summer.

Other Notes And Tidbits

• According to several reports, the list of winter enrollees among Ohio State's 20

signees includes both Armstrong brothers, Houston, Lockhart, McClain, Mensah, Moore, Noland, Peoples, Lucas (Texas) Lovejoy four-star linebacker Payton Pierce (6-1, 225), Scott, Smith, Sunbury (Ohio) Big Walnut four-star linebacker Garrett Stover (6-0, 214), West and Williams-Dixon, while Graham, LeBlanc, Roker, VanSickle and Witten will be summer enrollees.

• Texas natives Peoples and Pierce spent time with Ohio State's coaches while the team was in Arlington, Texas, for the Cotton Bowl, and got to spend time on the field in AT&T Stadium before of the Cotton Bowl.

• The Armstrong brothers and Witten were on the losing side of the U.S. Army Bowl on Dec. 19, suffering a 62-37 loss, though Witten was named the game's MVP after collecting four passes for 96 yards and three touchdowns.

• Graham, Scott and West were all on the winning side in the Under Armour All-American Game on Jan. 3, leading Team Ice to a 39-9 win over Team Fire.

• Five future Buckeyes – Houston, Moore, Peoples, Smith and Stover – participated in the All-American Bowl on Jan. 6, all representing Team East in a 31-28 loss to Team West. Smith caught a touchdown, while Houston recorded a tackle for loss.

• Four 2025 prospects with Ohio State offers committed to other schools in recent weeks, including Cocoa, Fla., four-star defensive end Javion Hilson (6-4, 225) to Alabama; Kissimmee (Fla.) Osceola four-star linebacker Elijah Melendez (6-2, 225) to Miami (Fla.); Alcoa, Tenn., four-star tight end Eli Owens (6-2, 243)

to Michigan; and Calhoun, Ga., four-star tight end Emaree Winston (6-2, 235) to Texas.

• Several prospects included Ohio State among their top schools in recent weeks. The Buckeyes landed in the top five for Olney (Md.) Good Counsel five-star safety Faheem Delane (6-3, 195); the top 10 for Sugar Land (Texas) Fort Bend Christian Academy four-star defensive end Max Granville (6-3, 215), Cincinnati Winton Woods four-star defensive end Justin Hill (6-3, 220), Columbia (S.C.) Heathwood Hall four-star cornerback Onis Konanbanny (6-2, 170) and Fort Lauderdale (Fla.) American Heritage four-star running back Byron Louis (5-10, 180); and the top 13 for Humble (Texas) Atascocita four-star running back Tory Blaylock (5-11, 175).

• Cocoa, Fla., four-star wide receiver and Ohio State pledge Jayvan Boggs (6-0, 188) was named Florida's Mr. Football after collecting 93 passes for 1,493 yards and 23 touchdowns during his junior season.

• Ohio State sent out three new offers in recent weeks, including to Woodbridge (Va.) Freedom three-star running back Jeff Overton (5-11, 187) in 2025 and both Buford, Ga., linebacker CJ Sibley (6-1, 185) and Fairburn (Ga.) Langston Hughes tight end Xavier Tiller (6-4, 205) in 2025.

For the latest in Ohio State football recruiting news, be sure to visit BuckeyeSports.com, free to all Buckeye Sports Bulletin subscribers.

Analysts Break Down Ohio State's 2024 Class

By **GREG WILSON**

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Associate Editor

The early signing period has come to an end, and with most players having already signed with their respective schools – including 20 signees for Ohio State – recruiting is mostly in the rearview mirror when it comes to 2024.

Ohio State's class features five five-star signees and an average player rating of .9292, which is second in the country, though the overall class is ranked just fifth in the country, according to the 247Sports composite ranking, behind No. 4 Miami (Fla.), No. 3 Texas, No. 2 Alabama and No. 1 Georgia.

"It's a highly rated class, but to me, I never look at like the final rating," BuckeyeScoop recruiting analyst Bill Greene told Buckeye Sports Bulletin. "You could take the top 10 quarterbacks in America, get them all committed, take the top eight safeties and take the top seven defensive ends, you'd have a class of 23 guys, they'd all be highly rated. You'd have a number two or three class in the country, but does that really help you?"

The quarterback the Buckeyes signed was Fairburn (Ga.) Langston Hughes five-star Air Noland (6-2, 195), who wasn't head coach Ryan Day's first choice, but the left-handed prospect still projects to be a solid addition under center, according to Greene. Ohio State previously had a commitment from Buford, Ga., five-star Dylan Raiola (6-3, 230), who ended up with Nebraska after committing and decommitting to Georgia as well.

"I like Air Noland a lot," Greene said. "There's a lot that I like with him. He's one of the best in the country. He fits with and is probably better than Devin Brown and Lincoln Kienholz. Now, do I think he's going to start next year? No. But his long-term potential would be higher than those two, so I think they hit with Air Noland."

While not the largest position group signed by the Buckeyes, the best pound-for-pound haul was at wide receiver. They inked the No. 1 overall prospect in the country in Opa Locka (Fla.) Chaminade-Madonna five-star Jeremiah Smith (6-3, 214) and New Haven, Ind., five-star Mylan Graham (6-1, 170), another top-25 prospect.

The class is another recruiting success story for offensive coordinator/wide receivers coach Brian Hartline. Smith is the highest-rated wide receiver to ever sign with Ohio State, and Graham is no slouch, either, ranked No. 23 overall in the country.

"I'm not shy about this. (Smith) is the best wide receiver prospect I've ever covered," Buckeye Huddle recruiting analyst Marc Givler told BSB. "In fact, I think he's going to be very hard to keep out of the starting lineup (in 2024), which I pretty much never say. You've got to start there. But Mylan Graham, the other receiver in the class, is an absolute stud. He's a Carnell Tate-caliber prospect coming out of high school. Any other year he'd be your top-ranked receiver prospect in the class. He just happened to be in with Jeremiah this year."

At running back, Ohio State signed two prospects after Fort Lauderdale (Fla.) St. Thomas Aquinas four-star Jordan Lyle (6-0, 180) flipped to Miami (Fla.). The Buckeyes were able to secure letters of intent from San Antonio Veterans Memorial four-star James Peoples (5-10, 200) and Pickerington (Ohio) North three-star Sam Williams-Dixon (5-11, 203).

Greene and Givler both think it's a real possibility that Peoples could be one of the incoming freshmen who sees time on the field next season.

"I know they lost Lyle – that wouldn't concern me that much," Greene said. "If they would have lost Peoples that would have concerned me because I think he's one of the best running backs in the country. Then you have Sam Williams-Dixon, who is kind of a plug-and-play. I don't know where he's

going to end up. He could play running back, could be a safety. The running back situation is good."

Tight end was another position where the Buckeyes did well, signing two at the position for the first time since 2016, including Chattanooga (Tenn.) Baylor School four-star Max LeBlanc (6-4, 222) and Cleveland Glenville four-star Damarion Witten (6-4, 215), who Givler believes is one of the most underrated players Ohio State signed in this class.

"He's not your traditional 6-6, 265-pound tight end," Givler said. "He's more of a flex tight end. He's dynamic. He's one of the best athletes in the state. He's an above-the-rim player on the basketball floor. He's an absolute matchup nightmare."

"(Glenville head coach) Ted Ginn Sr. told me a few weeks ago that Damarion is one of the three most versatile athletes he's seen in 50 years at Glenville, which I think carries a lot of weight. This is a guy who can make plays in a lot of different ways, who can play two or three different positions at the college level."

One place where the Buckeyes struggled in this recruiting class, however, was in the trenches, where they missed out on Santa Ana (Calif.) Mater Dei five-star Brandon Baker (6-5, 285) and Bradenton (Fla.) IMG Academy five-star Jordan Seaton (6-5, 287) on the offensive side of the ball, two highly rated tackle recruits.

The Buckeyes instead signed New Palestine, Ind., four-star Ian Moore (6-6, 317), three-star Devontae Armstrong (6-5, 297) and four-star Deontae Armstrong (6-6, 280) from Lakewood (Ohio) St. Edward and flipped Coopersville, Mich., four-star Gabe VanSickle (6-5, 283) from Northwestern. Devontae Armstrong and VanSickle each normally play on the interior of the offensive line, while Moore and Deontae Armstrong are projected as tackles.

"I like Ian Moore, and then you have the three projects," Greene said. "You keep taking projects and you get what you saw (in the Cotton Bowl). You need better. They bring in the Smiths, the Garrett Wilsons of the wide receiver position, but they don't bring in those top-level guys on the offensive line. They haven't since Paris Johnson."

"You're plugging and playing and hoping you get lucky, which they have. With Dawand Jones, they hit it really big with a guy that was not highly rated. But for the most part you end up with what you had this year. Those are the kinds of guys they've taken the past two classes."

On the other side of the ball, Ohio State signed just two prospects on the defensive line, including Buford, Ga., five-star defensive end Eddrick Houston (6-3, 269) and Stafford (Va.) Mountain View three-star defensive tackle Eric Mensah (6-3, 290).

Houston almost flipped to Alabama on signing day, but a last-minute phone call with Day kept him around, saving what could have been a complete failure on the defensive line for the 2024 class if he hadn't signed given the previous flip of Chicago St. Ignatius five-star defensive lineman Justin Scott (6-4, 310) to Miami (Fla.). Givler said that while people often overreact to losing recruits, he believes the response to holding onto Houston wasn't an overreaction.

"The reality is that recruiting is more about the whole of what you're bringing in the collective of the 2024," Givler said. "Very, very rarely does one player have this enormous of an impact on your program. That being said, I think in this particular situation, this was about as must-get of a situation as you could get. There's very few guys I look back on and think, 'Oh gosh, what if they wouldn't have landed him? Where would this program be?'"

"This would have been as close to a disaster as you can possibly have in recruiting, so this was highly important. Eddrick is a big-time difference maker. He's going to play early. I don't think he's going to start or anything like that, but he's going to play early. He's physically ready. He's explosive. He's a high-motor kid. He's one of the best players in the country."

But there were positives on defense. Cornerback was a position where the Buckeyes excelled, signing Springfield, Ohio, five-star Aaron Scott (6-2, 190), Cleveland Glenville four-star Bryce West (5-11, 177) and Chandler (Ariz.) Basha four-star Miles Lockhart (5-10, 185).

"West, Scott (and) Lockhart is as good as you could do," Greene said. "That's as good of a group as anybody in America got at corner."

To finish out the group in the secondary, the Buckeyes signed West Orange (N.J.) Seton Hall Prep four-star Jaylen McClain (6-0, 185) and Fort Myers (Fla.) Bishop Verot three-star Leroy Roker (6-1, 170) at safety.

McClain is a top-300 prospect, but Roker – just inside the top 1,000 – was a late addition to the class after the Buckeyes missed on several targets, including Waco (Texas) Connally four-star Kobe Black (6-0, 190), Hollywood (Fla.) Chaminade-Madonna Prep four-star Zaquan Patterson (6-0, 185) and Buford, Ga., five-star KJ Bolden (6-1, 187).

"When you're looking at Black, Patterson and Bolden and you end up with McClain and Roker, it's not good enough," Greene said. "Everything I do, everything I write about is in regard to Ohio State winning the national championship. Are you're interested in, 'Can we beat Indiana and Rutgers with these guys?' Because that answer is 'Yes.' All 20 of these guys absolutely help you to compete in the Big Ten. But does this recruit help you beat 'Bama and Georgia?'"

At linebacker, Ohio State signed Sunbury (Ohio) Big Walnut four-star Garrett Stover (6-0, 214), the cousin of Ohio State tight end Cade Stover, and Lucas (Texas) Lovejoy four-star Payton Pierce (6-1, 225), someone that Greene sees shades of Tommy Eichenberg in.

It is yet another top-five class for Ohio State, though one that feels similar to classes of late that are built through strong additions at quarterback and other skill positions while leaving things lacking on the offensive and defensive lines, and Greene said this is a problem the team will need to address moving forward.

"I see a lot of position groups that are excellent, and then I see some position groups that are very important position groups that are not excellent," Greene said. "I think the class is good in a lot of ways, but there's some misses here in position groups that they needed to hit."

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FOOTBALL (11-2, 8-1)

Sept. 2 at Indiana, W 23-3; **9** YOUNGSTOWN STATE, W 35-7; **16** WESTERN KENTUCKY, W 63-10; **23** at Notre Dame, W 17-14.

Oct. 7 MARYLAND, W 37-17; **14** at Purdue, W 41-7; **21** PENN STATE, W 20-12; **28** at Wisconsin, W 24-10.

Nov. 4 at Rutgers, W 35-16; **11** MICHIGAN STATE, W 38-3; **18** MINNESOTA, W 37-3; **25** at Michigan, L 30-24.

Dec. 29 vs. Missouri in Cotton Bowl at Arlington, Texas, L 14-3.

FOOTBALL 2024

Aug. 31 AKRON.

Sept. 7 WESTERN MICHIGAN; **21** MARSHALL; **28** at Michigan State.

Oct. 5 IOWA; **12** at Oregon; **26** NEBRASKA.

Nov. 2 at Penn State; **9** PURDUE; **16** at Northwestern; **23** INDIANA; **30** MICHIGAN.

MEN'S BASKETBALL (12-3, 2-2)

Oct. 22 at Dayton (Exh.), W 78-70

Nov. 6 OAKLAND, W 79-73; **10** TEXAS A&M, L 73-66; **15** MERRIMACK, W 76-52; **19** WESTERN MICHIGAN, W, 73-56; **24** Emerald Coast Classic at Niceville, Fla. vs. Alabama, W 92-81; **25** Emerald Coast Classic at Niceville, Fla. vs. Santa Clara, W 86-56; **29** CENTRAL MICHIGAN, W 88-61.

Dec. 3 MINNESOTA, W 84-74; **6** MIAMI (OHIO), W 84-64; **9** at Penn State, L 83-80; **16** CBS Sports Classic at Atlanta, Ga., vs. UCLA, W 67-60; **21** NEW ORLEANS, W 78-36; **30** vs. West Virginia, Cleveland, W 78-75 (OT).

Jan. 3 RUTGERS, W 76-72; **6** at Indiana, L 71-65; **10** WISCONSIN; **15** at Michigan; **20** PENN STATE; **23** at Nebraska; **27** at Northwestern; **30** ILLINOIS

Feb. 2 at Iowa; **6** INDIANA; **10** MARYLAND; **13** at Wisconsin; **18** PURDUE; **22** at Minnesota; **25** at Michigan State; **29** NEBRASKA

March 3 MICHIGAN; **10** at Rutgers.

WOMEN'S BASKETBALL (11-3, 2-1)

Nov. 6 Naismith Hall of Fame Series at Las Vegas vs. USC, L 83-74; **12** IUPUI, W 108-58; **16** BOSTON COLLEGE, W 88-66; **20** Pink Flamingo Championship in the Bahamas vs. East Carolina, W 79-55; **22** Pink Flamingo Championship in the Bahamas vs. Oklahoma State, W 75-57; **26** CORNELL, W, 83-40.

Dec. 3 at Tennessee, W 78-58; **5** OHIO, W 85-45; **10** PENN STATE, W 94-84 (OT); **15** GRAND VALLEY STATE, W 73-49; **18** UCLA, L 77-71; **22** BELMONT, W 84-55; **30** at Michigan, L 69-60.

Jan. 5 at Northwestern, W 90-60;

11 RUTGERS; **14** MICHIGAN STATE; **17** at Maryland; **21** IOWA; **25** at Illinois; **28** at Purdue

Feb. 1 WISCONSIN; **4** INDIANA; **8** at Minnesota; **11** at Michigan State; **14** NEBRASKA; **22** at Penn State; **25** MARYLAND; **28** MICHIGAN.

March 3 at Iowa.

FENCING

Oct. 1 OSU DUALS, Men: 5-0; Women: 5-0; **21-22** Garrett Open at University Park, Pa., NTS.

Nov. 4-5 Western Invitational at USAF Academy, Colo., Men: 4-1, Women 4-1; **19** ELITE INVITATIONAL, Men 4-2, Women 2-4.

Jan. 20 St. John's Invitational at Queens, N.Y.; **21** Philadelphia Invitational at Philadelphia.

Feb. 3-4 Northwestern Duals at Evanston, Ill.; **24-25** Central Collegiate Fencing Conference Championships.

MEN'S ICE HOCKEY (8-8-4, 0-8-2)

Oct. 7 Mercyhurst, W 4-3; **13-14** LINDENWOOD, W 4-2; T 2-2; **20-21** Michigan, L 7-1; T 2-2 OT (SW); **27-28** Nebraska-Omaha, T 2-2 OT (SW); W 4-0.

