



## Reload The Clip

### Army Of Returning Bucks Sets Stage For Big 2024

By **BRADEN MOLES**

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Editor

The night of Jan. 3, 2003, was one of triumph for Ohio State, as the Buckeyes brought home what was then the fifth national championship in program history with a 31-24 upset in double overtime of the defending national champion in Miami (Fla.).

There was no shortage of big plays in the win – look no further than a pair of fourth-down conversions in the first overtime, either of quarterback Craig Krenzel's rushing touchdowns or the game-winning run by Maurice Clarett – but maybe the most significant factor leading to Ohio State's win had happened nearly a year earlier.

With media assembled on short notice at the Woody Hayes Athletic Center on Jan. 9, 2002, junior safety and then-two-time All-American Mike Doss announced that he would return for his senior season at Ohio State, pushing the NFL back for another year despite speculation he would forgo his remaining season of eligibility.

"I've been playing football since I was 8 years old," Doss said. "My dream has been to play in the National Football League, and now that that opportunity has arrived I had to ask myself, 'Is this the best thing for Michael Doss?'"

"My mother told me, living in a two-bedroom apartment with nothing to survive on but her son, she told me to get my education, and I will be returning to Ohio State."

The choice seems clear in retrospect – come back, win a national championship and boost his draft stock, leading to an eventual six-year run in the NFL that included winning Super Bowl XLI with the



SONNY BROCKWAY

**COMING BACK STRONG** – Ohio State received plenty of positive news in recent weeks, highlighted by the returns of a large group of third-year players for their senior seasons, including defensive ends J.T. Tuimoloau (left) and Jack Sawyer (right).

Indianapolis Colts – but at the time, he was not so sure. In fact, Doss – despite calling a press conference for his announcement – did not know what his decision would be even as he stepped up in front of the media.

"I am positive I did not know what I was going to say (when I got to the lectern)," Doss said. "You could say you watched me decide."

The decision paid off. Doss finished second on the team in tackles with 107 stops

while adding five tackles for loss, eight pass breakups and two interceptions, including one returned for a touchdown. He earned unanimous All-America status – then just the second safety in program history to earn the honor, joining Jack Tatum in 1970.

He provided some of the season's biggest highlights, including an interception in the national championship game – one that led to him being named defensive MVP for the contest – that set up Ohio State's first touchdown of the game.

"I believed in our team," Doss said after winning the national championship. "Twelve months ago on Jan. 9, my mom's birthday, I made the decision to come back. I had one goal in mind and that was to win a national championship. I have won a championship on every level since I was 8 years old. I was able to come back, and we got it done."

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### A&M's Bjork Named Next Athletic Director

By **BRADEN MOLES**

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Editor

Ohio State's next athletic director will be Texas A&M athletic director Ross Bjork, OSU announced on Jan. 16 ahead of his formal introduction the following day. Bjork – pending approval by the Ohio State board of trustees – will replace long-time athletic director Gene Smith, who announced his retirement in August and will serve his final day on June 30.

Bjork, who will become Ohio State's ninth athletic director, will officially begin in Columbus on July 1 after serving as athletic director for the Aggies since 2019.

The Dodge City, Kan., native and former football player and graduate of Emporia State has also held the position at Ole Miss (2012-19) and Western Kentucky (2010-12), and he has been in sports administration for 30 years, also holding administrative roles at Albuquerque, Tulsa, Western Illinois, Missouri, Miami (Fla.) and UCLA dating back to 1994.

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SONNY BROCKWAY

**NEXT UP** – Ohio State announced on Jan. 16 that Texas A&M athletic director Ross Bjork will fill the same position for the Buckeyes following current athletic director Gene Smith's retirement this summer.

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## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Don't Forget The Backs

While writers speculate that the TreVeyon Henderson-Quinshon Judkins-Dallan Hayden running back room might be the greatest group of all time, it is interesting to look at the history of two other positions.

At this time in 2014, Braxton Miller was backed by redshirt freshman J. T. Barrett and sophomore Cardale Jones, who was labeled immature. Miller was lost to a shoulder injury, Barrett became the best quarterback in the Big Ten but was hurt late in the Michigan victory. Jones finished the victory and led a legendary run to the national championship.

Early in 1968, when fullback was the most important position in the Woody Hayes offense, rising sophomore John Brockington was third in line. Brockington set a school rushing record as a senior, was selected NFL Rookie of the Year and the first player to rush for 1,000 yards his first three years in the league.

He was behind Jim Otis, returning starter and son of Woody's college roommate. Otis was the team's leading rusher all three years he was eligible, named All-American as a senior and played in the NFL for nine years, making the Pro Bowl in 1975.

Jack Tatum was the best fullback at Ohio State 56 years ago. He was good enough to play several other

positions but was switched to rover back, a combination of cornerback and safety. When OSU avenged a 41-6 loss to Purdue (in 1967), Tatum led a Buckeye defense which shut out the Boilers and their Heisman candidate LeRoy Keyes, 13-0 (in 1968). Tatum was named defensive lineman of the week by one wire service, back of the week in the other.

When OSU beat Michigan for the Big Ten title and a trip to the Rose Bowl, Tatum ran across the field to catch Ron Johnson, the conference 60-yard dash champion, from behind. You can see that miracle on YouTube. As a senior, Tatum was All-American for the second time and seventh in the Heisman voting.

The quarterbacks and fullbacks added national titles to their stories. How about the running backs?

**Lee Caryer**  
Worthington, Ohio

*If you would like to express an opinion concerning Ohio State University sports, please send your letter to BSB Letters, P.O. Box 12453, Columbus, OH 43212, or email it to [bsb@buckeyesports.com](mailto:bsb@buckeyesports.com). Letters must be signed and include the writer's hometown and a daytime telephone number for verification. Publication priority will be given to those letters that are brief, and we reserve the right to edit letters for publication.*



## From The Message Board

**Ohio State has had an impressive run of luck since the calendar flipped to 2024, with double-digit starters announcing their return to the program next season. Any one of the returning players will be able to make a significant difference next year for the Buckeyes, but we asked our readers and writers at the BuckeyeSports.com Fan Forum which of the returning players they feel will have the most impact this upcoming season for Ohio State.**

**Here are some of the responses:**

"Cody Simon and the veteran defensive players. With their success this past year, they will build the foundation for 2024, as it appears the offense will again be a work in progress. What a difference a couple years make. The roles are reversed."

– R1TBDBITL

"(TreVeyon) Henderson, of course. I do hope to see Dallan Hayden on the field this year too. I'm also hoping to see Devin Brown on the field to finally show his stuff, but the QB room is a big mystery at the moment. Lots to look forward to."

– PeyoteBuck

"Most impactful? (Emeka) Egbuka and (Denzel) Burke narrowly behind. If healthy, I would expect them to be the first Buckeyes drafted next year unless (Sonny) Styles does the three-year thing."

– Terrier Buck

"I don't think there is a wrong answer to this question. This group of returning starters is outstanding. My choice is the group of them together. The stats they will put up as a defensive team in the 2024 season will be very impressive!"

– BuckeyeScott

"I will go with Lathan Ransom. Safety play wasn't as consistent

after he got hurt."

– Tiffin Buckeye

"I'll go Denzel Burke. He had a great Cotton Bowl and I thought for sure he was a goner. For some reason I feel like there is less depth in the secondary than some other positions (defensive line) and if (Jim) Knowles wants to continue to limit the big plays, we need the best players possible in the secondary."

– Mcarr

"A combo of (J.T. Tuimoloau) and Jack Sawyer. Maybe we will get back to the days of the Bosas and Chase Young with a relentless pass rush. With Burke and the others in the secondary, it could make for a lethal combination. Larry Johnson has seen this level of talent before. Has Jim Knowles?"

– Poster That Harley Built

"I haven't seen Tyleik Williams mentioned yet. He was so good this past season on the interior, and I think not having him next season may have been felt more than any of the other individual players not returning. His junior year was a breakout season but I still think he has a lot of room to grow as he looks to boost his draft stock."

– Braden Moles, BSB

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## Day Going 'All In' For 2024 Season

If you're a fan of movies in which various games of poker are a recurring theme, you might have watched Matt Damon push all of his chips to the middle of the table at the end of the 1998 film "Rounders." Daniel Craig did the same thing as James Bond in "Casino Royale." Ditto Paul Newman in "The Sting," Kenny Rogers in "The Gambler," Warren Beatty in "Kaleidoscope," and countless others.

Whether it was a full house, four of a kind, straight flush or, in Damon's case, a simple straight, each of those actors and the characters they played had what he thought was enough of a winning hand that he was willing to bet everything he had.

The term for that kind of bet is "going all in," and it seems to be the same strategy Ohio State head coach Ryan Day is using as he prepares for the 2024 college football season.

Perhaps stung by withering criticism stemming from a loss to Michigan for a third straight year, his starting quarterback departing through the transfer portal and a poor Cotton Bowl showing against Missouri that represented by far the Buckeyes' lowest point total during his tenure, Day has made nothing but positive headlines since the new year began.

During an era when many of the top college players seek the shortest route to the NFL, the Buckeyes will welcome back such projected first-round draft choices as cornerback Denzel Burke and wide receiver Emeka Egbuka as well as running back TreVeyon Henderson and defensive starters Jack Sawyer, J.T. Tuimolau and Tyleik Williams.

Then, belying a past during which he was only willing to dip a toe into the talent pool afforded by the portal, Day went full cannonball by signing the likes of Kansas State quarterback Will Howard, Alabama center Seth McLaughlin, Ole Miss running back Quinshon Judkins and Alabama safety Caleb Downs.

Howard is a 6-5, 242-pound quarterback who reminds some observers of the college version of Buffalo Bills QB Josh Allen, who was 6-5 and 233 pounds when he was at Wyoming. Howard threw for 2,643 yards and 24 TDs last season at Kansas State and rushed for 351 yards and another nine scores. No Ohio State quarterback has run for that many touchdowns since Justin Fields had 10 in 2019.

Meanwhile, McLaughlin, who made 25 career starts for the Crimson Tide, fills a vital spot in the middle of an Ohio State offensive line that underachieved in 2023. Judkins, considered the No. 1 running back available in this year's portal after rushing for 1,158 yards and 15 TDs last season, will team with Henderson to give the Buckeyes perhaps the best one-two RB punch in college football. And Downs is coming off a season during which he led Alabama with 107 tackles, including 70 solo stops, and won national freshman of the year honors.

Added to that impressive haul on Jan. 21 was another Alabama convert, five-star quarterback prospect Julian Sayin, who had signed with the Crimson Tide in December as the No. 1-rated QB in the 2024 recruiting class.

Sayin's commitment put the cherry on top of another impressive performance from Day and his staff on the recruiting trail. They brought in another top-five class during the early signing period, a 20-player haul that included 16 prospects rated with either four or five stars. That total didn't even count the commitment for the 2025 class from five-star cornerback Devin Sanchez from North Shore High School in Houston and news that four-star defensive end Dom Kirks of Painesville, Ohio, had switched his commitment from Washington to Ohio State and will sign with

the Buckeyes in February.

Finally, in what might be his most important offseason acquisition of all, Day hired former Penn State and Houston Texans head coach Bill O'Brien as his offensive coordinator and quarterbacks coach.

### EDITOR'S NOTEBOOK Mark Rea

Some observers disagree with that assessment, and many OSU fans greeted O'Brien's hiring with yawns of disinterest. The 54-year-old coach gets something of a bad rap because of his middling record as a head coach – 15-9 in two seasons at Penn State, and 52-48 in six-plus seasons with the Texans.

But O'Brien is something of a quarterback guru. Christian Hackenberg left Penn State with nearly every passing record in program history, Alabama QB Bryce Young won the Heisman Trophy in 2021 under O'Brien's tutelage, and while the coach was on Bill Belichick's staff in New England from 2007 to 2011, he worked with some guy named Brady.

O'Brien also possesses a prickly disposition, something that might be a missing ingredient in Day's locker room. How intense is O'Brien? Brady gave O'Brien the nickname of "Teapot" when he was with the Patriots because of how the coach would often "boil over." When asked about that nickname, O'Brien told reporters, "It wasn't all me. ... There were a few teapots in that (quarterbacks) room."

Day toyed last year with ceding gameday play-calling duties to wide receivers coach Brian Hartline, something that never materialized – perhaps because Hartline possessed zero experience in calling plays. But O'Brien has tons of experience in that realm, and it is unlikely he would have taken the job at Ohio State just to coach quarterbacks. He would undoubtedly like another shot at a head coaching position in the NFL, and any success he can help bring to Ohio State in 2024 would smooth that path.

Likewise, it's a smoother path Day seeks in the wake of how this past season collapsed around him. Give the coach credit for an honest assessment of his program and recognizing that continuing to do business as usual wasn't getting the job done.

Of course, all of the player retention, portal acquisitions, prospect signings and staff hirings will only serve to make the target on Ohio State's back even larger. But as the saying goes, nothing ventured, nothing gained, so Day has pushed all of his chips to the middle of the table.

We'll know just about this time next year whether or not the bet paid off.

#### Wait And See

Keeping with the betting theme of this column, I would have wagered good money on the next director of athletics at Ohio State being one of Gene Smith's former assistants who are currently ADs elsewhere – Patrick Chun at Washington State, Martin Jarmond at UCLA, or Heather Lyke at Pitt.

When Chun was hired at Washington State in 2018, he became the first Asian-American athletic director at a Power Five school. Jarmond left Ohio State in 2017 to become the first African-American director of athletics at Boston College and three years later became the first African-American athletic director at UCLA. And Lyke is one of only five females

currently running Power Five athletic departments. Jennifer Cohen (USC), Beth Goetz (Iowa), Nina King (Duke) and Carla Williams (Virginia) are the others.

Instead of dipping into that pool of talent, however, Ohio State instead went completely off the board to select 51-year-old Kansas native Ross Bjork, who has run the athletic departments at Western Kentucky, Ole Miss and Texas A&M. When he formally takes over July 1, Bjork will become the ninth director of athletics in Ohio State history and just the third (after Rick Bay and Andy Geiger) with no previous ties to Ohio.

Since taking the job in College Station in 2019, Bjork has improved the school's overall academic profile for athletes, been a prolific fundraiser, and presided over significant advancements in Name, Image and Likeness money for A&M athletes. Presumably, his NIL expertise was one of the things that made Bjork most attractive to Ohio State.

But there were missteps at Texas A&M as well as at his previous stop at Ole Miss that might have given pause to other potential employers. Longtime sportswriter Pat Forde chronicled some of those problems when he took aim and unloaded both barrels on Bjork in a story that appeared online at SportsIllustrated.com the same day Ohio State announced the hire.

Bjork presided over what Forde called "the Hugh Freeze Scandal Buffet" at Ole Miss from 2014 to 2016, a time period that included major NCAA violations, Freeze's personal scandal that cost him his job, and what Forde described as "an organization disinformation campaign about the NCAA's investigation of the Rebels that led to a defamation lawsuit from former coach Houston Nutt."

Nutt filed the defamation suit in late 2017, and according to Forde, "Bjork's name is all over the lawsuit, and his actions are detailed extensively."

Ole Miss, which later offered a public apology to Nutt and settled the suit out of court, received NCAA sanctions including a two-year postseason ban, a 15-percent reduction in scholarships, recruiting restrictions, and disassociated boosters. There were also 33 victories over a four-season span that were vacated.

Once he got to Texas A&M, Bjork awarded Aggies head coach Jimbo Fisher what Forde described as "the most irresponsible contract extension in the history of college football, which ultimately led to the most expensive buyout in the history of college football."

There is some dispute about whether Fisher's extension was Bjork's idea or whether he was simply rubber-stamping what the Texas A&M Board of Regents wanted, but there is no denying the school was on the hook for approximately \$77 million when Fisher was fired last November with two games remaining in the 2023 season.

The botched hiring of Kentucky head coach Mark Stoops to replace Fisher as well as NCAA investigations and subsequent penalties levied against the A&M football and men's basketball programs also occurred on Bjork's watch.

Personally, I don't know Ross Bjork from the Icelandic singer Björk, who is perhaps most famous for wearing a swan dress to the 2001 Academy Awards. But I think I know a checkered résumé when I read one.

Perhaps the problems that occurred at Ole Miss and Texas A&M were missteps created by people or events that were out of Bjork's control. Therefore, I would like to give him the benefit of the doubt. For now, however, I prefer to wait and see.

# OHIO STATE INSIDER

## O'Brien Named Buckeyes' Offensive Coordinator

On Jan. 18, Ohio State made a big splash in its offseason search for a new offensive play-caller, hiring longtime NFL and college football head coach Bill O'Brien as the team's co-offensive coordinator and quarterbacks coach.

"I am extremely proud to add Bill O'Brien to our coaching staff," head coach Ryan Day said. "He brings a wealth of knowledge – and a tremendous amount of success – at both the NFL and collegiate levels. He is an excellent coach who has run NFL and Power Five programs and developed some truly elite players throughout his career. He'll be an excellent teacher and recruiter for us, and he absolutely strengthens our staff."

O'Brien brings over 30 years of coaching experience as an offensive assistant and head coach to Day's staff next season. O'Brien is a past head coach with the Houston Texans (2014-20) and at Penn State (2012-13). He posted a 52-48 record in six seasons with the Texans and was 15-9 in two seasons at Penn State, taking over following the firing of Joe Paterno, and he was named Big Ten Coach of

the Year in 2012. He most recently served as offensive coordinator and quarterbacks coach for the New England Patriots this season, though it was a challenging year with the Patriots averaging just 13.9 points per game.

Before his most recent role with the Patriots, O'Brien was the offensive coordinator and quarterbacks coach at Alabama under Nick Saban from 2021-22, where he helped lead the Crimson Tide to an SEC Championship Game win and an appearance in the College Football Playoff while working with Heisman Trophy-winning quarterback Bryce Young and posting back-to-back seasons with a top-six scoring offense.

He had previously served as an assistant coach with the Patriots from 2007-2011, helping lead several high-octane offenses under then-head coach Bill Belichick and quarterback Tom Brady, and he has had previous collegiate coaching stints at Maryland and Georgia Tech in his career dating back to 1993.

O'Brien is expected to take over play-calling duties from Day as he looks to transition into a more "CEO" role with the program, and he will share the coordinator position with Brian Hartline, who will also serve as wide receivers coach.

O'Brien also replaces Corey Dennis as quarterbacks coach after four years in the role, although it is expected that Dennis will stay on Ohio State's staff and transition into a still-to-be-determined role with the team.

## Ohio State Adds Judkins, Downs, Sayin From Portal

Ohio State made three significant additions to its roster through the transfer portal since Buckeye Sports Bulletin last went to press, garnering commitments from former Ole Miss

## 2024 Ohio State Football Schedule

Date	Opponent	Result/Time (ET)	TV	2023 Record, Bowl Result
Aug. 31	AKRON	TBA	TBA	2-10, not eligible
Sept. 7	WESTERN MICHIGAN	TBA	TBA	4-8, not eligible
Sept. 21	MARSHALL	TBA	TBA	6-7, 35-17 loss to UTSA (Frisco)
Sept. 28	at Michigan State	TBA	TBA	4-8, not eligible
Oct. 5	IOWA	TBA	TBA	10-4, 35-0 loss to Tennessee (Citrus)
Oct. 12	at Oregon	TBA	TBA	12-2, 45-6 win over Liberty (Fiesta)
Oct. 26	NEBRASKA	TBA	TBA	5-7, not eligible
Nov. 2	at Penn State	TBA	TBA	10-3, 38-25 loss to Ole Miss (Peach)
Nov. 9	PURDUE	TBA	TBA	4-8, not eligible
Nov. 16	at Northwestern	TBA	TBA	8-5, 14-7 win over Utah
Nov. 23	INDIANA	TBA	TBA	3-9, not eligible
Nov. 30	MICHIGAN	TBA	TBA	15-0, 34-13 win over Washington (CFP Champ.)

running back Quinshon Judkins on Jan. 8, former Alabama safety Caleb Downs on Jan. 19 and former Alabama quarterback Julian Sayin on Jan. 21.

The most impact addition was Downs, considered the No. 1 transfer prospect in all of college football before signing with the Buckeyes. He is the reigning SEC Freshman of the Year and led the Crimson Tide in tackles last season. Following the retirement of head coach Nick Saban on Jan. 10, Downs entered the transfer portal on Jan. 17, and Ohio State followed up just a day later with an in-home visit.

During his standout freshman season, he finished with 107 tackles – 40 more than the next-closest Alabama defender – two interceptions and four pass breakups. He was also named the Shaun Alexander Freshman of the Year, which is given to the best first-year player in all of college football.

A former five-star prospect with three seasons of eligibility remaining, Downs figures in

as an immediate starter for Ohio State, which is looking to fill an open starting job at free safety following the departure of Josh Proctor. The Buckeyes also return Lathan Ransom and Sonny Styles, who started at safety last season, though it is likely that the 6-4, 230-pound Styles will move to Will linebacker.

Judkins, who announced his commitment on Twitter just minutes after Michigan's national championship win and has two years of eligibility remaining, is a former three-star prospect out of Pike Road, Ala. He entered the transfer portal on Jan. 5 after two seasons with the Rebels in which he rushed for 2,725 yards and 31 touchdowns and averaged 5.0 yards per carry.

Judkins was a first-team All-SEC selection in his freshman season and named SEC Freshman of the Year after rushing for 1,567 yards and 16 touchdowns, the second-best ever rushing season by an SEC freshman behind Herschel Walker's 1,616 yards at Georgia in 1980. He followed up his first season with another strong year at Ole Miss, where he ranked second in the SEC in carries (271) and rushing yards (1,158) and first in rushing touchdowns (15).

Judkins' transfer to Ohio State came four days before junior running back TreVeyon Henderson announced that he was returning to the program on Jan. 12. With the All-Big Ten tailback joining forces with the former All-SEC rusher, the Buckeyes should boast a formidable running back room that also includes rising third-year Dallan Hayden and incoming freshmen James Peoples and Sam Williams-Dixon.

The pair could also be utilized in a split backfield, operating as a one-two punch to help limit wear and tear with both receiving a healthy number of carries.

The other portal addition – and perhaps the most surprising – was that of Sayin, a former five-star in the 2024 recruiting class who signed with Alabama and had enrolled in classes in Tuscaloosa but entered the transfer portal on Jan. 19 following Saban's retirement. He was the fifth-ranked prospect and top-ranked quarterback in the class.

Ohio State, which had originally locked in on Buford, Ga., five-star quarterback Dylan Raiola (6-3, 230) under center in the 2024 recruiting class before his eventual decommitment, tried unsuccessfully to flip Sayin from Alabama after his commitment to the Crimson Tide on Nov. 2, 2022, offering him last January.

But Sayin stayed firm in his pledge, and Ohio State eventually signed Fairburn (Ga.) Langston Hughes five-star quarterback Air Noland (6-2, 195), who told The Columbus Dispatch after Sayin's commitment that he looks forward to the addition to Ohio State's quarterback room.

"We're excited to have him a part of the brotherhood," Noland said. "He will definitely make the (quarterback) room better than what it is now."

In three years as a starter for Carlsbad, Sayin threw for 7,284 yards and 85 touchdowns to

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**Scarlet VIPs:** William Adams, Willoughby, Ohio; Anthony Ananthanarayanan, 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.; Dr. William Thomas, Gallipolis, Ohio; Anonymous, Dallas; Anonymous, Gaffney, S.C.; Anonymous, Girard, Ohio; Anonymous, Norwalk, Ohio.

## Buckeyes See 124 Recognized As Academic All-Big Ten Honorees

The Big Ten announced on Dec. 11 that 124 student-athletes from Ohio State had earned academic All-Big Ten honors this past fall. It's the second straight year that the Buckeyes had 124 honorees, and it is tied for the second most all-time behind 140 honorees in 2021.

This fall's honorees include student-athletes from field hockey, football, men's and women's cross country, men's and women's soccer and women's volleyball. To be eligible for academic All-Big Ten selection, students must be on a varsity team, have been enrolled for a minimum of 12 months and carry a cumulative grade-point average of 3.0 or higher.

The football team led with 37 honorees, followed by field hockey with 21 and men's soccer with 20. Women's cross country and women's soccer each had 14 honorees, followed by men's cross country with 11 and women's volleyball with seven.

Field hockey junior back Erin Little and men's soccer graduate forward Reed Davis were recognized for a 4.0 grade-point average.

The following is a complete list of Ohio State's fall academic All-Big Ten honorees, including their class year and major. The list is in alphabetical order by sport.

**Men's Cross Country** - Colby Adams, So., marketing; Kevin Agnew, Jr., electrical and computer engineering; Sean Carney, Jr., economics-business; Giovanni Copploe, Gr., fashion and retail studies; John Cuozzo, Sr., mechanical engineering; Alex Dediu, Sr., international business; Keegan Freyhof, So., electrical and computer engineering; Zubin Jha, Sr., computer science & engineering; Kaleb Martin, Jr., mechanical engineering; Ivan Slyepkan, Gr., health sciences; Keegan Souhan, So., chemical engineering.

**Women's Cross Country** - Samantha Coleman, So., mechanical engineering; Chloe Dawson, Jr., Spanish; Audrey DeSantis, So., exercise science education; Addie Engel, Sr., health sciences; Amelia Figler, Sr., history; Ana Karmol, So., environment, economy, development & sustainability; Andrea Kuhn, Gr., statistics; Carina Napoleon,

Jr., speech and hearing science; Gia Napoleon, Gr., women's, gender & sexuality studies; Sydney Paul, So., exercise science education; Daniella Santos, Sr., social work; Morgan Schmitt, So., economics-business; Lindsay Stull, Jr., human nutrition; Akemi Von Scherr, Sr., human resources.

**Field Hockey** - Zella Bailey, So., sport industry; Holland Bell, So., international studies; Leanne Bough, Gr., specialized master bus-bus ana; Hallie Brost, Jr., health sciences; Jessica Courtright, So., business; Abby Danson, Sr., construction systems management; Kelly Davis, So., business; Katie Fichtner, So., criminology & criminal justice; Cameryn Forgash, Jr., health sciences; Ali Gordon, Sr., communication; Riley Hudson, So., exploration; Loryn Jordon, So., sport industry; Hanna Killeen, Jr., communication; Erin Little, Jr., biology; Megan McKenna, Sr., health sciences; Sarah Richards, Sr., health sciences; Claudia Thomas, Jr., marketing; Olivia Wallace, So., communication; Makenna Webster, Sr., communication; Olivia Zettervall, Jr., communication; Jenna Zunic, Jr., human development & family science.

**Football** - David Adolph, So., business; Devin Brown, So., finance; Quinton Burke, Sr., zoology; Reid Carrico, Jr., construction systems management; Bennett Christian, So., communication; Emeka Egbuka, Jr., marketing; Patrick Gurd, Sr., health sciences; Marvin Harrison Jr., Jr., sport industry; Sam Hart, Jr., marketing; Dallan Hayden, So., marketing; TreVeyon Henderson, Jr., sport industry; Carson Hinzman, So., sport industry; Donovan Jackson, Jr., sport industry; Jakob James, Sr., sport industry; Xavier Johnson, Gr., translational data analytics; Cameron Kittle, Sr., construction systems management; Trey Leroux, Sr., finance; Parker Lewis, Sr., human development & family science; Max Lomonico, Jr., human development & family science; Mason Maggs, So., accounting; Kyle McCord, Jr., communication; Jaden McKenzie, 5th-Year, sport coaching, recreation and physical education; Zen Michalski, Jr., sport industry; Jace Middleton, Jr., human development & family science; Jesse Mirco, Jr., sport industry; Joop Mitchell, Jr., finance; Andrew Moore, Sr.,

consumer and family financial services; Jalen Pace, Jr., sport industry; Gabe Powers, So., sport industry; Bryce Prater, Jr., construction systems management; Chad Ray, Sr., health sciences; Jack Sawyer, Jr., sport industry; Cody Simon, Sr., finance; Reis Stocksedale, Jr., sport industry; Sonny Styles, So., business; Kourt Williams II, Sr., journalism; Toby Wilson, Jr., sport industry.