Nov. 3-4 MICHIGAN STATE, L 6-0; L 6-4; **10-11** Notre Dame, L 4-1, L 3-0; **24-25** PRINCETON, W 6-3, W 4-3.

Dec. 1-2 Wisconsin, L 3-0, L 6-1; **8-9** MINNESOTA, L 5-4, T 1-1 OT (SW); **30** MERCYHURST, W 5-3.

Jan. 5 BOWLING GREEN, W 6-2; **6** Bowling Green, W 4-2; **12-13** NOTRE DAME; **19-20** Minnesota; **26-27** Penn State.

Feb. 2-3 MICHIGAN; **16-17** WISCONSIN; **23-24** Michigan State.

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March 1-2 PENN STATE; **8-10** Big Ten Tournament Quarterfinals; **16** Big Ten Tournament Semifinals; **23** Big Ten Tournament Final.

WOMEN'S ICE HOCKEY (16-2-0, 13-1-0)

Sept. 29-30 Colgate, L 3-2; W 3-2 (OT).

Oct. 13-14 Minnesota Duluth, W 5-2; W 2-0; **20-21** St. Thomas, W 6-2; W 7-1; **27-28** MINNESOTA, W 4-3 OT; W 6-5.

Nov. 3-4 Bemidji State, W 9-1; W 5-0; **17-18** WISCONSIN, W 3-0, W 2-1 OT; **24-25** ST. LAWRENCE, W 11-0, W 5-1.

Dec. 1-2 ST. CLOUD STATE, L 2-1, W 6-2; **9-10** MINNESOTA STATE, W 6-1, W 4-1

Jan. 12-13 Minnesota; **19-20** MINNESOTA DULUTH; **26-27** St. Cloud State.

Feb. 2-3 BEMIDJI STATE; **9-10** Minnesota State; **16-17** ST. THOMAS; **24-25** Wisconsin.

MEN'S SWIM & DIVE (2-0)

Oct. 28 VIRGINIA TECH, W 193.5-178.5.

Nov. 10 DENISON, W 186.0-103.0; **16-18** OHIO STATE FALL INVITATIONAL, 2nd; **29-Dec. 2** Toyota US Open at Greensboro, N.C., NTS.

Jan. 5 Hawaii, W 154-109; **20** MICHIGAN, 12 p.m.; **26-27** Tim Welsh Classic at South Bend, Ind.

Feb. 2 PITTSBURGH, 3 p.m. **16-18** OHIO STATE WINTER INVITATIONAL; **28-March 2** BIG TEN CHAMPIONSHIPS.

March 10 LAST CHANCE MEET; **13-16** Zone Championships at Louisville, Ky.; **14-16** CSCAA National

Invitational at Ocala, Fla.; **27-30** NCAA Championships at Indianapolis.

WOMEN'S SWIM & DIVE (3-0)

Oct. 28 VIRGINIA TECH, W 226.0-135.0.

Nov. 3 AKRON, W 222.5-77.5; **10** DENISON, W 180.0-108.0; **16-18** OHIO STATE FALL INVITATIONAL, 1st; **29-Dec. 2** Toyota US Open at Greensboro, N.C., NTS.

Jan. 5 Hawaii, W 160-96; **20** MICHIGAN, 12 p.m.; **26-27** Tim Welsh Classic at South Bend, Ind.

Feb. 2 PITTSBURGH, 3 p.m.; **16-18** OHIO STATE WINTER INVITATIONAL; **21-24** Big Ten Championships at West Lafayette, Ind.

March 3 LAST CHANCE MEET; **13-16** Zone Championships at Louisville, Ky.; **14-16** CSCAA National Invitational at Ocala, Fla.; **20-23** NCAA Championships at Athens, Ga.

MEN'S TENNIS

Sept. 18-24 COLUMBUS CHALLENGER, NTS. **30** ITA All-American Championship at Tulsa, Okla., NTS.

Oct. 1-8 ITA All-American Championship at Tulsa, Okla., NTS.; **19-23** ITA Midwest Regional Championship at Ann Arbor, Mich., NTS; **23-29** Las Vegas Challenger at Las Vegas, NTS.

Nov. 1-5 ITA Fall National Championship at San Diego, Calif., NTS; **1-5** Big Ten Singles & Doubles Championship at Madison, Wisc., NTS.

Jan. 27 VANDERBILT; **28** OREGON/BOISE STATE.



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Rutgers Extends Schiano Through 2030 Season

It was announced on Dec. 13 that Rutgers and head coach Greg Schiano had agreed to a contract extension that will keep him with the Scarlet Knights through 2030.

BIG TEN NOTES Greg Wilson

"I would like to thank President (Jonathan) Holloway, Athletic Director Pat Hobbs, the Board of Governors and our entire team for their continued belief in what we are building," Schiano said in a release. "Rutgers is home to my family and me, and we are blessed to have the opportunity to build a championship program right here in New Jersey."

Rutgers started 6-2 this season and eventually finished 7-6, capping the campaign off with a 31-24 win over Miami (Fla.) in the Pinstripe Bowl on Dec. 28, the program's first bowl win and winning season since 2014.

Schiano, the former Ohio State defensive coordinator, is in his second stint as head coach of the Scarlet Knights. He coached there from 2001-11 and then returned in 2020, and he has collected an 87-95 record in 15 combined seasons.

His original contract in 2019 was for eight years and \$32 million, and he will make \$6.25 million in 2024 under the new agreement.

"This is a great day for Rutgers athletics," Hobbs said in a release. "In four years, Coach Schiano has transformed our program, this year resulting in bowl eligibility. Continuity is critical in building winning programs. We have the right leader and the right staff to lead the Scarlet Knights in the years ahead."

Michigan Receives Notice Of Allegations from NCAA

The NCAA sent Michigan a notice of allegations on Dec. 20 related to the school's recruiting violations that occurred during the COVID-19 dead period.

Head coach Jim Harbaugh served a three-game suspension at the beginning of the season that was self-imposed by the university in an attempt to lessen the pun-



FILE PHOTO

NEW DEAL — Rutgers has extended the contract of head coach Greg Schiano following the team's first winning season and bowl win since 2014, tying Schiano to the school through 2030.

ishment from the NCAA when they officially finish the investigation into the matter.

The alleged violations include analysts serving as on-field coaches, coaches watching players work out over video chats and messaging recruits during a dead period. Harbaugh also allegedly committed a Level I violation by misleading NCAA investigators.

Now that the notice of allegations has been received by Michigan, they have 90 days to respond to it in writing, which the NCAA will then have 60 days to respond to.

This is, of course, not the only NCAA investigation Harbaugh and Michigan are involved in at this point. The Wolverines also remain under investigation for their sign-stealing scandal, though this notice has nothing to do with those allegations.

Illinois Guard Shannon Charged With Rape, Suspended By Team

Illinois suspended basketball guard Ter-

rence Shannon Jr. on Dec. 28 after he was charged with one count of rape for an incident on Sept. 9 that occurred in Lawrence, Kan., when he was there for an Illinois vs. Kansas football game.

If he is found guilty, Shannon could face up to 54 years in prison and/or a fine of up to \$300,000 with 36 months of post-release supervision. According to the university, Shannon went to Lawrence on Dec. 28 to turn himself in to the authorities, later posting his \$50,000 bail and returning to Champaign, Ill.

"The University and DIA (Division of Intercollegiate Athletics) have shown time and again that we have zero tolerance for sexual misconduct," Illinois athletic director Josh Whitman said. "At the same time, DIA policy affords student-athletes appropriate levels of due process based on the nature and severity of the allegations. We will rely on that policy and our prior experiences to manage this situation appropriately for the university and the involved parties."

Mark P. Sutter, Shannon's attorney, released a statement on behalf of Shannon after the news came out.

"Since September, when these allegations surfaced, Terrence has cooperated with law enforcement throughout the investigation, declaring his innocence from the beginning," the statement read. "Now, several months later, my office learned that formal charges were filed against him yesterday in Lawrence, Kan. In less than 24 hours, my client responded, and he voluntarily surrendered to local authorities for processing and release. Terrence is innocent of these charges, and he intends to take his case to trial."

In 11 games this season for Illinois, Shannon had started all 11 contests and

BIG 2023 Standings

East Division

| | Conf. | | | All | | |
|-------------------|----------|----------|--------------|-----------|----------|-------------|
| | W | L | Pct. | W | L | Pct. |
| x-Michigan | 9 | 0 | 1.000 | 14 | 0 | 1.000 |
| Ohio State | 8 | 1 | 0.889 | 11 | 2 | .917 |
| Penn State | 7 | 2 | 0.778 | 10 | 3 | 0.833 |
| Maryland | 4 | 5 | 0.444 | 8 | 5 | 0.583 |
| Rutgers | 3 | 6 | 0.333 | 7 | 6 | 0.500 |
| Michigan State | 2 | 7 | 0.222 | 4 | 8 | 0.333 |
| Indiana | 1 | 8 | 0.111 | 3 | 9 | 0.250 |

West Division

| | Conf. | | | All | | |
|--------------|-------|---|-------|-----|---|-------|
| | W | L | Pct. | W | L | Pct. |
| x-Iowa | 7 | 2 | 0.778 | 10 | 4 | 0.833 |
| Northwestern | 5 | 4 | 0.556 | 8 | 5 | 0.583 |
| Wisconsin | 5 | 4 | 0.556 | 7 | 6 | 0.583 |
| Minnesota | 3 | 6 | 0.333 | 6 | 7 | 0.417 |
| Nebraska | 3 | 6 | 0.333 | 5 | 7 | 0.417 |
| Illinois | 3 | 6 | 0.333 | 5 | 7 | 0.417 |
| Purdue | 3 | 6 | 0.333 | 4 | 8 | 0.333 |

x - denotes division champion

Dec. 2 Game

Big Ten Championship at Indianapolis
Michigan 26, Iowa 0

was averaging 21.7 points, 4.5 rebounds and 2.5 assists on 51.4 percent shooting, and he helped lead the Fighting Illini to a 9-2 start.

Tagovailoa Enters Transfer Portal

Maryland quarterback Taulia Tagovailoa, the Big Ten's all-time leading passer, announced on Jan. 5 that he is entering the transfer portal and is filing a reinstatement waiver with the NCAA for a sixth year of eligibility.

Tagovailoa played his freshman season at Alabama before transferring to Maryland, where he threw for 11,256 yards over the past four seasons, surpassing former Purdue quarterback Curtis Painter for the most passing yards in conference history.

"I love him to death," Terrapins head coach Mike Locksley said. "He's a great kid and did a tremendous amount for our program. The relationship goes back to 2016, when I was at Alabama and we started recruiting Tua and the family migrated to Alabama. I have nothing but utmost respect, and I'm very thankful for what they've been able to do as a family for my career."

Tagovailoa's waiver was filed by Maryland. His request stems from two games earlier in his career at Alabama in which he played four total snaps late in blowouts due to injuries. He told ESPN that he hopes another year of eligibility at a new school will help to boost his draft stock, as he is currently projected as a late-round selection if he were to declare for the draft.

"Just to better my draft stock," Tagovailoa said of his goals on the field. "I think with another opportunity and another year of college, I can raise that to a day-one (pick). Obviously, that's the goal. I have the experience to get better. I've seen the defenses before."



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| <p>Music City Dec. 30 • 2 p.m. ABC Maryland 31, Auburn 13</p> | <p>ReliaQuest Jan. 1 • Noon ESPN2 LSU 35, Wisconsin 31</p> | <p>Citrus Jan. 1 • 1 p.m. ABC Tennessee 35, Iowa 0</p> | <p>Rose (CFP Semifinal) Jan. 1 • 5 p.m. • ESPN Michigan 27, Alabama 20</p> | |

Howard Returns To U-M After Heart Surgery

Michigan's Juwan Howard returned as the Wolverines' head coach on Dec. 16 after he had heart surgery in September, coming back with an 83-66 win over Eastern Michigan.

While Howard was out as head coach, associate head coach Phil Martelli served as the interim coach and had a 5-5 record with a 1-1 record in the Big Ten after starting the season 3-0.

"We greatly appreciate associate head coach Phil Martelli's guidance of our program on an interim basis to start the season," Michigan athletic director Warde Manuel said. "I want to personally thank Phil for what he has done in the past few months to lead the program. We will continue to benefit from his wisdom moving forward."

In the weeks prior, Howard had been going through a slow transition to return to his full-time position, returning to the bench as an observer during Michigan's trip to the Bahamas for the Battle 4 Atlantis from Nov. 22-24, and had been serving as an assistant coach for several games leading up to his return.

Shortly before Howard returned to the court, however, it was reported that there was an altercation between Howard and strength and conditioning coach Jon Sanderson, also a former basketball player at Ohio State. The Athletic reported that Sanderson filed an HR claim over the dispute, which was about the recovery and rehabilitation of Howard's son, Jace, a junior who is recovering from a stress fracture in his right leg. Manuel has since reviewed the claim and commented on the matter.

"The return of our usual coaching structure comes after a review of an incident involving several individuals during a team practice last week," Manuel said. "Based on a thorough internal review, nothing was found to warrant disciplinary action for anyone involved. As such, we will move forward with a focus on our team and our season."

Monangai Returning To Rutgers In 2024

Rutgers running back Kyle Monangai, the leading rusher in the Big Ten this season, announced on Dec. 11 that he is returning to play with the Scarlet Knights for one more season instead of entering his name into the 2024 NFL draft.

"A lot of guys are coming back, a lot of guys I came in with," Monangai told ESPN about his decision. "I just feel like we've made a lot of progress this year, but it definitely wasn't the goal we had in mind. I think with everybody coming back we definitely have a good opportunity to do a lot better this coming season."

"The Big Ten rushing title, it means a lot. But it was kind of my first year of true production. I had the opportunity to declare. It definitely was a choice, something I considered. I think the best choice for me and my future, also just to come back for another opportunity to do better, was for me to come back this year."

Monangai had 1,262 rushing yards on 242 carries and eight touchdowns this season, including a performance in the Pinstripe Bowl in which he ran for 163 yards on 25 carries and one touchdown. He also gained 159 yards on 24 carries in a 35-16 loss to Ohio State in early November. He was the first Rutgers running back since Jawan Jamison in 2012 to reach the 1,000-yard rushing mark in a season and just the eighth player in program history to do so.

Kaliakmanis Brothers Transfer in Conference

Former Minnesota quarterback Athan Kaliakmanis announced he was entering the transfer portal on Nov. 28, and he announced on Jan. 2 that he is headed to Piscataway, N.J., to play for Rutgers with three seasons of eligibility remaining.

He will be reuniting with his former offensive coordinator Kirk Ciarrocca, who held the same position with the Gophers from 2017-19 and in 2022 when Kaliakmanis threw for 946 yards, three touchdowns and four interceptions in 11 games as the backup to Tanner Morgan.

Kaliakmanis struggled this season, throwing for 1,838 yards, 14 touchdowns and nine interceptions and completing 53.1

percent of his passes before opting out of the Quick Lane Bowl in which the Gophers beat Bowling Green 30-24.

His brother, wide receiver Dino Kaliakmanis, is also transferring from Minnesota to Rutgers, announcing the news the same day his brother did. He has been with the Gophers for three years, redshirting in 2021 and only playing in five games throughout the next two years.

Scarlet Knights quarterback Gavin Wimsatt is returning for his senior season at Rutgers but now finds himself in a battle for the starting role after he led the Knights to a bowl game with 1,735 passing yards, nine touchdowns and eight interceptions while being a threat in the run game as well with 497 rushing yards and 11 more scores on the ground.

Iowa Punter Taylor Breaks NCAA Record

Iowa's offense this season was one to for-

get, ranked 129th out of 130 teams in the country with just 15.4 points per game and dead last in total offense at 234.6 yards.

Since it was tough for the Hawkeyes to drive down the field and score, punter Tory Taylor had plenty of opportunity to show off his skills, and in the Hawkeyes' 35-0 loss in the Citrus Bowl to Tennessee, he etched his name in the record books, setting a new NCAA mark for most punting yards in a season with 4,479 yards, averaging 48.2 yards on 93 boots.

The record had stood since 1938, previously set by Michigan State's Johnny Pingel, who punted 99 times for 4,138 yards. Taylor had 4,119 yards heading into the bowl game and needed just one kick to break it, though he did have six more in the game to add to his record.

Taylor was a unanimous all-American after his record-breaking season and won the Ray Guy Award, which is given annually to the best punter in college football.



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Key, Buckeyes Commit To Improved Defense

Throughout the offseason, Ohio State head coach Chris Holtmann and his players consistently identified defense as an area of their play that needed to be improved upon the most. The coach even said in his performance review of last season that his team's defense needed to get "dramatically better" and had the "worst efficiency we have had in my six years."

COURT REPORT Patrick Engels

Through the first 15 games of the 2023-24 season, Holtmann and his team have used these concerns to their benefit. When Buckeye Sports Bulletin went to press, Ohio State's retooled roster had given up just 65.8 points per game – fifth in the Big Ten – and limited its opponents to under 70 points in seven games.

Senior forward Zed Key told the media on Dec. 20 that his team's successes on defense stemmed from a rekindled focus and intensity on that side of the ball, a mentality he said was instilled within the group throughout the offseason.

"I think guys just bought in," Key said. "It was a big topic this offseason, like 'Are we going to play defense this year?' And guys took that to heart. We wanted to be a better defensive team, and we're on the path to being a great defensive team. And we've shown that so far."

Ohio State's improved defense was on full display in back-to-back games against UCLA on Dec. 16 and New Orleans on Dec. 21, where they held the talented Bruins to just 60 points on 38.7 percent shooting then limited the Privateers to just 36 points, the lowest point total allowed by the Buckeyes in the Holtmann era.

Key said dominant outings like those have allowed the team to rely on its defense more this season, where they now have the capability to bail out a sluggish offense and still emerge victorious. The center said being able to win with defense is a sign of a great team, a luxury he admitted has not always been there since he joined the program as a true freshman in 2020.

"It's crazy because our offense has just

2023-24 Ohio State Men's Basketball Statistics

12-3 Overall (2-2 Big Ten) Statistics through games of Jan. 6

| 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. | | | | | | |
| THORNTON, Bruce | 15-15 | 481-32.1 | 78-181 | .431 | 28-82 | .341 | 69-83 | .831 | 5-39 | 44-2.9 | 25-1 | 65 | 14 | 1 | 21 | 253-16.9 |
| BATTLE, Jamison | 15-15 | 462-30.8 | 79-170 | .465 | 47-104 | .452 | 20-22 | .909 | 23-55 | 78-5.2 | 28-1 | 23 | 25 | 3 | 7 | 225-15.0 |
| GAYLE JR., Roddy | 15-15 | 466-31.1 | 75-162 | .463 | 17-48 | .354 | 51-64 | .797 | 19-63 | 82-5.5 | 34-0 | 48 | 45 | 1 | 10 | 218-14.5 |
| KEY, Zed | 15-1 | 284-19.0 | 49-81 | .605 | 2-4 | .500 | 39-55 | .709 | 40-43 | 83-5.5 | 35-0 | 11 | 15 | 9 | 4 | 139-9.3 |
| OKPARA, Felix | 14-14 | 298-21.3 | 37-59 | .627 | 0-2 | .000 | 14-24 | .583 | 31-68 | 99-7.1 | 37-1 | 7 | 12 | 34 | 5 | 88-6.3 |
| BONNER, Dale | 15-0 | 311-20.7 | 30-93 | .323 | 14-45 | .311 | 12-16 | .750 | 5-41 | 46-3.1 | 21-0 | 22 | 10 | 3 | 12 | 86-5.7 |
| MIDDLETON, Scotty | 14-0 | 241-17.2 | 25-64 | .391 | 13-30 | .433 | 6-11 | .545 | 9-17 | 26-1.9 | 14-0 | 14 | 11 | 3 | 4 | 69-4.9 |
| MAHAFFEY, Evan | 15-15 | 327-21.8 | 21-59 | .356 | 1-10 | .100 | 11-15 | .733 | 27-37 | 64-4.3 | 33-0 | 29 | 20 | 8 | 21 | 54-3.6 |
| ROYAL, Devin | 13-0 | 100-7.7 | 10-22 | .455 | 2-5 | .400 | 5-12 | .417 | 10-15 | 25-1.9 | 15-0 | 6 | 8 | 5 | 1 | 27-2.1 |
| BAUMANN, Colby | 2-0 | 4-1.8 | 0-0 | .000 | 0-0 | .000 | 4-4 | 1.000 | 0-0 | 0-0.0 | 0-0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 4-2.0 |
| HARDMAN, Bowen | 6-0 | 12-1.9 | 3-5 | .600 | 2-4 | .500 | 0-0 | .000 | 0-1 | 1-0.2 | 0-0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 8-1.3 |
| PARKS, Austin | 6-0 | 15-2.5 | 0-0 | .000 | 0-0 | .000 | 1-2 | .500 | 0-3 | 3-0.5 | 2-0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1-0.2 |
| CHATMAN, Taison | 5-0 | 19-3.8 | 0-4 | .000 | 0-3 | .000 | 0-0 | .000 | 1-0 | 1-0.2 | 5-0 | 3 | 4 | 0 | 0 | 0-0.0 |
| ETZLER, Kalen | 5-0 | 10-2.0 | 0-4 | .000 | 0-3 | .000 | 0-0 | .000 | 1-3 | 4-0.8 | 4-0 | 2 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0-0.0 |
| Team | | | | | | | | | 27-18 | 45 | | 7 | | | | |
| Total | 15 | 3030 | 407-904 | .450 | 126-340 | .371 | 232-308 | .753 | 198-403 | 601-40.1 | 253-3 | 231 | 173 | 67 | 87 | 1172-78.1 |
| Opponents | 15 | 3025 | 365-884 | .413 | 93-298 | .312 | 164-249 | .659 | 160-336 | 496-33.0 | 290-9 | 147 | 178 | 39 | 83 | 987-65.8 |

been so dominant, we could really score the ball," Key said. "But in that (UCLA) game, our shot wasn't falling. So we had to rely on our defense and our principles and the stuff that we practice every day. And we did. We were getting stops down the line, so we did what we needed to do.

"Defense definitely wins games. Over the years I've been here, our defense was OK, we just relied heavily on offense. But this year, I feel like we have both – offense and defense. So we're just building on that and working on that every day."

Despite the strong start on the defensive end, Key and his teammates still believe there is room for improvement. The center said that he and his team must continue to fine-tune their game on that end of the court and work through the minor details if they want to become a top-25 defense in the nation, a goal that the team has set for themselves this season.

"We still have to clean up some stuff," Key said. "Some ball-screen coverages, different cuts that different teams do, rebounding – there's always stuff to work on. But once we get those down pat and keep practicing and get into Big Ten play, I think we'll be really solid."

Holtmann Sees Benefits In Guard-Heavy Lineup

Ohio State pulled off one of the biggest wins of its season when the Buckeyes beat UCLA 67-60 in the CBS Sports Classic, and it did so by utilizing a strength in its roster that Holtmann

thinks his team can continue to use to its advantage as the year progresses.

With the Buckeyes clinging to a single-digit lead in the final minutes of the game, he decided to go small, inserting fifth-year guard Dale Bonner into the game with 2:07 left to create a guard-heavy lineup that also consisted of sophomores Roddy Gayle Jr. and Bruce Thornton.

This decision paid off for Holtmann as they were able to space the floor and stymie UCLA's pressure defense to close out the game on an 8-4 run and hang onto the seven-point victory. Holtmann said on Dec. 18 that this smaller lineup of guards Bonner, Gayle and Thornton can help his team have success in late-game situations moving forward, where they can rely on the trio to handle the ball and limit turnovers.

"I think that will be a lot for us late," Holtmann said. "We'll play that lineup a lot because of the ball-handling. I'd like to be able to play three guards consistently here moving forward these next couple years. Roddy's length and size allows us to do that. But that's going to be a critical lineup for us late as well because of the ball-handling and free-throw shooting."

Holtmann pointed to an inbounds play late in the second half against UCLA where his team particularly benefited from having three guards on the floor. During this play, Holtmann put all five of his players on the out-of-bounds line to defend against the Bruins press before passing it in to Gayle, who was fouled

and sent to the free-throw line.

"We got it right where we wanted to," Holtmann said. "Roddy got to the free-throw line, Bruce broke the press. (Assistant coach) Mike Netti did a good job (of drawing up the play). He's in charge of our late-game special situations. We ran it on the fly a couple of times in practice, and our guys executed it really well. Jamison (Battle) and Dale cleared the floor out, and we were able to get those guys open."

Holtmann recognized that having three ball-dominant guards on the floor throughout the rest of the season can pose a major advantage for his team moving forward, particularly if Gayle and Thornton continue to emerge as a formidable one-two punch. But he also pointed to the play of Bonner as a key component to the Buckeyes' backcourt success, something that can take this team to another level this season.

"I just can't emphasize how important he's going to be for us this year," Holtmann said. "He has to be able to be a 'plus.' In the two games we've lost (to that point), we've needed more from (Bonner), when I look back at it. And when we played well – when we beat Alabama – he was fantastic. When we beat UCLA, he was fantastic. We really do need that out of him."

OSU Still In Contention For Five-Star Peterson

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FILE PHOTO

RAISE THE ROOF — Ohio State senior forward Zed Key finished with 16 points — one shy of his season high — in the Buckeyes' 78-36 win over New Orleans on Dec. 21, connecting on 6 of 8 attempts from the field.

a premier 2025 prospect on New Year's Day when Huntington (W.Va.) Prep five-star shooting guard Darryn Peterson (6-5, 195) placed the Buckeyes in his trimmed list of top eight schools. Ohio State is joined on the list by Arkansas, Baylor, Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, Michigan and North Carolina, while he will also remain open to exploring a professional career out of high school.

Peterson, who is a native of Canton, Ohio, and played his first two high school seasons at Cuyahoga Valley (Ohio) Christian Academy, is tabbed as the third-best player in the country as well as the nation's top-ranked shooting guard. He told On3 that he plans to take five official visits before making a decision, a list that includes Ohio State along with Arkansas, Kansas, Kentucky and North Carolina.

While Peterson will be making his first official visit to Ohio State at an unknown date, he is no stranger to the campus and the program. Holtmann and his staff — who first offered the shooting guard a scholarship as a freshman at Cuyahoga Valley in August of 2021 — hosted Peterson for two unofficial visits for the football team's games against Wisconsin on Sept. 24, 2022, and Penn State on Oct. 21 of this past season.

According to Peterson's father, Darryn

— who played basketball at Akron from 2001-2005 — the two visits to Columbus piqued his and his son's interest, allowing them to identify Ohio State as a viable option that can provide the top prospect with all the resources he needs to thrive both in college and at the next level.

"We always said Ohio State from the beginning, just being Ohio guys," Darryn Peterson told The Columbus Dispatch after his son's Oct. 21 visit. "But people (were) saying, 'Can you get everything you want from a place like that?' Going on campus for the second time, it answered the question the first time but that was more of a visit, seeing the place.

"This time it was more, we saw film, saw some offensive stuff, and saw the practices. The time was more letting us see that we can get what we need from a place like Ohio State."

If the Buckeyes were to land him, Peterson would become Holtmann's first commitment for the class of 2025, as well as the first-ever five-star to commit to Ohio State in the Holtmann-era. The last five-star prospect to sign with the Buckeyes was current Los Angeles Lakers guard D'Angelo Russell, who pledged to the then-Thad Matta-led program in 2014.

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Five-Star 2025 Cornerback Devin Sanchez Commits To Ohio State At All-American Bowl

By Patrick Engels In Basketball

Ohio State received a significant win on the recruiting trail on Saturday, as Houston North Shore five-star cornerback Devin Sanchez (6-2, 170) announced his pledge to the Buckeyes as the...

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January 6, 2024 (11:26 am) in Football

Former Alabama Center Seth McLaughlin Transferring To Ohio State

Ohio State has made another additional through the transfer portal, picking up a commitment on Saturday from former Alabama center Seth McLaughlin (6-4, 305)...

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January 6, 2024 (9:00 am) in Basketball

Buckeyes Gearing Up For Difficult Road Test Against Indiana

OHIO STATE SQUANDERS NINE-POINT SECOND-HALF LEAD, FALLS TO INDIANA 71-65 TO SNAP FOUR-GAME WINNING STREAK

Ohio State let another second-half lead get away from them on the road Saturday night in front of a hostile...

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OHIO STATE MEN'S BASKETBALL



SONNY BROCKWAY

STRONG NIGHT — Ohio State sophomore guard Evan Mahaffey was perfect from the field in the Buckeyes' 78-36 win over New Orleans on Dec. 21, finishing 4-of-4 shooting with eight points.

ana-Monroe on Dec. 27, 2013.

The Buckeyes were led by Battle, who had 17 points on 6-of-12 shooting, including 5 of 8 from deep, while Key (16 points), Thornton (11) and Bonner (10) also reached double digits, and Battle posted a game-high nine rebounds. New Orleans guard Jordan Johnson led the Privateers with eight points.

Gayle's Career High Powers Bucks To OT Win Over WVU

Ohio State needed overtime and a career night from Gayle to squeak past West Virginia on Dec. 30, defeating the Mountaineers 78-75 in the Legends of Basketball Showcase held in front of 12,211 fans at Rocket Mortgage Fieldhouse in Cleveland.

The Buckeyes (11-2, 1-1) squandered a 61-53 lead with 5:13 left in the second half,

allowing West Virginia (5-8) to tie the game at 65 in the final minute and send the game into overtime. But Holtmann's team buckled down in the extra period, making four of its six shots and outscoring the Mountaineers 13-10 to hang onto the three-point win.

"We knew that this was going to be a long game," Holtmann said. "West Virginia is too talented, too gifted. In college basketball nowadays, you never look (past) a 10-point lead, you just stay aggressive and make the next right play and figure out how to execute on both ends."

Like many times this season, Ohio State jumped out to an early lead, benefiting from three Mountaineer turnovers and a pair of Gayle and Thornton triples to go up 12-5 before the first media timeout. That lead then swelled to 16-6 after a turnaround jumper

from Battle, which capped an extended 11-1 run for Ohio State.

Ohio State was then held scoreless for over two minutes, but it was still able to build upon its lead through the middle portion of the half due to some poor Mountaineer offense. The Buckeyes held West Virginia to 4-of-16 shooting in the game's first 12 minutes to increase their advantage to 24-10 after a basket from Gayle, which proved to be the largest lead of the game for Holtmann's squad with 7:59 left in the half.

But Ohio State's positive momentum quickly evaporated after West Virginia — aided by 11 straight misses from Ohio State — responded with a 16-2 run to tie the game at 26 before the Buckeyes took a 28-26 lead into the break.

Ohio State turned the tide on the offensive end coming out of the locker room, connecting on five of its first seven shots — two of those being Battle triples — to take a 40-30 lead. West Virginia continued to fight back, though, immediately responding with a 10-2 run — aided by five straight Buckeye misses — to cut the deficit to two with 11:39 left.

The Buckeyes, after another miss, finally got back on the board thanks to a basket from Gayle and then connected on a trio of three-pointers over their next four possessions to hold a 53-47 advantage, which then increased to 58-49 after another five points from Gayle.

But the Mountaineers responded with a 12-5 run to cut the deficit to just 63-61 with 2:47 remaining in regulation. The Mountaineers tied the game at 65 with 29 sec-

onds on the clock after back-to-back baskets by forward Pat Suemnick, a sequence that forced overtime after Gayle missed at the buzzer.

The Buckeyes didn't let the blown lead affect them in the extra period, however. They connected on four of their first five shots — with three triples from Battle, Gayle and Thornton — and got a free throw from Thornton to build a 77-71 lead with 2:03 left.

This sequence proved to be the deciding factor in the back-and-forth contest, as the Mountaineers cut the deficit to 78-75 with 50 seconds left but ultimately ran out of time for a final comeback, allowing the Buckeyes to hold onto the dramatic three-point win.

"The poise our guys played with, particularly in overtime, was a real testament to them," Holtmann said.

Ohio State was led in the victory by Gayle, who produced a career-high 32 points on 11-of-21 shooting while also collecting six rebounds and a team-high five assists. Battle added 17 points, while Thornton contributed 11 points, including six points in overtime. The Mountaineers were led by guard RaeQuan Battle, who scored 24 points on 9-of-19 shooting and pulled down a game-high 10 rebounds.

Strong First Half Leads Bucks To Win Vs. RU

Ohio State started the new year on a strong note, capitalizing on a hot first-half shooting performance and a strong finish

Continued On Page 42

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Cold Shooting Fells Ohio State At Indiana

Continued From Page 41

to hold on for a 76-72 win over Rutgers on Jan. 3 in front of 10,614 fans at Value City Arena.

The Buckeyes (12-2, 2-1) shot 17 of 32 (53.1 percent) from the field and made nine of their 15 threes (60.0 percent) – five of those makes from Battle – in the game's first 20 minutes to lead 45-32 at half, but they had their advantage decrease to as little as 67-66 with 3:20 left due to a furious late run from the Scarlet Knights (8-5, 0-2).

Ohio State outscored Rutgers 9-6 the rest of the way to hold onto the four-point victory.

"It was a great team win against a great defensive opponent," Thornton said. "I feel like we just stayed the course, stayed on the same page throughout the whole game. It's Big Ten play, so anything can happen on any given night. But I'm just proud of the guys tonight."