**Men's Soccer** - Ashton Bilow, So., primary education; Marko Borkovic, So., finance; Tanner Creech, So., finance; Reed Davis, 5th-Year, kinesiology; Nathan Demian, Jr., computer & information science; Connor DesRoches, Sr., finance; Brayden Durbin, 5th-Year, sport industry; Thomas Gilej, Sr., economics; Jacob Maisonneuve, So., aerospace engineering; Dyland Onwona-Agyeman, So., exercise science education; Luciano Pechota, So., business; Sean Ryan, 5th-Year, accounting; Anthony Samways, Jr., psychology; RJ Stoller, So., finance; Owen Sullivan, 5th-Year, accounting; Peter Van Euwen, Sr., finance; Deylen Vellios, Sr., psychology; Tommaso Villa, Jr., economics; Donny Williams, So., marketing; Laurence Wootton, Sr., environment, economy, development and sustainability.

**Women's Soccer** - Tatum Adamson, Jr., biology; Christin Baumbick, Sr., health sciences; Sydney Browning, Jr., human nutrition; Kailyn Dudukovich, Jr., actuarial science; Kine Myhrer Floetre, Sr., human development & family science; Mirann Gacioch, So., sport industry; Ella Giannola, So., business; Nina LeFlore, Sr., public management, leadership, & policy; Sophia Louder, So., biology; Dakota Lyons, So., biology; Peyton McNamara, Sr., international business; Brooke Otto, So., business; Molly Pritchard, So., sport industry; Nicole Sidloski, So., marketing.

**Volleyball** - Emily Londot, Sr., sport industry; Anna McClure, So., finance; Sarah Morbitzer, Sr., exercise science; Rylee Rader, Sr., sport industry; Zaria Ragler, So., social work; Sydney Taylor, Jr., marketing; Chelsea Thorpe, So., marketing.

just 10 interceptions while completing 70.7 percent (502 of 710) of his passes. He also rushed for 548 yards and nine additional scores, leading him to be named the top quarterback in the class.

While Noland has reaffirmed his pledge to the Buckeyes and transfer Will Howard is viewed as the presumed starter in what will be his only season at Ohio State, Sayin's addition is likely to cause some upheaval in the rest of the Buckeyes' crowded quarterback room, which also includes returning quarterbacks Devin Brown and Lincoln Kienholz.

Though Sayin would be unlikely to factor into the starting discussion next season, he would firmly be in the competition for 2025 and beyond, which could cause other younger quarterbacks on the roster to reassess their options.

Ohio State has now taken six transfers this offseason, with Downs, Judkins and Sayin joining former Kansas State quarterback Howard, former Ohio University tight end Will Kacmarek and former Alabama center Seth McLaughlin.

### Guerrieri Hired As Safeties Coach

Ohio State hired a familiar face to replace

the relieved Perry Eliano as safeties coach on Jan 10, selecting former Indiana co-defensive coordinator and safeties coach Matt Guerrieri to fill the open role.

Guerrieri, 34, spent the 2022 season with the Buckeyes as a senior analyst on defense. Prior to his one year at Ohio State, Guerrieri spent 10 seasons at Duke, starting as a graduate assistant and working his way up to safeties coach and co-defensive coordinator, a role he shared with current Ohio State defensive coordinator Jim Knowles.

"I do have great respect for Matt," Knowles said on Aug. 29. "He's - I don't know if I have to say a son for me, I'm not much older. Maybe a little brother."

In Guerrieri's lone season as Indiana's co-defensive coordinator, the Hoosiers allowed 29.9 points per game, ranking 98th nationally, and gave up 237.8 passing yards per contest, ranking 86th. He helped Indiana limit Ohio State's passing game to just 237 yards and no touchdowns when the two teams squared off on Sept. 2.

But during his time with the Blue Devils - specifically when he was coaching safeties from 2015-2021 - they finished with three

top-50 passing defenses, including the No. 16 pass defense at 179.4 yards per game in 2017. This helped him earn some personal accolades, when he was nominated for the Broyles Award for college football's best assistant coach in 2018 and was one of three finalists for the AFCA Assistant Coach of the Year in 2020.

Although Guerrieri spent just one season with the Buckeyes, he left an impression on several players who are likely looking forward to having his presence back in the building.

"When he was here, that was my guy," Ransom said earlier this season. "One of the smartest guys I know, and I think he brings a lot of good things. You see how successful he was at Duke. You saw how successful he was here. And to go (to Indiana), I'm honestly really happy for him, but when we get on that field, it's us against him."

### Fleming Out As ST Coordinator

The hiring of Guerrieri was not the only notable coaching move Ohio State made on Jan. 10. The program also announced that special teams coordinator Parker Fleming will not be retained for the 2024 season, ending his three-

year stint leading the unit.

Fleming was elevated to special teams coordinator in 2021 after spending the previous three seasons as a special teams quality control coach from 2018-2020 under both Day and former Ohio State head coach Urban Meyer. He was also a graduate assistant at Ohio State under Meyer from 2012-13.

Ohio State's special teams have struggled throughout Fleming's run as coordinator, headlined by notable gaffes this season such as an accidental fake punt against Maryland, a turnover after Lorenzo Styles Jr. made contact with the ball on a punt return against Penn State and an unsuccessful fake punt against Rutgers in which Jesse Mirco took off with the ball, something Day later said was a miscommunication.

"The one-off plays, we have to be better," Fleming said earlier this season. "We have to eliminate those. Our job is to change field position, create explosives when we have opportunities to, and we've done some of that. When you look at the net field position in a bunch of games, we've won it. People don't care about that because the big things can't happen, and

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# OHIO STATE INSIDER

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they're right. You can't put your team in some situations we have, and I totally understand that."

Day said earlier this season that despite being impressed with the way Fleming has gone about his business, Ohio State has a better expectation for special teams across the board and was looking to evaluate and fix those mistakes that have plagued the unit.

"I can just tell you that (Fleming) works as hard as anybody in the building," Day said. "But we're all being evaluated every single time we're out there, and 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. We'll just keep pushing to make it better. But we know what the expectation is."

But by the end of the regular season, Ohio State's special teams were average nationally in several categories, including kickoff return defense (17.9 yards, 37th), net punting (39.0 yards, 60th), kickoff returns (19.9 yards, 70th), punt returns (4.6 yards, 107th), and punt return defense (13.5 yards, 117th).

Even with an open assistant coaching position following Fleming's firing, Ohio State is not expected to hire another full-time special teams coordinator. Rather, a current assistant coach is expected to add those responsibilities to his current job. The open assistant coaching position is still expected to be filled on the defensive side of the ball, either by promoting graduate assistant James Laurinaitis or adding another assistant on the defensive line.

## Carter Supports Day On First Day In Office

It took just a few hours into his first day as Ohio State's new president before Walter "Ted" Carter Jr. was asked to comment on the job security of the head football coach for the Buckeyes. In his first media availability of his tenure on Jan. 8, the school's 17th president told reporters that while he recognizes the weight three straight losses to Michigan holds over the school and football program, he feels Day will remain at his position for the foreseeable future because the coach has built a program that is among college football's elite.

"I have a great respect for the biggest rivalries that exist in the country," Carter told reporters. "As somebody that ran the Naval Academy, the Army vs. Navy game is as big a rivalry, only second to the Ohio State vs. Michigan rivalry. I think Ryan Day would also say that our goals are to win the Big Ten and win the national championship every year. We didn't meet that. ... But Ryan Day runs a fantastic program. He's our coach, I'm proud that he's our coach and he will continue to be our coach."

The former Navy graduate and "Top Gun" pilot Carter, who came to Ohio State after serving as Nebraska's president, entered office

## Late Signing Day Alters Date Of Recruiting Wrap-Up

The late date of this year's traditional football National Signing Day has caused BSB to alter the mailing date of our popular Football Recruiting Wrap-Up issue. The Recruiting Wrap-Up will be mailed on Feb. 13, three weeks from the mailing of this issue. The BSB mailing schedule is always listed in the credit box on page 3 of each issue.

There is bound to be plenty of Ohio State sports news in the three-week 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 total reversal of fortune in the 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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in Columbus shortly after Day and his football program dropped their last two games of the season against the Wolverines on Nov. 25 and Missouri on Dec. 29 in the Cotton Bowl, a difficult sequence for the team that put mounting pressure and criticism on the coach entering the new year.

## TE Hart Enters Transfer Portal

Ohio State tight end Sam Hart announced on Jan. 16 that he will enter the transfer portal as a graduate transfer after three seasons with the Buckeyes.

"I am very grateful for these past few years as a buckeye," Hart wrote on Twitter. "I would like to thank my teammates for the friendships and the memories, and the coaches for giving me the opportunity of playing here. After a lot of thought I have decided to enter the transfer portal as a graduate transfer (May 2024) with two years of eligibility remaining."

Hart did not record a statistic during his time with the Buckeyes, though he did appear in five games in 2022, including Ohio State's loss to Georgia in the College Football Playoff following an injury to tight end Cade Stover. A former four-star recruit out of Aurora, Colo., Hart was a member of Ohio State's 2021 recruiting class.

Even with the expected departure of Stover, Ohio State is largely set at tight end next year. The Buckeyes will return Gee Scott Jr., Jelani Thurman and Bennett Christian while welcoming incoming freshmen Max LeBlanc and Damarion Witten, as well as Kacmarek.

## Freshman WR Rodgers Returning To Ohio State

Freshman wide receiver Bryson Rodgers announced on Jan. 13 that he will return to Ohio State and withdraw his name from the transfer portal.

"I appreciate all the coaches that blessed me with an opportunity to come to their program," he wrote on Twitter. "This has been nowhere near easy for me. Buckeye Nation, with deep reconsideration and thought, I will be returning to The Ohio State University."

Rodgers, a former-four star prospect out of Zephyrhills, Fla., entered the transfer portal on Dec. 31 after failing to record a catch in just two appearances during his first year with the Buckeyes. He made the initial decision to transfer just four days after Hartline praised Rodgers for his development as the season progressed at a Dec. 27 press conference.

"Bryson's really done a good job," Hartline said. "He's continued to grow."

With Rodgers now returning to the program, he will look to take the next step in his

development and compete for more playing time in an already-deep Ohio State wide receiver room that features Emeka Egbuka, Carnell Tate, Brandon Inniss and others, along with incoming five-star freshmen Mylan Graham and Jeremiah Smith.

## Titans Fire Former OSU Assistant Vrabel

The Tennessee Titans fired former Ohio State defensive lineman and assistant coach Mike Vrabel after six seasons with the franchise on Jan. 8, one of several head coaching dismissals this winter that have dramatically shifted the NFL landscape.

Vrabel led the Titans from 2018-2023 after spending four seasons as a defensive assistant coach with the Houston Texans, accumulating a 54-45 overall record that included three straight playoff appearances from 2019-2021. Vrabel's best coaching seasons occurred in 2019, when he took Tennessee all the way to the AFC Championship Game as a No. 6 seed, then in 2021 when he won AP NFL Coach of the Year honors after leading the Titans to a 12-5 regular-season record and No. 1 overall seed in the AFC.

Vrabel's time with the Titans took a downturn in his final two seasons with the franchise, when he missed the playoffs in both seasons and earned just a 13-21 combined record, leading to his eventual dismissal at the end of this season.

"As I told Coach Vrabel, this decision was as difficult as any I've made as controlling owner," Titans owner Amy Adams Strunk said. "I appreciate Mike's contributions to the Tennessee Titans both on and off the field. Anyone who has ever met him knows how passionate and genuine he is, and he's been a strong supporter of the Nashville community. We wish Mike, Jen, and the Vrabel family nothing but the best in the future."

Following the firing, Vrabel's name began circulating as a potential fit to replace long-time New England Patriots head coach Bill Belichick, who agreed to a mutual parting of ways with the franchise on Jan. 11. Vrabel, who played linebacker for the Patriots from 2001-08, never had an interview with the franchise, however, and the team promoted defensive assistant coach Jerod Mayo to head coach on Jan. 17.

Vrabel played for Ohio State from 1993-1996, becoming a two-time All-American and the school's all-time sack leader with 36, only to return to the program as a defensive assistant coach under interim head coach Luke Fickell in 2011 and Meyer from 2012-2013.

All signs point to the former Buckeye staying in the NFL to fill one of the six remaining head coaching vacancies. Vrabel had one confirmed

NFL head coaching interview as Buckeye Sports Bulletin went to press, meeting with Los Angeles Chargers ownership on Jan. 18.

## OSU Finishes 10th In Final AP, Coaches Polls

Ohio State checked in at No. 10 in the final AP top 25 poll of the season released Jan. 9. The Buckeyes' ranking – their lowest since finishing at No. 12 in the final poll of the 2013 season – came after a 14-3 loss to Missouri in the Cotton Bowl, which put their final record at 11-2 for the third time in as many seasons. This was also the second consecutive season that Ohio State closed with back-to-back losses.

The top five of the poll was made up of No. 1 Michigan – which received all 61 first-place votes – followed by No. 2 Washington, No. 3 Texas, No. 4 Georgia and No. 5 Alabama. Florida State and Oregon finished tied for sixth, followed by No. 8 Missouri, No. 9 Ole Miss and the Buckeyes rounding out the top 10.

Ohio State also finished No. 10 in the coaches poll, with the rest of the top 10 made up of No. 1 Michigan, No. 2 Washington, No. 3 Georgia, No. 4 Texas, No. 5 Alabama, No. 6 Florida State, No. 7 Oregon, No. 8 Missouri and No. 9 Ole Miss.

Day participated in the coaches poll for the first time since 2019. The coach placed his team at No. 9 and Missouri at No. 8, with the rest of his top 10 including No. 1 Michigan, No. 2 Washington, No. 3 Texas, No. 4 Alabama, No. 5 Georgia, No. 6 Florida State, No. 7 Oregon and then No. 10 Mississippi.

## Former Buckeye QB Miller Retiring From Football

Former Ohio State quarterback Jack Miller III has reportedly retired from football, according to a report from 247Sports on Jan. 7. Miller, who spent two seasons at Ohio State and the last two at Florida – where he graduated from the school at the conclusion of the 2023 winter semester – is no longer a part of the Gators' football program. He has not chosen to transfer to another team.

Miller, a former four-star prospect out of Scottsdale (Ariz.) Chaparral, joined Ohio State in 2020 in a recruiting class that also included current Houston Texans quarterback C.J. Stroud. The freshman appeared in just six games for the Buckeyes during those two seasons while backing up Justin Fields in 2020 and Stroud in 2021, completing seven of his 14 pass attempts for 101 yards and zero touchdowns and logging 22 rushing yards and a score on seven carries.

Miller's Ohio State career may be defined by a serious off-field incident, however. On Nov.

5, 2021, he was arrested and charged in Columbus for operating a vehicle while impaired and refusing to take a breathalyzer test. Miller's arrest prompted Day and the program to suspend him indefinitely later that same day, a punishment that led him to not see the field again for Ohio State and eventually transfer from the team at the end of the 2021 season.

Miller then transferred to Florida before the 2022 season, where he spent the last two seasons with the Gators. The former Buckeye missed most of the 2022 regular season after a right thumb injury, but he did make his first – and only – career start with the program in the Las Vegas Bowl against Oregon State on Dec. 17, 2022, completing 13 of his 22 passes for 180 yards in a 30-3 blowout loss.

Miller served as the backup to Florida quarterback Graham Mertz this season and did not make an appearance.

### Linsley Likely Retiring Due To Heart Condition

Miller was not the only former Buckeye to

likely call it quits this offseason. Former Ohio State and current Los Angeles Chargers center Corey Linsley told the media on Jan. 8 that he is “99 percent sure” that he is retiring from the NFL due to a heart issue that kept him out of the majority of the 2023 season.

“After my last appointment with a (heart) specialist, his advice was to stop playing,” he said. “So I’m 99 percent sure that that is going to happen. I’m in year 10, I don’t know how many years I have left anyways. It sucks, obviously. It’s not how I would want this to end. But I can’t complain, I can’t be sad about anything. It has to end for everybody at some point.”

Linsley played just three games for the Chargers this season at center before being placed on the non-football illness list after a non-emergent heart issue was discovered by doctors. The 32-year-old Linsley said he initially scheduled an appointment earlier in the season to check on his irregular heartbeat, but doctors found a separate, non-life-threatening issue that they warned could further harm him if he continued to play professional football.

“I don’t want to speak on the actual medical stuff, because I’m not a doctor,” Linsley said. “But the advice that I got was that I could make a decision, and the decision was safest to stop playing and re-evaluate in a couple months. It’s serious enough where playing football put me at risk for further complications.”

Prior to suffering his heart condition, Linsley served as a stalwart at center with two NFL franchises for a decade, starting 132 games in 10 seasons with the Chargers and Green Bay Packers. Linsley’s best two seasons occurred in 2020 and 2021, when he was named a first-team All-Pro while snapping to then-Packers quarterback Aaron Rodgers. He then earned Pro Bowl honors the next year in his first season with Los Angeles.

Linsley also earned a lucrative contract in that stretch of play, signing a five-year, \$62.5 million deal with the Chargers in 2021 that is still the highest total value for any player at the position in the NFL.

Linsley, a Youngstown, Ohio, native, played at Ohio State from 2009-2013. He started at

center in his last two collegiate seasons while snapping for standout quarterback Braxton Miller, earning first-team All-Big Ten honors as a fifth-year in 2013, a year in which he was also named team captain.

### Ward Named To College Football Hall Of Fame

Former Ohio State and two-time All-American offensive tackle Chris Ward will be inducted into the College Football Hall of Fame this year as a member of the 2024 class, the National Football Foundation and College Football Hall of Game announced on Jan. 10.

Ward becomes the 28th Buckeye to receive the distinguished honor and the first since safety Mike Doss (1999-2002) in 2022.

Ward, a Dayton native, was a four-year letterman under head coach Woody Hayes from 1974-1977, a period in which the Buckeyes won four Big Ten titles and amassed a 39-8-1

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## From The Pages Of BSB

### 40 Years Ago — 1984

Dave Jones was recruited out of Jewett-Scioto High School to play guard at Ohio State. It made sense. Jones had a great outside shot, which helped him score 32.1 points a game his senior year en route to Ohio Class A “Player of the Year” honors. And he stood 6-2.

However, Jones, now a junior, found himself starting at forward for the Buckeyes and being matched up against opponents as much as 10 inches taller.

“I really didn’t expect it (playing forward), but it’s pretty fun so far,” Jones said.

When Ohio State’s two centers – Clarence McGee and Keith Wesson – fouled out against Iowa on Jan. 26, Jones ended up going against 7-0 Hawkeye Brad Lohaus. And he never let Lohaus get the ball.

“That was pretty fun, but I would rather not guard someone that is 7-0 tall,” Jones said.

### 35 Years Ago — 1989

As drug scandals, point shaving and grade tampering ran rampant throughout college basketball, it was refreshing to see there were still some hardworking overachievers playing. Luckily for the Ohio State Buckeyes, they had a classic overachiever and blue-collar hero in Jerry Francis.

“I always knew I had all the little things needed to be a competitive basketball player,” Francis said. “I also knew that I would have to work harder than everyone else to be really successful.”

Francis, a 6-5, 210-pound senior forward, had started 108 of the 114 games he had played for the Buckeyes, which in itself was quite a measure of success.

“I’m very satisfied with what I’ve accomplished here,” Francis said. “I’ve been a Buckeye fan all my life, and I’ve fulfilled a childhood dream by playing here. I also feel I’ve helped Ohio State basketball get back to where it belongs, and I’m glad I was a part of it.”

### 30 Years Ago — 1994

Ohio State already had a tall order in trying to stop center Rashard Griffith and an undefeated Wisconsin team in Madison on Jan. 8.

Then fate really tied an arm behind the back of the Buckeyes when the team was forced to make the trip without head coach Randy Ayers, who was nursing a broken and dislocated right ankle in the hospital.

The end result was a 69-55 loss to the Badgers, but OSU did not wither from the start as expected. The Buckeyes’ surprising 33-32 halftime lead was partly the result of sound half-court play and partly due to the nervous energy of assistant coach Dave Cecutti, who inherited the head coaching duties for a night.

“Dave was good,” said fellow full-time assistant Mark Anderson. “He got more juiced up as the game started. To be honest, I’ve never seen a guy sweat so much since I’ve been here.”

### 25 Years Ago — 1999

While meeting with reporters in New Orleans, OSU coach John Cooper shared some of his feelings on the Bowl Championship Series as well as a possible playoff format.

“I’m of the opinion we do need to make some changes,” Cooper told reporters. “I was under the impression that the top eight teams would play in the BCS bowl games. Obviously, that’s not the case. ... I’m not in favor of having the champions of all the major conferences being guaranteed a spot. I think Kansas State got a raw deal. No question they should have been playing (in

the BCS).”

But Cooper admitted it’s hard to upset a system that has brought millions of dollars to the conferences and their member schools through the years.

“I don’t want to do anything to disrupt the bowls,” he said. “I would be more in favor of using the bowls (in a playoff). Each league should have a playoff like the Big 12 and the SEC have. Use that as the first round of the playoffs. Then you have eight teams left and play for the championship (in January). I’m not sure that would hurt the bowls we have now.”

### 20 Years Ago — 2004

The seemingly never-ending Maurice Clarett saga took another rather surprising turn in mid-January when the suspended Ohio State tailback indicated that he wanted reinstatement to play for the Buckeyes in 2004.

Although Clarett was not talking to the media, several members of his camp said they believed the tailback wanted to resume his college career despite a pending lawsuit against the National Football League petitioning for inclusion into that year’s player draft.

“I know he wants to play with Ohio State next season,” attorney Percy Squire told The Associated Press on Jan. 14.

Squire further said that Clarett always wanted to return to the Buckeyes but filed the lawsuit as a hedge against the possibility of never being allowed to play collegiately again.

“The development of other options by Maurice has been a reaction to the impression that has been given that his return to Ohio State wasn’t welcome,” Squire said.

### 15 Years Ago — 2009

In hindsight, the signs were probably always there.

With wide receiver Brian Hartline adding his name to the list of juniors leaving Ohio State early to head for the NFL, plenty of fans wondered why a player who saw his production decline sharply this season would not stick around for another year.

When tailback Chris “Beanie” Wells announced that he was leaving, even head coach Jim Tressel admitted that the move was a good one because Wells was bound to be a first-round pick. Both Wells and Hartline were joined in opting for the NFL by cornerback Donald Washington.

But a receiver who had 21 catches for 479 yards and four touchdowns as a junior, including no catches in his final game, opting to jump to the next level? That thought did not seem to sit well with the Buckeye Nation, as Hartline was turning down the opportunity to lead a young receiver corps next season.

Speaking with BSB on team photo day, Hartline’s parents both cited his overwhelming work ethic as his best trait.

“When he was younger he would want to beat me out all the time,” said his father, Dale. “We would go out and play and you’d do a third speed, a half speed and you’d ramp it up. I think he was somewhere around fifth or sixth grade when we were playing football in the yard and I would always have to do the half-speed with he and his brother, and he came at me on a kickoff once and he juke’d me, went around me, took off and I couldn’t catch him.

“I thought, ‘What just happened?’ I went into the house and said, ‘That’s it – full blast with this kid from then on.’”

### 10 Years Ago — 2014

Ohio State announced Jan. 23 that former Arkansas defensive coordinator Chris Ash had been hired to fill the vacancy caused by the departure of co-defensive coordinator and safeties coach Everett Withers.

The announcement came just over a week after the official news that the Buckeyes had also hired former Penn State assistant Larry Johnson as defensive line coach to replace Mike Vrabel, who went to the NFL’s Houston Texans.

“We’ve competed against a Chris Ash defense before, and I have respect for him as a coach,” OSU head coach Urban Meyer said. “I like the fact he has experience in the Big Ten Conference and that he is a great recruiter. He was highly recommended by everyone I spoke to.”

An OSU spokesman confirmed to BSB that Ash would make \$520,000 annually in his new role, while Johnson would earn \$400,000 per year.

“I was attracted to this position because it is Ohio State and I had to wonder if I ever would have this opportunity again,” Ash said. “This is one of the top five college football programs in the country. It has tremendous history and tradition, and it is a great academic institution.

### Five Years Ago — 2019

Though Ryan Day’s first coaching staff as Ohio State’s head coach had seemingly been set since early January, there was no confirmation that additional changes were out of the question. That changed Jan. 23 when Ohio State officially announced Day’s 10-man coaching staff as his first spring leading the Buckeyes approached. The group included five holdovers from Meyer’s staff and five new additions.

“I am really excited with this foundation of coaches who will mentor, coach and prepare in all areas the young men in our program,” Day said. “I am obviously very comfortable with the coaches who have been here and helped us win consecutive Big Ten championships and bowl games, and I am thrilled they want to continue to help this program pursue championships and achievements.”

Returning to the fold was Johnson, who was also promoted to associate head coach, assistant head coach for offense/running backs coach Tony Alford, offensive line coach Greg Studrawa, offensive coordinator/tight ends coach Kevin Wilson and Hartline, who spent 2018 on staff in an interim capacity before being promoted to a permanent spot in December.

The new additions were highlighted by two defensive coaches who arrived in Columbus from rival Michigan – co-defensive coordinator Greg Mattison and linebackers coach Al Washington. Co-defensive coordinator/defensive backs coach Jeff Hafley arrived from the San Francisco 49ers in the NFL while special teams coordinator/assistant secondary coach Matt Barnes signed on after previously coaching at Maryland. Day also hired Mike Yurcich from Oklahoma State to be passing game coordinator and quarterbacks coach.

### One Year Ago — 2023

Hartline would be taking over as offensive coordinator for Ohio State football, the team announced on Jan. 13.

Hartline took over for former offensive coordinator Wilson, who left the program following its loss to Georgia in the College Football Playoff to become the head coach at Tulsa.

“Brian has been successful in every football capacity for which he has been engaged,” Day said. “He has progressed incredibly well from college to NFL receiver, and then from quality control coach to wide receivers coach to passing game coordinator. He figures things out quickly, and he is more than ready to now transition to offensive coordinator.”

## Continued From Page 8

record. Considered one of the greatest offensive linemen in school history, Ward excelled as Ohio State's left tackle, starting 36 consecutive games and earning a consensus first-team All-American honor in 1976 and a unanimous first-team All-American honor in 1977.

Ward's strong career at Ohio State led him to be drafted by the New York Jets with the No. 4 overall pick in the 1978 NFL draft. He had a seven-year NFL career – six with the Jets, one with the New Orleans Saints – and appeared in 100 games.

Ward is one of 22 inductees for the College Football Hall of Fame this year, a list that also includes wide receivers Larry Fitzgerald (Pittsburgh, 2002-2003) and Randy Moss (Marshall, 1996-97), defensive end Julius Peppers (North Carolina, 1999-2001), linebacker Paul Posluszny (Penn State, 2003-2006) and head coach Mark Dantonio (Cincinnati, 2004-2006, Michigan State, 2007-2019), among others.

Ward and the rest of the 2024 College Football Hall of Fame class will be formally inducted during the National Football Foundation's awards dinner held in Las Vegas on Dec. 10.

### Keels A Six-Time Ohio Sportscaster Of The Year

Longtime Ohio State play-by-play broadcaster Paul Keels was named National Sports Media Association Ohio Sportscaster of the Year for the sixth time in his career, NSMA executive

director Dave Goren announced on Jan. 16. He also took home the honor in 2007 – a title he shared that year with longtime Cincinnati Reds broadcaster Marty Brennaman – as well as in 2010, 2011, 2012 and 2021.

A Cincinnati native and Xavier graduate, Keels has been "The Voice of the Buckeyes" for the football and men's basketball teams on 97.1 The Fan and the Ohio State Radio Network since 1998. He has called two national championship wins in football in 2002 and 2014 and two Final Four runs in basketball in 1999 and 2012. His run as lead play-by-play man also allowed him to be inducted into the Ohio Broadcasters Hall of Fame in 2007.

Keels also earned the opportunity this season to lend his voice to the National Football League. On Nov. 5, 2023, the Buckeye broadcaster served as the radio play-by-play announcer for the Cleveland Browns' 27-0 win over the Arizona Cardinals, filling in for the Voice of the Browns, Jim Donovan, who took a leave of absence to concentrate on his battle with leukemia.

Keels pulled double duty that weekend, also calling Ohio State's 35-16 win over Rutgers on Nov. 4 before making the quick trip west to Cleveland.

### Muzerall Sets Program All-Time Win Record

Ohio State women's ice hockey head coach Nadine Muzerall added another impressive accolade to her résumé with the Buckeyes' 3-0

shutout victory over Minnesota on Jan. 19, becoming the winningest head coach in program history with 179 wins.