Despite the teams coming into the matchup as the No. 4 and No. 1 scoring defenses in the Big Ten, respectively, the Buckeyes and Scarlet Knights both came out of the gates firing on offense. They combined to make six of the game's first seven shots to have the score tied eight-all before the first media timeout.

The hot shooting continued as the first half progressed, allowing the score to inflate to 20-19 in favor of the Scarlet Knights with 11:38 left in the first half. Rutgers began to cool off, though, and Ohio State kept rolling, utilizing an 11-0 run to lead 30-20 with 7:52 left before the break.

The extended run was broken by a made jumper from Rutgers guard Derek Simpson, but the Buckeyes responded with a three from Thornton, who added another triple and a steal to spark an 11-2 run by the Buckeyes, making it 41-24 at the 4:14 mark. Ohio State led 45-32 at the break.

Rutgers entered the second half with a different intensity on both ends, scoring 12 of the period's first 18 points to trail 51-44 with 14:14 remaining. But the Buckeyes responded with a 7-2 sequence of their own – led by four points from Gayle – to lead 58-46 at the 11:58 mark.

The Scarlet Knights continued to stay within striking distance with the Buckeyes struggling on offense, though, cutting the deficit to 60-55 with 8:44 left after a pair of free throws by Austin Williams. The lead was reduced to 67-64 with 4:00 left following a made jumper from Simpson. Rutgers trailed by just one point after another bas-

ket, this time by Mawot Mag, on its next possession, capping off a 7-0 run, but it was instantly broken by a Mahaffey layup that pushed the lead back up to 69-66 with 2:42 left.

The Buckeyes extended their advantage to six on a Gayle triple, but it was matched on the ensuing possession by a three from Rutgers guard Noah Fernandes. Two free throws from Thornton helped turn the tide back in Ohio State's favor, but Rutgers soon made it interesting again, this time connecting on a three from Simpson that cut the deficit to 74-72 with 15 seconds remaining.

A pair of Gayle free throws iced the game, however, extending the lead to four, allowing the Buckeyes to hold for their fourth straight victory.

"The sign of this team has been really good poise, for the most part, down the stretch," Holtmann said. "And we showed that."

Ohio State was led by Thornton and Battle, who scored 24 and 22 points, respectively, on a combined 17-of-27 shooting. Gayle added 11 points – all in the second half – while he and Okpara also recorded a team-high seven rebounds each. Rutgers was led in the loss by Simpson, who had 23 points on 9-of-16 shooting. Aundre Hyatt had a game-high 10 rebounds to help Rutgers to a 39-35 edge on the boards.

Road Woes Continue For Bucks Against Hoosiers

Ohio State let another second-half lead slip away on the road in front of a hostile Assembly Hall crowd of 16,584, succumbing to sloppy play and poor shooting to fall to the Hoosiers 71-65 and snap its four-game winning streak.

The Buckeyes (12-3, 2-2) used another strong shooting performance from Battle to jump out to a 46-37 lead with 18:11 left in the game on his three-pointer, but that advantage slowly slipped away from them due to some costly turnovers and shooting woes. The Buckeyes committed seven turnovers in the second half and made two of their 12 three-point attempts, allowing the Hoosiers (11-4, 3-1) to outscore the Buckeyes 34-19 the rest of the way.

"We missed shots that we usually make," Key said. "Our shots weren't falling tonight. Indiana is a good team. They're at home, and they made a good run. Give credit to them. We just didn't get a 'W' tonight."

Ohio State's offense struggled in the early going, missing three shots and com-

Ohio State 76, Rutgers 72

Jan. 3, 2024
Value City Arena • Columbus

| | 1 | 2 | F |
|------------------------|----|----|----|
| Rutgers (8-5, 0-2) | 32 | 40 | 72 |
| Ohio State (12-2, 2-1) | 45 | 31 | 76 |

| Rutgers | Total | FG | FT | Reb. | A | PF | Pts. |
|---------------|------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|----------|-----------|-----------|
| Simpson | 34 | 9-16 | 3-4 | 4-4 | 2 | 1 | 23 |
| Fernandes | 27 | 7-13 | 2-2 | 0-5 | 0 | 2 | 17 |
| Mag | 33 | 4-12 | 2-2 | 1-1 | 0 | 0 | 11 |
| Hyatt | 23 | 4-9 | 0-0 | 3-7 | 2 | 2 | 9 |
| Omoruyi | 28 | 2-6 | 3-4 | 2-5 | 1 | 1 | 7 |
| Griffiths | 16 | 1-8 | 0-0 | 1-1 | 1 | 0 | 3 |
| Williams | 12 | 0-0 | 2-2 | 0-1 | 0 | 2 | 2 |
| Davis | 12 | 0-2 | 0-0 | 0-0 | 0 | 2 | 0 |
| Woolfolk | 12 | 0-1 | 0-0 | 1-2 | 1 | 3 | 0 |
| Palmquist | 3 | 0-0 | 0-0 | 0-0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Totals | 200 | 27-67 | 12-14 | 12-26 | 7 | 13 | 72 |

Percentages: FG: 40.3%. FT: 85.7%. **Three-point field goals:** 6-24 (Fernandes 1-6, Simpson 2-5, Mag 1-4, Hyatt 1-4, Griffiths 1-4, Davis 0-1). **Team rebounds:** 1. **Blocked shots:** 5 (Omoruyi 2, Griffiths, Mag, Williams). **Turnovers:** 11 (Simpson 3, Mag 3, Omoruyi 2, Fernandes, Davis, Team). **Steals:** 5 (Simpson 2, Omoruyi, Williams, Woolfolk).

| Ohio State | Total | FG | FT | Reb. | A | PF | Pts. |
|---------------|------------|--------------|-------------|-------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Thornton | 38 | 9-15 | 4-6 | 1-3 | 7 | 1 | 24 |
| Battle | 35 | 8-12 | 0-0 | 1-2 | 0 | 0 | 22 |
| Gayle Jr. | 35 | 4-15 | 2-2 | 1-6 | 2 | 3 | 11 |
| Okpara | 25 | 2-3 | 3-4 | 2-5 | 1 | 3 | 7 |
| Mahaffey | 21 | 2-4 | 0-0 | 2-1 | 0 | 0 | 4 |
| Bonner | 16 | 1-6 | 0-0 | 1-4 | 2 | 2 | 3 |
| Middleton | 14 | 1-3 | 0-0 | 0-2 | 3 | 0 | 3 |
| Key | 15 | 1-2 | 0-0 | 0-2 | 2 | 1 | 2 |
| Royal | 1 | 0-0 | 0-0 | 0-1 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Totals | 200 | 28-60 | 9-12 | 8-26 | 17 | 10 | 76 |

Percentages: FG: 6.7%. FT: 75.0%. **Three-point field goals:** 11-24 (Battle 6-9, Thornton 2-6, Gayle 1-4, Bonner 1-2, Middleton 1-2, Mahaffey 0-1). **Team rebounds:** 1. **Blocked shots:** 3 (Mahaffey 2, Okpara). **Turnovers:** 13 (Gayle 4, Thornton 3, Battle 3, Key 2, Team). **Steals:** 3 (Thornton, Okpara, Mahaffey). **Officials:** Breeding, Ek, Carstensen. **Attendance:** 10,614.

Indiana 71, Ohio State 65

Jan. 6, 2024
Assembly Hall • Bloomington, Ind.

| | 1 | 2 | F |
|------------------------|----|----|----|
| Ohio State (12-3, 2-2) | 38 | 27 | 65 |
| Indiana (11-4, 3-1) | 37 | 34 | 71 |

| Ohio State | Total | FG | FT | Reb. | A | PF | Pts. |
|---------------|------------|--------------|------------|--------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Battle | 34 | 6-12 | 0-0 | 3-6 | 1 | 0 | 17 |
| Gayle Jr. | 35 | 3-17 | 3-3 | 1-5 | 1 | 3 | 9 |
| Thornton | 31 | 4-17 | 1-1 | 0-1 | 5 | 4 | 9 |
| Okpara | 30 | 2-5 | 2-3 | 5-10 | 1 | 2 | 6 |
| Mahaffey | 21 | 1-4 | 0-0 | 3-1 | 2 | 2 | 2 |
| Key | 17 | 4-5 | 2-2 | 4-1 | 1 | 2 | 11 |
| Middleton | 18 | 4-4 | 0-0 | 0-0 | 0 | 0 | 9 |
| Bonner | 11 | 1-5 | 0-0 | 0-2 | 2 | 2 | 2 |
| Chatman | 3 | 0-0 | 0-0 | 0-0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Totals | 200 | 25-69 | 8-9 | 16-26 | 13 | 15 | 65 |

Percentages: FG: 36.2%. FT: 88.9%. **Three-point field goals:** 7-27 (Battle 5-10, Thornton 0-7, Gayle 0-5, Bonner 0-2, Mahaffey 0-1, Key 1-1, Middleton 1-1). **Team rebounds:** 7. **Blocked shots:** 9 (Okpara 5, Key 2, Middleton, Bonner). **Turnovers:** 14 (Battle 5, Gayle 5, Middleton 2, Okpara, Chatman). **Steals:** 3 (Gayle, Thornton, Mahaffey).

| Indiana | Total | FG | FT | Reb. | A | PF | Pts. |
|---------------|------------|--------------|--------------|-------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Reneau | 37 | 10-16 | 2-2 | 1-6 | 1 | 3 | 23 |
| Johnson | 33 | 4-9 | 8-11 | 1-2 | 3 | 1 | 18 |
| Ware | 30 | 4-9 | 0-0 | 2-4 | 2 | 1 | 8 |
| Mgbako | 14 | 2-5 | 0-0 | 1-0 | 1 | 2 | 5 |
| Galloway | 32 | 2-8 | 0-0 | 1-3 | 7 | 3 | 4 |
| Gunn | 24 | 4-7 | 1-1 | 0-0 | 0 | 1 | 10 |
| Banks | 13 | 1-2 | 0-0 | 0-1 | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| Walker | 13 | 1-2 | 0-0 | 0-1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Cupps | 4 | 0-0 | 0-0 | 0-0 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| Totals | 200 | 27-58 | 12-16 | 6-19 | 16 | 15 | 71 |

Percentages: FG: 46.6%. FT: 75.0%. **Three-point field goals:** 5-12 (Galloway 0-3, Johnson 2-2, Reneau 1-2, Mgbako 1-2, Gunn 1-2, Ware 0-1). **Team rebounds:** 2. **Blocked shots:** 3 (Reneau, Johnson, Walker). **Turnovers:** 4 (Reneau, Mgbako, Galloway, Cupps). **Steals:** 8 (Ware 2, Galloway 2, Reneau, Johnson, Mgbako, Gunn). **Officials:** McClunkins, Dorsey, Anderson. **Attendance:** 16,584.

points, inflating the lead to 62-54 with 4:42 left. That lead then ballooned to a game-high 10 points, 66-56, after an alley-oop dunk by Reneau.

Ohio State attempted a comeback, going on a 9-1 run to cut the deficit to 67-65 with 1:44 left. But another Reneau basket and a miss from Gayle allowed the Hoosiers to close out the game and earn the come-from-behind six-point victory.

"We have to learn from this," Holtmann said. "We have to move on quickly, win or lose. Our league is the second best in the country, and certainly what I believe to be the deepest, us and the Big 12. That really has to be our approach in every game."

Ohio State was led in the loss by Battle, who reached 17 points on 6-of-12 shooting, including 5-of-10 from three. Key (11) was the only other Buckeye to reach double figures, while Okpara had a career-high 15 rebounds.

Indiana was led by Reneau and Johnson, who scored 23 and 18 points on a combined 14-of-25 shooting, with 29 of those points coming in the second half.

Ohio State will play three conference games before BSB goes to press again, including home games against Wisconsin on Jan. 10 and Penn State on Jan. 20 as well as a road game against Michigan on Jan. 15.

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Family Affair Highlights Win Over Belmont

Ohio State's final nonconference games of a given season rarely have much intrigue, with schools such as Grand Valley State, New Hampshire and Albany gracing the December schedule over the last few seasons as final warmups ahead of Big Ten play.

DOUBLE DRIBBLE Braden Moles

The Buckeyes' final nonconference opponent for this season, however, provided something different. When the Belmont Bruins visited Value City Arena on Dec. 22, they did so with a familiar face in town, as junior guard Kilyn McGuff – the daughter of Ohio State head coach Kevin McGuff – faced off against her father in an eventual 84-55 win for the Buckeyes.

Kilyn McGuff had started every game for Belmont through Dec. 30, averaging 10.3 points and 6.5 rebounds per game on 41.7 percent shooting. Against the Buckeyes, she finished 2 of 10 from the field for four points and six rebounds.

"I caught myself at some points second-guessing and thinking, '(Coach McGuff) is right there,'" she said. "That's kind of crazy."

She was particularly excited to match up with fifth-year guard Jacy Sheldon, with whom she has developed a relationship during Sheldon's time at Ohio State.

"It was cool," Kilyn said. "I worked out with her a lot over these past few years in the summer, so it was cool to see that on the court and guard her and have her guard me."

"I know her really well," Sheldon added before the game. "She's a really good player, a really good person. I respect her game, and I know she respects ours."

While both McGuffs tried to treat the game as business as usual, the elder McGuff – who, due to his coaching responsibilities, has rarely been able to see his daughter play in person – said it was a great experience getting to see her in action.

"It was surreal," he said. "Obviously I'm very proud of Kilyn and what she's accomplished, who she's becoming as a young woman most importantly. But to see her play in person was a great experience for me. It was a little nerve-racking on the other side of the court, but it was fun."

Basketball, of course, runs through the entire family. In addition to Kevin and Kilyn, Keiryn McGuff is a freshman for the Bowling Green women's basketball program, and Letitia McGuff, Kevin's wife, was a four-year starter at Notre Dame from 1991-95 and served as an assistant from 1996-2002 alongside Kevin.

Ohio State Adds Five-Star Point Guard Cambridge

Ohio State added a commitment on Dec. 30 from one of the top-rated players left in the 2024 recruiting class, picking up a verbal pledge from Montverde (Fla.) Academy five-star point guard Jalonni Cambridge (5-6).

Cambridge, the younger sister of current Buckeye guard Kennedy Cambridge, is the third-ranked overall prospect in 2024, according to ESPN, and selected Ohio State over Baylor,

Florida, Georgia, Louisville, LSU and South Carolina.

After four seasons at Ensworth High School in Tennessee – including her eighth-grade year – where she was three-time Division II-AA Miss Basketball, the younger Cambridge transferred to Montverde Academy in Florida for her senior season and is averaging 21.2 points per game.

"It's the way they play, their style of play" she told The Tennessean of why she chose Ohio State. "But before that, it's their culture. When I talk about wanting to surround myself with like-minded people, that's there from coaches and players.

"They want you at your best. They are going to do whatever it takes to get you there. I just want to be the next guard at Ohio State."

The addition is an important one for the Buckeyes, who could see a dramatically overhauled roster next season with the departures of Jacy Sheldon and Celeste Taylor at guard, who will have exhausted their eligibility.

Cambridge is the fifth addition for Ohio State in the 2024 recruiting class, joining her fellow classmates in forward Seini Hicks (6-0), forward Ella Hobbs (6-4), guard Ava Watson (5-8) and forward Elsa Lemmilä (6-6). Though Cambridge missed the early signing period in November, she will have her opportunity to sign with the Buckeyes from April 17 through May 15, the regular signing period for women's basketball.

Greene Returns After Knee Injury

The crowd at Value City Arena on Dec. 10 for Ohio State's 94-84 win over Penn State saw a welcome sight when redshirt senior guard Madison Greene returned to the floor for the first time since suffering a season-ending knee injury nearly a year earlier on Dec. 20, 2022.

While she did not start the contest, Greene – who has spent the better part of the last two years in rehab after also suffering a season-ending knee injury before the 2021 campaign – checked in with 3:39 remaining in the first quarter to a significant response from the 6,032 in attendance.

"I feel great," she said. "I'm glad to be back. I'm excited to be back with the team. It's been fun, and I'm glad I got to play a little extra today. I'm excited to be back and ready to keep playing with this team."

Greene played just four minutes against the Nittany Lions but saw significantly more action five days later in the 73-49 win over Grand Valley State, registering 21 minutes on the floor and finishing with six points, the first coming on a pair of free throws.

"The free throws I made, those were really important, and then I really wanted to get an actual basket," she said. "That was a big one for me. Seeing that is going to help me regain my confidence and scoring again."

Greene has yet to play that many minutes in the ensuing games, combining for just 19 minutes against UCLA, Belmont and Michigan. But the Buckeyes are working her back in slowly given her injury history, with the hope that she will be able to contribute for Ohio State once the bulk of Big Ten play is in full swing.