Muzerall's win total eclipsed the previous record of 178 held by Jackie Barto, who coached the Buckeyes for their first 12 seasons from 1999-2011.

"When you're the winningest coach at The Ohio State – in whatever sport that is – there's a lot of pride in that," Muzerall said after her record-breaking win. "Hopefully, I stay here for a while and the wins keep on coming."

Since taking over as Ohio State's head coach in 2016, Muzerall has transformed the program into a perennial powerhouse, accumulating a 180-71-19 overall record and now six seasons with at least 20 wins, a successful stretch that also includes the team's first ever national championship in 2021-22. Muzerall's coaching efforts have also led her to personal success. She has taken home three WHCA Coach of the Year awards in her first six seasons.

Muzerall has also led the Buckeyes to success this season, where they held a 20-2-0 record and No. 1 overall ranking in the nation as of Jan. 22.

### OSU Spirit Team Claims National Title

The Ohio State spirit team earned some serious hardware in Orlando, Fla., on Jan. 12, securing their first national championship since 1993 at the 2024 UDA College Nationals.

The team, which was composed of cheer,

dance and Brutus, won the D1A national championship on the first day of the competition with a 98.45-point total, ahead of second-place Mississippi, which earned 94.7333 points. Oklahoma (94.6333), UMass (92.6833) and Louisiana-Lafayette (91.5167) rounded out the top five.

The spirit team was not the only Ohio State program that hoisted a trophy in Florida that week. On Jan. 14, the Buckeyes' dance team secured a national title in D1A jazz. The team finished with a score of 98.9206 in the final round of the competition, besting runner-up Minnesota (98.4286).

Ohio State did lose to Minnesota in the pom finals, though, by a score of 98.4762-97.7143. Ohio State also had strong finishes in a number of other competitions held that weekend, finishing second in the coed partner stunt (89.6) and seventh in the D1A mascot competition (84.92).

### Next BSB Print Issue Mails On Feb. 13

The late date of this year's traditional football National Signing Day has caused BSB to have to tinker with its winter/spring biweekly schedule to make sure our 24 print issues are allotted properly. The next issue, the popular Recruiting Wrap-Up, will be mailed on Feb. 13, three weeks from the mailing of this issue.

Please note that the BSB print schedule can always be found in the credit box on page 3 of each issue. If you have any questions, feel free to call us at (614) 486-2202.

## BUCKEYE SCOREBOARD

### 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 (13-5, 3-4)

**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, L 71-60; **15** at Michigan, L 73-65; **20** PENN STATE, W 79-67; **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 (15-3, 6-1)

**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, W 90-55; **14** MICHIGAN STATE, W 70-65; **17** at Maryland, W 84-76; **21** IOWA, W 100-92 (OT); **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., M 3-2, W 1-4; **21** Philadelphia Invitational at Philadelphia, M 4-1, W 2-3.

**Feb. 3-4** Northwestern Duals at Evanston, Ill.; **24-25** Central Collegiate Fencing Conference Championships.

### MEN'S ICE HOCKEY (9-11-4, 1-11-2)

**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** NOTRE DAME, W 3-2; **13** NOTRE DAME, L 5-2; **19** Minnesota, L 5-2; **20** Minnesota, L 6-3; **26-27** Penn State.

**Feb. 2-3** MICHIGAN; **16-17** WISCONSIN; **23-24** Michigan State.

**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 (20-2-0, 17-1-0)

**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, W 7-0, W 6-1; **19-20** MINNESOTA DULUTH, W 3-0, W 1-0; **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 (4-0)

**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, W 163-137; **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 (5-0)

**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, W 184-116; **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.



# Winning Titles, Beating U-M Motivate Returns

Continued From Page 1

Now, more than 20 years later, Ohio State is hoping to see a similar impact from not one but a cavalry of returning Buckeyes who have announced their decision to come back for another season in Columbus. In addition to safety Lathan Ransom and linebacker Cody Simon, both of whom are returning for their fifth seasons, the extensive list of returning juniors includes cornerbacks Denzel Burke and Jordan Hancock; defensive linemen Ty Hamilton, Jack Sawyer, J.T. Tuimoloau and Tyleik Williams; offensive lineman Donovan Jackson; running back TreVeyon Henderson; and wide receiver Emeka Egbuka.

While it was a decision that Doss said took until the last minute to come to a conclusion, for the returning Buckeyes of today, it sounds like it had been in the works for a while.

Each of the returning players announced their decisions during a two-week span at the beginning of January – in addition to Simon, who said on Dec. 12 he would be returning – but Sawyer may have tipped his hand when Ohio State was down in Texas for the Cotton Bowl.

“When you’ve got a bunch of guys that could have gone to the NFL and they all come back and they’ve got 50-some seniors on their roster and everybody’s experienced and all their top players are coming back, I think it helps the team win,” he said on Dec. 26. “It’s definitely something we’ve talked about.”

The most surprising of the returns may have been Tuimoloau, viewed as one of just a few Buckeyes – along with wide receiver Marvin Harrison Jr. and Egbuka – who had a chance of going in the first round of the 2024 NFL draft. It was another consistent season for Tuimoloau. He finished with five sacks and seven tackles for loss after collecting 3½ sacks and 10½ tackles for loss in 2022, but he felt there was more on the table in his senior season.

“A sense of unfinished business, and an unbreakable bond with my Buckeye brothers, I am standing firm in my decision to return,” Tuimoloau wrote on social media.

The idea of unfinished business was a popular one when these Buckeyes explained why they were returning for another season. Hamilton and Ransom both said they had unfinished business, while Williams and Jackson implied they had things left to do in Columbus. Burke, however, was the most forward in his announcement.

“I want to graduate and keep developing into an elite corner,” he wrote. “I’m chasing greatness and my own legacy as a corner. I want to spend this last year with my brothers and win a championship.”

That championship – as well as beating Michigan – is the basis for several of these decisions. Yes, most will be able to boost their draft stock in returning for another season, but the idea of leaving Ohio State without winning a Big Ten championship – something the Buckeyes have not even competed for since 2020, let alone won – or defeating the Wolverines is something that does not sit well with most players.

“I want to be a top-10 pick, and not only



SONNY BROCKWAY

**DOMINANT DEFENSE – Ohio State is set to return nearly all of its defensive starters next season, including safety – and potentially future linebacker – Sonny Styles (6) and defensive end Jack Sawyer (33).**

that, but to have something to show for (my college career) down the road,” Burke said on Dec. 12. “To be able to show my kids and my family when I was at Ohio State, we won something.”

Complicating matters was how this past season ended. Another loss to Michigan was painful enough, but the true season-ending loss – an embarrassing 14-3 defeat to Missouri in the Cotton Bowl, albeit with some things out of the Buckeyes’ control at quarterback – left a bad enough taste that it had players reconsidering how they wanted their careers to end.

“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,” Sawyer said after the game. “We all love it here. We love Coach (Ryan) Day. We love the staff. And sometimes unfortunate things happen and you don’t get the outcome you want, and I think it’s going to play a big factor in our decisions.”

Now that those decisions have been made, Ohio State can begin looking forward to spring practice and the upcoming season, and expectations are already high.

“We’ll be the No. 1 defense coming into next year,” Burke said before the Cotton Bowl. “There’s a lot of guys that have played a lot of ball. Honestly, it would look scary.”

That potential dream for Ohio State has now become a realized nightmare for opposing teams, especially on the defensive side of the ball. Nine out of 11 positions will be filled by returning starters, including Burke, Hancock and Davison Igbinosun at cornerback; Ransom and Sonny Styles at safety; Sawyer, Tuimoloau and Williams on the line; and Simon at linebacker.

Ohio State also returns 67.2 percent of tackle production, 82.6 percent of the team’s tackles for loss and 91.1 percent of the team’s sacks in what should be one of the most veteran defenses in the country, which could also have young players such as safety Malik Hartford and linebacker C.J.

Hicks step up and push for roles next season.

More questions exist on offense, with the Buckeyes welcoming in quarterback Will Howard, looking at potential retooling on the offensive line and the possibility of a split backfield with Henderson and former Ole Miss running back Quinshon Judkins.

But just as the defense did for much of this past season, it should be in a position to carry the team and be a strength under defensive coordinator Jim Knowles, who appears to have put together a championship-caliber unit in entering his third season with the Buckeyes. And even with all that talent coming back, the returning players still see room to grow.

“You saw what happens when you build off the first year into the second year (in a defense), how big of a jump you can take,” Sawyer said. “I still think, personally, we have another big jump to take next year if we all decide to come back.”

## Harrison Shocks Few With Decision To Leave

One player who will not be joining the large group of returning players is Harrison, who announced on Jan. 11 that he will forgo his final year of eligibility to declare for the NFL draft.

“I want to give thanks to everyone at The Ohio State University within and outside of the football program,” Harrison said in a statement. “With that said, I have decided to declare for the NFL draft. Truly a dream come true.”

Harrison departs as a program great, collecting 155 receptions for 2,613 yards and 31 touchdowns in three seasons. His receptions and yards rank sixth in program history, while his touchdowns place him third all-time, and he holds the program record with 15 100-yard receiving games and the single-season record with eight of those instances this past season.

In addition to finishing fourth in Heisman

Trophy voting this past season, he was also named the winner of the Biletnikoff Award, given to the best wide receiver in college football, and was named the Big Ten’s Richter-Howard Wide Receiver of the Year and Graham-George Offensive Player of the Year, along with countless other accolades.

But for all the accomplishments and statistics that have put Harrison firmly in the discussion for the top receiver in the upcoming draft class, as well as a potential top-three selection, it is what he did not accomplish that weighed most heavily ahead of his decision. In his three seasons, Ohio State suffered three excruciating defeats to Michigan, losses that also knocked the Buckeyes out of contention for the Big Ten Championship Game, both goals that Harrison had hoped to achieve during his career.

“Coming into this year, I wanted to beat The Team Up North and win a Big Ten championship, and obviously I did not do that this year,” he said on Dec. 7. “I think there’s a great motive to come back if that’s what I decide to do. That’s something I definitely want to do in my Ohio State career and not having done that yet definitely opens the door for me to come back, but I’m undecided. Really, I’m just taking it day by day at this time.”

It was never for a lack of trying, at least on Harrison’s part. In his two games against Michigan during his sophomore and junior seasons, he combined for 12 receptions for 238 yards and two touchdowns. But he will leave without another chance, even if a significant chunk of his recruiting class is returning to right those wrongs on Nov. 30 in Columbus.

“We all go in there and debate in the locker room who has the best class, who’s the best team, and probably the No. 1 question you have to ask is, ‘Did you beat The Team Up North?’ I think it always starts there,” Harrison said. “That’s a deciding factor I would say on where your class ranks, as far as legacy-wise. I think what definitely matters most is that game.”

Even if it never made much sense for Harrison to return, considering the money on the table as a projected early pick in the draft, he seemed sincere in that his hope of defeating Michigan and winning a Big Ten championship had him seriously considering a return.

But after three highlight-filled seasons at Ohio State, he will instead get his first chance to take the field at Indianapolis’ Lucas Oil Stadium – where the Big Ten Championship Game is played – when he suits up for the NFL Combine in late February, and it could end up being a bittersweet moment for the star wideout.

“I’m definitely blessed to be getting all the recognition that I am for these different awards and everything like that, but I think I would trade it all for a win against The Team Up North, get to Indy and play in the Big Ten Championship (Game),” he said on Dec. 7. “It’s been tough dealing with it, but we stick together as a team, as a group. We support each other, lift our heads up, and you’ve just got to move on with life, figure out how we can get better for next year and what we can do to get that win.”

# Bjork Has Reputation As Diligent Fundraiser

Continued From Page 1

Bjork, 51, was introduced at the Covelli Center alongside over a dozen family members – including his wife, Sonya, and two sons – by Smith and new university president Walter “Ted” Carter Jr., who began his tenure on Jan. 1.

“I want to offer congratulations to President Carter and everyone that participated in the search,” Smith said. “In Ross, the president has found an experienced and seasoned leader. Ross’ experience in understanding the collegiate landscape will be invaluable to Buckeye Nation as we navigate the changes that are in place and those that are in front of us.

“We’re positioned for increased success, both now and well into the future. I’ve said this job has been the professional opportunity of a lifetime, and it has been. I feel 100 percent at peace because I know what Ross brings to this family. He’s an outstanding leader, and I’m just so blessed and honored to have the opportunity to work with him over the next five months.”

In looking to replace Smith, Carter – who was not involved with the entire hiring process but was on the scene in time to conduct final interviews – said he was looking for three main characteristics in an athletic director.

“The first I was looking for was somebody that can come in and be a leader in a complex space. This is a university that has 36 programs, 1,000 student-athletes, a revenue stream of over \$250 million,” he said. “I need someone that could come in and understand this ever-changing landscape of collegiate athletics: name, image, and likeness, potential revenue sharing, the changing landscape of conferences, expansion, expansion of the College Football Playoff, and even NCAA structure and governance.

“Finally, as the Big Ten is going to 18 universities – that’s 18 chancellors, presidents and athletic directors – I needed somebody that could come in and carry the true weight

of The Ohio State University, and that person I found: Ross Bjork.”

Bjork’s hiring was a departure from the expectation that Ohio State would hire someone from Smith’s administrative tree, including several sitting Division I athletic directors such as Washington State’s Pat Chun, a reported finalist. But Carter said that Bjork was the clear leader among those considered for the position.

“He struck me as somebody that has the values here at Ohio State – integrity, passionate, and care for our students,” Carter said. “I was looking for those three criteria, and I measured those against all of the candidates, and he was by far the leader. We had good candidates, and we had a really wide range of candidates, as you might imagine, interested in this job. But Ross was a clear winner in that discussion.”

In his first message as incoming athletic director, Bjork thanked Carter for his support – and joked that he hoped not to mess up Carter’s first hire as university president – and expressed his excitement at joining Ohio State.

“You have my pledge that I will work hard every single day for the Buckeyes, especially our student-athletes,” he said, “to make sure that we provide the best athletic and academic experience possible while adhering to the Buckeye core values and fulfilling the mission of this great university.”

Bjork said his main keys to be successful as an athletic director include driving the department’s culture, developing coaches and staff, student-athlete well-being and his involvement in external relations and resource acquisition.

“The vision for Ohio State athletics, under our leadership – maintain but enhance the culture in the department,” he said. “Innovate and grow upon what Gene has established. Showcase and enhance the student-athlete experience. Maintain but grow the academic profile, if that’s even possible. Essentially, don’t mess that piece of it. Cul-

tivate meaningful relationships across all of Ohio State, Columbus, the state, nationally as well.

“We need to lead in the modern era. Be not afraid to embrace high expectations. Win at the highest level. I get it. I know what we say – The School Up North. I totally will get it, and every single day, we will be ready and prepared.”

Bjork has been at big universities in the past, but he views Ohio State as the best of the best when it comes to college athletics and an opportunity that he could not pass up.

“In college athletics, there’s championship brands. There’s sort of fighter brands that are trying to fight their way. This is a championship brand, period,” he said. “You take the person in Gene Smith and the legacy that he has built. You take the championship pedigree and the facts that championships have been won here. You take the business side of the enterprise. It’s viewed as No. 1, No. 2, however you want to rank it. It’s up there as the top athletic department.

“Then, I know what the university stands for. (My) family has been wearing Buckeye shirts around family reunions, so I know that if you’re from this state, it doesn’t leave you,” said Bjork, whose mother is from Williamstown, Ohio. “You understand that, the magnitude of it, and you have to embrace that, and that’s what we’ll do.”

While Ohio State is an entirely different beast compared to Bjork’s past stops, this is not his first rodeo at a significant job in a major conference. His past athletic director roles at Ole Miss and Texas A&M have provided their shares of ups and downs for Bjork.

Perhaps the key benefit from Bjork’s arrival at Ohio State is his ability to raise money for wherever he has worked. He raised Ole Miss’ revenue to over \$100 million annually during his time with the Rebels and led a fundraising campaign at Texas A&M – \$120 million for new facilities and facility improvement – that was the second largest in school history.

“Managing the budget, the future of fundraising and how we’re going to manage a program this vast and this big is going to take some imagination and take somebody with the ability to show people what right looks like,” Carter said, “and Ross is the man to deal with it.”

Texas A&M’s athletic department also had over \$193 million in revenue in 2023-24, according to USA Today, which was seventh highest in the country. But at the top of the list was Ohio State, with over \$250 million in revenue, establishing a tall task for Bjork to continue creating revenue at that level.

“Revenue generation, revenue acquisition, we have to embrace all of it,” he said. “(Name, image and likeness) to buying a T-shirt and everything in between is something that we will embrace heavily, and we will get after it.”

Bjork’s previous experience with NIL is another significant piece of his hiring. Texas A&M has been at the forefront of NIL since it was introduced in 2021, with the Aggies – behind reportedly lucrative NIL deals – signing the nation’s top-ranked re-

cruiting class in 2022 that featured eight five-star prospects, though many have since transferred from the university. Ohio State’s NIL efforts have begun to catch up over the past year following the consolidation of several collectives and a clearer delineation between which collectives served which sports, and Bjork will look to further raise the Buckeyes’ NIL profile once he takes over this summer.

“What I would say in the NIL space is today’s leaders, today’s coaches, we have to get the culture right first. That’s going to still matter,” he said. “Team culture, team chemistry, and then there has to be a structure around NIL. The players know who’s the most valuable player. They know who’s going to make the most money because of who they are. If there’s structure within your organization, if there’s constant communication about value, if the coach is building culture and there’s a lot of communication, people shouldn’t have to hide around their locker room and say, ‘Hey, what’s that person getting and what’s that person getting?’

“The best players are going to thrive. Other players should be able to be accommodated, as well. If there’s communication, if there’s a plan, those are all the aspects that I believe in. I can’t wait to see how it works here and see what the dynamics are.”

Along the lines of NIL and paying players, Bjork indicated his support for an eventual revenue-sharing model – even if he did not call it as such – that would establish a relationship between a student-athlete and their university in regard to financial agreements.

“We need to chart a new course for the financial arrangement, the financial agreement between the athlete and the institution,” he said. “We can call that whatever we want, but that’s where we’re going. We need to re-create that model, period.”

“Eventually what I think you’re going to see is, you’re going to see a hub within the athletic department where everything just funnels into one hub, and that may be some of the revenue that comes into that hub and it may go out,” he later said. “If we can build the infrastructure the right way to model this out for the future, that’s what I’ll look at. That’s what I’ll study when I get here and learn more about.”

Those are big changes that could be on the horizon, but Carter believes Bjork fits the bill in terms of handling those upcoming issues.

But for all the positives with Bjork and his fundraising abilities, he has taken his share of hits during his past stops as athletic director at Ole Miss and Texas A&M.

The most publicized was an ill-fated extension he gave to then-Aggies head coach Jimbo Fisher in 2021. It was a 10-year, fully-guaranteed, \$95 million deal that, following Fisher’s firing in November after a 19-15 record in the past three seasons, will have Texas A&M paying over \$76 million to a coach no longer employed by the university.

“As you might imagine, I pressed that question pretty hard,” Carter said. “I’ll just say, right up front, Ross has owned it, as has the institution. Remember, these things don’t just happen in a vacuum, even though he is the athletic director. He wasn’t the

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SONNY BROCKWAY

**NEW DAY — Ohio State's new leadership was on full display at the Covel Center on Jan. 17, when new university president Walter "Ted" Carter Jr. (right) introduced incoming athletic director Ross Bjork (left).**

original hiring authority. Yes, he did get an extension, and that happens a lot.

"I experienced that myself in Nebraska, so I understand that. I've been around the block a long time. I've had my own lifelong experiences, and I'm going to use a nautical reference here as a lifelong sailor: A calm sea never produced a good sailor. Those that have been in the arena, those that have had to make those tough decisions, those who have been in it, they learned from that. Those are life lessons, and he'll bring that here. I don't expect we're going to get into any kind of decisions like that here at Ohio State."

Bjork also took some heat during this past coaching cycle, as the Aggies publicly missed on Kentucky head coach Mark Stoops to fill the same role at Texas A&M. While the Aggies eventually settled on Duke's Mike Elko, it was another black eye for the athletic department.

But perhaps the most damaging occurrence during Bjork's time as an athletic director was during his time at Ole Miss, when the football program under coach Hugh Freeze — who was hired before Bjork arrived — was charged by the NCAA with 21 recruiting violations for providing impermissible benefits to players that led to a bowl ban and 33 vacated wins.

Bjork was criticized for how the university handled the NCAA investigation. It was later hit with a defamation lawsuit by Houston Nutt — who had preceded Freeze as head coach — claiming that Ole Miss had "conspired to smear (Nutt)" with false claims about the violations. After phone records were uncovered during Nutt's lawsuit revealing that Freeze's school-issued cell phone had dialed an escort service, Freeze resigned on July 20, 2017.

"We went on facts," Bjork said. "There were a lot of outside forces that infiltrated, but as far as the head coach we knew exactly what was happening from a compliance standpoint. Then he had a personal failure."

Following Freeze's firing, Bjork later promoted then-offensive coordinator Matt Luke to the full-time position, though he was fired following the 2019 season by Bjork's successor at athletic director, Keith Carter, after just a 15-21 record in three seasons.

While Bjork did not go into detail about miscues at his previous stops, he did take responsibility for what happened under his watch.

"As we went through whatever it was at Ole Miss, at Texas A&M, you own those decisions," Bjork said. "If they happened on your watch, maybe you were responsible, or maybe you weren't. But at the end of the day, it's the Harry Truman quote, 'The buck stops here.' I'm the athletic director. If anybody wants to blame anybody, blame me."

Bjork will not officially take over as athletic director until July 1, but the next few months will be spent getting him up to speed before Smith's retirement. Beginning on March 1, Bjork will start as a senior advisor to Smith in a role that will pay him \$175,000 per month.

"You'll probably see me a little more around after March 1, when I can start coming to events," Bjork said. "Again, it goes back to really what I said earlier. I just want to learn the people. I think that's the most important thing, get to know the people."

"Luckily, I don't have to make the key decisions. The day-to-day decisions, I can really, really soak myself in and learn all about this place."

Bjork will work closely with Carter and Smith during those few months before he takes over as athletic director, and Smith is looking forward to the coming months of working with Carter and Bjork to facilitate a smooth transition from one athletic director to the next.

"It will be a joy to work with Ross over my last five months to ensure a smooth and seamless transition," Smith said. "He's a fast learner and will quickly learn what it means to be a Buckeye."

## Bjork Offers Thoughts On Day, Holtmann

Bjork will not be officially on the job until later this summer, but he did offer his early thoughts and analysis on the job that football coach Ryan Day and men's basketball coach Chris Holtmann — both contracted through 2028 — have done with their respective jobs.

Beginning with Day, Bjork did not mince words when discussing his excitement around Day and the football program.

"This guy right here, Coach Day," Bjork said pointing to Day in the audience. "He's going to get it done and it's going to be a lot of fun when we win those championships."

In five seasons at Ohio State, Day has collected a 56-8 record and two conference championships, though he has been under fire after three consecutive losses to Michigan and losses in the Buckeyes' past two bowl games, including a disappointing 14-3 defeat against Missouri in the most recent Cotton Bowl. But Bjork is confident that Ohio State will get to where it needs to go with Day at the helm.

"(He has a) brilliant mind in the game of football," Bjork said. "A high-level leader. He knows what championship football looks like, how to put all of those pieces together. We get it. The Game matters. He and I talked about that, and the best thing that I can do is lock arms with him."

Bjork will surely communicate with Day over the coming months as he prepares to step into his new role with the Buckeyes, and once he is in position, he looks forward to collaborating with Day to help in whatever way he can.

"He's the coach, he's the strategist, he has to build the roster," Bjork said. "It's my job to say, 'What are the infrastructure pieces, what are the culture pieces that I can help you with?' and then let him go to work. By all accounts, those things are all coming together. I know he and Gene have been locking arms on key changes, and I'm here to help in whatever I can do in that realm while they make those decisions."

Day briefly echoed positive thoughts about Bjork when meeting with the media after Bjork's introduction.

"I'm just really excited to be moving forward and excited about the future," Day said. "I've had just short conversations (with Bjork) but I'm very impressed."

As for Holtmann, his tenure has hit troubled waters of late. The Buckeyes are off to a 13-5 start this season with a 3-4 record in conference play and are hoping to avoid consecutive seasons without an NCAA Tournament appearance since 2015-16. Ohio State has also not won a true road game since Jan. 1, 2023, at Northwestern, with 12 consecutive losses away from Value City Arena, the latest a 73-65 loss at Michigan on Jan. 15.

"He seems like a great guy," Bjork said of Holtmann. "He seems like he's doing a great job. Obviously, I don't like losing that game (at Michigan). We've talked about, how does he build chemistry and culture on the stretch run? You have 2½ months left in the regular season. I know he's looking to finish strong."

Whether assessing Day and Holtmann or any one of the Buckeyes' varsity coaches, Bjork said the standard is clear when you are a coach at Ohio State.

"You want to win championships," Bjork

said. "This is not for the faint of heart. Be not afraid, so we will not be afraid of embracing that. The coaches understand the magnitude of all of that. They have to have the wherewithal, they have to have the chops to deal in that environment, to understand the dynamics. That's Ohio State and that should be the standard."

Bjork was limited in his time with the media, so football and men's basketball received most of the attention, though he did reinforce his belief in all of Ohio State's 36 varsity sports and stated that there are no expectations of cutting sports.

"We owe that to the people. We owe that to our athletes. We owe that to our fans, to say we want to compete at the highest level at everything. It may look different. It may be reallocated differently. It may be structured differently. But we have unbelievable facilities. Those aren't going to sit empty. We have unbelievable infrastructure that's been built that allows us to have this foundation where we can be a broad-based program, for sure."

Carter, a former student-athlete at Navy, also issued his support for the variety of athletic programs at Ohio State.

"I do not want to cut sports at all," he said. "I've seen programs like Stanford and William & Mary go through that and then regret it and have to cycle back. I'd like to not do that. I'm going to stand here and tell you that we have 36 Division I sports here. I refer to Gene in where we are today and Ross in where we're going, but my intention is to keep 36 Division I sports."

## A Look Inside Bjork's Contract With OSU

Assuming Bjork is approved when Ohio State's Board of Trustees convenes in February, he will begin on July 1 a five-year deal that runs through June 20, 2029, and will pay him just over \$2 million annually, along with several performance- and academic-based incentives.

He will receive an annual base salary of \$1.65 million in addition to \$350,000 for annual media, promotions and public relations, \$50,000 for fringe benefits and \$10,000 for travel. Bjork will also receive a lump sum payment totaling \$1.09 million as a result of \$750,000 owed to Texas A&M for his departure before his contract was set to expire in 2026.

Bjork's compensation — which will make him among the highest-paid athletic directors in the country — is in line with Smith, who had received a five-year extension in 2021 that paid him just over \$2 million annually.

Bjork's contract is also laden with incentives, including for top-10 rankings in the Director's Cup and Capital One Cup; winning conference or national championships in football, men's basketball and women's basketball; and national championships in any other sports. There are also incentives for cumulative grade-point averages, scholar-athlete rates and student-athlete placement percentage, ranging anywhere from \$10,000 to \$100,000.

Also in Bjork's contract is a retention award totaling \$500,000 if he remains at Ohio State through June 30, 2027, and a \$750,000 retention award if he completes the length of his initial five-year contract.

# Another Loss To Michigan Tops 2023 Stories

By **GREG WILSON**

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

The past calendar year of 2023 provided all kinds of storylines for Ohio State, both for the football team and in other sports. Football losing to its archrival for the third straight year and the transfer portal were among the biggest stories, but women's basketball, wrestling and administrative changes at Ohio State also provided headlines through the year.

The following are the top 10 Ohio State sports stories of 2023, as voted on by the Buckeye Sports Bulletin staff.

## 1. Ohio State Loses To U-M For Third Straight Year

Ohio State dropped its third straight rivalry game to Michigan in 2023, also marking the third straight time a loss to the Wolverines takes the No. 1 spot on the top stories of the year.

As usual, The Game meant plenty in terms of the postseason. The winner would get to play in the Big Ten Championship Game in Indianapolis and would likely be slotted into a College Football Playoff spot. Not only that, but Michigan was in the middle of an investigation for stealing signs – more on that later – and Ohio State had the chance to avenge those defeats that suddenly had an asterisk attached to them.