"She is coming along – you can see it," McGuff said after the win over Grand Valley State. "She looked a little more comfortable tonight. I think she can be a big part of what we're doing here as we come out of Christmas. I was happy to see her get those wins."

OSU Gives UCLA Taste Of Life In The Big Ten

UCLA came away with a 77-71 win over Ohio State on Dec. 18, but the matchup between future conference opponents did not come easily for the Bruins, who had to fend off a late rally by the Buckeyes to secure the win.

"This is our first real road test in a hostile environment against a really good team," UCLA coach Cori Close said. "I honestly smiled a couple times when they got loud. You can't simulate this."

UCLA sophomore center Lauren Betts, who had a double-double with 17 points and 11 rebounds, said that type of game helps prepare the Bruins for what they will face next season with teams such as Ohio State, Maryland, Michigan, Iowa and Indiana on the schedule.

"I think this is like our first little taste of what we're going to get next year," she said. "It definitely was a battle."

Although Ohio State came out on the losing side – both against UCLA and in an earlier matchup this season against USC, another future conference opponent along with Oregon and Washington beginning in August – McGuff is looking forward to the level of competition each season with some new blood in the conference.

"I already think we have the best conference in women's basketball (now), but there's going to be no question who's the best next year," McGuff said. "It's going to be tough, but that's why these kids come to Ohio State, to compete against people like that. We'll be ready."

USC and UCLA were established as non-

conference matchups this season, a standard under McGuff and athletic director Gene Smith of scheduling at least one or two marquee nonconference games per season. But he said that moving forward, an expanded conference schedule – not to mention the grind of adding teams such as USC and UCLA – could have the Buckeyes re-evaluating how they go about non-conference scheduling.

"It might," McGuff said. "We still have to make some decisions as a conference, how many (conference) games we're going to play, and so forth. But it will obviously be an incredible gantlet next year with the plethora of great players and great teams."

Taylor Is Plank's Lady Buck Of The Month For December

While not a scoring leader like Sheldon, Taylor Thierry or Cotie McMahon, fifth-year guard Celeste Taylor has started making her own impact on the Buckeyes, making her Plank's Lady Buck of the Month for December.

In seven games over the final month of the calendar year, Taylor averaged 11.0 points, 5.9 rebounds, 3.3 assists and 2.3 steals on 38.0 percent shooting. She also registered a pair of double-doubles in wins at Tennessee and against Penn State, and she had a season-high 16 points on 7-of-15 shooting – as well as four rebounds and four assists – in the Buckeyes' 69-60 loss to Michigan on Dec. 30.

Taylor's scoring has taken time to catch up to her defense, but with four double-digit point totals in seven games in December, it appears she is catching on at the right time for the Buckeyes with Big Ten play now at hand.

Plank's Cafe



Celeste Taylor
Senior Guard
Valley Stream, N.Y.

PLANK'S LADY BUCK OF THE MONTH FOR DECEMBER

OHIO STATE WOMEN'S BASKETBALL



SONNY BROCKWAY

DRIVE THE LANE — Despite a loss to UCLA on Dec. 18, Ohio State junior guard Taylor Thierry still turned in one of her best performances of the season, finishing with 20 points on 6-of-9 shooting with four rebounds and four steals.

times so we never stopped believing and we always fight until the end," Sheldon said. "Unfortunately we put ourselves in that position, but we never feel like we're out of a game. We have to make sure to compete until the end."

The Bruins scored the first two baskets to begin the fourth, both by Gabriela Jaquez, but Ohio State showed life with three-pointers from Mikulášiková and Sheldon that cut the deficit to 67-51 with 7:42 left in the game. And after a jumper by Betts broke into the scoring run, the Buckeyes responded with an 8-0 run – all from Sheldon and Thierry – that made it 69-59 with 4:41 remaining.

UCLA shot back with a three-pointer by Charisma Osborne and held Ohio State to only free throws over the next few minutes until a triple from McMahon with 1:15 remaining to make it 74-65. Sheldon later cut the deficit to just 75-71 on a bucket with six seconds remaining, but it was too little and too late and the Buckeyes suffered their second loss of the season.

Ohio State was led by Sheldon, who had 30 points on 12-of-23 shooting, while Thierry added 20 points on 6 of 9 from the floor, including 2 of 4 from deep. Betts had a double-double with 17 points and 11 rebounds, while senior guard Osborne led the Bruins with 19 points, eight coming from the free-throw line.

OSU Wins Battle Of The McGuffs

Sheldon led the Buckeyes to an 84-55 win on Dec. 22 over Belmont, registering a 31-point outing with five makes from deep before a crowd of 6,336 fans at Value City Arena.

The Buckeyes (10-2) shot 52.5 percent from the field (32 of 61) and 46.2 percent from beyond the arc (12 of 26), while holding a 37-29 advantage on the boards over the Bruins (7-4), whose roster includes junior guard Kilyn McGuff, the daughter of Kevin McGuff.

"I love the Belmont program – they're great people," the elder McGuff said. "They have a great culture and they're going to win a bunch of games, so it was a great win for us and fun to see my daughter play."

The Buckeyes got off to a good start, connecting on five of their first eight shots as they jumped out to a 12-7 lead, with six of those points coming from Sheldon. The Bruins bounced back, however, with an 8-2 run to take a 15-14 lead with 2:24 left in the first. Ohio State scored the final three baskets of the quarter, though, the last a triple by Sheldon, to take a 21-15 lead into the second frame.

Belmont made a push to start the next quarter, hitting on a pair of free throws,

a basket and a three-pointer by Kendal Cheesman to retake the lead, 22-21, with 8:34 left in the half. Ohio State began to break through after a pair of free throws from Harris and a jumper from Sheldon to retake the lead, sparking a 16-4 run to enter the break with a 38-28 lead.

Ohio State's lead continued to grow during the third quarter in which it shot 78.6 percent (11 of 14) from the field and connected on all six of its three-point attempts, including two each from Sheldon and Taylor. The Buckeyes eventually increased their lead to 67-47 entering the fourth after a late triple from Harris.

"It builds momentum for us and from there we will work off that, but that's what Rikki is," Sheldon said. "Rikki's energy and amount of excitement she brings to the game and how much she shares the ball and her ability to guard and score too is really special."

Sheldon scored the first five points of the fourth quarter as the Buckeyes held the Bruins scoreless until Kilyn McGuff made a layup with 6:58 remaining in the game, at which point Ohio State held a 72-49 lead. The Buckeyes were able to close on a 12-6 run.

Ohio State was led by Sheldon's 31 points, while Taylor (15 points) and Harris (10 points) also reached double digits. Thierry led the Buckeyes with a game-high nine rebounds, while junior forward Tessa Miller led Belmont with 15 points on 6-of-10 shooting. Kilyn McGuff finished with four points and six rebounds.

2023 Ends With Whimper In Loss At Michigan

No. 17 Ohio State (10-3, 1-1) suffered a 69-60 loss on Dec. 30 at Michigan (11-3, 2-0), falling victim in a close game to close out the calendar year.

The Buckeyes shot 44.2 percent from the field (23 of 52) but were just 5 of 24 (20.8 percent) from deep, while the Wolverines hit on 7 of 20 (35.0 percent) of their shots from beyond the arc. Ohio State also committed 19 turnovers resulting in 18 points for Michigan.

Michigan 69, Ohio State 60

Dec. 30, 2023
Crisler Center • Ann Arbor, Mich.

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | F |
|------------------------|----|----|----|----|----|
| Ohio State (10-3, 1-1) | 11 | 15 | 19 | 15 | 60 |
| Michigan (11-3, 2-0) | 12 | 15 | 15 | 27 | 69 |

| Ohio State | Total | FT | Reb. | A | PF | Pts. | |
|---------------|------------|--------------|-------------|-------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Mikulášiková | 26 | 2-4 | 0-0 | 0-4 | 1 | 3 | 5 |
| McMahon | 17 | 2-6 | 1-2 | 0-0 | 1 | 4 | 5 |
| Thierry | 36 | 5-7 | 5-6 | 3-6 | 1 | 4 | 15 |
| Sheldon | 38 | 3-9 | 0-0 | 1-1 | 2 | 3 | 7 |
| Taylor | 39 | 7-15 | 0-0 | 0-4 | 4 | 5 | 16 |
| Harris | 23 | 3-8 | 3-5 | 1-3 | 1 | 1 | 10 |
| Shumate | 6 | 0-0 | 0-0 | 0-0 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| Walker | 9 | 1-2 | 0-0 | 0-1 | 0 | 0 | 2 |
| Greene | 3 | 0-1 | 0-0 | 0-0 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| Parks | 3 | 0-0 | 0-0 | 0-0 | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| Totals | 200 | 23-52 | 9-13 | 5-22 | 13 | 22 | 60 |

Percentages: FG: 44.2%. FT: 69.2%. **Three-point field goals:** 5-24 (Taylor 2-9, Harris 1-5, Mikulášiková 1-1, Sheldon 1-6, McMahon 0-2, Thierry 0-1). **Team rebounds:** 3. **Blocked shots:** 4 (Mikulášiková, Sheldon, Taylor, Thierry). **Turnovers:** 19 (Sheldon 5, Mikulášiková 4, McMahon 3, Taylor 3, Harris 2, Thierry, Walker). **Steals:** 7 (Harris 2, Taylor 2, Thierry 2, Walker).

| Michigan | Total | FT | Reb. | A | PF | Pts. | |
|---------------|------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|----------|-----------|-----------|
| Evans | 36 | 0-5 | 0-2 | 1-7 | 3 | 3 | 0 |
| Brett | 37 | 2-4 | 4-4 | 0-4 | 2 | 3 | 10 |
| Hansen | 34 | 6-15 | 4-6 | 1-1 | 2 | 0 | 17 |
| Phelia | 40 | 10-22 | 4-7 | 1-3 | 0 | 1 | 26 |
| Hobbs | 36 | 4-6 | 1-2 | 1-5 | 0 | 1 | 11 |
| Kampschroeder | 2 | 0-0 | 0-0 | 0-0 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| C. Williams | 2 | 0-0 | 0-0 | 0-0 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| Stuck | 6 | 0-0 | 0-0 | 1-0 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| T. Williams | 7 | 1-1 | 3-4 | 2-0 | 1 | 1 | 5 |
| Totals | 200 | 23-53 | 16-25 | 10-24 | 8 | 12 | 69 |

Percentages: FG: 43.4%. FT: 64.0%. **Three-point field goals:** 7-20 (Brett 2-4, Hobbs 2-3, Phelia 2-4, Hansen 1-7, Evans 0-2). **Team rebounds:** 7. **Blocked shots:** 1 (Evans). **Turnovers:** 15 (Hansen 5, Evans 4, Hobbs 2, Brett, Kampschroeder, Phelia, C. Williams). **Steals:** 6 (Hansen 4, Phelia 2). **Officials:** Grinter, Morris, Resch. **Attendance:** 8,078.

"The turnovers were huge," McGuff said. "Anytime we got a lead and had the chance to pull ahead or maybe put the game away, we would turn the ball over and they would get easy baskets on the other end."

Continued On Page 46

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Ohio State Starts 2024 Off With Big Win

Continued From Page 45

Ohio State shot poorly to start the game, connecting on just one of its first eight attempts from the field – including five misses from deep – and the Wolverines jumped out to a 9-2 lead with 4:40 left in the first. But Thierry then took over for Ohio State, scoring the team's final nine points of the frame as the Buckeyes trailed just 12-11 following the first quarter.

Thierry's run gave way to an even bigger stretch for Ohio State to begin the second quarter, where it opened on an 8-2 run – with two baskets coming from Sheldon – to take a 19-14 lead with 6:35 left in the half. But Michigan responded with an 8-1 run to retake the lead, 22-20, and the lead then changed hands four more times over the next three minutes, with the Wolverines going into the half up 27-26 after a late triple from guard Jordan Hobbs.

The Buckeyes' shooting struggles continued into the third quarter. They missed their first three shots and did not get on the board until a layup from Mikulášiková with 6:30 left in the frame, at which point Ohio State trailed 34-28.

Michigan then extended the lead to 37-28 on a basket by Lauren Hansen and a free throw by Hobbs, but the Buckeyes went on another big run, utilizing a triple from Sheldon and five points from Harris to spark a 13-0 run that put Ohio State up 41-37 with 1:55 left in the quarter before leading 45-42 entering the final frame.

The Wolverines tied the game to begin the fourth with a triple by Elissa Brett, and the lead then changed hands four times over the next two minutes, culminating in a 51-48 lead for Michigan, leading to a timeout from McGuff.

After the break, Mikulášiková connected from deep to tie the game back up, but the Wolverines pulled away with a 7-0 run to take a 58-51, resulting in another timeout.

"I knew they were going to go on a run," Harris said. "I knew we were going to go on a run. We just needed a little more time, and we didn't have it."

Ohio State missed its first four shots out of the break while the clock continued to wind down and Michigan's lead increased to 60-51. McMahon broke through with a layup, and later an and-one opportunity by Thierry cut the deficit to just 62-57 with 1:14 remaining. But the Wolverines were then able to close things out at the free-throw line over the final minute, scoring seven from the stripe.

2023-24 Ohio State Women's Basketball Statistics

11-3 Overall (2-1 Big Ten) Statistics through games of Jan. 6

| Player | G-GS | Min.-Avg. | FG-FGA | Pct. | 3P-3PA | Pct. | FT-FTA | Pct. | Rebounds | | | A | TO | BS | ST | Pts.-Avg. |
|------------------|-----------|-------------|----------------|-------------|---------------|-------------|----------------|-------------|----------------|-----------------|--------------|------------|------------|-----------|------------|------------------|
| | | | | | | | | | O-D | T-Avg. | PF-FO | | | | | |
| SHELDON, Jacy | 14-14 | 434-31.0 | 94-170 | .553 | 25-62 | .403 | 41-48 | .854 | 12-32 | 44-3.1 | 27-0 | 41 | 39 | 3 | 29 | 254-18.1 |
| THIERRY, Taylor | 14-14 | 388-27.7 | 65-105 | .619 | 6-15 | .400 | 49-62 | .790 | 37-48 | 85-6.1 | 33-0 | 25 | 14 | 8 | 30 | 185-13.2 |
| MCMAHON, Cotie | 14-14 | 365-26.1 | 64-141 | .454 | 7-29 | .241 | 46-72 | .639 | 12-55 | 67-4.8 | 32-1 | 19 | 37 | 5 | 19 | 181-12.9 |
| TAYLOR, Celeste | 14-14 | 395-28.2 | 45-122 | .369 | 13-50 | .260 | 23-37 | .622 | 18-45 | 63-4.5 | 41-2 | 48 | 30 | 11 | 30 | 126-9.0 |
| MIKULASIKOVA, R. | 13-13 | 279-21.5 | 40-81 | .494 | 14-33 | .424 | 17-19 | .895 | 5-31 | 36-2.8 | 18-0 | 27 | 19 | 5 | 9 | 111-8.5 |
| SHUMATE, Emma | 13-0 | 136-10.4 | 21-49 | .429 | 17-40 | .425 | 3-6 | .500 | 5-12 | 17-1.3 | 11-0 | 5 | 7 | 4 | 3 | 62-4.8 |
| HARRIS, Rikki | 14-0 | 253-18.0 | 18-47 | .383 | 9-33 | .273 | 15-22 | .682 | 5-21 | 26-1.9 | 25-0 | 18 | 13 | 3 | 14 | 60-4.3 |
| PARKS, Taiyier | 14-0 | 164-11.7 | 22-50 | .440 | 0-1 | .000 | 12-18 | .667 | 14-24 | 38-2.7 | 24-1 | 7 | 6 | 4 | 7 | 56-4.0 |
| COLLINS, Diana | 11-0 | 133-12.1 | 16-50 | .320 | 4-19 | .211 | 8-10 | .800 | 6-11 | 17-1.5 | 18-1 | 2 | 8 | 1 | 6 | 44-4.0 |
| WALKER, Eboni | 11-1 | 138-12.5 | 13-33 | .394 | 0-2 | .000 | 7-9 | .778 | 14-20 | 34-3.1 | 7-0 | 17 | 11 | 1 | 5 | 33-3.0 |
| GREENE, Madison | 6-0 | 63-10.4 | 4-12 | .333 | 0-2 | .000 | 4-6 | .667 | 3-2 | 5-0.8 | 4-0 | 8 | 1 | 0 | 4 | 12-2.0 |
| HENDERSON, Kaia | 10-0 | 58-5.8 | 5-13 | .385 | 0-1 | .000 | 0-0 | .000 | 1-9 | 10-1.0 | 3-0 | 6 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 10-1.0 |
| VRES, Karla | 6-0 | 17-2.9 | 3-31 | .000 | 0-0 | .000 | 0-0 | .000 | 1-2 | 3-0.5 | 3-0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 6-1.0 |
| CARSON, Faith | 3-0 | 5-1.8 | 0-1 | .000 | 0-0 | .000 | 2-2 | 1.000 | 1-4 | 5-1.7 | 1-0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 2-0.7 |
| Team | | | | | | | | | 17-28 | 45 | | 5 | | | | |
| Total | 14 | 2828 | 410-877 | .468 | 95-287 | .331 | 227-311 | .730 | 151-344 | 495-35.4 | 247-5 | 225 | 195 | 45 | 156 | 1142-81.6 |
| Opponents | 14 | 2835 | 312-781 | .399 | 72-258 | .279 | 160-228 | .702 | 143-350 | 493-35.2 | 269-6 | 153 | 310 | 31 | 87 | 856-61.1 |

The Buckeyes were led by Taylor, who had 16 points on 7-of-15 shooting, while Thierry (15 points) and Harris (10 points) also reached double digits. Sheldon was held to just seven points on 3-of-9 shooting, including 1 of 6 from deep. She was also charged with five turnovers. The Wolverines were led by guard Laila Phelia, who had 26 points on 10-of-22 shooting.