“There are guys with scars,” head coach Ryan Day said before the game. “I’m one of them. That drives you every day to work harder and to make sure you do everything you possibly can to win this game.”

In the previous two years, the Buckeyes were beaten by explosive plays, but it turned out to be exactly the opposite when it came down to the final quarter this past season. The defense did well when it came to stopping big plays, but needing a stop facing a 27-24 deficit, it allowed a 7:00 drive by Michigan which ended in a field goal to put it up 30-24.

The Buckeyes had just 60 seconds left to traverse 81 yards and score a touchdown. After completions of 22 and 21 yards to Marvin Harrison Jr. and Julian Fleming by Kyle McCord that put Ohio State at Michigan's 37-yard line, a win still seemed possible until a pass rusher got past Donovan Jackson, who tripped on the play, and pressured McCord, who threw up a prayer that was intercepted by Rod Moore to secure the win for the Wolverines.

Day said losing the turnover battle was an important factor in why they found they were hanging their heads after the game, along with the lack of success in the running game.

“There was some traction for sure,” Day said. “There was one drive in particular where I felt like we were really rocking off the ball and we were doing a good job. I don’t know ultimately what the final numbers were, but when you go into this game you have to win rushing yards, and that didn’t happen. They had more than we did, and that’s a big part of controlling the game. It certainly has to do with the last couple of drives. Then the turnover battle – I’d like to say it’s more than that, but I’m not sure it is.”

So far this offseason, several players who

have yet to earn a pair of gold pants have announced they are returning for another year, citing the fact that they didn’t beat Michigan as one of the biggest motivators to return to Columbus.

## 2. Starting QB McCord Transfers To Syracuse

Just over a week after the loss to Michigan, McCord announced on Dec. 4 that he would enter the transfer portal, an unprecedented move for an Ohio State quarterback who started every game of a season and – to the outside world at least – seemed to have a good chance at securing that job for his senior season as well.

Potentially foreshadowing McCord's departure, just one day before the QB's announcement, Day was noncommittal as to who would be the starter under center for Ohio State in 2024, and even in the Cotton Bowl just a few weeks later.

“That’s kind of a long way away right now,” Day said Dec. 3. “We’re going to get back to work here. We had a practice last week, we’ll have a practice coming up this weekend, and the guys will get out there and compete and grind and we’ll take it from there. I can’t sit here and tell you I know for sure about any of those things right now.”

Day and McCord have remained mum on the departure other than McCord referring to it as a “business decision,” though it seems clear now that Day was looking for an upgrade at quarterback entering next season, whether that was on the roster or through the transfer portal.

“When you come up short, the bottom line is you have to look at everything because you didn’t get it done,” Day said.

McCord had the tough task of following C.J. Stroud as the starter – himself preceded by Justin Fields and Dwayne Haskins – so the quarterback position had high expectations from fans, media and coaches. McCord had a solid year but didn’t meet those lofty expectations, finishing 229 of 348 passing (65.8 completion percentage) with 3,170 yards, 24 touchdowns and six interceptions, two of those in the final regular-season game against Michigan.

McCord has since announced his transfer to Syracuse and new head coach Fran Brown, of whom McCord said the coaching staff was part of his decision.

“I think the experience on the coaching staff is extremely important,” McCord said. “It was a big factor in my decision. Just being at a place where I can be surrounded with good players. They’ve done some good things on the portal trail, bringing in some guys from Georgia and other places. All of that, when you combine it, makes it an appealing destination.”

The Buckeyes have already brought in quarterback Will Howard from Kansas State, who has one more year of eligibility, and the starting job seems his to lose entering the spring, even with Devin Brown and Lincoln Kienholz both returning and Air No-land and Julian Sayin joining the room.

## 3. Michigan Caught Up In Sign-Stealing Scandal

Michigan was the topic of many conversations throughout the season, and it start-



SONNY BROCKWAY

**OFF TO THE ORANGE** – One of the most shocking stories from this past year was the sudden transfer of Ohio State starting quarterback Kyle McCord, who announced his transfer to Syracuse on Dec. 17.

ed early on when Jim Harbaugh served a self-imposed three-game suspension for recruiting violations committed during a COVID-19 dead period. While that investigation was still ongoing, it was revealed that the NCAA was also looking into Michigan for illegally stealing signs.

It was first reported on Oct. 19 that the Big Ten had been told by the NCAA that it was investigating the matter, and from there more and more news about it leaked out slowly throughout the remainder of the year, all while the Wolverines were on their way to an undefeated national championship-winning season.

In short, it was revealed that former staffer Connor Stalions masterminded a sign-stealing scheme in which he purchased tickets to over 30 games over the last three seasons – including 12 at Ohio Stadium – featuring future Michigan opponents, with seats located across from that team’s sideline. While Stalions was never reported as being in the stands, he would have friends and family go to those games and record the opposing sideline. Stalions resigned from his position on Nov. 3, and Harbaugh denied any knowledge.

As for how Stalions utilized the information, videos of him on Michigan’s sideline often showed him close to play callers and talking to them throughout the game. One example was against Ohio State in 2022 when Stroud wanted to change a play call while Stalions is seen staring at the Buckeyes’ sideline. When he sees the call, he speaks to Michigan’s defensive coordinator and the sideline gives a new signal before the play ends up as an incomplete pass.

There was one time, however, when Stalions was possibly on site for an opponent’s game, as images emerged on social media of someone who looked like Stalions on the Central Michigan sideline in the Chippewas’ game against Michigan State on Sept. 1. Central Michigan said it would investigate, and head coach Jim McElwain said he had no knowledge of the situation but confirmed he didn’t know who the person was on the sidelines.

While the NCAA investigation is still ongoing, the situation this season culminated in another three-game suspension for Harbaugh for violating the Big Ten’s sportsmanship policy. He missed games against Penn State, Maryland and Ohio State, with offensive coordinator and interim head coach Sherrone Moore leading the Wolverines to a win in each contest.

After the Wolverines won the national championship, Harbaugh – who is seeking immunity from being fired due to future NCAA investigation findings into the program if he were to take an extension with Michigan – proclaimed innocence.

“Off-the-field issues, we’re innocent,” he said postgame. “We stood strong and tall because we knew we were innocent. I’d just like to point that out.”

## 4. AD Smith Announces Retirement After 20 Years

Ohio State athletic director Gene Smith announced on Aug. 9 that he will retire at the end of the 2023-24 academic year, bringing his 20-year career with the Buckeyes to an end.

“I have always believed that a leader



SONNY BROCKWAY

**MARVELOUS MARV – Ohio State wide receiver Marvin Harrison Jr. had a spectacular junior season with the Buckeyes, winning the Biletnikoff Award and finishing fourth in Heisman Trophy voting.**

seeks to be the right person at the right time in the life of the institution,” Smith said. “I believe that July 2024 is the right time to welcome new leadership to build upon what we have achieved and continue to build upon the great tradition of excellence in athletics and business advancement at Ohio State.”

He is the longest-serving athletic director in Ohio State’s history but wanted to step aside to spend more time with his family.

“Sheila and I look forward to the next chapter when we plan to spend more consistent quality time with our children, grandchildren and extended family,” he said.

Under Smith, the Buckeyes have won 32 team and 117 individual national titles – including the football team’s most recent national championship in 2014 – and have also brought home 115 team and 369 individual Big Ten championships in his time at Ohio State.

The Buckeyes have also consistently finished in the top five of the Directors’ Cup rankings and had nine first-place finishes among Big Ten schools under Smith.

Smith said the hardest thing he had to deal with was in 2011 when five football players were suspended for selling memorabilia in exchange for tattoos. Head coach Jim Tressel resigned as a result, and Luke Fickell took over as interim head coach for a year with a 6-7 record.

“That was painful,” Smith said. “The student-athletes who were impacted didn’t deserve the penalties that they had to deal with. That was hard. People were affected negatively, and that was a hard time.”

He also had to deal with the situation in 2018 when wide receivers coach Zach Smith was fired after allegations of domestic abuse emerged, and Gene Smith and then-head coach Urban Meyer were both suspended for mishandling the incident.

Smith played football at Notre Dame before becoming an athletic director at Eastern Michigan from 1986-93, Iowa State from 1993-00 and Arizona State from 2000-05 before heading back to Ohio, where he is originally from. Smith’s future replacement

– Texas A&M athletic director Ross Bjork – was introduced on Jan. 17 and will begin his tenure on July 1.

**5. Harrison Dominates In Junior Season At OSU**

Harrison first burst onto the scene in 2022 with 77 catches for 1,263 yards and 14 touchdowns, and he was named a finalist for the Biletnikoff Award – given to the nation’s best receiver – and a unanimous All-American in his sophomore season.

With Stroud off to the NFL last off-season, it was unclear how Harrison would fare with a new starting quarterback. But he showed that it doesn’t matter much who is throwing the ball to him, catching 67 passes for 1,211 yards for 14 touchdowns in one fewer game.

His best outing came against Penn State, which had one of the top defenses in the country, finishing with a career-high 11 catches for 162 yards and a touchdown.

“I’ve got to give Marvin Harrison Jr. so much credit,” Day said after the game. “To go for 11 catches for 162 yards and a touchdown when I would think most teams, the first thing they look at is, ‘How do I take away Marvin Harrison?’ We targeted him 16 times, I think he was open on most of those plays, so he showed up in a big spot today again.”

“I would argue to say – and I haven’t seen everybody play across the country – that it’s hard for me to find somebody who’s better in the country. I don’t know how he gets on these lists or doesn’t get on these lists, but to me, he’s one of the most special players in the country.”

He ended up getting on pretty much all of those lists that Day was talking about. His performance made him a unanimous All-American for the second time, and he was named the Big Ten Richter-Howard Wide Receiver of the Year and Graham-George Offensive Player of the Year and won the Chicago Tribune Silver Football, given to the best player in the Big Ten. Harrison also won the Biletnikoff Award

this time around.

He finished fourth in Heisman Trophy voting, becoming the first wide receiver invited to the ceremony in New York since Alabama’s DeVonta Smith won the award in 2020.

Harrison has already confirmed that he will be heading to the NFL after this season, and he is expected to be drafted in the top five. He will go down as one of the best wide receivers – if not the best – in Ohio State history, even with all of the other impressive pass catchers who have come through Columbus.

**6. Women’s Basketball Makes First Elite Eight Since 1993**

The Ohio State women’s basketball team started the 2022-23 season off in historical fashion, beginning the campaign with a program-record 19-0 start, and it was obvious that this team had what it takes to make a run deep into the NCAA tournament.

The Buckeyes’ first loss didn’t come until Caitlin Clark and Iowa came to town on Jan. 23, beating them 83-72 behind a triple double for Clark coming from 28 points, 15 assists and 10 rebounds. Even with a slower end to the regular season, Ohio State ultimately finished 25-7 entering the NCAA tournament, earning a No. 3 seed.

Ohio State was able to dispatch No. 14 James Madison and No. 6 North Carolina at home to move on to the Sweet 16, where No. 2 UConn awaited, having won its last six contests against the Buckeyes dating back to 2010. But the Buckeyes were able to deliver the upset, forcing 24 turnovers and registering 11 steals as they pulled off the

73-61 win over the Huskies to advance to the Elite Eight for the first time since 1993, when Ohio State finished as the national runner-up.

The Buckeyes’ win over UConn resulted in an Elite Eight matchup with No. 1 Virginia Tech. Ohio State shot 64.3 percent from the field in the first half against the Hokies and trailed just 48-45, but was outscored 36-29 in the second half of the 84-74 loss despite impressive performances from Taylor Mikesell (25 points on 7-of-11 shooting from deep for the game), Jacy Sheldon (19 points) and then-freshman Cotie McMahon (18 points).

“I do think in the first half both teams were playing at a really high level and making tough shots and executing to get good shots,” OSU head coach Kevin McGuff said after the game. “As the game went on, they just did a little more of that than we did in the second half and took advantage of the opportunities they got.”

“We scored well from the perimeter, but not so well around the basket. I think that was a big problem for us is that the balance that they got out of scoring on the perimeter and (Elizabeth) Kitley running the basket, we couldn’t replicate that, and that just gave them better opportunities.”

Kitley finished with 25 points.

While Ohio State fell short of the Final Four, the win cleared a significant hurdle for the Buckeyes over the past couple of decades, setting Ohio State up to possibly reach that mark on a more consistent basis over the next few years.

Continued On Page 14

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# Football Ends Season On Dour Note In Loss

Continued From Page 13

## 7. Ohio State Loses To Missouri In Cotton Bowl

After the loss to Michigan this past season, Ohio State – unlike in 2022 – did not find a backdoor into the College Football Playoff, instead settling for an appearance in the Cotton Bowl in Arlington, Texas, against No. 9 Missouri.

Ohio State's health and availability were concerns leading into the contest. It was unclear which Buckeyes might participate as they considered potential entry into the NFL draft. But after close to a month of waiting for decisions, only Harrison ended up opting out while linebacker Tommy Eichenberg and safety Lathan Ransom were ruled out with injuries.

The Buckeyes were able to play with almost the exact same team they did all season, except for one important position: quarterback, with McCord's departure.

Brown was announced as the starter leading up to the game, and it was viewed as a chance for him to show he could be the starter going forward. He said McCord's transfer caught him off guard, but he was excited to get the opportunity to start his first game.

"I'm excited to go play and have fun with this team," Brown said. "I can't believe my first start is going to be in the Cotton Bowl. It's a big stage against a really good team. It's a top-10 matchup, and I'm just excited to go out there and show what I can do."

That is not how the game went. Brown was injured early on a sack when his cleat was caught in the turf at AT&T Stadium and he was twisted up. He was very obviously impacted by that, and he made it just one more drive before being replaced by freshman Lincoln Kienholz midway through the second quarter. Brown finished 4 of 6 passing for just 20 yards, leading the team to its only scoring drive of the game, a field goal in the first quarter.

Kienholz looked overwhelmed by the pressure the Tigers brought at him. It didn't help that the offensive line was going through some changes with center Carson Hinzman replaced by Matt Jones at center and Enokk Vimahi in at right guard. Missouri finished the game with four sacks, 10 tackles for a loss and eight quarterback hurries. Kienholz didn't have much time to work with in his first significant snaps on the field, finishing 6 of 17 passing for just 86 yards.

"Lincoln got put into a tough spot there, to say the least," Day said. "I thought he bat-

led 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."

The defense looked to be at its best for most of the game, forcing eight straight punts – outside of a kneel-down at the half – to begin the contest. It looked like there might not be a touchdown by either team until Missouri, on a drive beginning late in the third quarter, drove 95 yards in eight plays to score at the beginning of the fourth quarter on a 7-yard rush by Cody Schrader to give the Tigers a 7-3 lead.

After another punt by Ohio State, the Tigers got the ball on their own 9-yard line and drove 91 yards in 13 plays to score on a 7-yard touchdown to Luther Burden III, taking the final 14-3 lead. It marked the second straight year Ohio State had lost two straight games to finish.

## 8. Stroud Becomes Highest Drafted OSU Quarterback

Stroud's Ohio State career came to an end as the clock struck midnight on Dec. 31, 2022, when Noah Ruggles missed a 50-yard field goal that would have sent the Buckeyes to the College Football Playoff National Championship against TCU.

Stroud declared for the draft on Jan. 16, and several projections had him going as high as No. 1 overall. But Stroud's stock took a relative tumble after he had reportedly low test scores on pre-draft assessments, leading to Alabama quarterback Bryce Young becoming the favorite to be the first player off the board. After he slipped out of the No. 1 pick, Stroud had a message for anyone who doubted him going forward.

"If you don't trust and believe in me," Stroud said, "all I can tell you is watch this."

Young ultimately ended up as the top pick to the Carolina Panthers, who traded up before the draft to the top spot. Stroud was up next, picked by the Houston Texans at No. 2 overall, and surpassed former Ohio State quarterback Art Schlichter – taken fourth overall by the Baltimore Colts in 1982 – to become the highest-selected signal caller in program history.

"I know that it's meant to be," Stroud said. "I know that with this franchise, it's going to be something that I'm really going to take very, very seriously, and I'm going to work my tail off to get some wins."

He became the third straight Ohio State starting quarterback to be taken in the first round after Dwayne Haskins was the No. 15 pick by Washington in 2019 and Justin

Fields was taken with the No. 11 selection by the Bears in 2021.

Stroud finished his Ohio State career with 8,123 passing yards in two seasons with 85 touchdowns and just 12 interceptions. He won the Big Ten Graham-George Offensive Player of the Year award and Griese-Brees Quarterback of the Year in both of his years as a Buckeye starter, and he was a two-time Heisman Trophy finalist.

Stroud has shown so far that his early selection was the smart choice, after he threw for 4,108 yards and 23 touchdowns against just five interceptions during his rookie regular season, helping lead the Texans to a playoff berth, and tossed for 274 yards and three touchdowns in his playoff debut, a 45-14 win over the Cleveland Browns.

## 9. OSU Wrestler Sasso Shot But On Road To Recovery

The 2022-23 wrestling season was another great one for the Buckeyes, and Sammy Sasso was the highlight of the team at 149 pounds as a national runner-up.

The two-time Big Ten champion and four-time All-American would have been ranked near the top – this time at 157 pounds – in 2023-24, but wrestling became the least of his worries on Aug. 18 when he was shot during a carjacking on North High Street in Columbus.

The bullet caused severe nerve damage, and Sasso had to spend three days in the intensive care unit before being transferred to the acute care unit. He had surgery to reconstruct his colon on Aug. 19, and a day later another surgery to remove the bullet that was near his spine. He spent over a month in the hospital before he was able to leave and still had to relearn how to walk.

Head coach Tom Ryan said Sasso is feeling good emotionally and is continuing to work to wrestle at Ohio State. He has also been spending as much time as he can with the team, and Ryan said that it has been great to have him around, giving everyone there a dose of reality.

"Sammy has been really incredible," Ryan told BSB. "He's an incredible example. He's in the room every day, he's helping the guys technically with stuff, he's walking around. He's part of the team. They're watching someone who would be ranked first in the country who's not struggling to walk, but he's not walking the way he used to walk."

"It's incredibly valuable. You can talk about scenarios in life when you're coaching people, 'Imagine this and imagine that,' but when you're walking alongside it, and you're actually experiencing it, and you're witnessing it, it's a powerful thing. Gratitude is a real thing, and authenticity is real, and love is real, and they're witnessing that firsthand. They're feeling it. It's been really powerful for our team."

## 10. McCord Wins Starting QB Job Over Brown

The quarterback battle was one of the biggest storylines of the offseason dating back to the spring between McCord and Brown, both hoping to line up under center for the 2023 season.

Despite Day's hope to name a starter



SONNY BROCKWAY

**ROAD TO RECOVERY** – Ohio State wrestler Sammy Sasso is continuing to recover after being shot in a carjacking in August.

during the spring, the battle lasted into the summer, into fall camp and even into the early regular season. When Sept. 2 came around and Ohio State went into Bloomington, Ind., to play its first game against Indiana, Day still hadn't made a final decision about who would be the Buckeyes' quarterback for the season.

"Kyle has done a great job over the last two weeks of showing consistency," Day said. "Devin, throughout the body of the pre-season, has shown he deserves to play. We have confidence in both of them."

"You would like to have somebody who's the quarterback to play the whole game, but for me to say, 'Hey, this guy should just play the whole game and the other one shouldn't,' that's not the right thing to do right now, because they both deserve to play at this point."

McCord started the contest and Brown did not see the field for more than a handful of snaps, with the same holding true the following week against Youngstown State. It wasn't until after McCord threw for 258 yards and three touchdowns in the 35-7 win over the Penguins that Day finally said that McCord would be their guy moving forward.

"After reviewing the film, we decided Kyle's going to be the starter," Day said. "We'll make that distinction. We still plan on playing Devin, but we feel like Kyle has really stepped up and deserves to be the starter. So, we're going to go ahead and make that distinction."

After he was named the starter, McCord had two of his biggest games of the season, including a 63-10 blowout of Western Kentucky in which he had 318 yards and three touchdowns and then leading a game-winning drive at Notre Dame for a 17-14 victory in South Bend, Ind.

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# Houston Texans Have No Problem With Stroud

By **CRAIG MERZ**

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

A season that went longer than anyone could have imagined ended too soon for C.J. Stroud and the Houston Texans.

The former Ohio State quarterback ended his first NFL season the way it began – with a loss to the Baltimore Ravens. The latest, 34-10 on Jan. 20, was more painful as it came in the divisional round, leaving the Texans a game shy of the AFC Championship Game. Stroud found it difficult to express his feelings immediately afterward.

“It’s hard to answer that right now,” Stroud said. “I know where I come from in college – if you don’t win it all, then it’s kind of a fail. That’s kind of the mindset I have. I think we have the capability, we have the team to do it.”

“We came up short. You can’t look back and be like, we didn’t do anything special. You’ve got to look back and smile through-out everything. But at the same time, it’s like, what if? That’s the worst feeling, is having regrets. What if I did this, what if I did that? Just learning experiences.”

Stroud, who certainly will earn all the NFL rookie of the year awards available, has nothing to apologize for even though he had one of his poorer performances against the Ravens.

“C.J. is the reason that we are in this position. He’s special.”

Those words were spoken by Texans coach DeMeco Ryans after Stroud’s record-setting performance in the 45-14 rout of the Cleveland Browns in the wild-card round on Jan. 13. Stroud, 22, became the youngest quarterback in NFL history to win a playoff game while tying the mark of three touchdown passes in a postseason game by a rookie. All three were in the first half, by the way. He was 16 of 21 for 274 yards with no interceptions.

“For C.J. to go and have the game that he had – an unbelievable performance by a rookie,” Ryans said.

The 157.2 passer rating for Stroud was the fourth highest in NFL playoff history (Jordan Love of the Green Bay Packers tied it the next day) trailing Terry Bradshaw (158.3 in 1976), Peyton Manning (158.3 in 2003) and Josh Allen (157.6 in 2021).

Stroud and Love were each in their post-season debuts, but the difference is Love was a backup for the three prior seasons to Aaron Rodgers. Stroud was a rookie with a first-year head coach, yet the Texans went from 3-13-1 last season to winning the AFC South and reaching the playoffs for the first time since 2019.

“What C.J. has been doing on the field is bringing the city out, man. It’s amazing to be a part of,” said running back Dameon Pierce.

Stroud threw for 236 yards in the first half against the Browns, who had the No. 1 defense in the league. He sat most of the fourth quarter with the game well in hand.

“I think he’s going to be best of all time,” third-string quarterback and 11-year veteran Case Keenum said. “Like, he truly has the ability to be that way. I know, it’s very early to say that sort of stuff. But, man, he

does some stuff that is just out of this world.

“On a good day, there’s maybe two or three (throws) that I want back, and on a bad day, there’s 10. I can count on maybe one hand the things that he’s missed this entire year.”

Wide receiver Nico Collins has been the recipient of many of Stroud’s passes, finishing with a career-high 1,297 yards and eight touchdowns on 80 receptions in his third-season, and still marvels at how well Stroud has made the transition to the NFL after a standout career at Ohio State.

“That is one dude that is locked in,” Collins said. “He’s calm and collected. He’s willing to leave it all out there for the brother. (No. 7) is special.”

## Someone Special

Tight end Brevin Jordan, who had a 76-yard touchdown against the Browns, knew early on that Stroud was not a typical rookie.

“I wish you guys could be in the huddle and around him,” Jordan said. “The dude is unbelievable, how he moves, how he talks, everything. You can tell from training camp that he was a captain and a QB1, since like day two. You could tell how he moved, how he walks around the locker room and talks to guys. When you have a humble, confident guy who loves to work, the sky’s the limit.”

Stroud said his teammates make him successful.

“It’s hard to come in, especially guys coming from other teams, other successful teams, and just trust a rookie quarterback,” he said. “And those guys full-fledged really bought into what I was really hoping to become and they helped me along the way. So, the main thing when I look back it’s just the relationships and the people who I feel real bonds with this year.”

That connectivity translates to the field.

Stroud was never sacked against the Browns, and the one time he was really pounded by the rush, he still completed a 38-yard pass to Collins.

“That was No. 3 or No. 4 in the progression, depending on how you look at it,” backup quarterback Davis Mills said. “He does a really good job of really taking advantage of what the defense is giving to us, and it doesn’t matter if one is not open, or two is not open, he is going to keep clicking through his progression and trusting our offensive line to hold up in protection and finding a guy out in space.”

It was that way all season. Despite missing two games with a concussion, Stroud threw for the third-most total passing yards of any rookie quarterback in NFL history (4,108) behind only Andrew Luck (4,374) and Justin Herbert (4,336).

He led all quarterbacks who started at least half of their teams’ games during the regular season with 273.9 passing yards per game and a 23-to-5 touchdown-to-interception ratio, and he tied the rookie record for touchdown passes in a game when he threw for 470 yards and five touchdowns in the 39-37 win over the Tampa Bay Buccaneers on Nov. 5.

Credit for the Texans’ resurgence goes to Stroud, the No. 2 pick in the NFL draft behind Alabama’s Bryce Young (Carolina



FILE PHOTO

**SET FOR SUCCESS — Former Ohio State quarterback C.J. Stroud had a successful rookie season with the Houston Texans, leading them to a playoff berth and finishing as the favorite for NFL Offensive Rookie of the Year.**

Panthers), and Ryans.

“My last two years here, it wasn’t ideal,” Collins said. “For us to get 10 wins, now 11 wins, playoffs – that’s a big turnaround. It’s hard to explain the feeling.”

## Among The Best

One of the more impressive stats for Stroud is he opened the season with 191 consecutive passes without an interception, an NFL record to start a career, and he finished the season with 198 consecutive passes without a pick.

Stroud’s first regular-season game was a 25-9 loss in Baltimore when he was 28 of 44 for 242 yards, was sacked five times and a lost a fumble. The Texans improved immensely from that point, but it wasn’t enough to overcome the veteran Ravens in the rematch.

“This wasn’t our moment right now, this wasn’t our time right now,” Ryans said. “We didn’t get it done. But I’m proud of each and every coach and player in the locker room for what we’ve accomplished throughout the entire year, how we grew through the entire year, and I’m proud of our guys. That’s what I told all our guys, keep your head up. Credit to the Ravens, but man, I’m proud of each and every man.”

Stroud had a tough game the second time against the Ravens. He was 19 of 33 for 175 yards, and a 72.2 rating was his second worst of the season.

“The defense was as good as it could be,” Ravens head coach John Harbaugh said of his squad. “That’s a good offense over there. That’s a good quarterback. C.J. Stroud deserves a lot of credit. They’re very well-coached. Their offensive line is really good and tough. It’s tough to get to the quarterback. I thought our guys chased him, and we plastered their receivers downfield. Our coverage was just outstanding. We covered as long as we needed to so many times.”

Another Harbaugh. For those keeping score, Stroud is 0-4 against the family after losing twice to Jim Harbaugh’s Michigan Wolverines. Each loss stings, as Stroud not-

ed following the playoff loss.

“I’m upset right now, but I’m really just blessed looking back on this year, this opportunity we had today to play in front of millions of people,” he said. “I’m really grateful to God for all of the opportunities that he’s blessed me with. I’m hoping to lean on him and I know that this isn’t the end for me. There’s a lot more football for me to play and I’m excited for that.”

“It’s been a heck of a year, and I think DeMeco hit on it there, the future’s bright but these types of losses suck. That’s a great Ravens team over there and they deserved to win, and it’s tough to just get embarrassed like that, but definitely I think our future is bright.”

Especially for Stroud. But those who know him best weren’t surprised by his success.

Ohio State head coach Ryan Day told Albert Breer of Sports Illustrated’s Monday Morning Quarterback that Stroud showed his potential in the College Football Playoff semifinal loss to eventual champion Georgia, when he threw for 348 yards and four touchdowns and ran for another 34 yards.

“I think that game was definitely a culmination of his development at Ohio State,” Day said. “We saw things during the season that you saw during that game. But I also think that the stage was set, and he responded and competed his tail off. I think, especially when you play the quarterback position, you’re a collection of your experiences. It leads you to where you are as a player and how you respond to different things.”