"People say you want to play your best basketball at the end of February, beginning of March, going into April," Taylor said. "We do know there's a long road ahead of us. We don't want to take any losses, but we can learn from them and get them out of the way now."

Ohio State Responds With Big Win At NU

Ohio State (11-3, 2-1) cruised to a 90-60 win at Northwestern (6-9, 1-3) on Jan. 5 to open up the calendar year in the victory column, bouncing back from the tough loss at Michigan.

The Buckeyes had six players finish in double digits – led by 18 points from Sheldon – while Ohio State came together on the defensive end, forcing 28 turnovers by the Wildcats that turned into 37 points for the Buckeyes.

"We did have a couple games where we didn't play our best, but we've been working on not beating ourselves up," said fifth-year forward Eboni Walker, who started in place of Mikulášiková due to an illness. "Just do the best that we can, and things will go our way. This is the first game of many."

Ohio State got off to a fast start, open-

ing with an 8-0 lead with 6:08 left in the first quarter, capped by a jumper from Walker. But Northwestern responded by getting hot from deep, making its next four shots from beyond the arc to close the gap and eventually taking a 16-15 lead with 2:47 left in the frame after a layup from forward Caileigh Walsh. Taylor hit back, converting an and-one opportunity to put the Buckeyes back up, and they were able to maintain a 20-19 lead heading into the second.

While the Wildcats showed some fight early, Ohio State began to take over in the second quarter. The Buckeyes forced six turnovers in the first five minutes of the frame as they increased their lead to 34-25 behind six points from Thierry over the span of 2:25.

Northwestern continued struggling to hold onto the ball, committing six more turnovers during the rest of the half and going without any points over the last 3:57 of the quarter and the Buckeyes took a 42-28 lead into the break.

A pair of baskets out of halftime and a later three-pointer – one of eight for the game by Northwestern – cut the deficit to 45-35 for the Wildcats with 7:17 left in the third, but it was the closest they would get for the rest of the contest. Ohio State responded with an 11-2 run to go up 56-37 before taking a 62-41 lead into the fourth.

Ohio State did not take its foot off the gas in the fourth quarter, either, outscoring the Wildcats 28-19 in the final frame behind eight points from freshman guard Diana Collins, and 68.8 (11 of 16) percent shooting for the stanza.

"She's very talented, especially on the offensive end," McGuff said of Collins. "As we continue to go through the season, I'm hopeful that our depth will be a little strength of ours. I think she can be a big part of that."

In addition to Sheldon's 18 points, the Buckeyes also saw Taylor (15 points), Walker (11 points) and McMahon, Thierry and Collins (10 points) all finish in double digits. Walsh led the Wildcats with 14 points on 6-of-11 shooting.

Ohio State is now in the full swing of the Big Ten schedule, set to play four conference games before Buckeye Sports

Ohio State 90, Northwestern 60

Jan. 5, 2024
Welsh-Ryan Arena • Evanston, Ill.

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | F |
|-------------------------|----|----|----|----|----|
| Ohio State (11-3, 2-1) | 20 | 22 | 20 | 28 | 90 |
| Northwestern (6-9, 1-3) | 19 | 9 | 13 | 19 | 60 |

| Ohio State | Total | FT | Reb. | A | PF | Pts. | |
|---------------|------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| | | | | | | | Min |
| Walker | 25 | 5-7 | 1-1 | 3-3 | 6 | 0 | 11 |
| McMahon | 29 | 3-11 | 4-4 | 2-1 | 0 | 2 | 10 |
| Thierry | 23 | 3-7 | 4-4 | 2-1 | 3 | 0 | 10 |
| Sheldon | 27 | 7-11 | 3-3 | 0-3 | 3 | 0 | 18 |
| Taylor | 22 | 5-11 | 3-3 | 0-2 | 2 | 2 | 15 |
| Harris | 16 | 1-4 | 0-0 | 0-0 | 2 | 1 | 3 |
| Parks | 15 | 2-7 | 0-0 | 1-4 | 0 | 2 | 4 |
| Greene | 20 | 2-4 | 2-4 | 1-1 | 5 | 2 | 6 |
| Collins | 13 | 4-5 | 0-0 | 0-1 | 1 | 3 | 10 |
| Shumate | 7 | 1-2 | 0-0 | 0-0 | 1 | 0 | 3 |
| Henderson | 2 | 0-0 | 0-0 | 0-0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Totals | 200 | 33-69 | 17-19 | 10-17 | 23 | 12 | 90 |

Percentages: FG: 47.8%. FT: 89.5%. Three-point field goals: 7-18 (Collins 2-3, Taylor 2-4, Harris 1-4, Sheldon 1-3, Shumate 1-2, Greene 0-1, Thierry 0-1). Team rebounds: 2. Blocked shots: 6 (Taylor 3, McMahon, Parks, Shumate). Turnovers: 6 (McMahon 4, Collins, Sheldon). Steals: 15 (Greene 3, McMahon 3, Sheldon 2, Taylor 2, Thierry 2, Collins, Parks, Walker).

| Northwestern | Total | FT | Reb. | A | PF | Pts. | |
|---------------|------------|--------------|-------------|--------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| | | | | | | | Min |
| Walsh | 23 | 6-11 | 0-0 | 1-4 | 2 | 4 | 14 |
| Mott | 29 | 5-8 | 0-0 | 1-5 | 1 | 3 | 10 |
| Lau | 29 | 3-5 | 0-0 | 0-5 | 4 | 1 | 9 |
| Harter | 31 | 0-3 | 3-4 | 1-3 | 2 | 2 | 3 |
| Daley | 21 | 1-6 | 0-0 | 0-1 | 2 | 1 | 2 |
| Pina | 23 | 2-6 | 1-1 | 0-1 | 2 | 2 | 6 |
| McWilliams | 16 | 2-3 | 2-2 | 1-1 | 1 | 1 | 6 |
| Weaver | 11 | 0-1 | 0-0 | 1-1 | 2 | 0 | 0 |
| Goodchild | 10 | 2-5 | 0-0 | 0-1 | 1 | 3 | 6 |
| Wang | 6 | 1-1 | 1-2 | 1-1 | 1 | 0 | 3 |
| Ademusayo | 2 | 0-0 | 1-2 | 0-0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Totals | 200 | 22-49 | 8-11 | 10-26 | 18 | 17 | 60 |

Percentages: FG: 44.9%. FT: 72.7%. Three-point field goals: 8-15 (Lau 3-3, Goodchild 2-4, Walsh 2-3, Pina 1-3, Mott 0-1, Weaver 0-1). Team rebounds: 7. Blocked shots: 4 (Walsh 3, Pina). Turnovers: 28 (Lau 5, Mott 5, Daley 3, Walsh 3, Weaver 3, Harter 2, Pina 2, Wang 2, Ademusayo, Goodchild, Team). Steals: 1 (Daley). Officials: Kantner, Cruse, Berger. Attendance: 1,872.

Bulletin goes to press again. It will host Rutgers on Jan. 11 (6 p.m., BTN) and Michigan State on Jan. 14 (12 p.m. or 4 p.m., BTN) before traveling to face Maryland on Jan. 17, set for a 7 p.m. tip on Peacock.

The Buckeyes will then play their biggest conference matchup yet, set to host Iowa on Jan. 21 for a 12 p.m. tip on NBC.

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From Buckeyes To Bruins For Lohrei, Merkulov

Mason Lohrei and Georgii Merkulov came "home" for the holiday season, but it wasn't to celebrate the new year.

Thanks to fortuitous scheduling, the former Ohio State hockey players got to hang out with their former teammates on Jan. 1 then played for the first time as NHL players in Columbus the next night when their Boston Bruins faced the Blue Jackets at Nationwide Arena.

IN THE CREASE Craig Merz

"I'll try and treat it like any other game," Lohrei said the morning of the game. "Obviously it's special to be here, but I've still got to go out there and perform knowing there will be two points on the line. So it will be cool to have a lot of friends and family and old teammates in the building, but there's a job to do."

The Ohio State players and staff attended the game.

"It's awesome," said Ohio State forward and former teammate Dalton Messina. "Georgii and Mason, they're just two guys that you just can't help but be happy for them and watch them succeed. You hope they have great, long careers in the NHL. They're talented players, even better people and even better teammates."

Lohrei played the past two seasons for the Buckeyes, getting 29 points (four goals, 25 assists) in 31 games before suffering a season-ending knee injury his first year when the defenseman made the Big Ten all-freshman team. Last season, he garnered 31 points (four goals, 27 assists) in 40 games when the Buckeyes reached the quarterfinals of the NCAA tournament.

Merkulov, a 23-year-old forward, had an outstanding season in 2021-22 with 20 goals, sixth most in program history for a freshman and the most since Brian Loney had 21 in 1991-92, along with 14 assists for 34 points in 36 games to earn a spot on the All-Big Ten first team.

He turned pro after the season as a free agent and spent the past two seasons with the Bruins' top affiliate, the Providence Bruins of the American Hockey League. Boston coach Jim Montgomery said prior to the game that he expected his two rookies to have added incentive.

"I think the first thing is when you come back to where you played college or junior this is probably as close as you do it anywhere outside of maybe Boston or Minnesota for college players," he said. "It's a great feeling because you're coming back. They both had tremendous careers. They're both really good Buckeyes, and they're really good young players for us that I'm sure are going to be excited and have a little extra jump in their legs."

The Bruins played in Detroit on Dec. 31 then made the short trip to Columbus, allowing Lohrei and Merkulov to visit campus on New Year's Day.

"I only know about four players from when I was there," Merkulov said. "But the coaches are there, the managers too. Everyone was training so it was nice to see them."

Just In Time

Lohrei, the 58th pick in the 2020 NHL draft who turns 23 on Jan. 17, almost made his re-

turn to Columbus on Nov. 27. He was recalled from Providence on Nov. 1, made his NHL debut the next day and scored his first goal against the Dallas Stars on Nov. 6.

However, he was sent back to Providence two days before the Bruins' first trip to Ohio. He rejoined Boston on Dec. 7 and noticed the Bruins would make a second stop in Columbus.

"Being up (with the Bruins), seeing it on the schedule ahead, I just did everything I could to try and stay in the lineup and stay up here for this game," he said. "It's cool to be here."

Ohio State junior Cam Thiesing was happy things worked out.

"I've known him for years, and it's good to spend the day with him" he said. "So we just hung out all day long. I mean, it's kind of funny seeing the way that Mason plays there vs. how he played here a little bit. He's a little bit more controlled, but it's awesome to see both of them out there. I'm super happy for them that they get to live out their dreams."

Merkulov cut it close playing in Columbus. He made his NHL debut against the New Jersey Devils on Dec. 30, a day after he was recalled from Providence. He was fourth in AHL scoring at the time with 30 points (14 goals, 16 assists) in 31 games. He was in Utica, N.Y., when he was informed that he was going to the big club.

"I just got called up randomly," Merkulov said. "I didn't even look at the schedule. That's cool it's worked out with some friends here and my teammates and coaches."

It wasn't his first time in Nationwide Arena, though. Merkulov, from Ryazan, Russia, attended his first NHL game his freshman season when the Blue Jackets played the Minnesota Wild. Just as Thiesing noted Lohrei was a different player, Merkulov's game has also matured.

"When I signed my contract, I wasn't a two-way player for sure," Merkulov said. "I was shooting offense. I like scoring goals because everyone knows in college hockey it's hard to score goals and you only play 30 games, so I was more focused on my offensive game and scoring goals."

"But in the pros, you play 70-some games so you have time to work on stuff the general managers and coaches want you to. So I spent all last year trying to be a two-way player and the start of this year too trying to do some things, but also I don't want to lose my offensive side because obviously I'm an offensive player."

Getting A Boost

Lohrei credited Ohio State for helping him make the jump to the next level.

"I think just going to Ohio State and being in such a great program and having all the facilities, it's the closest you're going to get to the pro lifestyle," he said. "Obviously, games are different because you only play Fridays and Saturdays. But just being able to utilize the facilities for recovery and nutrition and all that stuff, learning all that at school over two years and being able to come into the pros, I already knew a lot of that so that's helped out."

Ohio State coach Steve Rohlik said having former players in the NHL and being in the same city as the Blue Jackets are recruiting selling points.

"It starts with a great relationship with the Blue Jackets with (general manager Jarmo Kekalainen) and (president of hockey operations) John Davidson and the rest of the crew there," he said. "They've been so good to us since I've been here, and it starts with that."

"They're only a couple miles down the road

so our guys get to go down to a lot of the games. Obviously, they come to our building to see us play, and other NHL teams that come to town to play the Blue Jackets love to come down to our games, so it's a great tool."

The Bruins defeated the Blue Jackets 4-1, and neither former Buckeye got on the score sheet, but Lohrei was a focal point. Midway through the second period, a puck rode up his stick and struck him in the mouth. He was leaking blood as he went to the bench, and he lost a tooth. The ice crew at Nationwide Arena later collected the snow that built up in front of the Bruins bench, melted it in a container and were able to find the tooth.

Lohrei, after getting a few stitches in his lip, returned in the third period.

Lohrei had six points (three goals, three assists) in 22 games. Merkulov was reassigned to Providence on Jan. 6 after going scoreless in four games with Boston.

On A Roll

The Buckeyes (8-8-4, 0-8-2 Big Ten) won all three nonconference games since Buckeye Sports Bulletin last printed.

They downed visiting Mercyhurst 5-3 on Dec. 30 and swept Bowling Green Jan. 6 and 7, winning 6-2 at home before a 4-2 win on the Falcons' home ice the next night.

It was a team effort that helped Ohio State to a 5-3 nonconference win against visiting Mercyhurst on Dec. 30 to snap a five-game winless streak.

A total of 12 Buckeyes posted points, including the first career goal for freshman Max Montes, with Caden Brown picking up a goal and an assist before an energetic crowd of 5,096 at Value City Arena, far greater than what had been expected considering the holiday season and students away on the break.

"I thought our crowd was outstanding," Rohlik said. "Walking out today and seeing the glow sticks and the energy in the building, our players saw it. It was awesome."

The score was tied 2-2 after the first with Montes and Brown scoring for the Buckeyes. Stephen Halliday scored a power-play goal at 12:45 of the second to make it 3-2 for Ohio

State, and Thiesing added a goal at 18:14. Jake Dunlap extended the score to 5-2 at 5:56 of the third period before Keanan Stewart made it the 5-3 final at 14:39.

Halliday, Thiesing and defenseman Scooter Brickey had a big weekend against the in-state rival. Brickey scored twice in the opener, Thiesing extended his goal streak to five games with a goal in each and Halliday had five assists vs. the Falcons.

The Buckeyes won the first game by scoring four unanswered goals in the second period for a 4-1 lead before 5,050 fans. Brickey had two goals in the game, Halliday had four helpers, and Kristoffer Eberly made 23 saves.

In the rematch, Joe Dunlap, in his first game of the season after returning from an injury, broke a 2-2 tie at 5:30 of third, and Patrick Guzzo added an empty-netter with 29 seconds left. Logan Terness made 40 saves.

Next

The Buckeyes return to Big Ten play exclusively beginning with hosting Notre Dame at 7 p.m. on Jan. 12-13.

Lots of Glove

Eberly is the Varsity Club Icer of the Month for December after playing his first four games as a Buckeye.

Eberly, from Pinckney, Mich., made his debut in a relief role at Wisconsin on Dec. 2 and stopped all 10 shots in the third period. He came off the bench again vs. Minnesota on Dec. 8 and stopped 10 of 12 shots in 38:11.