“The more experience you get, the more you can draw upon that and learn from your mistakes and enhance the things you do well. He embraced that part of it. That was his last game as a Buckeye, but I think game after game he continued to develop and get better. Now you’re seeing it translate to the NFL. Every game he plays in the NFL, you’re going to see a better product next week.”

# Day's Legacy Unwritten Entering Sixth Year

By **PATRICK ENGELS**

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

There are few head coaches in college football who have as complicated a tenure as Ohio State's Ryan Day. Since assuming the high-profile title from Urban Meyer in 2019, Day has built an established winning culture in Columbus, leading the Buckeyes to a 56-8 overall record in five seasons with two Big Ten championships and three College Football Playoff appearances.

However, Day's blazing start to his Buckeye tenure has been stained by his inability to defeat the program's biggest rival in The Game, where he has experienced three straight excruciating losses to Michigan, with two of those defeats coming by more than 15 points.

This, along with his 1-6 record against top-five College Football Playoff teams and a two-game losing streak in New Year's Six bowl games, has cast a negative light on Day's run as head coach in recent years, a stark contrast from the beginning of his Ohio State coaching career when he was widely considered as the "golden boy" and heir apparent to Meyer.

But when exactly did Day's status as an offensive guru and coaching mastermind begin to wane? Buckeye Sports Bulletin spoke with three reporters who have covered the team since Day arrived on Meyer's offensive coaching staff in 2017: 247Sports' Steve Helwagen, Eleven Warriors' Dan Hope, and Buckeye Huddle's Kevin Noon.

Day's run at Ohio State began in 2017, when he was hired by Meyer to serve as the program's quarterbacks coach and co-offensive coordinator, joining a staff that had been desperately searching for answers on the offensive end. Despite the Buckeyes posting a combined 23-3 record the previous two seasons and securing a College Football Playoff berth in 2016, the program struggled on offense, particularly in the passing game.

With veteran quarterback J.T. Barrett under center and offensive coordinators Tim Beck and Ed Warinner calling plays, Ohio State averaged just 188.8 passing yards per game in 2015 and 213.9 in 2016, good for 100th and 81st in the nation, respectively. These shortcomings were exacerbated in the 31-0 blowout loss to Clemson in the 2016 Orange Bowl, where Ohio State gained just 215 total yards – 127 of those coming through the air – another sluggish offensive performance that forced Meyer to make some changes.

"You just sensed that something had to be done," Helwagen said. "It was two years of the offense really holding the team back."

"Ohio State had a lot of pieces," Noon added. "It just needed to see its offense evolve. And that's not saying that Urban's offense was that outdated. It needed some freshening up. It needed some changes."

For Meyer and the Buckeyes, those changes came by hiring Day, who joined the coaching staff on Jan. 3, 2017, after spending the previous two seasons in the NFL as quarterbacks coach for the Philadelphia Eagles and San Francisco 49ers. With Day – and co-offensive coordinator Kevin Wilson

– assuming control of the offense, the Buckeyes experienced a renaissance on that side of the ball.

Ohio State finished the 2017 season ranked sixth in the nation in scoring of offense at 41.1 points per game, while it also improved its passing game to 36th in the country at 262.8 yards per contest. Then, in 2018, Day and the unit experienced a historic season under one-year starter Dwayne Haskins, recording a Big Ten-record 535.6 total yards per game, with Haskins setting single-season conference records in passing yards (4,831) and passing touchdowns (50).

Noon said Ohio State's high-flying offense in 2017 and 2018 – one which allowed them to win back-to-back Big Ten titles and a pair of New Year's Six bowl wins – was largely a product of Day's forward-thinking mentality and more unpredictable play-calling, something that was not always evident within the unit in prior years.

"We all know that Urban had his favorite couple of moves and couple of plays, and Ryan was able to expand that and really get the offense into more of a cutting-edge position than a predictable position," Noon said. "Ryan Day gave the offense a lot more firepower in terms of how the plays were called, and morphed it into what (the offense) is that we see today."

"He reminded Ohio State that the forward pass was legal," he continued. "We were seeing more of a downfield passing game. And that was important, because Urban had a lot of success with the read option and having quarterbacks that were very much dual threat at the truest meaning of the definition, whereas the offense became much more quarterback-friendly for throwers under Ryan Day, (which is) where we stand today."

Day's positive impact on the offense allowed those around the game to view him as a rising star in the coaching industry, including Meyer and athletic director Gene Smith, who appointed him as Ohio State's interim head coach for the first three games of the 2018 season, filling in for the suspended Meyer. Day – who went 3-0 in that span, including a 40-28 win over then-No. 15 TCU at AT&T Stadium – was even selected to lead the team over older and more proven assistants with head coaching experience such as associate head coach/defensive coordinator Greg Schiano and Wilson, a move that Hope viewed as a sign of things to come for the program in the future.

"I remember being impressed," Hope said. "I remember thinking at the time that, if this ends up being it for Urban, Day is probably going to be that next guy. I think everybody kind of had that feeling that Day was going to be the guy."

"The job he did in those three weeks, even just simple stuff like being very composed in press conferences, and feeling like he had a good handle on those head coaching-type duties that he wouldn't have had as an offensive coordinator – the job he did in those three games definitely went a long way toward Gene Smith promoting him, because that was kind of his audition to show he could handle that spotlight. I think he did



FILE PHOTO

**LEAVING A LEGACY – Ohio State head coach Ryan Day is looking to rebuild momentum for the football program after a strong start to his head coaching career faltered as the team failed to reach key goals – namely beating Michigan and winning conference and national titles – over the past three seasons.**

a good job of that."

Day's impressive performance as both offensive coordinator and interim head coach allowed him to be seen as not only the favorite to succeed Meyer as Ohio State's head coach, but as a figure who could help the program reach its championship potential. Helwagen, who said that Day was "no doubt" Ohio State's golden boy and the clear heir apparent to Meyer, added that he viewed Day as someone who was calling all the right shots.

"You just looked at it and said, 'This guy could do no wrong as an offensive coach,'" Helwagen said. "They're putting up 40, 50 points a game, throwing for these huge numbers. You just had the sense that Ryan Day really had an idea of what it takes to be successful offensively at the college level. People just fell in love with him in Columbus. And Gene Smith and Ohio State and Urban Meyer hand-picked him to be (Meyer's) successor. I think it just made a lot of sense (to promote Day to head coach)."

Despite the lofty expectations for Day heading into his first season as Ohio State's full-time head coach in 2019, he lived up to hype. Leading a loaded roster that included a litany of future NFL players such as J.K. Dobbins, Justin Fields, Chris Olave, Jeff Okudah and Chase Young, Day helped guide the program to a dominant 13-0 regular season along with a Big Ten title and College Football Playoff Appearance.

Hope said that Day exceeded expectations in his first year as head coach, as he

had them prepared to dominate on a week-in-week-out basis. This was a mentality that was not always present at Ohio State during the final years of Meyer's tenure, where it regularly dropped one game each season on the road to an inferior Big Ten opponent.

"They were pretty dominant the entire regular season that year," Hope said. "That's, in my time on the beat, as dominant as a team as I think we've seen in terms of just week-in and week-out during the regular season. For (Day) to come in as a first-year coach, to be that consistent – in Urban's last two years, you had those games against Iowa and Purdue where Ohio State just really laid an egg. There was kind of that vibe around Ohio State under Urban where you would always have that one game every year where the team just wouldn't show up, and that just never happened. That first year, it was like every week, Ohio State was on point."

Day's upward trajectory continued into the COVID-19-shortened 2020 season. Despite playing just five regular-season games due to the Big Ten halting play until late October, Day won his second conference title in as many seasons and – perhaps most importantly – secured a berth in the College Football Playoff National Championship Game against Alabama after defeating Trevor Lawrence and undefeated Clemson in the Sugar Bowl.

That 49-28 drubbing of Clemson, to many, remains the high point of the Day era so far. Noon said the win was a defining mo-



ment for Day and Ohio State, giving them a triumph over another perennial power in Clemson that had been a thorn in its side for many seasons.

“Reaching the national championship game, getting the win against Clemson after the disappointing loss the year before (28-23 to Clemson), that is the peak of the Day era,” Noon said. “That was the big 900-pound gorilla in the room. Ohio State could not get past Clemson since 2014 and had not really been able to muster success in the College Football Playoff.

“And to be able to slay both of those dragons at the same time and deal with very restrictive COVID-19 measures put in place by the Big Ten – maybe stricter than some of the other conferences out there – that was really a high point for the Buckeyes. That’s not to say there haven’t been other high points, but I think this one stands above the rest of them.”

### Say Goodbye To Smooth Sailing

Day’s win over Clemson at the end of the 2020 season further elevated his reputation as one of the top coaches in college football, but those feelings began to take a back seat in 2021, in part due to the team’s poor performance in the most significant games of the season.

Ohio State and redshirt freshman quarterback C.J. Stroud positioned themselves to secure a third straight College Football Playoff appearance, entering the final week of the regular season with a 10-1 record, the lone loss coming to Oregon back in the second week of the season that led to the demotion of defensive coordinator Kerry Coombs.

But standing in its way of a playoff berth was then-No. 6 Michigan, poised to defeat its rivals at its home field and break the Wolverines’ eight-game losing streak in The Game. With both teams looking to secure a Big Ten East crown, the Wolverines took care of the Buckeyes to break the skid, bludgeoning Day’s squad with a strong rushing attack and dominating defensive effort to cruise to a 42-27 win.

Noon said the lackluster performance in the 2021 version of The Game was Day’s first major blip on his previously clean résumé, where it showed for the first time that the coach’s philosophy and coaching style could be vulnerable if the opponent could put the right plan in place.

“I really tend to look at the ’21 edition of the Michigan game as being maybe the first indicator (of Day’s program shifting in a downward direction),” Noon said. “It only took a worldwide pandemic for the perfect storm on the Michigan roster to form, and it showed that the Ryan Day system was not infallible, that there was a way to combat it and come out victorious.”

Day’s first loss to Michigan seemed to serve as a turning point for the coach. Despite having another strong 2022 season and heading into that year’s version of The Game undefeated, the Buckeyes suffered their second consecutive blowout loss to the Wolverines, this time a 45-23 defeat at home where they allowed 530 total yards and three scores of over 70 yards.

Helwagen said Ohio State’s consecutive losses to Michigan in 2021 and 2022 signaled the beginning of Day’s “struggles” as head coach. These struggles could be

pinned on the program’s inability to bring in star defensive and offensive line recruits throughout Day’s first few years leading the program, a series of misses that he thinks falls on the head coach.

“Day is an offensive-minded coach,” Helwagen said, “and they did not do a good job of recruiting defensive players in his first two years. They were great defensively living off the upperclassmen. But when those upperclassmen left after the 2020 season, and then in ’21 and ’22, you didn’t have the material to fill in behind them. That’s when you started seeing things like the Oregon game and the two Michigan games where you just didn’t have the horses on defense.

“They were signing (around) 13 or 14 offensive guys and eight or nine defensive guys, and seven or eight of the offensive guys are top-100 players and maybe one or two of the defensive guys are top-100 players. The emphasis just wasn’t there.

“Then the second part of it was they didn’t recruit offensive linemen. After Paris Johnson Jr., they really only had one blue-chip offensive lineman since then and that’s Donovan Jackson. That explains how bad they were on the offensive line (in 2023). The material you put in is equal to the product you have coming out.”

Day’s recruiting misses largely did not hinder him at the start of this past season, when, under first-year starting quarterback Kyle McCord, the Buckeyes held an unblemished 11-0 record heading into the final week of the regular season. But another failed trip to Ann Arbor once again cast a dark cloud over the program, this time from a gut-wrenching 30-24 loss that ended with a McCord interception as the Buckeyes were driving to take the lead late.

Unlike the previous two seasons, though, Ohio State’s struggles did not end with the loss to the Wolverines. Instead, it ignited what was perhaps Day’s worst month as head coach. Nearly 20 left for the transfer portal in the weeks following the Michigan defeat – a group that included McCord – and the Buckeyes were also victimized by a key recruiting decommitment from Chicago St. Ignatius five-star defensive lineman Justin Scott (6-4, 310), who flipped to Miami (Fla.).

This was followed by an uninspiring 14-3 loss to Missouri in the Cotton Bowl on Dec. 29 where the Buckeyes looked outclassed and outcoached by their SEC counterparts.

“The month of doom and gloom was real,” Noon said. “The interest going into the Cotton Bowl was minimal. There was a lot more interest coming out of it because of how poorly Ohio State performed in that game. At the end of the day, the buck stops with the head coach. When we’re talking about where the blame is, you’d have to put a lot of it at the feet of Day.”

While Noon characterized this month as one of “doom and gloom,” Hope viewed it in a different light. He argued that the events that negatively affected the Buckeyes in December – especially the mass transfer exodus – have been overblown by those who follow the program due to the Michigan loss, which has put a negative light on the team since the end of November. Instead, Hope sees the events as a result of the changing college football landscape, which has given both players and recruits more flexibility to play for different schools.

“Sometimes perception can feel a little more extreme than reality with these things,” Hope said. “When the team loses to Michigan, it kind of puts a cloud over the program. Every little thing (is magnified). But the majority of those guys who transferred, it makes sense why they transferred. They weren’t going to play. They probably knew that a lot of these guys were going to come back, and they weren’t going to play or play much if they stayed at Ohio State next year, and that’s why they transferred.

“This is just the reality of the world now, and I think people are going to have to get used to that, with a lot of transfers being the norm.

### Reasons For Optimism On Horizon

Regardless of how one interprets the sequence of events that transpired in December, Day and his program have put things back in an upward direction at the start of the new year, a sudden turnaround that has given fans optimism for greener pastures for next season.

Since the calendar turned to 2024, the Buckeyes have benefited from being on the other end of the transfer portal, bringing in high-profile reinforcements such as Kansas State quarterback Will Howard on Jan. 4, Alabama center Seth McLaughlin on Jan. 6, Ole Miss running back Quinshon Judkins on Jan. 9, Alabama safety Caleb Downs on Jan. 19 and Alabama quarterback Julian Sayin on Jan. 21.

These moves are only part of Ohio State’s good fortune in January.

Several starters announced their return to the program, an extensive list that included cornerbacks Denzel Burke and Jordan Hancock; defensive linemen Ty Hamilton, Jack Sawyer, J.T. Tuimoloau and Tyleik Williams; offensive lineman Donovan Jackson; running back TreVeyon Henderson; safety Lathan Ransom; and wide receiver Emeka Egbuka.

Noon said Ohio State’s rapid turnaround in January mostly falls on the shoulders of Day, who showed great poise and leadership to get the program back on its feet.

“What a good leader does is he sits there, calm under pressure, and assesses the situation and works to remedy the situation,” Noon said. “I think Day was able to do all of that. It certainly wasn’t something he was able to do all on his own, but it’s what good leaders do.”

Helwagen added that Day’s ability to right the ship thus far this calendar year is a promising sign for the program heading into next season. It showed that Day was committed to patching up the mistakes he made and ensuring that Ohio State would remain a top-tier program in college football.

“I think that really does speak volumes that he’s in this for the long haul and he’s not going to just allow the status quo to prevail,” Helwagen said. “This offseason certainly began with a thud with that Cotton Bowl (loss). And really since then, every move has been calculated. It seems to me like they have their ducks in a row as to what they want to do. So I think you have to be excited about where the program is at.”

While Noon, Helwagen and Hope all admitted that it is hard to predict if this sudden turnaround is a sign of more positive things to come for Day and Ohio State, they

did agree that the coach still needs to make some changes in order for the team to have sustained success in 2024 and beyond. All three reporters pointed to Day taking more of a “CEO” approach and giving up play-calling duties as something that could benefit the program in the future, which appears to be a reality for next season given the Buckeyes’ hiring of longtime offensive assistant and head coach Bill O’Brien as offensive coordinator on Jan. 18.

“They need to make sure they have everybody inside the program pointed in the right direction,” Noon said. “There are a lot of ways to play football these days, and I don’t know if necessarily everybody views it the same way. Day needs to make sure he has a good grasp on the philosophies and beliefs of his staff. Day moving into a more of a ‘CEO’ role is very important.

“The proof is in the pudding. We’ll see where the play-call sheet is and if it’s in his hands or if it’s nowhere near him when the season opens against Akron. But those moves are what you need to be able to do. I think CEO Ryan Day is going to be the right position for him as the head coach and will benefit the Buckeyes for years to come.”

Regardless of how he leads the program in the future, Noon said Day’s reputation moving forward will ultimately be defined by the team’s success in accomplishing the team’s three main goals: winning the Big Ten, winning a national championship and, perhaps most importantly for Day’s sake, defeating Michigan.

“Beating Michigan is where it starts,” Noon said. “Ohio State has to beat Michigan to make some of this noise go away. Winning Big Ten titles certainly will help. I think just getting into the College Football Playoff doesn’t really matter. They’ve shown that if the 12-team playoff had been in place going back to 2014, Ohio State would have been included every single year. But beating Michigan and winning Big Ten titles – hell, throw in a national championship every now and then. That will keep people happy.”

Day’s recent shortcomings against Michigan and in postseason play have soured his reputation as Ohio State’s “golden boy,” but those around the program believe the coach has still built and maintained a strong culture and foundation within the Woody Hayes Athletic Center that will have the Buckeyes ready to compete for championships. Now, it all comes down to execution, which will determine his legacy moving forward as Ohio State’s head coach.

“It’s still a top-five program, I don’t have any doubt about that,” Helwagen said. “They finished ranked 10th in the AP poll this year, and you can take that and do whatever you want with it. But by the way they recruit, by the support that they have and everything else, it’s still a top-five program. There’s no question about it. They are right where they need to be. They’re well-positioned, and it’s going to continue to motor on.

“Day has kept them in the playoff three of his five years. That’s a pretty good ratio. I don’t look at it like he’s led any drop-off. If he does win a national championship, then you could say he’s taken it to another level. Jim Tressel took it from a level that John Cooper had it. Then Urban took it from a level that Tressel had it. It remains to be seen whether or not Day will take it to another level beyond where Urban had it.”

# Buckeyes Add Final Piece In 2024 With DL Kirks

Ohio State has now put the finishing touches on the program's 2024 recruiting class, adding a commitment on Jan. 20 from Painesville (Ohio) Riverside four-star defensive lineman Dominic Kirks (6-4, 255).

## RECRUITING OUTLOOK Braden Moles

Kirks is the No. 251 overall prospect and No. 33 defensive lineman in the class and was offered by the Buckeyes during an official visit to Columbus the weekend of Jan. 13-14.

He had been committed to Washington since June, but he did not sign with the Huskies in December and stepped back from his pledge on Jan. 12 following Kalen DeBoer's departure to become the head coach at Alabama.

"I am an Ohio kid and I love my state, so I get to stay close to home and play for Ohio State," Kirks told On3. "Ohio State has that brotherhood. I am a big family guy, and they treat their players with tough love and care. That is what I am looking for."

"I am about development, competitiveness and family. I will get that at Ohio State. Ohio State is a great fit for me."

Kirks was also connected with USC during the latter stages of his recruitment

before eventually settling on Ohio State. He will not be able to sign with the Buckeyes until National Signing Day on Feb. 7. At Riverside High School in northern Ohio, Kirks collected 86 tackles (17 for loss) to go along with 11 sacks, an interception and four pass break-ups.

"He has a big frame and has filled that in to around 255 pounds as he enters college," wrote 247Sports recruiting analyst Allen Trieu. "He has big hands and longer arms. He moves fluidly and has been timed sub-5.0 in the 40 at his size. He has added to his technique and as a senior demonstrated better use of his hands."

"He can win with finesse as well as power. He closes quickly and changes directions well at his size. He has rushed some from a two-point (stance) but his future is likely entirely as a hand-down player. He can give teams some options as he is athletic enough to play the edge but has enough growth potential to kick down at times or play end in an odd front."

Kirks is now the third defensive lineman in Ohio State's class, joining Buford, Ga., five-star end Eddrick Houston (6-3, 269) and Stafford (Va.) Mountain View three-star tackle Eric Mensah (6-3, 290), with Kirks expected to play at defensive end.

### OSU Adds DL Mathis In 2025

Ohio State is already off to a hot start in the 2025 recruiting class, landing a pledge

## OSU Football 2024 Commitments

Players in the class of 2024 who have committed or 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.,
Dominic Kirks	DL	6-4	255	★★★★	Painesville (Ohio) Riverside
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

on Jan. 10 from Philadelphia Imhotep Institute four-star defensive end Zahir Mathis (6-6, 225).

Mathis is the No. 38 overall prospect and No. 5 defensive end in the class, and he chose Ohio State over Florida State, South Carolina, Tennessee and Texas. He was offered by the Buckeyes last May and camped with the team, where he received some in-depth instruction from defensive line coach Larry Johnson, a significant factor in Mathis' recruitment.

"He's patient," Mathis said of Johnson. "He isn't going to rush you throughout your development. If you mess up, just get back up and get back on the field, you'll be OK. And just his focus on the basics."

Beyond Johnson's instruction, Ohio State was also a draw to Mathis because of the type of talent – namely Nick and Joey Bosa, as well Chase Young – that has come through Columbus in recent years.

"He had a big impact on me because Chase Young was coming from the DMV," Mathis said. "I'm from Philadelphia, so just to be so close to home and see his big impact on the world. Then Larry Legend had both of the Bosa brothers. I've got that love and respect for him."

Mathis had 52 tackles (five for loss) with three sacks last season, helping lead Imhotep Institute to an undefeated 15-0 record, and should be an impact addition for the Buckeyes once he arrives in Columbus.

He is the first defensive line pledge for Ohio State in 2025 and the fourth commitment on the defensive side of the ball, joining Houston North Shore five-star cornerback Devin Sanchez (6-2, 170), Baltimore St. Frances Academy four-star cornerback Blake Woodby (5-11, 175) and Akron Archbishop Hoban three-star linebacker Eli Lee (6-3, 215). Other edge rushers being pursued by Ohio State include Santa Ana (Calif.) Mater

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## 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
Zahir Mathis	DL	6-6	225	★★★★	Philadelphia Imhotep Institute
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

Dei four-star Nasir Wyatt (6-3, 210) and Cincinnati Winton Woods four-star Justin Hill (6-3, 220), among others.

### Commitment Pushed Back By 2025 CB Brew

Conroe, Texas, five-star cornerback Dorian Brew (6-2, 185), the No. 20 overall prospect and fourth-ranked cornerback in 2025, was originally set to announce his commitment on Jan. 24 but has since pushed back his pledge, according to a report from 247Sports.

Brew had previously released a top five that included Michigan, Ohio State, Oregon, Penn State and Texas. The Buckeyes still remain a heavy favorite to land Brew, considering his past residence in Ohio as well as his mother, Donica Merriman, residing in Ohio State's Athletic Hall of Fame for her track and field career, but he will take time to think about his decision.

Brew was offered by Ohio State last January and has continued to build his relationship with the coaching staff, and specifically with cornerbacks coach Tim Walton.

"He's hard on the technique," Brew said last summer. "He emphasized that a lot, and that's what I like about him. I focus on my technique. That's what I work on a lot and he does that too, so I feel like that's a great match for me."

Ohio State has the makings of a superstar haul at cornerback in 2025, already holding pledges from Sanchez and Woodby. Brew could also play safety at the next level.

### 2025 Prospects Short, Ffrench Decomit From Alabama

A pair of 2025 prospects being pursued by Ohio State – Evans, Ga., four-star offensive lineman Mason Short (6-6, 305) and Jacksonville (Fla.) Mandarin five-star wide receiver

Jaime Ffrench (6-1, 185) – announced in recent weeks that they have decommitted from Alabama.

Short pledged to the Crimson Tide last April, while Ffrench had been in the class since July. Short is the No. 160 overall prospect and No. 8 interior lineman in the class, while Ffrench is the No. 12 overall prospect and third-ranked wide receiver.

Short backed off his pledge after the hiring of DeBoer, who planned to bring over offensive line coach Scott Huff from Washington. Short had previously been recruited by former Alabama offensive line coach Eric Wolford.

Ffrench, meanwhile, pointed to the departure of head coach Nick Saban as a significant factor in his decommitment from Alabama.

"(Saban leaving) definitely played a big part," Ffrench told 247Sports. "I don't know anyone else that was recruiting me from there. The whole staff changed. It's really just me taking a step back and resetting everything. I wanted to take a bigger look. Also, I haven't really heard from anyone, not even the Washington coaches or the recruiting staff."

Ffrench is considering offers from Ohio State in addition to Florida State, Miami (Fla.) and Texas A&M, among others, though he is good friends with recent Ohio State wide receiver signee Jeremiah Smith. He does not expect to make a decision until this fall at the earliest.

### OSU's Coaches Hit The Road

The recruiting dead period ended on Jan. 12, allowing Ohio State's coaches to go out on the road and meet with high school prospects.

While the Buckeyes were operating with one fewer assistant following the firing of special teams coordinator Parker Fleming, NCAA bylaws allow teams to replace that spot with someone on staff who has completed "required education," with that someone in this case being graduate assistant James Laurinaitis. In his first day allowed on the road, Laurinaitis was kept busy. He and defensive coordinator Jim Knowles checked in with Lee, while Laurinaitis and Walton later went to visit Hill.

Other visits on Jan. 12 included offensive line coach Justin Frye stopping to see Cleveland St. Ignatius offensive lineman Will Conroy (6-3, 275), a 2026 prospect; running backs coach Tony Alford and Johnson stopping at Cleveland Heights to see four-star running back Marquise Davis (6-0, 190) and three-star defensive lineman Brandon Caesar (6-4, 250), respectively; and Alford visiting Cleveland Villa Angela-St. Joseph to see four-star running back Bo Jackson (6-1, 190).

Coming out of the weekend, co-offensive coordinator and wide receivers coach Brian Hartline and tight ends coach Keenan Bailey made a visit out west to see Mission Viejo, Calif., four-star wide receiver Phillip Bell (6-2, 195). The next day, Frye stopped to see Short, and head coach Ryan Day was kept busy with visits to see Vero Beach, Fla., four-star linebacker Tarvos Alford (6-2, 210); Orlando (Fla.) Jones four-star wide receiver Vernell Brown III (6-0, 165); and Kissimmee (Fla.) Osceola four-star linebacker Elijah Melendez (6-2, 225), who is committed to Miami (Fla.). Day was flanked on those trips by Laurinaitis.

**Continued On Page 20**

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# Pursuit Of 2025 Class Beginning To Heat Up

Continued From Page 19

On Jan. 17, Johnson went south to visit Atlanta Woodward Academy four-star defensive end London Merritt (6-3, 235). The next day, the Buckeyes sent Bailey, Frye, Hartline and Corey Dennis – who is expected to remain on staff in some capacity following the hiring of Bill O'Brien as co-offensive coordinator and quarterbacks coach – to see Lewisville, Texas, five-star offensive tackle Michael Fasusi (6-4, 285). Laurinaitis also visited with Forney, Texas, four-star linebacker Kelvion Riggins (6-0, 205), and Alford checked in on Woodbridge (Va.) Freedom three-star running back Jeff Overton (5-11, 187).

On Jan. 19, Alford went west to see Santa Ana (Calif.) Mater Dei four-star running back Jordon Davison (5-11, 203), while Day visited with Mobile (Ala.) C.F. Vigor four-star offensive tackle Micah DeBose (6-5, 315). New safeties coach Matt Guerrieri also made the trip to Virginia and Warwick High School, likely to visit four-star safety Messiah Delhomme (6-1, 196).

## Ohio State Has Big Group For Junior Day

Ohio State held a "Junior Day" on Jan. 20

for prospects in the 2025 and 2026 recruiting classes, and there was a positive response with over 20 high-profile targets making their way to Columbus to meet with Day and the rest of the coaching staff.

Beginning with 2025, the list of prospects included Pickerington (Ohio) North three-star wide receiver Preston Bowman (6-0, 190); Justin Hill; Lee; Toledo Whitmer four-star offensive tackle Carter Lowe (6-5, 290); Cleveland Shaker Heights four-star athlete Trey McNutt (6-0, 180); Washington, Okla., four-star tight end Nate Roberts (6-4, 235); Bellefontaine, Ohio, four-star quarterback Tavien St. Clair (6-4, 210); Columbus Upper Arlington three-star defensive end Cal Thrush (6-4, 230); Woodby; and Clayton (Ohio) Northmont four-star defensive end Cedric Works (6-4, 220).

Works has had a relatively quiet recruitment thus far, but it started to pick up on Jan. 10 after he received an offer from Georgia, and Ohio State will presumably remain heavily involved.

There were plenty of 2026 prospects as well, including Painesville (Ohio) Harvey running back Shahn Alston (5-9, 196); Conroy; Akron Hoban wide receiver Payton Cook (6-2, 170); Lewis Center (Ohio) Olentangy safe-

ty Kaden Gebhardt (6-1, 195); Akron Hoban four-star offensive tackle Sam Greer (6-8, 290); and Cleveland St. Ignatius three-star athlete Cody Haddad (6-1, 175), who is committed to Wisconsin.

Also in attendance were Akron Hoban cornerback Elbert Hill (5-10, 160); Mentor, Ohio, wide receiver Justen Hodge (6-1, 180); Cleveland Glenville defensive end Cincere Johnson (6-3, 225); Cleveland Glenville athlete Chris Newell Jr. (5-9, 165); and Avon Lake, Ohio, five-star offensive tackle Maxwell Riley (6-5, 263).

Additionally, Nashville (Tenn.) Christian School five-star quarterback Jared Curtis (6-4, 225) – a 2026 prospect – was expected to attend but rescheduled his visit for this spring after the hiring of O'Brien.

## Ohio State Issues Flurry Of Offers

Ohio State has issued double-digit offers since Buckeye Sports Bulletin last went to press, with targets in 2025 and 2026 receiving their chances to play for the Buckeyes.

Beginning in 2025, the Buckeyes sent out offers to Dinwiddie (Va.) County three-star athlete Harry Dalton III (5-10, 197); Douglasville (Ga.) County wide receiver James

Johnson (6-0, 175); Bradenton (Fla.) IMG Academy four-star linebacker Gavin Nix (6-0, 220); Cary (N.C.) Panther Creek three-star defensive lineman Trajen Odom (6-5, 265); Mesquite (Texas) Horn four-star offensive tackle Lamont Rogers (6-6, 305); and Wayne (N.J.) DePaul Catholic four-star safety DeShawn Stewart (6-2, 185).

Dalton projects as a running back and holds additional offers from Alabama, Duke, Florida, Maryland, Penn State and Tennessee, among others. Odom is the lowest-ranked among the Buckeyes' recent offers but holds additional offers from Florida State, Georgia, Miami (Fla.), North Carolina, Oregon and Tennessee, among others, after a junior season in which he collected 54 tackles (22 for loss) with four sacks and a forced fumble.

In 2026, Ohio State offered Conroy; Elkhart, Ind., four-star defensive end Mariyon Dye (6-5, 235); Jacksonville (Fla.) Bolles School tight end Corbyn Fordham (6-4, 205); and Haddad, who committed to the Badgers on Jan. 17 but was offered just three days later by Ohio State.

The Buckeyes appear to be an early favorite for the in-state Conroy, who holds additional offers from Arizona, Florida, Miami (Fla.), Michigan State and Oregon, among others,

## A Look Back At Recruiting From The Pages Of BSB

### 35 Years Ago – 1989

Ohio State nearly doubled its 1989 recruiting class during the holiday weekend of Jan. 14-16, landing verbal commitments from four more prep stars.

During the three-day weekend, Buckeye Sports Bulletin learned that the Buckeyes had sewn up commitments from Cincinnati Moeller lineman Jack Thrush; Lorain, Ohio, lineman Eric Morgan; Tiffin (Ohio) Columbian lineman Alan Kline; and Louisville (Ky.) Holy Cross running back Aaron Payne.

### 30 Years Ago – 1994

Ohio State's list of verbal football commitments hit the lucky number of 13, but some of the biggest names were still making OSU coaches and recruiting fans wait.

The Buckeyes were set to receive a much-anticipated verbal commitment from defensive back Damon Moore of Fostoria, Ohio. Moore was to officially announce his decision Jan. 19 but told BSB two days earlier that Ohio State was his choice.

"I just like everything about the place," Moore said. "Plus, when I was there on my visit, I became good friends with (fellow defensive backs) Anthony Gwinn and Shawn Springs. I think I'm really going to like it there."

Moore pushed to 13 the number of verbal commitments the Buckeyes had received so far. They also got verbals in the last week from defensive lineman Dan Gibbons of Birmingham (Mich.) Brother Rice and quarterback Steve Baird of Hilliard, Ohio.

### 25 Years Ago – 1999

It seemed unlikely that Pahokee, Fla., defensive back Anquan Boldin (6-1, 205, 4.39) would visit OSU. Rather, his decision would likely center around Florida, Florida State and Miami (Fla.). Auburn and Syracuse were also involved. OSU assistant Bill Conley was trying to get the Buckeyes on Boldin's dance card.

Boldin, a USA Today All-USA first-team pick, led Pahokee to the state title game his senior year as a quarterback and part-time DB. He rushed for 1,497 yards and 20 touchdowns, plus he threw for 2,842 yards and 36 touchdowns against just five interceptions. At defensive back, he made four interceptions. Boldin held a 3.1 GPA and scored an 18 on the ACT.

### 20 Years Ago – 2004

With recruiting season at full tilt as signing day neared, Ohio State coach Jim Tressel spent a week in Maui, Hawaii, coaching the senior all-star game, the Hula Bowl.

With 22 players committed to Ohio State for 2004, though, it appeared Tressel could afford to have his capable assistants

handle the bulk of the recruiting while he was in the 50th state. Among those committed to OSU were a few of the more prominent prospects in the nation.

Ted Ginn Jr., a defensive back out of Cleveland Glenville, was ranked the No. 2 prospect in the nation by Rivals.com. Meanwhile, linebacker Marcus Freeman of Huber Heights (Ohio) Wayne was No. 31 on the Rivals top 100 list.

With those two top Ohio players, plenty of other excellent in-state talent and several key out-of-state commitments, Tressel's class was getting high marks from national analysts with two weeks remaining in the '04 recruiting season.

"I think when everything is said and done, it will probably be a top-five at most, but maybe top-10 class in the entire country – at least," said Jeremy Crabtree of Rivals.com.

### 15 Years Ago – 2009

The Buckeyes had not yet extended a scholarship offer to Inkster, Mich., quarterback Devin Gardner, but one of their chief recruiting rivals had.

Notre Dame offered the 6-4, 196-pound Gardner, putting the Fighting Irish in the same boat as Michigan, Michigan State, Wisconsin and seven other schools.

"It feels good because I thought they weren't going to offer me anymore," the 2010 target told Scout. "I hadn't talked to them during the season so I didn't know if they knew how I was doing, but I guess they were following."

As a junior, Gardner threw for 26 touchdowns and rushed for 22 more while leading Inkster to a berth in the state title game. Scout already ranked him a four-star prospect.

The Buckeyes had shown Gardner interest, inviting him to a junior day scheduled for Jan. 25, the same day their men's basketball team hosted Michigan State. He unofficially checked out the Spartans on Dec. 3, and he was scheduled to visit Michigan as it hosted the Buckeyes on Jan. 17.

### 10 Years Ago – 2014

There appeared to be only one or two spots left in Ohio State's 2014 recruiting class, and one of them may have been saved for Cedar Grove, N.J., receiver David Njoku.

A 6-3, 218-pound three-star prospect whom Scout listed as a wideout but who projected as a tight end at the college level, Njoku received an offer from the Buckeyes on Jan. 21 and planned on visiting Columbus. A one-time Rutgers commit who reopened his recruitment in October, Njoku said that his former pledge was the reason Ohio State only recently offered him, and the interest was obviously mutual.

"They told me I can play anywhere because of my athletic ability," Njoku said of the Buckeyes. "And if I didn't commit to

Rutgers, (Ohio State said) I would have gotten offered a long time ago. I have always liked Ohio State since I was a kid."

### Five Years Ago – 2019

Active all over, Ohio State left no stone unturned with its new coaching staff out on the recruiting trail across the country. At multiple stops, the Buckeyes offered two players per school.

The first came Jan. 16 when OSU extended scholarships to Philadelphia St. Joseph's 2021 duo of quarterback Kyle McCord (6-3, 195) and wide receiver Marvin Harrison Jr. (6-3½, 174).

McCord held offers from Arizona, Baylor, Boston College, Central Michigan, Michigan, North Carolina, Penn State, Pittsburgh, Rutgers, Syracuse, Temple and West Virginia. He completed 201 of 302 passes for 2,883 yards (school record) and totaled 38 touchdowns as a sophomore in 2018, becoming the Philadelphia Catholic League MVP and leading St. Joseph's (13-0) to the Pennsylvania 6A State Championship.

Harrison held offers from Baylor, Florida, Penn State, Syracuse, and West Virginia. His father, Marvin Harrison, played 13 seasons in the NFL with the Indianapolis Colts from 1996-2008 with 1,102 receptions for 14,580 yards and 128 touchdowns. The Syracuse product is a member of the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

### One Year Ago – 2023

Millersburg (Ohio) West Holmes three-star running back Sam Williams-Dixon (5-11, 203) was only a three-star prospect, but he had already racked up an offer list that featured Cincinnati, Kentucky, Penn State, Pittsburgh, Rutgers and Tennessee, among others, in addition to receiving an offer from the Buckeyes on Jan. 12.

He rushed for nearly 1,300 yards and 41 touchdowns the past season after going for 35 touchdowns in his sophomore year for West Holmes. After missing out on a scholarship running back in 2023, it was likely that Ohio State would look to take two in 2024. The Buckeyes were involved with several top running backs in the class such as Bradenton (Fla.) IMG Academy five-star Jerrick Gibson (5-10, 200), Cincinnati Moeller four-star Jordan Marshall (5-11, 195) and Fort Lauderdale (Fla.) St. Thomas Aquinas four-star Stacy Gage (5-11, 200).

Williams-Dixon wasn't rated as highly as those prospects, but the offer showed that Ohio State clearly viewed Williams-Dixon as a take and potentially a good match with a topflight back in the class.

# ASK AN ANALYST

## With Allen Trieu of 247 Sports

**Ohio State had another impressive receiver class with Jeremiah Smith and Mylan Graham. What makes Brian Hartline such an effective recruiter for the Buckeyes?**

"I don't think it's rocket science. I mean, for one thing, I think he's built up, now, years of trust, where the kids can look at the results on the field. They're not only landing top receivers, but they're developing those guys. And when you have a bunch of first-round receivers and those guys were playing well in the pros, it's an easy sell, in addition to everything else that Ohio State has to offer. Then I think Hartline's personality and his effort on the trail also add into that. Having NFL success is huge, but the right person has to be able to sell that, and I think he's the right person. So it's just really the ideal mix of an outstanding recruiter with a personality who can relate to the kids, and then the success to be able to sell that."

**On the other side of the ball, what do you make of the addition of Philadelphia Imhotep Institute four-star defensive end Zahir Mathis (6-6, 225) in 2025 for Ohio State?**

"At this time of the year to get that little momentum – that's a position that they didn't do as well in the '24 class as you would hope, so it's huge to get it started in '25 at a position of need. That's an area of the coun-

try that I think they've done pretty well in. I think he fits the Ohio State mold of what they look for in an edge rusher. Long, athletic, again tons of potential, and I think he's going to be a really good college player. He's still just getting to the point where we're seeing him kind of round out his game and capitalizing on his natural tools."

**What impact will Michigan winning a national championship have on the Wolverines' recruiting efforts given everything going on with the program right now?**

"I think what happens with Jim Harbaugh in the next couple of weeks will matter some, and then from there, it's about keeping the staff together, because I do think their staff does a great job recruiting. So if they keep that largely intact, coming off of a national championship, I don't think they'll see too many negative effects. Michigan tends to recruit right to where they know they can be. And I mean that by saying like, they're not going to overextend themselves, they won't necessarily chase ghosts. They'll finish, a lot of the time, a little bit lower than maybe their fans would like. Sometimes they're in towards the bottom of the top 10, or in the teens after having a good season, but they do a pretty good job of balancing top-level guys vs. guys they know they can develop. They're going to take some mid-to-high three

stars, and those guys tend to do pretty well. I think that they're going to keep that approach, and it's worked for them so far."

**With the changes at Alabama, how do you see that impacting the Crimson Tide's current roster and recruiting classes, and could Ohio State be involved with some of those players and/or prospects?**

"I do think that they're going to have a momentary hit here, where they're going to have to either recruit some of those guys back to the roster or recruit some guys back to the class or fill those voids. Ultimately, they're going to be OK. I think Kalen DeBoer and his staff have done a good job over the years where they've proven themselves on the recruiting trail. I'm not too concerned about where it will end up. In the moment, they could lose some guys. I would suspect with that kind of talent leaving the roster in the class schools are going to go after them. Those are guys that can play at Ohio State. I'm sure Ohio State will be involved. It's a little bit too early to know exactly how involved and which of those guys Ohio State fans should keep an eye on, but they are going to monitor that, and there will be some guys who fit the bill for sure."

while the recruitment for Dye appears to be heating up, with recent offers from Oklahoma, Oregon and Texas A&M.

### Other Notes And Tidbits

- Former USC linebacker Tackett Curtis, a target of Ohio State in the transfer portal, announced his commitment to Wisconsin on Jan. 9 with three seasons of eligibility remaining.
- Former Alabama offensive tackle Kady Proctor, a target of Ohio State in the transfer portal, announced his commitment to Iowa on Jan. 20 with three seasons of eligibility remaining.
- Three prospects have listed Ohio State among their top schools since Buckeye Sports Bulletin last went to press, including

Savannah (Ga.) Calvary Day School three-star wide receiver Edward Coleman (5-10, 194), who had the Buckeyes in his top six along with Alabama, Florida State, Georgia, South Carolina and Tennessee. Norfolk (Va.) Maury four-star defensive end Ari Watford (6-5, 220) had Ohio State in his top six along with Clemson, Penn State, South Carolina, Syracuse and Virginia Tech, and Indianapolis Ben Davis four-star cornerback Mark Zackery IV (5-11, 164) had Ohio State in his top 10 with Cincinnati, Georgia, Michigan, Notre Dame, Oregon, Penn State, Purdue, Tennessee and USC.

- Carrollton, Ga., five-star quarterback Julian Lewis (6-1, 185), who is committed to USC but has continued to be pursued by Ohio State, announced on Jan. 16 that he is reclassifying from 2026 to the 2025 recruit-

ing class. With Ohio State already holding a quarterback pledge in 2025 from St. Clair, it likely ends the Buckeyes' pursuit of Lewis.

- Despite Michigan winning the national championship on Jan. 8, it has yet to translate to recruiting success. The Wolverines suffered a decommitment on Jan. 15 from Hollywood (Fla.) Chaminade-Madonna Prep four-star cornerback Chris Ewald

(6-0, 160), Michigan's top-ranked prospect in the 2025 recruiting class. He is the No. 87 overall prospect and No. 11 cornerback in his class.

*For the latest in Ohio State football recruiting news, be sure to visit [BuckeyeSports.com](http://BuckeyeSports.com), available for free to all Buckeye Sports Bulletin subscribers.*

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**TIM POND**, 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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# Michigan Wins First National Title Since 1997

Michigan capped off an undefeated 15-0 season on Jan. 8, defeating Washington 34-13 in the College Football Playoff National Championship Game to win the program's first championship since 1997 and the 12th in program history.

## BIG TEN NOTES Greg Wilson

Quarterback J.J. McCarthy threw for 140 yards on 10-of-18 passing while both Blake Corum and Donovan Edwards ran for two touchdowns each with 134 and 104 yards, respectively. Defensive back Mike Sainristil finished with a team-high eight tackles and had an 81-yard interception return in the win.

The Wolverines are the first national champion from the Big Ten since Ohio State won it all in 2014, with Alabama, Clemson, Georgia and LSU combining for each of the previous nine college football national championships. The Wolverines also became the first national champions since Miami (Fla.) in 2001 to lead at halftime in every game.

"I feel like this has been the perfect happy ending," Edwards said. "A lot of personal success, a lot of personal failures, but our ultimate goal was to win a national championship. There's no other feeling than to go through what we have and still come out on top. So perfect story, a lot of adversity – Coach (Jim) Harbaugh's not there for six games – perfect story."

The win, of course, does not come without controversy, because as Edwards referenced, Harbaugh served two separate three-game suspensions this season.

"It fueled us," Michigan defensive tackle Mason Graham said. "Everything we've been through, everything they tried to do to us, tried to discredit everything we did this season. Winning this game solidifies we're that team. Coach Harbaugh's on the plane and he doesn't get to go to our game against Penn State. Our back's been against the wall, but this team's different."

Harbaugh missed the first three games of the season due to a self-imposed suspension related to alleged recruiting violations, while he was also suspended for the final three games of the regular season by the Big Ten due to a violation of the conference's sportsmanship policy regarding the Wolverines' sign-stealing scandal.

Through nine seasons at Michigan, Harbaugh now holds an 86-25 record (60-17 in the Big Ten) with three conference championships and three College Football Playoff appearances.

### Harbaugh Wants Immunity In New Michigan Contract

Speaking of Harbaugh, shortly after Michigan's title win, yet another offseason began that features Harbaugh searching for another opportunity in the NFL.

Harbaugh, who was head coach of the San Francisco 49ers from 2011-14, has



FILE PHOTO

**HAIL TO THE VICTORS — Michigan completed an undefeated 15-0 season on Jan. 8, knocking off Washington 34-13 in the College Football Playoff National Championship Game to win the program's first title since 1997.**

interviewed for several NFL head coaching positions over the last several years. Since Michigan's season concluded, Harbaugh has already interviewed with the Los Angeles Chargers and Atlanta Falcons, and he was reportedly scheduled to hold a second round of interviews with those teams during the week of Jan. 22. But despite Harbaugh's pursuit of the NFL, Michigan president Santa Ono has said he is trying to do everything he can to keep Harbaugh.

"I'm doing my very best (to keep Harbaugh)," Ono said on Jan. 8. "And I hope that he will stay. As they said, we are champions. Those who stay will be champions."

Those hopes of keeping Harbaugh were reiterated by athletic director Warde Manuel, though he acknowledged that Harbaugh leaving is a potential reality.

"It doesn't matter about the stuff in the past. It doesn't matter what happens in the future," Manuel said. "He's always going to be somebody I'm proud of, who coached the University of Michigan and led this team. If he decides that he wants another opportunity to coach in the pros, then I'm going to be happy for him, sad for us, and we're going to move on and find the next person to lead."

But according to a report from Yahoo Sports' Dan Wetzel, should talks continue with Michigan and Harbaugh about a potential contract extension, Harbaugh wants it to include language that would give him immunity from being fired due to any findings that come from multiple NCAA investigations into the program.

The language Harbaugh seeks would include limiting Manuel's ability to fire Harbaugh "for cause," with the decision instead deliberated by a three-person arbitration panel.

The NCAA recently sent a notice of allegations to Michigan surrounding the investigation regarding recruiting violations, for which Harbaugh served a self-imposed three-game suspension. The sign-stealing investigation is still ongoing, but the NCAA

has yet to send a notice of allegations. Former Michigan staffer Connor Stalions, who was at the center of the scandal, resigned from his position in November.

Also according to Wetzel, if Harbaugh does move on to an NFL team, he is seeking a delay in the start date of his new contract so that the buyout owed to Michigan by Harbaugh's new team would be lower. His buyout is currently at \$1.5 million after it dropped from \$2.25 million on Jan. 11. In a new deal, Michigan would be looking to raise that number to \$4 million.

Wetzel reported that the financial terms of a possible contract between Harbaugh and Michigan are mostly settled. The language regarding his potential firing due to rules violations is what is holding the process up.

### Shannon Allowed To Rejoin Illini After Restraining Order

Illinois basketball player Terrence Shannon Jr., who was suspended in December after being charged with rape, rejoined his team on Jan. 19 after he filed a temporary restraining order against Illinois.

"Effective immediately, Terrence Shannon Jr. has been reinstated to full status as a University student-athlete and will be eligible for basketball practice and competition," Illinois associate chancellor Robin Kaler said in a statement.

The restraining order was requested originally earlier in the month on the grounds that the school made a "rush to judgement" when it suspended him in late December for the incident that allegedly occurred in September in Lawrence, Kan. Shannon waived his right to an initial hearing in Douglas County, Kan., the day before the judge made the ruling, and a preliminary hearing will be held on Feb. 23.

The ruling was made by Judge Colleen Lawless, a judge in the United States District Court of the Central District of Illinois. She ruled against any monetary damag-

es but did say the suspension could cause "harm" to Shannon. In a statement from Shannon's attorney, it said Shannon is happy to return to the basketball court.

"(Shannon) is grateful for today's ruling and looking forward to playing for the Illini again," the statement read. "(Shannon) is also thankful to his legal team, lead counsel Rob Lang, Steve Beckett, Mark Goldenberg, Zoe Spector, Tom Horscroft, and Mark Sutter."

The alleged incident occurred when Shannon traveled to Kansas for a football game on Sept. 8. A woman told police that Shannon had inappropriately touched her and sexually assaulted her at a bar. Josh Whitman, athletic director of Illinois, said the school originally learned about the investigation in September but said they didn't receive any "actionable" information until Dec. 27, when they suspended him.

### Tagovailoa Denied Waiver For Sixth Collegiate Season

Maryland quarterback Taulia Tagovailoa, who had entered the transfer portal and was seeking a sixth year of eligibility to improve his draft stock with one more year, had his request for an additional season denied by the NCAA despite support from Alabama and former head coach Nick Saban, under whom Tagovailoa played during his freshman season in 2019.

With Tagovailoa's waiver being denied after hopes of playing for a sixth season – reportedly at Miami (Fla.) – he instead has entered his name into the 2024 NFL draft, where he is considered a late-round prospect.

Tagovailoa recently completed his fifth season of college football, with the last four at Maryland, where he became the Big Ten career leader in passing yards with 11,256 yards, passing Purdue's Curtis Painter who had 11,163. He also set school records with 76 touchdown passes, 89 total touchdowns and a completion percentage of 67.1.

He led Maryland to three straight bowl appearances but opted out of the Music City Bowl, where the Terrapins beat Auburn 31-13 behind quarterbacks Billy Edwards Jr. and Cameron Edge.

### Gophers Hire New DC Hetherman From Rutgers

Minnesota hired Corey Hetherman as its new defensive coordinator on Jan. 8 to replace Joe Rossi, who left for the same position at Michigan State.

For the last two seasons, Hetherman has served as Rutgers' linebackers coach, but he does have experience as a coordinator with Maine from 2016-18 and James Madison from 2019-21.

Minnesota ranked 67th in the country and 10th in the Big Ten this past season in scoring defense, giving up 26.7 points per game. It was also 54th in total defense with 368.4 yards per game allowed, also 10th in the conference.

In his tenure with Maine, the defense improved each year he was there, moving up from 64th in the FCS in total defense in 2016 to 17th in 2018. During each of his three seasons at James Madison, the Dukes were top-10 in both scoring defense and total defense.

# Thornton Excelling In Leading Role With OSU

By **PATRICK ENGELS**

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

Last season, then-freshman guard Bruce Thornton flew under the radar on the national scale, becoming only an intriguing name to watch for this season after flashing in spurts as a promising second fiddle to NBA first-round draft selection Brice Sensabaugh.

That all changed at the start of this season, however. With Sensabaugh gone and the Buckeyes relying on Thornton to steer the ship, the sophomore has caught attention with his improved play, averaging a team-high 16.0 points and 4.4 assists along with 3.2 rebounds per contest, all an uptick from his averages of 10.6, 2.6 and 2.7 last year.

Thornton's improvements have impressed national experts and pundits, with NCAA.com and Big Ten Network analyst Andy Katz even anointing him as a "lock" to make the All-Big Ten first team a few weeks into the season. But it has also propelled opposing head coaches to key in on the guard in their game preparation for Ohio State, causing him to become the focal point of opposing defenses and face different coverages all season.

"Teams are committing multiple guys to him when he comes off ball screens more than they ever have," associate head coach Jake Diebler said on Jan. 5. "We're seeing teams that are going outside of what their base coverage is either earlier in games or throughout the course of the game more than that they have shown all year on film because Bruce has earned that."

Amid this growing attention from the media and opposing teams, though, Thornton has still found a way to thrive for the Buckeyes this year, ignoring the extra eyeballs and serving as Ohio State's unquestioned leader and the most consistent player this season.

The Fairburn, Ga. native, who has started every game for the Buckeyes since joining the program as a four-star prospect last season, said before this year began that he knew he would need to take on a larger role as both a player and leader, a challenge that became even more evident when he was named team captain before just his second year in the program.

"I feel like my voice is going to be a big, big part of this team, for the young guys and the transfers," he said on Sept. 25. "Just to show them how we play basketball at Ohio State. (Head coach Chris Holtmann) let me know I'm a captain this year. I'm going to take ownership of letting all the new guys know how we do things here, and we're going to be ready this year."

According to his teammates, Thornton has taken his captain title to heart all season, establishing a hardworking standard for the team – and most importantly the new players on the roster – through his actions and his words in practice. Senior center Zed Key said on Nov. 6 that Thornton's increasing leadership signals a major improvement in his development from last season, a change in mentality that has since trickled down to the rest of the team.

"He's grown tremendously," Key said.



FILE PHOTO

**SECOND-YEAR STAR** – Ohio State sophomore guard Bruce Thornton has taken his game and leadership to the next level in his second season with the Buckeyes.

"The coaching staff wants the most out of him, and he brings that to the table every day. He doesn't take days off, and that's what leaders do. The guys respect them and they listen to him. That just shows what type of basketball player he is and what type of person he is."

Holtmann has also taken notice of the strides Thornton has taken with his leadership this season. While the coach admitted that Thornton may not have felt as comfortable lending his voice and setting an example for his team during portions of last season, he said it has all changed this year, now bringing a grinding mentality to Ohio State's locker room.

"He has a better feel (for the game)," Holtmann said on Nov. 29. "Just more of a comfort level with things defensively and offensively. He certainly has more assertiveness in terms of as a player, but also in terms of leadership."

"It's really how he practices. He practices with great attention to detail, great focus. He's as everyday of a guy as I've ever coached in my career. What that does is allow him to be a pretty consistent player. The consistency of performance is a clear result of the consistency of his practice habits."

Thornton has made a positive impact on the team as the year progresses, but it also allowed him to improve upon his individual game and grow as a more well-rounded player. While he showed glimpses of being a star as a freshman, he still showed signs of inconsistency, mainly during the middle of the year when he hit a "rookie wall," averaging just 5.4 points on 19-of-70 shooting (27.1 percent) with 11 turnovers in 10 games from Jan. 1 through Feb. 2.

According to Holtmann, these struggles may have been attributed to his inability to play strong at the rim and drive through contact while also making plays off ball screens, two areas of his game that he thinks his

point guard vastly improved upon this season.

"I think a year ago at this time, I'm not sure he's finishing plays (at the rim) as much," Holtmann said on Dec. 5. "I think as last season wore on, we started to see him finish those plays more. Bruce has shown the ability to attack and get others involved, which is great."

"I had a guy say to me that it's remarkable how much he's grown in his ball-screen reads and his ability to play off ball screens from year one to year two. I saw it more toward the end of (last season) as he was getting better, but he has really gotten better at that. We knew his shooting was going to be good, but now the weapon that he has coming off ball screens is tremendous."

Thornton's growth as an all-around point guard was most evident in what was perhaps Ohio State's most impressive win so far this season in the Emerald Coast Classic, where it upset then-No. 17 Alabama 92-81 on Nov. 24 behind a career-high 29 points from Thornton.

With the Buckeyes facing off against a talented Crimson Tide backcourt, Thornton stole the show with a complete performance that also included three rebounds, four assists and a steal, along with 4-of-6 shooting from beyond the arc. He followed up his career night with another strong showing in the Buckeyes' 86-65 win over Santa Clara on Nov. 25, finishing with 13 points, five rebounds and seven assists.

"Bruce gave us leadership and competitiveness (during the Emerald Coast Classic)," Holtmann said after the Santa Clara win. "He played with a real confidence that good players play with. Bruce just led us with his competitiveness when we needed it."

Thornton's Emerald Coast Classic performance seemed to propel him to greater heights. He has reached double figures in

all but three games this season, including five 20-point performances, all while logging 32.6 minutes per contest. This consistent play has forced him to emerge as the main emphasis of opposing defenses' preparations, a major challenge that Diebler said Thornton has – for the most part – met so far this season.