He made his first start the next night and saved 23 shots in a 1-1 overtime tie, and then he stopped all three attempts in the shootout and the Buckeyes won the extra conference point against the Golden Gophers.

Eberly made 23 saves in the Dec. 30 win vs. Mercyhurst. For the month he was 1-1-1 with a 1.97 goals-against average and a .917 save percentage.

For full recaps of the games against Mercyhurst and Bowling Green, go to BuckeyeSports.com, free to all Buckeye Sports Bulletin subscribers.

VARSITY CLUB ICER OF THE MONTH For December



Kristoffer Eberly
Freshman Goalie
Pinckney, Mich

Pins Lead To Upset Of Second-Ranked NC State

Going into the Collegiate Duals on Dec. 19 in Nashville, Tenn., Ohio State was favored to win two out of three duals in the event that also featured Lock Haven, No. 21 Northern Iowa and No. 2 NC State.

ON THE MAT Greg Wilson

To start off the day, the Buckeyes took down Northern Iowa 26-7. They followed that up with a 28-9 win over Lock Haven and went into the matchup against NC State as underdogs. But the Buckeyes wound up victors over the Wolfpack, pulling off a 21-20 upset to take home the Collegiate Duals title because of three pins despite winning in only four weight classes.

Redshirt freshman Brendan McCrone started the dual off with the Wolfpack against Jakob Camacho, the No. 1 wrestler in the country at 125 pounds. Despite coming in unranked, McCrone got an immediate takedown and was able to pin Camacho in just 37 seconds to earn three extra points for Ohio State, starting the match off 6-0.

After McCrone's pin, 12th-ranked redshirt freshman Nic Bouzakis went into his bout at 133 pounds aggressively as well and picked up a fall of his own, needing only 51 seconds to beat No. 5 Kai Orine. Now up 12-0, third-ranked sophomore Jesse Mendez knew the Buckeyes had a comfortable early lead, but he wasn't going to be outdone by McCrone and Bouzakis.

At 141 pounds, Mendez pinned No. 4 Ryan Jack with six seconds remaining in the third period after trailing 4-2 early in the final period. After the first three wrestlers of the dual, there were still seven matches to go, but Ohio State held an 18-0 lead over the second-best team in the country. Head coach Tom Ryan said he was feeling good

about the dual at that point.

"That felt great. That doesn't happen very often," Ryan said. "That's the beauty of the dual meet, which is why I love dual meets so much. It's why the dual meet should determine who the national champion is as a team because it's less predictable. Obviously, anyone can be the difference in the team win. I was very happy with those three."

After Mendez' win, the Wolfpack began to claw back with three straight wins. At 149 pounds, No. 4 Dylan D'Emilio lost to No. 5 Jackson Arrington 5-3; at 157 pounds, No. 13 Paddy Gallagher dropped his bout 4-2 to No. 6 Ed Scott; and at 165 pounds, No. 21 Isaac Wilcox dropped his match to unranked Derek Fields by a score of 4-1, cutting the lead to 18-9.

Carson Kharchla didn't wrestle at 174 pounds, but freshman Rocco Welsh took over and got the win over No. 23 Alex Faison in a 9-6 decision. Those were the final points Ohio State would earn against the Wolfpack, but it was just enough for the win.

"I always say that we're in a competition," Ryan said. "For our sport, there's 11 chances to win. There are 11 different competitions. In football, there's one competition. But in wrestling there are 11 chances to win. And against NC State, we won the most important one, which was the team win. But of the 10 matches, we only won four, so we were 4-6 ultimately."

Ryan said he is happy with the win and will take beating a top team in any way they can, but that doesn't mean the team doesn't need to improve on some things, especially since they lost six out of the 10 matches.

"It was a good team that we beat," Ryan said. "Our 125-pounder, basically a walk-on who has got great talent and loves the sport, pinned the No. 1 ranked (wrestler) in the country. You have to celebrate that. Then your 133-pounder pins the No. 5 kid in the country, and then your 141-pounder pins the No. 4 kid in the country. The way we won, those were good. We were the aggressor. We went out right away and we took

control of the match. Jesse didn't pin until late, but he was constantly pressuring his opponent, so those were good.

"We had a chance to win a lot more matches. It could have been a blowout, and we didn't get it done. So it's, 'What can we do? Why did we not get it done? Why was it not a blowout?' There's all sorts of reasons and we work on them."

Graduate Gavin Hoffman didn't wrestle for the Buckeyes against NC State at 184 pounds. Freshman Ryder Rogotzke, whom Ryan said the Buckeyes are still planning to redshirt this season, got the call against No. 15 Dylan Fishback in an eventual 7-3 loss.

Hoffman dropped from 197 pounds to 184 pounds for this season, and Ryan said he's still trying to acclimate to the weight change, but he believed Rogotzke gave the team the best chance to win in this scenario.

"We thought he was the right guy for that dual against that opponent-style matchup," Ryan said. "Our 184-pounder right now is Hoffman, but he's still stabilizing his weight. He's still trying to get this thing where it needs to be. We just felt that was the best option for us to win the dual on that night."

After No. 23 Luke Geog was beaten by technical fall at 197 pounds, giving the Wolfpack two extra points, Ohio State's lead was cut to 21-17. If the heavyweight wrestler gave up any extra points, the Buckeyes would have lost the match because NC State would have won the majority of the bouts in the dual.

Sophomore Hogan Swenski had been wrestling at heavyweight since redshirt freshman Nick Feldman was injured at the Cliff Keen Invitational and did not participate in the first two duals of the day.

But with the win on the line, Ryan believed it was best to send No. 18 Feldman out against No. 17 Owen Trephan of the Wolfpack even though he was still dealing with the same injury. Feldman lost the match, but only by decision, securing the win in the dual for Ohio State.

"He was not ready to compete," Ryan said. "It certainly wasn't an ideal situation for him. Going into that match, we knew that we couldn't give up a major. If we gave up a major we would have lost the dual. If that match ended 21-21, we would have lost on criteria."

"We played it safe. We put him out there and we knew he wasn't 100 percent, but I still thought he would find a way to win. And he was in a position to win, just didn't get it done."

McCrone Starting To Separate At 125 Pounds

McCrone became the starter at 125 pounds because he won the wrestle-off against sophomore Peyton Fenton before the season, but Ryan has been adamant so far that his spot is not secure. Fenton and freshman Vincent Kilkeary are on his heels and fighting to take his spot every practice, something Ryan believes is a positive for a team.

"There's a lot of competition in the room, which is healthy," Ryan said. "We've got multiple weights where we're competitive, and that drives work. Everybody here for the most part is intrinsically motivated, but

there's nothing like seeing somebody every day that wants your position. You can feel that and experience that more than you can talk about it."

Though he has been somewhat inconsistent at some points, McCrone has been able to show up in the big spots. In Ohio State's upset win over then-No. 3 Virginia Tech on Nov. 10, he opened with a major over No. 4 Eddie Ventresca, setting the tone for the 24-12 win, and followed it up with his big win against the Wolfpack.

"He's got a position and he's close to a master at it," Ryan said. "Wrestling is like a chess match where you're looking for an advantage that if you can get on anybody, you're dangerous. And if he gets his position, he scores with it. And not only scored with it, but he ended the match. He's very long and he has a really good feel on how to cradle people."

Despite the success McCrone has had in those big moments, Ryan still wants to see more from him to be confident that he will be their best option when the NCAA tournament comes around. He said the inconsistency McCrone has shown has left him unconvinced that the redshirt freshman will be able to win when the team needs it late in the season.

Ryan's plan is still to redshirt Kilkeary if the team can do that, but in unattached matches, he has been proving why he still belongs in the conversation, even though McCrone has been able to separate himself some after the NC State win.

"Vinny went to Midlands (Dec. 30), a huge Christmas tournament, and he placed seventh," Ryan said "For the most part they were one-takedown matches. But right now, McCrone has taken the spot from him or is ahead still, because he's pinned No. 1 and beat No. 4. Now his inconsistencies this season, some of his positional things – he lost to No. 16, he lost to No. 12, he beat No. 1, he beat No. 4, he lost to No. 17. He just has too many little holes right now for us to say that without a doubt he's our guy come March. But he's moving in that direction."

"There's single defense, tension in his hand fight, just being able to get away, being able to put himself in position on top. Getting his leg in safely, getting to his position safely, and getting it in before in a way that gives him an advantage and doesn't put him at a disadvantage. He's just got some technical things he's got to work on. I think weight management is good with him. His fitness is pretty good."

Even when McCrone is wrestling in bouts that he wins by a mile, Ryan and the other coaches are still carefully diagnosing everything he sees that he could improve on because when it comes to March, he will be wrestling against all of the best in the country.

"Every time I watch someone compete, my staff watches someone compete, my brain is watching it, knowing what the best in the country will do in that situation, not what the person who's wrestling is going to do. You're always stacking against what elite is going to do."



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Late-Season Losses Lead To Program Evaluation

Just when things couldn't seem much bleaker for the Buckeye football team after suffering their third straight defeat to their archrivals, an embarrassing loss to Missouri in the Cotton Bowl has put the Buckeye program in a tailspin.



Added to the pain of a second loss in a row, the floodgates of the portal opened wide. A record number of players have decided to leave and take their talents to a different collegiate program. By the time the portal date closed on Jan. 3, 20 total players decided to bail from Ohio State in hopes of finding better opportunities to play somewhere else, make more NIL money, or leave a program that suddenly has lost some of its luster.

The Buckeyes will bounce back, but the question is how soon. The face of college football has drastically changed and changed quickly.

The transfer portal, along with the monies associated with NIL, has made college coaching a nightmare for many coaching staffs around the country. Dealing with the portal and the NIL forces coaches to spend much of their time trying to keep the athletes they recruited previously, while still going after the top high school talent.

The number of high school recruits entering Division I programs each fall is gradually going down due to the ability to offer transfers from the portal. To add to the situation, many high school recruits need to be enticed with NIL monies before they commit. This is the sad reality of college football at this time in history.

McCord Move Troubling

Kyle McCord did an excellent job for a first-year starting quarterback. He performed well and seemed to have the potential to be outstanding in the future. Head coach Ryan Day and his staff gave McCord a tremendous opportunity to excel, but his days as a Buckeye are over.

Whether it was a guarantee he would not have to compete for the starting job next season or the desire for more money from NIL, or a combination of the two, McCord decided to leave a top football program for an average one at Syracuse. One thing is for certain – the talent surrounding him, especially at wide receiver, will not be the same at his new home.

The pressure on a starting quarterback at Ohio State is great, and the fans can be brutal. At the same time, that heat can help you maximize your talents and a possible shot at the NFL.

Time will tell, but McCord may have screwed himself out of reaching his collegiate goals due to his move. In the end, Ohio State will recover. McCord? Maybe not.

Is Will Howard the Answer?

No sooner had McCord walked out the door than Kansas State transfer quarterback Will Howard walked in.

Howard is a 22-year-old senior from West Chester, Pa. He had a very good career at KSU but not a spectacular one. This season, he threw for 2,643 yards, 24 touchdowns and 10 interceptions and was sacked 16 times.

The biggest difference between the two quarterbacks is Howard's ability to run the football. Howard has rushed for 921 yards and scored 19 touchdowns with his legs during his career at Kansas State. That athleticism could be the reason the Ohio State coaching staff is excited to have him on board.

The fight for the starting position at quarterback going into spring practice appears to be between Howard, Devin Brown, Lincoln Kienholz and incoming five-star quarterback Air Norland. It will be tough to give four quarterbacks equal time, and it's almost assured one or even two will transfer when the spring portal opens. The biggest shortcoming of Howard is the fact the Buckeyes will have him for only one season.

Coaching Issues Mount

Day is facing some huge decisions within the next few weeks. The defeat at the hands of Missouri following another loss to Michigan has magnified some major problems revolving around the coaching staff especially on the offensive side of the football and special teams.

Day is one of the most successful coaches in all of college football, but in the end his teams will be judged by the way they finish. In the last three seasons, Day's Buckeyes have lost to Michigan by a combined score of 117-74. The 14-3 loss to Missouri in the Cotton Bowl again put the spotlight on both coaching breakdowns and player performance.

Unlike the Jim Knowles defense that has made huge improvements in the past 12 months, the other two phases of the game have fallen short for the Buckeyes.

Offensively, perhaps the most glaring deficiency has been in the play of the offensive line. The lack of consistency in rushing-yard production has led to a noticeable lack of balance in the offense. Whether by choice or necessity, too many times the running game was abandoned in favor of the passing game.

The Buckeyes finished eighth in the Big Ten in rushing and tallied only 107 and 97 yards on the ground, respectively, against Michigan then Missouri. Adding to the offensive woes were the breakdowns in pass protection in the last two games as well as untimely turnovers. Criticism of the offensive line in terms of consistency and physicality only increased as the season progressed. The players play the game and must execute the game plan, but the coaches are paid big-time bucks to have their players prepared. Day will undoubtedly make some significant coaching changes at this point.

To add to the coaching dilemma, the poor performance of the Buckeyes special

teams' units reared its ugly head again in the Cotton Bowl, starting with a delay of game penalty on our punt team. After averaging only 36.7 yards in his three punts against Michigan, Jesse Mirco improved in the Cotton Bowl by averaging 48.3 yards per punt. The problem was he had to punt eight times due to the inability of the offense to mount drives. Like McCord, Mirco decided to enter the portal, once he got his leg iced down.

The return game again was practically nonexistent, and on one occasion, our punt returner decided to field one punt at the 5-yard line instead of letting it hit the ground. We went 1 of 2 in the field-goal department with a 48-yard miss coming early in the third quarter with Ohio State holding a 3-0 lead.

These performance issues, along with communication errors throughout the season, will have to get a hard evaluation by Day, and like with the offense, he must make personnel changes where necessary. Ultimately, Day is the scapegoat if things do not improve in these areas.

NCAA Responsible

The NCAA has let the entire face of college football change, and not for the better. They did nothing to head off the negative effects that the transfer portal and NIL monies would cause to the college game. By not allowing college football programs

to give their players enough spending money to make up for their expenses and giving the players limited or even no chance to earn money through offseason employment, a reckoning was sure to take place.

Major football programs have demanded more of a time commitment from their players than ever before to the point where there is no offseason for the athlete. The pressure on college football coaches to win is tremendous, and that pressure is passed on to the players as well.

Amateurism has been taken out of college football, and the NCAA sat on their hands and watched it happen. Soon the NCAA and college football will part ways because the major programs no longer need an organization that cannot justify its existence.

College football is a professional sport now – players jump from one program to the other for opportunities to play, which means making more money. The days of building a program, creating a culture, and football being a team sport are over. Team loyalties do not exist, and earning your spot on the roster through "competing" has been replaced with "transferring" to a program where your spot is guaranteed.

The NCAA, through its arrogance and lack of foresight, has harmed the college game and may, ultimately, bring about its own demise as an organization.

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No Concern About Day's Job After Cotton Bowl

Whether you want to talk about the 31-0 drubbing at the hands of Clemson in the 2016 Fiesta Bowl or the 41-14 loss to Florida in the 2006 BCS title game (played in January 2007), you have to go back several seasons to find a more disappointing post-season performance by an Ohio State football team.

**EXNER
POINT**
Rich Exner

It was depressing for the fans to watch and most certainly should have been just as depressing for the Ohio State coaching staff. So the question is, what's next?

To start, let's clear up one question. Absolutely, positively, 100 percent should Ryan Day's job be secure. Cut out the silly talk you might have come across on the Internet – the place that rewards the outrageous by amplifying ridiculous ideas.

Ohio State football is in good hands with Day. There's no one readily available who would clearly be an upgrade. His record is still fabulous at 56-8. Never before this season did one of his teams finish below sixth in the AP poll.

And let us not forget, those two previous bowl drubbings I mentioned above came with Urban Meyer (2016) and Jim Tressel (2006) as the coach. Bad things happen even to the best. Yes, this was a bad (is there a more harsh word?) finish to the season.

And, yes, it's not going to get any easier next year to win the Big Ten or the national title with Michigan and new Big Ten member Washington coming off their championship-game appearance.

But had the playoffs included 12 teams since the beginning in 2014, only one school would have made the field each sea-

son. That's Ohio State, including the last five years with Day as the coach. Something Alabama's Nick Saban, Clemson's Dabo Swinney and Michigan's Jim Harbaugh can't say.

Quarterback Questions

But next year's slate includes Oregon, Michigan and maybe Washington in a league title game, as well as Penn State. The road during the regular season will be tougher. Ohio State will be doing it with a new quarterback.

Immediately after the Cotton Bowl, the question was: Will it be Devin Brown? To hear the coaches talk, he's capable. We don't get to see practices like the coaches. Yet with the small public sample in game play, we're left wondering. Yes, his opportunities have been limited. But it sure didn't take long to know in 2019 that Justin Fields would be a star. Maybe Brown can be a star. We just don't have the game tape on that yet.

Could it be freshman Air Noland? That would be an awful lot to ask of a true freshman. Sure, the first three games of the season are against Akron, Western Michigan and Marshall. But asking a true freshman to carry the load for a team that expects to be in the national championship race is a high ask.

Or could Day find a transfer to his liking? There's wasn't an obvious target option left. But a few days later, on Jan. 4, we learned that a veteran quarterback from a fairly good team, Kansas State, will be heading to Ohio State for his fifth and final year of college football.

Will that guy, Will Howard, be the guy? One would think that before announcing his decision, he got a pretty solid idea from Day that he would be the Buckeyes' starter in 2024. He's not Justin Fields. But he is experienced, and there are some good things on his record. He made Kansas State competitive against Texas on Nov. 4 in an overtime loss (327 yards, four TDs).

But his numbers this past season fell below those of Kyle McCord (140.1 QB rating vs. McCord's 161.6; 2,643 passing yards vs. McCord's 3,170; and 24 TDs with 10 interceptions in comparison to McCord's 24 TDs and six interceptions). Yet we have to remember that McCord was surrounded by far better talent.

Time will tell if Howard is the answer. The bar is high at a school that has been so dependent on quarterback play and home to the first-team All-Big Ten quarterback every season from 2016 through 2022 (J.T. Barrett, Dwayne Haskins, Fields and C.J. Stroud). McCord was a mere third-team All-Big Ten pick, and in the end, that wasn't viewed as good enough.

What About The Line?

However, as important as filling the quarterback spot is, it doesn't appear to be the most difficult task facing the Ohio State coaching staff in trying to remain a title contender.

That concern involves the offensive line. Ohio State's line struggled to open running holes against even some mediocre opponents during the regular season, then it was decimated against Missouri.

One really has to question the coaching in this area. Maybe recruiting has been a little short for linemen. But I have a hard time believing that Missouri had overwhelmingly better raw talent on defense than what Ohio State had on the offensive line.

Ohio State recruits good players. They should be developed and coached up to perform. This unit was crushed against Missouri, amplified likely by an inexperienced quarterback in spotting blitzes and coverages.

And speaking of coaching, one other thought about the Missouri game. It sure seemed like that when Brown went down with his ankle injury, Day didn't have a plan in place for what plays could work for freshman Lincoln Kienholz.

Losing a quarterback is a real possibility in any game. The coaches, unlike the fans, see the backups every day in practice. They should know what they can and cannot do and have a selection of plays in mind if the backup is forced into action.

But almost from the get-go, it seemed Ohio State's best chance to win was to hang on for a 3-0 win. That was asking too much of the defense, no matter how great it once again played.

I started off by saying Day's job, without question, should be secure. But the security going forward will depend largely on the play of his next quarterback and the decisions he makes in how to improve the offensive line.

Bowl Season

Are the non-playoff bowls dead? They should be.

Empty seats. Multiple player opt-outs (for reasonable reasons). Little excitement. Let's officially declare the bowls pathetic and irrelevant, if it wasn't already assumed so.

Next season, 12 teams will be in the playoffs, lowering the attention and interest even further in the bowl games.

Like every other sport at the college, pro and even the high school level, the season should end at the end of the regular season for non-playoff teams. Maybe there should be an exception or two. For example, pitting the Mid-American Conference champion against the champion of a like league would be interesting and rewarding for the players.

But why have Minnesota play Bowling Green, UCLA play Boise State or even Ohio State play Missouri?

To me, the best solution is something I wrote about at the beginning of the season – a friend's idea that the traditional bowl games should be moved up to Labor Day weekend as an exciting launch to the season, rather than a lackluster finish.

Neutral-Site Basketball

Speaking of off-campus games, I'm not sure they work in basketball anymore either.

I went to Rocket Mortgage FieldHouse in Cleveland to watch the Buckeye basketball team play West Virginia on Dec. 30. Since I live just 15 minutes away, it was a convenient chance to see the Buckeyes.

But, much like many of those football bowl games, there were perhaps more empty seats than filled ones for the marquee game of a tripleheader that also included Ohio University against Davidson and Akron against St. Bonaventure.

In past years, I've seen OSU play Kentucky, Cleveland State and West Virginia in these games in Cleveland. The crowds seem to have shrunk each time. And when I watched OSU play UCLA earlier this year in Atlanta, from what I could tell from TV, few seats were actually used.

Anecdotally, what kept a lot of people away from the latest Ohio State-West Virginia game in Cleveland was ticket pricing. Including fees, most upper-deck seats were running north of \$30. For the lower deck, close to \$100 was common.

Yes, good deals could be found, but those were the exception. Don't ask me what the face value really was. You can't figure that out anymore with places like SeatGeek controlling the sales at the pro arenas. It's one of the big pitfalls of the loss of paper tickets and box office sales without fees.

But in looking at home game prices at Value City Arena, Ohio State lists pricing this year from \$7 to \$28 for nonconference games, \$11 to \$48 for conference games and \$16 to \$61 for premier games (Texas A&M, Illinois, Indiana, Purdue and Michigan). In other words, prices were generally at least double in Cleveland. No wonder there were so many empty seats and, as a result, a lacking atmosphere.

I bought a pair of midlevel seats for \$21 each when they fell just hours before tipoff. But that was a "steal of a deal," considering most pricing. Once I arrived, I realized many sections in the arena were completely empty (unsold) and better sections either had numerous unsold tickets or many, many no-shows.

Too bad. Marketed right, maybe to high school teams and others, at a fair price, it would have been a good event to showcase Ohio State and its basketball team. And more fans would have had the chance to see a thrilling overtime win by OSU.



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Missouri Loves Company But Not In This Corner

THE VIEW FROM 15TH & HIGH Frank Moskowitz, Publisher

I'm going to go contrarian here and say that I was not as devastated as most with the loss to Missouri in the Cotton Bowl. And the main reason is a funny one, a big-picture reason.

I was stunned at how few Buckeyes opted out of the Cotton Bowl. Opting out is a – I hesitate to call it a trend because it is now a fully established practice – choice that really bothers me and is one more reason the bowl system, as we know it, is rapidly dying, if it is not already dead. With so many Buckeyes potentially transferring or electing to go pro, the few defections before the game gave me faith that “The Brotherhood” still existed and was more than just lip service by players more concerned with their NIL money than their brothers.

I am sure you have noticed that every team seems to have a Brotherhood now, but did Ohio State *really* have one? Were the players really stung by three consecutive losses to Michigan, or was that something that hurts fans more than well-compensated players, many of whom come from out of state?

The virtually full roster gave me faith in the future and was also reassuring as far as Ryan Day's culture, which seems to be coming under attack from all corners of Buckeye Nation.

Leading up to the game, there was hope among some Buckeye fans that even Marvin Harrison Jr. might play. I never believed that, and in his case that really would have been crazy. His draft position can't get much higher, and there is the genuine risk of injury and losing millions.

I should point out, though, that for 80 years, from the time of the first NFL draft on Feb. 8, 1936, players played in bowl games and would never have dreamed of leaving their team before the season was complete. There were fewer bowl games for most of those eight decades, and playing in the postseason was rarer and more of an honor. I rue the day when Leonard Fournette and Christian McCaffrey broke the opt-out barrier in 2016.

By the way, Harrison's father, Marvin Harrison Sr., played in Syracuse's bowl game his senior year, reeling in seven Donovan McNabb passes for 173 yards and touchdowns of 38 and 56 yards in a 41-0 victory over Clemson in the Gator Bowl following the 1995 season. That is still the most lopsided win in the Gator Bowl's history. Not that the game was without incident. Senior broke his thumb during the game but continued playing.

Did the injury affect his pro career? He caught 64 passes for 836 yards and eight touchdowns in his rookie season and went on to have a Hall of Fame career.

But enough talk about opting out and Harrison Jr.'s father.

I also wasn't as discouraged by the loss to Missouri as many.

It was obvious fairly early that the OSU offensive line was overmatched, and once Devin Brown went down, the Buckeyes were in trouble with the inexperienced Lincoln Kienholz under center. Still, thanks to an outstanding defense, the Buckeyes led the game, albeit just 3-0, into the fourth quarter and were within four points until 5:25 was left in the game against a Missouri team that had far more to play for than the Buckeyes.

Do I think Ohio State could have won if Brown had not been injured? Yes. He seemed to be getting more confident and more comfortable in each of his possessions. Even a little more time off the clock as the game progressed might have kept the Buckeye defense fresher and they might have held off the Tigers, rather than fading down the stretch after seven of the first eight Buckeye possessions lasted 2:35 or

less with four of them 1:20 or less.

I have to also wonder if Kienholz might have had a better chance of producing on his first three drives if they had not started at the OSU 5, 11 and 7, the last starting point set up by a Buckeye block in the back penalty, yet another special teams gaffe.

With an untested freshman taking over in a meaningful situation for the first time and a game plan designed for a different quarterback, Day was extremely limited in plays to call that deep in Buckeye territory.

“We had a lot of things in the game plan designed for his style of play, and we lost him,” Day said of losing Brown and having to turn to Kienholz. “That was a little bit of a scramble, and we came up short.”

Of course, if the offensive line had opened up a hole or two for TreVeyon Henderson to pick up some yards and give Kienholz some breathing room, things might have changed. But on this particular evening, opening holes was just not happening.

Kienholz finally got some room to work with on OSU's first possession of the second half, taking over at the OSU 44. He immediately hit Xavier Johnson for a 24-yard gain to the Missouri 32. Right when Kienholz might have finally been settling into a groove, Day inexplicably – at least in my mind – called for a trick play, and Emeka Egbuka missed on a pass to Carnell Tate. Even if the pass had been complete, it might have been a case of winning the battle and losing the war. Why not let Kienholz build up his confidence and get better into the flow, winning the game with improved play, not trickery?

But let's face it. This game was all about the offensive line. By this time the Missouri defense was running over, around and through the Buckeyes' unsuccessfully revamped O-line. I was stunned to see, when looking at the final stats, that Kienholz was sacked only once. However, a closer look at the stat sheet showed that the Tigers registered eight quarterback hurries.

Sometimes the posters on our BuckeyeSports.com Forum are much more articulate than I am.

“Very few college or pro quarterbacks can survive and look good playing behind an offensive line that looked as bad as the Buckeye line looked Friday night,” poster Byron McNutt said. “Like Kienholz, no QB can throw a good pass while running full speed backwards from the line of scrimmage.”

Kienholz finished 6 of 17 passing for 86 yards.

Elsewhere in this issue, staff writer Craig Merz speaks to several experts on Buckeye football about the offensive line. I must admit that those whom Craig spoke to, while concerned about the offensive line play, were more bullish about the big guys than I am. In fairness to the guys in the trenches, by the end of the game the Tiger defenders were just flowing into the backfield, unfettered. This says to me there is a coaching issue, in addition to any limitations the Ohio State linemen may have in talent or execution.

In both personnel and coaching, the Buckeyes are fielding a line that is good enough to beat the bulk of the Big Ten competition, which will be even tougher with the addition of such teams as Washington, Oregon and USC. But if Ohio State wants to consistently beat Michigan and contend for national titles, the offensive line,

through both better talent and better coaching, is going to have to up its game.

So why, you may wonder after all that, am I not as concerned about the loss to Missouri as most others? It's all about the Brotherhood.

The Buckeyes, despite the loss of Brown, fought until the end. I like that attitude now and going forward, especially with the players who have elected to come back, led by defensive linemen Jack Sawyer and Tyleik Williams, and maybe even Denzel Burke. Hasn't it been fun to finally see Sawyer play the way we thought he would when he first made the short trip over from Pickerington?

Frankly, while I know Missouri is savoring its win over the Buckeyes, I think the Tigers should be concerned that they had so much trouble putting the wounded Buckeyes away. It was Brotherhood against Brotherhood.

“We're a dirty, hardworking brotherhood that loves each other and fights for each other,” Tiger coach Eliah Drinkwitz said. “We scored 14 points in the fourth quarter. We said, ‘We're not giving in. We're faster, stronger, tougher than you are in the fourth quarter.’”

What about quarters one, two and three? The Tigers failed to capitalize on Ohio State's dismal offensive line play and its novice quarterback as well as they might have. But when you are outside the elite, I guess a win is a win.

As far as dominating in the fourth quarter, this was the second game in a row that the outstanding Ohio State defense crumbled in the fourth quarter. As we all know, Michigan held the ball on a 7:00 drive in the fourth quarter that was every bit as devastating as Kyle McCord's game-sealing interception.

True, in the case of the Cotton Bowl, the OSU defense might have been worn down by being on the field so much. But maybe strength and conditioning coach Mickey Marotti needs to try to figure out why the defense faded down the stretch in two of the biggest games of the season – and do something about it. I refuse to believe that the Brotherhood threw in the towel when the game was on the line in the last two games.

Monthly, Or Not Monthly

This note is both a business note and an editorial note.

I have mentioned many times recently as I have talked about the struggles in the newspaper industry, that The Wolverine, the publication covering Michigan sports, switched to a monthly publishing schedule several years ago to try to stay viable. I received my January issue of The Wolverine, the one covering the Ohio State-Michigan game, on Dec. 21, 26 days after The Game was played.

Buckeye Sports Bulletin mailed its Michigan issue on Nov. 28, meaning the bulk of our readers, even with the terrible mail service we have been experiencing, had their papers by Friday, Dec. 1, nearly three weeks before the readers in that state up North had their coverage in The Wolverine.

A note to those BSB readers who continue to fight with us over price. We, too, could go monthly to remain viable, but you have made it quite clear to us that you prefer weekly during football season. But you have to pay for that service. And by the way, in its monthly format, The Wolverine costs \$5.83 per issue, as opposed to \$5 per issue for BSB, a rate that many of you don't pay with the frequent promotions that we

offer. And many thanks to the many readers who elect to pay full price, even though they have received a money-saving offer.

I said this was also an editorial note, because I found it interesting that The Wolverine issue with coverage of The Game just fawns over Jim Harbaugh, barely mentioning the sign-stealing scandal. And when they do, they pretty much dismiss it.

Buried in a column, longtime Wolverine editor John Borton says, “It does sound as if the Michigan brass has done everything in its power to keep Harbaugh in Ann Arbor. It backed him resolutely when the NCAA, Big Ten and conference coaches – all with selfish reasons for wanting to take Harbaugh down – unleashed an attack this fall.”

Or Borton again, calling Michigan's most recent win over the Buckeyes the most satisfying of the three straight.

“That's because Harbaugh wasn't anywhere to be found, banned from the premises by Big Ten Commissioner Tony Petitti, before the results are in from an NCAA investigation into advanced scouting/sign stealing *alleged to perhaps be illicit* (my italics).”

Wolverine.com editor Chris Balas had this to say about how important it was for Ohio State to beat Michigan this past season.

“Amid rumblings that Ohio State had hired a private investigator to uncover an alleged illegal on-site scouting and sign stealing operation, Michigan had to – *had to* – win this one to change the narrative. OSU fans, even head coach Ryan Day in an interview the day before the game, hinted that ‘cheating’ was the only reason the Wolverines had crushed the Buckeyes in consecutive years, even though Ohio State assistants acknowledged they changed their signs in 2022.”

Or Balas quoting Michigan president Santa Ono: “The coaches talked to me about that situation and have said he (Harbaugh) knows nothing about what happened, and I trust him,” Ono said. “He's a man of honor. Everyone who knows him knows that. It's an ongoing investigation. We'll see what happens.”

Nowhere in the magazine that I could find was there any acknowledgement of possible wrongdoing.

And finally, here's Borton again, this time quoting former BSB staffer Ari Wasserman, now with The Athletic, about how important it was for the Buckeyes and their fans to beat Michigan this time around.

“One thing that needs to be said that I haven't heard anyone say is this: Ohio State didn't just lose the game, it missed a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to really knock your hated opponent into a dark spot.

“Imagine if Ohio State won, how we'd be talking about Michigan and the cheating scandal today. It would have delegitimized everything Michigan accomplished the last three years. Now, it's the opposite.

“Ryan Day may win the Michigan game next year, but that missed opportunity in one of the biggest games in rivalry history can never be salvaged. Day could have hurt Michigan's program more in this one than any other individual game in rivalry history. He didn't.

“That has to be the toughest pill to swallow for Ohio State fans.”

It is apparently a tough pill to swallow for Michigan backers that their savior Jim Harbaugh, who just a couple of seasons ago was forced to take a pay cut, might not be the knight in shining armor that they hold him out to be.

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