"Bruce has handled it really well," Diebler said. "His assist-turnover (4.4-1.0) ratio speaks to how he's handled that. His efficiency speaks to how he's handled that. Now, he has to continue to improve. We have high, high-level trust in him and his ability to read and his ability to adapt within a play."

Despite emerging as Ohio State's clear No. 1 scoring option this year, Thornton's sophomore year has not come without some adversity. In his last six games as of Jan. 20, he succumbed to a midseason shooting slump, combining to shoot just 36.0 percent from the field and 21.1 percent from three.

Holtmann said after the Michigan loss on Jan. 15 that Thornton must remain confident in his abilities and not hang his head throughout both his and the team's slumps, a mentality that he seems to be committing to as the season trudges along.

"He's a young player who cares so much about the team and about winning," Holtmann said. "Sometimes you can almost care at such a level that you press, and he has to be careful that he just allows who he is, as a great leader and great player, to come through. He has to play with a little bit of a mindset of, 'Hey, I'm going to do my very best, and whatever happens, happens.' Because he is so committed to this team and this program and what we're doing."

"You can't (think about a shooting slump), you can't think about that," Thornton said after the Michigan game where he was 8 of 19 from the floor and 2 of 7 from deep. "You have to shoot the next wide-open one. What would it look like if me, (Jamison Battle), (Roddy Gayle Jr.) or Dale (Bonner), when we have a wide-open three and we don't shoot it? Now they're going to play under, and now the confidence is all messed up."

"Even though I'm not shooting well at all, I have to shoot the next one like I'm going to make it every time. That's how my thought process is. That's the confidence I put in my teammates and the coaching staff that we're going to make our next shot, regardless of who it is. I feel like when the time comes, we're going to hit those big shots and we're going to win big-time games."

But no matter what his offensive numbers may look like, Thornton has earned the utmost trust of his coaches and teammates through his play and his confident mentality, something that will help both him and the team as they attempt to emerge through a difficult Big Ten stretch and position themselves for a postseason run.

"I don't care if he's 0 of 10, he has to be able to take the 11th good one for this team," Holtmann said. "He has the freedom to do that. If it's a good look, he needs to take that shot for us. I don't care if he just went 0-for the night. He brings other things to help his team win. He's going to be on the floor a lot, and he's going to make a lot of big shots for us."

# Buckeyes Still Confident Despite Recent Slide

After a strong 12-2 start to the season, Ohio State has once again experienced a regression in January. Plagued by poor second-half shooting, turnovers and an inability to hold onto late leads, the Buckeyes have dropped three of the last five Big Ten contests to drop their record to 13-5 and 3-4 in conference play as of Jan. 20.

## COURT REPORT Patrick Engels

Ohio State's slide this year draws similarities to its midseason struggles last year, when, after a 10-3 start, the Buckeyes dropped five straight games and started a stretch of 14 losses in 15 tries.

While the Buckeyes' poor start to Big Ten play this season has given fans flashbacks of last season, head coach Chris Holtmann said he feels this team is more equipped to withstand adversity and emerge on the other side a better team for the rest of conference play.

"I have a high-level belief in this team," Holtmann said on Jan. 12. "I really do. And I'm being completely honest, I have

## 2023-24 Ohio State Men's Basketball Statistics

### 13-5 Overall (3-4 Big Ten) Statistics through games of Jan. 20

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	18-18	587-32.6	93-225	.413	32-101	.317	70-86	.814	6-51	57-3.2	29-1	79	18	1	26	288-16.0
BATTLE, Jamison	18-18	553-30.7	92-197	.467	53-119	.445	22-24	.917	24-73	97-5.4	34-1	24	26	4	7	259-14.4
GAYLE JR., Roddy	18-18	569-31.6	88-196	.449	17-58	.293	62-76	.816	21-70	91-5.1	40-0	55	50	1	11	255-14.2
KEY, Zed	18-1	321-17.8	52-91	.571	2-6	.333	48-66	.727	42-45	87-4.8	37-0	12	15	9	5	154-8.6
OKPARA, Felix	17-17	392-23.0	49-79	.620	0-2	.000	15-25	.600	44-85	129-7.6	44-1	10	15	44	5	113-6.6
BONNER, Dale	18-0	357-19.8	32-102	.314	15-51	.294	16-22	.727	5-50	55-3.1	22-0	27	10	3	13	95-5.3
MIDDLETON, Scotty	16-0	270-16.9	27-72	.375	14-35	.400	7-15	.467	9-19	28-1.8	16-0	15	11	5	4	75-4.7
MAHAFFEY, Evan	18-18	404-22.5	32-76	.421	1-10	.100	17-22	.773	29-47	76-4.2	37-0	30	22	11	25	82-4.6
ROYAL, Devin	15-0	113-7.5	16-30	.533	2-6	.333	8-15	.533	12-16	28-1.9	16-0	6	9	5	1	42-2.8
BAUMANN, Colby	2-0	04-1.8	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	7-0	25-3.5	0-7	.000	0-6	.000	0-0	.000	1-1	2-0.3	5-0	3	5	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									32-25	57		8				
<b>Total</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>3630</b>	<b>484-1084</b>	<b>.446</b>	<b>138-401</b>	<b>.344</b>	<b>270-357</b>	<b>.756</b>	<b>226-489</b>	<b>715-39.7</b>	<b>286-3</b>	<b>264</b>	<b>191</b>	<b>83</b>	<b>99</b>	<b>1376-76.4</b>
<b>Opponents</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>3625</b>	<b>445-1075</b>	<b>.414</b>	<b>123-367</b>	<b>.335</b>	<b>185-275</b>	<b>.673</b>	<b>188-418</b>	<b>606-33.7</b>	<b>339-9</b>	<b>186</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>92</b>	<b>1198-66.6</b>

a high-level belief in this team and what we're doing. Last year is last year. This is a different group. The leadership is different, and it's early in the season.

"I think that the challenge for us right now is to take this (loss against Wisconsin on Jan. 10) and learn from it and grow. We have to be tougher in certain areas. We have to be able to finish plays, but I real-

ly have a high-level belief in this group. I can't emphasize that enough."

Holtmann's unwavering belief in his team has trickled down to his players, such as fifth-year forward Jamison Battle, the Buckeyes' second-leading scorer this season at 14.4 points per game. He said on Jan. 12 that, despite the team's overall youth, he believes his team has enough experience and intangibles to right the ship and turn the Buckeyes' close losses into wins.

"I think so," Battle said after being asked if his team has enough experience to close out games. "The thing is, we're still learning and we're still growing. There are still a lot of young pieces on this team, and still, there are older guys on this team who have experience. And I think that's on me to show that experience.

"Regardless if I haven't won a lot of Big Ten games, I still feel like I played in a lot of meaningful ones. For me, I'll take the responsibility in that aspect to where I have to be a leader. In the end, we have plenty of experience, and we just have to trust it. We have to understand that with those experiences, we've learned, we have scars. Regardless of if I was here last year or not, there's plenty of experience on this team."

Despite the confidence in his team, Battle said that he and his teammates still need to fine-tune their game if they want to return to the winning ways this season. For him, this starts with the small things, something he feels his team has been lacking over this stretch.

"The biggest thing for us to close out games is to focus on little details," Battle said, "just honing in on those little details. Because in the end, those little details ultimately lead to big things, and that big thing is losing games.

"If we focus on those details, whether it's boxing out, rebounding, being in position, stuff like that, where those little things are shored up, that's where games are won and games are lost."

### Holtmann Wants To Improve Scoring Depth

Through the first 18 games of the season, Ohio State has established a formidable scoring trio of Battle (14.4 points per

game) and sophomore guards Roddy Gayle Jr. (14.2) and Bruce Thornton (16.0), a group the team has relied on to power them on the offensive side.

Outside of the three Buckeyes, however, the team has gotten little production all year with the next two leading scorers – forward Zed Key and center Felix Okpara – averaging just 8.6 and 6.6 points per game, respectively, on a combined 9.4 shots per contest.

Ohio State's major drop-off in scoring – combined with the recent shooting struggles of its top scoring trio – has emerged as one of the leading contributors to the team's January struggles, an issue that Holtmann sees as something that must be addressed.

"We really do need some additional scoring from a couple of guys," Holtmann said on Jan. 16. "We need somebody to come up and give us 10 to 12 points. That's what you need in Big Ten play because (teams) are so keyed on your main guys. That's what we're looking for is the ability to have some guys step up to do that."

While Key and Okpara have both shown that they are capable of reaching double figures on a given night, Holtmann pointed to some other players who need to step up and provide a much-needed lift for the group on offense.

The coach first listed freshman forward Devin Royal as someone who can provide a boost for the Buckeyes on offense. Despite Royal averaging just 2.8 points per game so far, Holtmann said the first-year has shown significant signs of progress on the offensive end, a promising development that was evident in his efficient performance against Michigan on Jan. 15 where he netted seven points on 3-of-5 shooting in just seven minutes of action.

"He's a guy that can provide some of that (offensive production), for sure," Holtmann said. "I thought Devin gave us a great lift in the first half. I was proud of him. He did some really good things. His physicality and ability to rebound and finish around the basket are strengths, and I think you're going to see that here in the next coming weeks."



FILE PHOTO

**JANUARY SLIDE** — Fifth-year forward Jamison Battle (pictured) is one of several players hoping to lead Ohio State out of yet another January slump under head coach Chris Holtmann.



## OHIO STATE MEN'S BASKETBALL

Holtmann also pointed to a player within his starting lineup as someone who will be asked to do more on offense, that being sophomore guard Evan Mahaffey, who has scored just 4.6 points per game this year, though he did post a career-high 16 points in Ohio State's 79-67 win over Penn State on Jan. 20. Holtmann said he thinks Mahaffey has increasingly become a weapon with his interior scoring, making him an important offensive weapon moving forward.

"I think he's growing," Holtmann said. "You see him going through some ups and downs, but we're seeing some of his growth and confidence (come to light). He's getting to his spots, and that was good to see. It's exciting to see. He just has to keep working on his finishing."

### Holtmann Calls For Primetime Home Games

Ohio State's matchup against Indiana on Jan. 6 had 16,584 raucous fans pack into Assembly Hall, a vintage Hoosier crowd that Holtmann said was only elevated by the game falling on a weekend and tipping off in prime time.

"You were pretty wired after that game," Holtmann said on Jan. 8. "That was a volatile crowd, a Saturday night, 8 p.m. tip."

This type of environment, which helped the home team Hoosiers overcome a nine-point second-half deficit and emerge with a 71-65 win, is something Holtmann said he wants to replicate at Value City Arena, a venue that has been heavily criticized in recent years for having low attendance and a lack of home-court advantage.

However, the coach thinks the crowd has not been able to reach full throat in recent years due to many of the team's home games landing on a weekday – or, if on a weekend, tipping off in the afternoon – a recent trend that he said the program is looking to fix.

"I have made that known over and over to the league about the weekend tip times," Holtmann said. "Both (athletic director Gene Smith) and I have discussed it in the offseason. I have been on that, because it seems like, to me, (we're playing) every year at Indiana on a weekend, a Saturday night tip. We will be at Michigan State (Feb. 25, 4 p.m.) on a weekend, a Sunday tip. I get why they do it. It's TV, and that's why they're doing it. I get all that, but you'd like to be able to have those in return."

Ohio State has had just five of its 13 weekend home games tip off later than 1 p.m. since Value City Arena returned to full attendance in the 2021-22 season, the latest being the team's 84-74 win over Minnesota this season on Dec. 3 which drew

10,481 fans and tipped off at 6:30 p.m. Conversely, the Buckeyes have had seven of their 14 road weekend games the past three seasons tip off at 6 p.m. or later, including two 8 p.m. starts in Assembly Hall.

These inequities in weekend tip-off times will continue for the rest of the season. The team's only primetime weekend tilt left on the schedule will be held in Evanston, Ill., where the team will face Northwestern at 8:30 p.m. on Jan. 27. Remaining home weekend games will tip off at 4 p.m. on Feb. 10 against Maryland, 1 p.m. on Feb. 18 against Purdue, 4 p.m. on Feb. 25 against Michigan State and 4 p.m. on March 3 against Michigan.

The Buckeyes averaged 10,554 fans through their first 11 home games this season when Buckeye Sports Bulletin went to press, ranking ninth in the Big Ten.

"There's not a better fan base than Buckeye nation," associate coach Jake Diebler said on Jan. 5. "And we feel their support. Even the crowds we've had, the energy has been really, really good. And we feel that. I have no doubt that that support is going to continue to grow and people are going to continue to come out and support this team."

### Other Notes And Tidbits

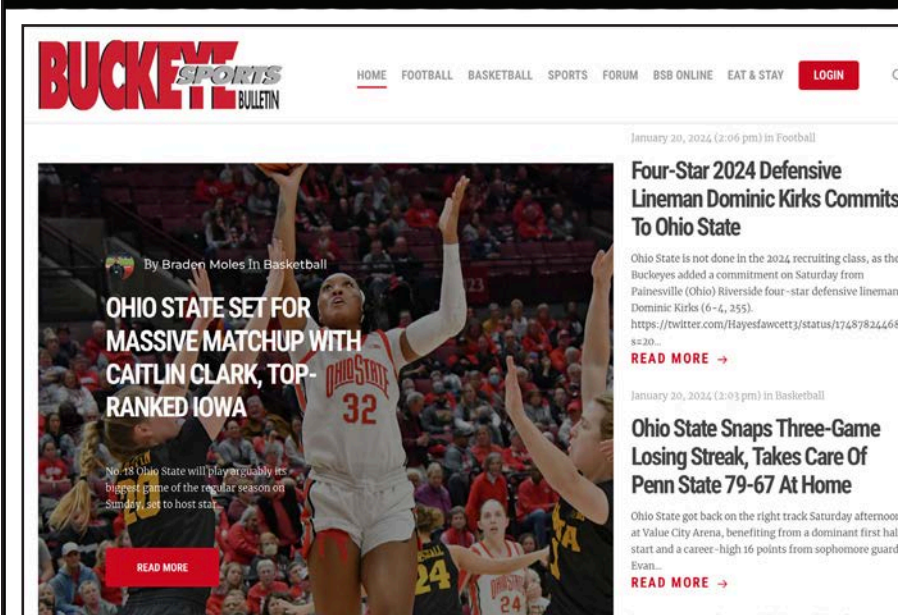
- Former Ohio State guard Duane Washington Jr. signed a two-way contract with the New York Knicks on Jan. 3. Washington was previously waived by the Knicks on Nov. 27 after suffering a thumb injury, just over one month after he was first cut by the franchise on Oct. 21, only to be signed again to a two-way contract on Oct. 22. Washington has yet to see the floor this season for New York.

- Former Ohio State and current Utah Jazz forward Brice Sensabaugh recorded his first career NBA point on Jan. 12 on a driving basket during the fourth quarter of the team's 145-113 win over the Toronto Raptors. Sensabaugh, who appeared in just three games prior to the Jan. 12 contest, then scored his first three-point basket, giving him five points and two total assists on the night.

- Cleveland Richmond Heights four-star shooting guard Dorian Jones, a 2025 prospect, placed Ohio State in his top 10 list of preferred schools on Jan. 8. The Buckeyes are joined by Alabama, Arkansas, Cincinnati, Houston, Illinois, Missouri, Oklahoma, Rutgers and USC. Jones, who visited the program the weekend of Sept. 9 for the football team's home opener against Youngstown State, is the nation's 47th-best prospect, eighth-best shooting guard and No. 2 overall player in Ohio.

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# Ohio State Snaps Three-Game Losing Streak

By **PATRICK ENGELS**

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

Ohio State played three hard-fought conference games since Buckeye Sports Bulletin last went to press, going 1-2 with a win over Penn State on Jan. 20 and a pair of difficult losses to then-No.15 Wisconsin on Jan. 10 and Michigan on Jan. 15.

The win over the Nittany Lions snapped a three-game losing streak for head coach Chris Holtmann's team, giving them their first conference victory since Jan. 3. It also gave the program just its fourth win in January dating back to the 2022-23 season.

While the Buckeyes returned to the win column against Penn State, Ohio State – as of Jan. 20 – still had yet to earn a road victory against a Big Ten opponent in its last 12 attempts, with its last win coming at Northwestern on Jan. 1, 2023.

## Buckeyes Fall Late To Badgers

Ohio State succumbed to poor shooting down the stretch and a dominant late-game performance from Badgers guard Max Klesmit on Jan. 10 to fall to Wisconsin 71-60 in front of 11,276 fans at Value City Arena.

The Buckeyes (12-4, 2-3) led 56-52 with 6:14 left in the game but had their advantage quickly slip away down the stretch due to the efforts of the Badgers (12-3, 4-0), who outscored Ohio State 19-4

– with 12 of those points coming from Klesmit – the rest of the way. The Buckeyes made just two of their last 10 shots while Wisconsin shot 6 of 7 in that same span.

“We didn’t make shots,” Holtmann said. “We missed a couple of free throws, which were critical. And then we had probably two breakdowns defensively. But we have to be able to make those clean, easy looks.”

Contrary to the end of the contest, the Buckeyes’ offense came out of the gates firing, connecting on six of their first eight shots to jump out to a 13-8 lead. Ohio State’s early lead then grew to 25-17 due to the shooting prowess of fifth-year forward Jamison Battle, who connected on a pair of step-back three-pointers with the shot clock expiring.

That was the largest lead they held all half, though, as the Badgers got back in the game with a 9-3 run to trail 28-26 with 3:55 remaining. The Buckeyes’ lead was brought back up to four, 33-29 with 1:49 until the break on Battle’s fourth triple of the half, but Wisconsin closed the frame with a 35-33 lead after back-to-back triples by John Blackwell and Connor Essegian.

A slow start from both teams coming out halftime allowed the Buckeyes to stay within reach, and they trailed 43-42 with 13:25 left. But Wisconsin instantly responded with five straight points to go back up 48-42.

The game then turned on a dime, with the Buckeyes utilizing an 8-0 run – capped by an and-one from sophomore center Fe-



FILE PHOTO

**GIVING HIS ALL** – Ohio State sophomore guard Bruce Thornton led the Buckeyes with 19 points in their 73-65 loss to Michigan on Jan. 15.

lix Okpara and a Scotty Middleton triple after a block from Okpara on the other end – to retake the lead, 50-48, with 9:58 remaining.

Ohio State’s lead was at 56-54 with 5:49 left, but a three from Klesmit quieted the crowd and put the Badgers back up by one. This sparked a scorching sequence for the junior, who connected on a layup and another three on consecutive possessions to allow his team to take control of the game and lead 62-56 with 3:12 remaining.

The Buckeyes closed to 64-60 with 1:39 on the clock after a basket from sophomore guard Roddy Gayle Jr., but the Badgers responded with a driving layup from guard Chucky Hepburn. A missed one-and-one free-throw attempt from sophomore guard Bruce Thornton on the other end killed any chance of a Buckeye rally, allowing Wisconsin to end the game on a 7-0 run.

“I have a high-level belief in this team and what we’re doing,” Holtmann said. “This is a different group (than last year). The leadership is different. The challenge for us right now is to take this and learn from it and grow.”

The Buckeyes were led in the loss by Battle and Thornton, who scored 18 and 13 points, respectively, with Battle hitting 4 of 5 five from beyond the arc and pulling down eight rebounds. Thornton passed out a game-high six assists. Okpara had seven rebounds and three blocks to go with seven points. Wisconsin was led by

Klesmit and guard A.J. Storr, who contributed 18 and 17 points, respectively, with all of Klesmit’s points coming in the second half.

## OSU’s Late-Game Woes Continue Against U-M

Ohio State (12-5, 2-4) suffered its third straight conference loss on Jan. 15 to Michigan (7-10, 2-4), overcoming a 12-point second-half deficit to take a late lead but ultimately falling flat in the game’s final minutes to suffer a 73-65 defeat at the Crisler Center before a crowd of 12,202.

The Buckeyes trailed 55-43 with 11:46 remaining in the game but stormed back with a 16-0 run in 3:48 to lead 59-55. Ohio State could not complete the comeback, though, scoring just six points and missing 12 of its 15 shots the rest of the way to allow the Wolverines to secure the victory.

“I loved our fight in the second half,” Holtmann said. “We had some really, really good stuff in those stretches. Obviously, we have to finish games and close out games better. But I thought there were some real positives that we can take into this week.”

Despite the frigid temperature outside, Ohio State’s offense jumped out to a hot start against Michigan, connecting on three of its first four shots and benefiting from six Wolverine misses in eight tries to take an early 8-5 lead. Michigan responded in the ensuing minutes, tying the score at 15 with 11:09 left in the half following

Wisconsin 71, Ohio State 60									
Jan. 10, 2024									
Value City Arena • Columbus									
	1	2	F						
Wisconsin (12-3, 4-0)	35	36	71						
Ohio State (12-4, 2-3)	33	27	60						
Wisconsin	Total	FG	FT	Reb.	A	PF	Pts.		
	Min	M-A	M-A	O-D					
Klesmit	33	5-9	6-6	0-3	2	0	18		
Storr	29	8-15	0-0	0-3	1	2	17		
Wahl	30	4-6	3-4	1-4	2	3	11		
Hepburn	37	3-8	0-0	1-3	4	3	7		
Crowl	28	2-8	1-1	3-3	3	2	5		
Winter	11	3-5	0-0	0-2	0	1	7		
Blackwell	10	1-3	0-0	0-1	1	0	3		
Essegian	8	1-3	0-0	0-2	0	0	3		
Gilmore	11	0-0	0-0	0-1	1	2	0		
McGee	3	0-0	0-0	0-1	0	0	0		
<b>Totals</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>27-57</b>	<b>10-11</b>	<b>5-23</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>71</b>		
<b>Percentages: FG:</b> 47.4%. <b>FT:</b> 90.9%. <b>Three-point field goals:</b> 7-22 (Hepburn 1-6, Klesmit 2-4, Storr 1-3, Winter 1-3, Essegian 1-3, Crowl 0-2, Blackwell 1-1). <b>Team rebounds:</b> 4. <b>Blocked shots:</b> 3 (Crowl 2, Wahl). <b>Turnovers:</b> 5 (Crowl 2, Storr, Wahl, Hepburn). <b>Steals:</b> 5 (Hepburn 4, Wahl).									
Ohio State	Total	FG	FT	Reb.	A	PF	Pts.		
	Min	M-A	M-A	O-D					
Battle	38	7-11	0-0	1-7	0	2	18		
Thornton	37	6-16	0-2	0-2	6	1	13		
Gayle Jr.	35	4-13	1-2	0-3	2	2	9		
Okpara	31	3-3	1-1	2-5	0	2	7		
Mahaffey	22	2-3	0-1	0-2	1	2	4		
Middleton	20	2-5	0-2	0-1	1	2	5		
Key	9	1-3	2-2	1-0	0	1	4		
Bonner	8	0-1	0-0	0-1	0	0	0		
<b>Totals</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>25-55</b>	<b>4-10</b>	<b>4-21</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>60</b>		
<b>Percentages: FG:</b> 45.5%. <b>FT:</b> 40.0%. <b>Three-point field goals:</b> 6-18 (Battle 4-5, Thornton 1-5, Gayle 0-4, Middleton 1-3, Key 0-1). <b>Team rebounds:</b> 8. <b>Blocked shots:</b> 7 (Okpara 3, Middleton 2, Battle, Mahaffey). <b>Turnovers:</b> 8 (Gayle 3, Battle, Thornton, Okpara, Mahaffey, Team). <b>Steals:</b> 2 (Mahaffey 2). <b>Officials:</b> Watson, Kissinger, Simmons. <b>Attendance:</b> 11,276.									

Michigan 73, Ohio State 65									
Jan. 15, 2024									
Crisler Center • Ann Arbor, Mich.									
	1	2	F						
Ohio State (12-5, 2-4)	28	37	65						
Michigan (7-10, 2-4)	37	36	73						
Ohio State	Total	FG	FT	Reb.	A	PF	Pts.		
	Min	M-A	M-A	O-D					
Thornton	38	8-19	1-1	1-5	2	2	19		
Gayle Jr.	34	3-8	6-6	0-2	0	3	12		
Okpara	35	5-8	0-0	5-4	2	2	10		
Mahaffey	23	3-5	2-2	2-3	0	1	8		
Battle	25	2-10	0-0	0-5	0	3	5		
Royal	7	3-5	1-1	2-1	0	0	7		
Bonner	13	1-4	0-0	0-2	3	1	2		
Key	14	0-2	1-2	0-0	1	1	1		
Middleton	9	0-3	1-2	0-1	0	0	1		
Chatman	2	0-2	0-0	0-1	0	0	0		
<b>Totals</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>25-66</b>	<b>12-14</b>	<b>10-24</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>65</b>		
<b>Percentages: FG:</b> 37.9%. <b>FT:</b> 85.7%. <b>Three-point field goals:</b> 3-25 (Battle 1-8, Thornton 2-7, Gayle 0-3, Bonner 0-2, Middleton 0-2, Chatman 0-2, Royal 0-1). <b>Team rebounds:</b> 4. <b>Blocked shots:</b> 5 (Okpara 4, Thornton). <b>Turnovers:</b> 4 (Gayle 2, Thornton, Okpara). <b>Steals:</b> 5 (Thornton 4, Key).									
Michigan	Total	FG	FT	Reb.	A	PF	Pts.		
	Min	M-A	M-A	O-D					
Nkamhoua	37	9-21	0-0	1-5	4	3	20		
Williams II	35	6-9	1-2	1-4	3	1	18		
McDaniel	39	6-16	0-0	0-3	4	0	15		
Burnett	37	2-4	2-4	1-9	4	2	7		
Reed Jr.	28	2-8	2-2	4-4	0	3	6		
Tschetter	15	2-4	2-2	1-0	0	3	7		
Howard	8	0-1	0-0	1-2	0	3	0		
Llewellyn	1	0-0	0-0	0-0	0	0	0		
<b>Totals</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>27-64</b>	<b>7-10</b>	<b>9-27</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>73</b>		
<b>Percentages: FG:</b> 42.9%. <b>FT:</b> 70.0%. <b>Three-point field goals:</b> 12-23 (Nkamhoua 2-8, McDaniel 3-6, Williams 5-5, Burnett 1-2, Tschetter 1-1, Howard 0-1). <b>Team rebounds:</b> 6. <b>Blocked shots:</b> 3 (Tschetter 2, Burnett). <b>Turnovers:</b> 9 (McDaniel 3, Reed 3, Nkamhoua 2, Burnett). <b>Steals:</b> 1 (Burnett). <b>Officials:</b> Green, Groover, Walton. <b>Attendance:</b> 12,202.									

# OHIO STATE MEN'S BASKETBALL

## Ohio State 79, Penn State 67

Jan. 20, 2024  
Value City Arena • Columbus

	1	2	F
Penn State (9-10, 3-5)	19	48	67
Ohio State (13-5, 3-4)	33	46	79

Penn State	Total	FG	FT	Reb.	A			PF	Pts.
					M-A	M-A	O-D		
Clary	29	5-16	0-0	0-1	2	2	2	13	
Kern	27	5-10	2-3	1-3	2	3	12		
Baldwin Jr.	35	4-11	0-0	0-1	3	2	10		
Wahab	16	2-7	0-0	5-5	0	1	4		
Hicks	20	1-6	0-0	1-2	1	1	3		
Johnson	20	5-6	0-0	1-6	0	2	13		
Brown	7	2-4	0-0	0-0	1	0	6		
Dunn	22	1-7	2-2	0-1	0	3	4		
Lilley	14	1-3	0-0	2-3	1	2	2		
O'Boyle	8	0-0	0-0	0-1	0	2	0		
Aire	2	0-0	0-0	0-0	0	3	0		
<b>Totals</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>26-70</b>	<b>4-5</b>	<b>10-23</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>67</b>		

**Percentages:** FG: 37.1%. FT: 80.0%. **Three-point field goals:** 11-24 (Hicks 1-5, Clary 3-4, Johnson 3-4, Baldwin 2-4, Brown 2-4, Dunn 0-2, Kern 0-1). **Team rebounds:** 3. **Blocked shots:** 0. **Turnovers:** 8 (Lilley 2, Clary, Kern, Baldwin, Wahab, O'Boyle, Team). **Steals:** 3 (Baldwin, Wahab, Lilley).

Ohio State	Total	FG	FT	Reb.	A			PF	Pts.
					M-A	M-A	O-D		
Gayle Jr.	33	6-13	4-4	2-2	5	1	16		
Mahaffey	32	6-9	4-4	0-5	0	1	16		
Battle	29	4-6	2-2	0-6	1	1	11		
Okpara	29	4-9	0-0	6-8	1	3	8		
Thornton	32	1-9	0-0	0-5	6	1	3		
Key	12	2-5	6-7	1-2	0	0	10		
Royal	5	3-3	2-2	0-0	0	1	8		
Bonner	25	1-4	4-6	0-6	2	0	7		
Chatman	3	0-1	0-0	0-0	0	0	0		
<b>Totals</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>27-59</b>	<b>22-25</b>	<b>9-34</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>79</b>		

**Percentages:** FG: 45.8%. FT: 88.0%. **Three-point field goals:** 3-18 (Thornton 1-7, Bonner 1-4, Gayle 0-3, Battle 1-2, Key 0-1, Chatman 0-1). **Team rebounds:** 0. **Blocked shots:** 5 (Okpara 3, Mahaffey 2). **Turnovers:** 6 (Thornton 2, Gayle, Mahaffey, Okpara, Chatman). **Steals:** 6 (Bonner 2, Mahaffey 2, Gayle, Thornton). **Officials:** Barlow, Comer, Carstensen. **Attendance:** 15,267.

a basket from forward Olivier Nkamhoua.

Nkamhoua's basket started an 8-0 run that gave U-M a 21-15 lead with 8:35 left. Ohio State responded with an Okpara basket and two Gayle free throws to cut the deficit to 21-19, but Michigan reclaimed momentum with threes from Terrance Williams II and Nkamhoua, starting another 8-0 Michigan run that allowed them to lead 29-19 with 5:28 left in the half.

Ohio State scored five straight points to cut the deficit to 29-24 on a basket from Okpara, but it was answered by the Wolverines' sixth three of the half – this time from guard Dug McDaniel – that brought the lead back up to 32-24 with 3:10 before the break. Michigan later closed the half with another McDaniel three, giving the team its seventh triple of the frame and a 37-28 lead heading into the locker room.

Ohio State started the second half with a pair of Evan Mahaffey baskets to cut the deficit to 37-32. This sparked another back-and-forth between the two teams that kept the Buckeyes in reach of the Wolverines, trailing just 43-39 with 16:37 left.

The Buckeyes continued to keep the game close as the middle portion of the half progressed, cutting it to 47-43 after a Gayle reverse layup. But Michigan came back with another 8-0 run – aided by another two threes from the home team – to go up 55-43.

This was the largest lead the Wolverines had all game, though.

After a Dale Bonner basket stopped the spurt with 11:18 left, Ohio State stormed back with the 16-0 run that allowed it to

take a 59-55 lead, capped by a Thornton three. It was OSU's first lead since the 11:25 mark of the first half. But Ohio State's lead was erased due to a 12-2 run that gave Michigan a 67-61 advantage with 2:26 left.

The Buckeyes had one last gasp, getting a basket from Thornton to cut the deficit to 69-65 with 52 seconds left. But Michigan connected on a three-pointer by Williams with 33 seconds left to put the contest away.

"Things are not going our way, in a lot of ways," Thornton said. "But you have to keep fighting each and every day. You just can't quit and just (need to) keep going."

Ohio State was led by Thornton, who had 19 points on 8-of-19 shooting and four steals. Gayle (12) and Okpara (10) also reached double figures, while Okpara had a team-high nine rebounds and five blocks. Michigan was led by Nkamhoua (20), Williams (18) and McDaniel (15).

Michigan did much of its damage from long range, hitting on 12 of 23 from beyond the arc for 52.2 percent. Ohio State, meanwhile, was ice cold from distance, connecting on just 3 of 25 shots for a dismal 12.0 percent.

### Three-Game Skid Snapped Vs. Penn State

Ohio State returned to the win column on Jan. 20 in front of 15,267 fans at Value City Arena, defeating Penn State 79-67 behind a career-high 16 points from Mahaffey.

The Buckeyes (13-5, 3-4) shot just 16.7 percent (3 of 18) from deep but shot 45.8 percent overall (27 of 59) from the field. Conversely, Ohio State held the Nittany Lions (9-10, 3-5) to 37.1 percent shooting (26 of 70) – though they were 11 of 24 (45.8 percent) from three – while the Buckeyes also held a 43-36 rebounding advantage and outscored Penn State 40-24 in the paint.

"The ups and downs of a Big Ten season are crazy," Mahaffey said. "You can go win four in a row and then come back and lose a couple, so being able to lock in on the next game and not dwell on the last ones and just be like, 'Hey, this is where it stops. This is the game we're going to get,' is a really big thing. I think it was a must-win game, and it feels nice that we got it."

Ohio State jumped out to a blazing start on both ends of the floor, holding the Nittany Lions without a point for the first 7:03 of the game and connecting on eight of its first 14 shots – six of those coming from Mahaffey and Gayle – to lead 16-0.

Penn State earned its first field goal with 12:57 left off a one-legged three-pointer from guard Jameel Brown, followed by another Brown triple that cut the deficit to 18-6. But the Buckeyes maintained a convincing lead as the half progressed, going up 24-11 after a dunk by Okpara with 8:29 left in the frame.

The Buckeyes soon hit a wall on offense, misfiring on their next six shots, but Penn State failed to capitalize, making just three of its next 14 attempts to close out the half. This allowed the Buckeyes to hold a 29-19 lead, and baskets from Battle and Gayle in the final two minutes gave them a 33-19 lead heading into halftime.

Ohio State began the second half much like it did the first, making three of its first

four shots – two of those from Mahaffey – to go up 39-23. Penn State responded with a 6-2 run to trail 41-29 at the 15:00 mark, but the Buckeyes answered with five straight points of their own on a basket by Devin Royal and a three from Battle for a 46-29 margin.

After two made free throws by Penn State guard D'Marco Dunn on the ensuing possession, Ohio State took off again, using a 7-0 personal run from Key to go up 53-31. Penn State cut that deficit down to 59-43 thanks to a 12-6 run, but the lead swelled back up to 64-43 with 8:51 left after a pair of Battle free throws and a Thornton three-pointer, his first points of the game.

Thornton's three was part of an extended 9-2 run for Ohio State that allowed it to go ahead 68-45 with 6:51 remaining, equaling the team's largest lead of the game. Mahaffey had the final five points of the run.

Penn State did not go away without a fight, utilizing an 18-4 run to trail just 72-63 with 2:17 remaining after back-to-back triples, forcing an Ohio State timeout.

"We just have to play with more maturity with a lead defensively than what we're playing right now," Holtmann said. "That just comes with growth and learning."

Ohio State reclaimed momentum with two free throws and a basket from Gayle, which gave it a 76-65 advantage with 1:04 left before closing things out at the free-throw line.

The Buckeyes were led in the win by Mahaffey's 16 points on 6-of-9 shooting. Gayle also had 16 points, while Battle (11) and Key (10) also reached double figures. Okpara had 14 rebounds to go along with eight points. Penn State was led in the loss by guards Kanye Clary and Puff Johnson, who each scored 13 points.

Ohio State will take the floor four times before Buckeye Sports Bulletin goes to press again. The Buckeyes will travel to Nebraska on Jan. 23 (7 p.m., Peacock) and Northwestern on Jan. 27 (8:30 p.m., Big Ten Network) before returning home to host Illinois on Jan. 30 (7 p.m., Peacock), and then going on the road to play Iowa on Feb. 2 (7 p.m., FS1).

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# OSU-Iowa Breaks Program Attendance Record

Ohio State's 100-92 win over Iowa on Jan. 21 set a program record for home attendance. The Buckeyes welcomed 18,660 fans into Value City Arena, the most to ever attend an Ohio State women's basketball game.

## DOUBLE DRIBBLE Braden Moles

"It was incredible," head coach Kevin McGuff said. "I'm just so proud of our community, the way they came out to support us and a great Iowa team. It was just an incredible game, two good teams. (Iowa guard) Caitlin Clark is a spectacular player and I know that was a big draw, and she delivered. She was absolutely unbelievable. Cotie (McMahon) was unbelievable.

"For fans who have never been here before, hopefully that keeps them coming back in, because I thought you saw a team playing extremely hard, extremely well and really together. I think we're a fun group to watch, and hopefully we can continue to build on this."

This was the first-ever sellout for the women's basketball team at Value City Arena,



SONNY BROCKWAY

**STAR POWER — Ohio State's 100-92 win over Iowa on Jan. 21 had 18,660 fans pack into Value City Arena to watch the Buckeyes take down the Hawkeyes and star guard Caitlin Clark (above), who had 45 points in the loss.**

## 2023-24 Ohio State Women's Basketball Statistics

### 15-3 Overall (6-1 Big Ten) Statistics through games of Jan. 21

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.						
SHELDON, Jacy	18-18	582-32.3	114-220	.518	29-80	.363	60-68	.882	17-42	59-3.3	37-0	53	50	3	38	317-17.6
MCMAHON, Cotie	18-18	497-27.6	87-191	.455	8-36	.222	68-111	.613	24-75	99-5.5	44-1	28	47	9	21	250-13.9
THIERRY, Taylor	18-18	492-27.3	83-132	.629	9-20	.450	60-79	.759	51-66	117-6.5	46-1	30	21	10	32	235-13.1
TAYLOR, Celeste	18-18	501-27.8	59-154	.383	18-63	.286	30-47	.638	23-60	83-4.6	52-2	62	39	17	39	166-9.2
MIKULASIKOVA, R.	17-17	394-23.2	57-118	.483	20-47	.426	20-23	.870	6-46	52-3.1	23-0	38	25	8	10	154-9.1
SHUMATE, Emma	16-0	166-10.4	27-60	.450	21-48	.438	3-6	.500	8-13	21-1.3	17-0	6	8	6	3	78-4.9
HARRIS, Rikki	17-0	299-17.6	24-59	.407	12-41	.293	19-29	.655	6-26	32-1.9	28-0	20	14	3	15	79-4.6
COLLINS, Diana	12-0	148-12.3	19-58	.328	5-22	.227	8-11	.727	8-12	20-1.7	18-1	3	8	1	7	51-4.3
PARKS, Taiyier	18-0	193-10.7	28-59	.475	0-2	.000	13-21	.619	17-30	47-2.6	29-1	7	7	5	8	69-3.8
GREENE, Madison	10-0	128-12.8	9-31	.290	4-13	.308	8-10	.800	5-7	12-1.2	11-0	19	6	0	7	30-3.0
WALKER, Eboni	14-1	168-12.0	16-38	.421	0-2	.000	7-9	.778	17-22	39-2.8	11-0	20	11	1	5	39-2.8
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
HENDERSON, Kaia	11-0	61-5.6	5-14	.357	0-1	.000	0-0	.000	1-9	10-0.9	4-0	6	5	0	0	10-0.9
CARSON, Faith	3-0	05-1.8	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									24-31	55		6				
<b>Total</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>3653</b>	<b>531-1138</b>	<b>.467</b>	<b>126-375</b>	<b>.336</b>	<b>298-416</b>	<b>.716</b>	<b>209-445</b>	<b>654-36.3</b>	<b>324-6</b>	<b>294</b>	<b>249</b>	<b>63</b>	<b>185</b>	<b>1486-82.6</b>
<b>Opponents</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>3660</b>	<b>412-1025</b>	<b>.402</b>	<b>93-330</b>	<b>.282</b>	<b>227-310</b>	<b>.732</b>	<b>188-452</b>	<b>640-35.6</b>	<b>357-8</b>	<b>208</b>	<b>377</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>111</b>	<b>1144-63.6</b>

na, with the previous attendance record set on Feb. 27, 2005, when 17,525 fans attended a 69-58 win over Penn State. Ohio State reported a sellout last season with 9,955 fans for an 83-72 loss to Iowa, though those ticket sales did not include the upper deck of Value City Arena.

"I just want to congratulate Ohio State," Iowa head coach Lisa Bluder said. "It was a great game, great environment. This is what it's all about, and it was really good for the Big Ten."

The previous attendance record at St. John Arena – which had four sellouts while the women played there – was 13,320 fans for a 58-54 win over Iowa on Feb. 26, 1988. In addition to being the most-attended game in program history, Ohio State also announced that it is the highest attendance for an indoor women's college basketball game this season.

### Clark Fine After Collision With Fan

Following Ohio State's win over Iowa with a full house, Buckeye fans – as they did for last season's home-opening win against Tennessee – stormed the court at Value City Arena to celebrate the victory over the Hawkeyes.

But the court storming coincided with Clark attempting to leave the floor, at which point she and a fan entering the court collided, sending her to the floor and in obvious pain. She was then helped up by her teammates and went to the locker room.

"It was a great environment, obviously," she said after the game. "These are the games you love to play in (with) 18,000 people here. Obviously, I can (understand) their fans storming the court, which is totally fine. I mean, good for their students, great win for them.

"I was just trying to exit the court as quickly as possible, so I started running and I was absolutely just hammered by somebody trying to run onto the court and basically blindsided. Kind of scary. It could have caused a pretty serious injury to me – (just) knocked the wind out of me. Luckily my teammates kind of picked me up and got me off the court.

"Their AD already came and apologized to me, so I really appreciate that. This is what comes with the territory. I'm sure they

tried their best to do whatever they could. Obviously, it didn't work, and that's disappointing."

Ohio State athletic director Gene Smith apologized to both Clark and Bluder, and McGuff offered his apologies as well after the game.

"There was an incident where Caitlin ran into a fan running off the floor, and I want to apologize to her and their entire program," he said. "She had a spectacular performance today and she's such a great player, and that should never happen. I feel really badly, so hopefully she's OK and it doesn't have any effect moving forward, but that's extremely unfortunate."

In addition to Clark being run into by a fan, Bluder said that Clark also had to deal with some "inappropriate words" yelled to her by opposing fans, and the coach was overall disappointed with how Clark was treated after the game.

"It's unfortunate the game ended that way and Caitlin gets taken out on the floor, gets some inappropriate words yelled at her by fans, by students," Bluder said. "That just should not happen. It should not happen. Our players should be safe. They should be able to walk off the floor. That's very disappointing.

"I think Ohio State (has a) great team, great environment, but I'm very disappointed with the postgame, with our players getting injured trying to walk out of the gym. That's wrong."

### Redshirt In Plans For Cambridge

Sophomore guard Kennedy Cambridge has yet to appear in a game this season, and McGuff said on Dec. 10 that will likely be the case throughout this year as the program looks to utilize a redshirt.

"We're probably going to redshirt her because she missed time and all that," McGuff said. "I think I'd rather preserve the year and give her a chance to impact us for longer on the back end. That is what the plan is right now."

Cambridge was dealing with an undisclosed injury throughout the early stages of the season but was recently cleared to play for the Buckeyes. She is in her first season at Ohio State after transferring from Kentucky following her freshman campaign,

where she averaged 2.7 points and 2.3 rebounds per game.

Once Cambridge returns to the court – likely next season – she will be able to play alongside her sister, Jalonni, a point guard who is committed to Ohio State's 2024 recruiting class and will sign with the Buckeyes in the spring.

### Wins At Maryland Rare For Big Ten Teams

Ohio State's win at Maryland on Jan. 17 was a rarity, both for the Buckeyes and for the Big Ten as a whole.

It was the first time Ohio State had won in College Park, Md., since 2016, dropping five games to the Terrapins on the road in between wins. It represented just the seventh time since Maryland joined the Big Ten in 2014 that the Terrapins lost a home conference game.

Other occurrences included losses to Nebraska in 2022-23, Michigan in 2021-22, Rutgers in 2018-19, Michigan State and Purdue in 2017-18, and the Buckeyes in 2016, which was the first-ever home conference loss for Maryland in the Big Ten.

Through the most recent loss to Ohio State, the Terrapins now hold a 74-7 (94.1 percent) record against the Big Ten at the Xfinity Center, with a 129-12 overall record (91.5 percent) against all competition at home since 2014.

### Other Notes And Tidbits

- McGuff said on Jan. 19 that he has already spoken with incoming athletic director Ross Bjork, who will begin his new position on July 1, saying, "Yeah, I did meet with him. He seemed awesome. He's a really forward thinker with a great vision for college athletics and specifically how Ohio State fits into that. I think he's going to do a great job."

- In a 2024 WNBA mock draft by ESPN released on Jan. 18, Ohio State fifth-year guard Jacy Sheldon was not found on the list despite being listed on several previous mock drafts. Through 18 games this season, she was averaging 17.6 points, 2.9 assists, 3.3 rebounds and 2.1 steals on 51.8 percent shooting.

# Getting Net Results Not Easy For Backups

Practice. Practice. Practice. More practice with no guarantee that he will play a game. Such is the life of Reilly Herbst, the junior goalie who has played in four games but whose total minutes on the ice in his Ohio State career barely surpasses half of a 60-minute game.

It's not easy being a backup, or even a backup to a backup, as is his case now.

## IN THE CREASE Craig Merz

"I just try to take one day at a time and try to do the best I can every day, and when my time comes, I just want to be as prepared as possible," he said. "That's kind of what I keep in the back of my mind."

The Niwot, Colo., native did not get into a game his freshman season, sitting behind Ryan Snowden and fellow rookie Jakub Dobeš, a teammate with Omaha (Neb.) of the United States Hockey League. Snowden started the first game of the season before Dobeš took over the net for good. The Montreal Canadiens draftee started 34 of 37 games in 2021-22 and all 40 last season before turning pro while Snowden played in eight games the past two seasons.

Herbst finally made his Ohio State debut in his sophomore year against Bentley on Oct. 20, 2022, making three saves and allowing one goal in 5:40 playing time to finish the 9-2 victory. That would be his last appearance of the season.

With Snowden, a senior last season and Dobeš gone, Connecticut transfer Logan Terness entered the scene and started the first 16 games this season with Herbst and freshman Kristoffer Eberly his backups. Herbst was the first to get the call when he relieved Terness on Nov. 3 against Michigan State and stopped nine of 10 shots in 11:18 of the 6-0 loss.

Herbst's last appearance to date was saving 4 of 6 shots in 13:09 against Wisconsin on Dec. 2 in the 6-1 loss at Wisconsin. For his career, he has a 7.97 goals-against average and a .800 save percentage in 30:07. Coach Steve Rohlik knows being a backup is not easy and appreciates how Herbst has handled the situation.

"It takes a lot of character," he said. "In what I've seen, this guy here is an unbelievable team player. Unbelievable character, great work ethic. It's never easy, but I'll tell you what, as a coach, he gives everything he's got every day."

"I think he's probably got as much respect in that locker room as any guy on our team. That speaks volumes of who he is and that our guys would go through the wall for him."

The Wisconsin game also marked the Ohio State debut of Eberly. He stopped all 10 shots against the Badgers in the third period.

In college hockey, three goalies can dress for games. Eberly was fortunate in that he

had the second intermission to prepare, unlike Herbst, who entered during a stoppage of play in the second period. Sometimes coaches will make changes because of a goalie's poor performance. Other times it's a message to the team that it needs to play better in front of the goalie.

"You practice every day, see all the shots and then during the game, you kind of just sit on the bench and stay ready," Herbst said. "I like to compare it to a relief pitcher in baseball, except in baseball the pitcher is going to warm up the whole game."

"The backups in hockey, you're sitting on the bench and when your time comes, you just pop in and you try to warm up but you're still cold so it's a big challenge."

Eberly has experienced both coming off the bench during a period and starting a period in relief. No surprise, he prefers the latter.

"It's definitely super tough during play," he said. "You haven't been moving for however so long and then when you when you finally jump in you haven't seen any shots in minutes. I think the mental side of the game is so huge, and just being confident and telling yourself that you can do this, you can handle this and just taking a deep breath helps a lot."

### Tough Spot

Rohlik understands the relief pitcher analogy and tries to avoid putting his backups in a tough spot.

"I did it both ways at Wisconsin," he said. "One was obviously at that point for us as a team where we weren't in a good spot and it was like we needed to change. We needed a momentum stop. We needed whatever we could do at that point. When Reilly went in, he didn't have a chance to get loose, just a couple quick stretches and you're in and go."

"Whereas when we were leaving the ice at the end of the second, I told Kris, 'Let's prepare yourself for the third period.' Sometimes you feel bad that you put the backup goalie in that situation. I think they know that comes with the territory."

Eberly got his second chance when he replaced Terness at the start of the second period against Minnesota on Dec. 8 and saved 10 of 12 shots. He made his first career start the following night and helped the Buckeyes to a 1-1 tie by making 23 saves in regulation and overtime. He did not allow a goal in the three-round shootout won by Ohio State, 1-0.

Eberly, who played 46 regular-season games for Green Bay (Wis.) in the USHL last season and posted a 2.97 goals-against average and a .893 save percentage, said it was difficult to wait his turn after being a starter last season.

"You can find yourself losing your confidence, but I take credit towards myself and I am really strong mentally," he said. "I think just coming to the rink with confidence each and every day and giving your all helps a lot in practice, and when my time came, I felt ready."

He followed the Minnesota game with two straight starts, victories over Mercy-

hurst and Bowling Green. Terness was in the net for the second BG game and the first game in the Notre Dame series on Jan. 12, both wins, before Eberly lost to Notre Dame the next game.

While Rohlik always notes that he has three goalies in competition, the battle for the starting role is between Terness and Eberly.

The shuffling continued at Minnesota on Jan. 19-20. Terness allowed five goals on 30 shots before being pulled 6:12 into the third in a 5-2 loss in the opener. Eberly made two saves. Terness played the full game the ensuing night, making 24 stops in the 6-3 loss.

Eberly is 2-2-1 with a 2.50 GAA and a .908 save percentage in seven games (four starts). Terness, in his 20 starts, is 7-9-3, 3.41, .896.

### Fighting The Irish

The Buckeyes extended their winning streak to four and their unbeaten run to five games when they downed Notre Dame 3-2 before a crowd of 5,762 at Value City Arena on Jan. 12. As a bonus, new OSU president Walter "Ted" Carter participated in the ceremonial puck drop and stayed to witness the first Big Ten win of the season.

Defenseman Scooter Brickey, who had scored six times in his previous four seasons, had a goal to give him a team-leading nine, and freshman defenseman Nathan McBrayer had his first two-assist game. After squandering a two-goal lead when Notre Dame scored twice early in the third, Brickey scored the winner at 11:32 on the power play with a shot from the right circle.

Rohlik said the win was special with Carter, a former Navy hockey player and die-hard fan of the sport, in attendance.

"It was a great crowd out there," Rohlik said. "I thought we had good atmosphere, but especially for the first game with President Carter in the building and his wife, Linda, and having the opportunity to have him come in and talk to our team before and after the game was pretty special. I know he's going to do great things for this university."

The Buckeyes couldn't sustain the momentum in the second game before 6,566 fans in the 5-2 loss. This time, OSU rallied from down two to tie it before Notre Dame netted the final three goals. The game ended with a bit of mayhem as Brickey and Riley Hughes and Notre Dame's Drew Bavaro and Jayden Davis all received fighting majors and disqualifications.

As a result, Brickey and Hughes were suspended for the first Minnesota game.

### Wrong Direction

The Buckeyes (9-11-4, 1-11-2 Big Ten) lost three of four games since the last issue of Buckeye Sports Bulletin. Their losing streak reached three games after the series with the No. 10 Golden Gophers (14-6-4, 7-4-3 Big Ten).

Theo Wallberg and Stephen Halliday each had a goal and an assist, but the opener started ominously with Minnesota taking a 3-0 lead after the first period. Wallberg made it 3-1 in the second before the Gophers added two more in the third prior to Halliday's eighth goal of the season at 11:03 for the 5-2 final.

## BIG Men's Hockey

	GP	Pts.	W	L	T	OW	OL	SW
Michigan State	14	34	10	2	2	0	1	0
Wisconsin	12	30	10	2	0	0	0	1
Notre Dame	16	24	7	7	2	0	0	1
Minnesota	14	23	7	4	3	1	0	0
Michigan	12	15	4	6	2	0	0	1
Penn State	14	11	2	9	3	0	0	2
<b>Ohio State</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>2</b>

**Overall records** — Wisconsin 19-4-1, Michigan State 16-5-3, Minnesota 14-6-4, Notre Dame 13-11-2, Michigan 11-8-3, Penn State 10-11-3, **Ohio State 9-11-4.**

- standings courtesy of College Hockey Inc.

In the second game, Minnesota led 2-0 in the middle stanza until Joe Dunlap scored to cut the deficit, but the Gophers responded with three straight goals for a 5-1 margin.

Jake Dunlap scored to make it 5-2 with older brother Joe assisting, the first time they scored in the same game as well as got points on the same goal. Jake transferred from New Hampshire this season, but Joe was sidelined with an injury until Jan. 6. He has two goals and three assists in five games.

Caden Brown made it 5-3, but Minnesota added an empty-net power-play goal with 34 seconds remaining for the 6-3 win.

### Next

The Buckeyes play at Penn State on Jan. 26 and 27. A four-game homestand begins with Michigan on Feb. 2 (7 p.m.) and 3 (8 p.m.). After an open weekend, they host Wisconsin on Feb. 16 and 17 at 6:30 and 4:30 p.m., respectively.

*For recaps of the Notre Dame and Minnesota series go to [BuckeyeSports.com](http://BuckeyeSports.com), free to all Buckeye Sports Bulletin subscribers.*

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# Big Ten Duals Under Way For Wrestlebucks

On Jan. 12, Illinois came to Columbus to kick off Big Ten wrestling season for Ohio State. The Buckeyes opened up with a 36-6 win over the Illini and continued their win streak, beating Maryland 38-4 on Jan. 19 and Wisconsin 27-15 on Jan. 21, losing just six total bouts.

## ON THE MAT Greg Wilson

Freshman Rocco Welsh, who was going to redshirt but earned a spot at 174 pounds when Carson Kharchla suffered a season-ending injury, was one of the losses for the Buckeyes against Illinois. He matched up against No. 3 Edmond Ruth in the ninth out of 10 matches, and Ryan gave credit to Illini head coach Mike Poeta for sending his best wrestler out even though they didn't have a chance to win the dual at that point.

"I'm glad the match happened," Ryan said. "We wanted that match badly and didn't know if it was going to happen. Kudos to the Illinois staff. The dual meet was over, they couldn't win the dual, so they could have protected his seed. That match didn't have to happen, so I'm glad Coach Poeta put him out there because that's

the one we came to see.

"There's a lot of talk in the college space that people duck people to protect their seed. Tonight we watched a team that had no chance of winning, but they put their best guy out there, and that was cool."

Welsh had a strong showing, even if the first-year could still count all of his dual-meet appearances at the collegiate level on a single hand. The first period was scoreless, and when Welsh was on bottom to start the second, Ruth earned 90 seconds of riding time before Welsh could escape to take a 1-0 lead into the third period. Ruth escaped quickly to start the third and no other points were scored, so he earned another point for riding time and won the match 2-1.

Ryan was happy with what he saw from the true freshman but thinks that more experience will help him tremendously when it comes to the smaller things.

"If you get one and he gets away you can't be like, 'Oh man, now he's going to come at me,'" Ryan said. "No, you're always going to go at him. The mindset is that no matter what the score is, you're always going to go at him. I think that was a big piece of the match tonight. We controlled the first period but didn't score. We were aggressive the first period, we got rode more than half of the second period, and the third period it was kind of neutral. It's just a tough match against a big-time, stingy opponent who can re-attack and has speed."

Against Maryland, all 10 matches – nine

by Ohio State and one by the Terrapins – were won by major decision or better, with the Buckeyes' lone loss coming from Gavin Bell at 197 pounds to No. 5 Jaxon Smith in a 16-4 defeat, providing Maryland's only points of the dual.

After the pair of home victories, the Buckeyes then went on the road for the win over the Badgers. No. 9 Dylan D'Emilio at 149 pounds and Welsh defeated ranked opponents in the dual, with Welsh taking down No. 11 Max Maylor in a 7-3 decision. After a stalling point and an escape in the second period, Welsh had another escape and a takedown in the third with an extra point added on for riding time.

No. 3 Jesse Mendez (141 pounds) and No. 17 Nick Feldman both had technical fall wins, accounting for 10 of the Buckeyes' 27 team points. Mendez had four takedowns in the first period and ended the match early in the third. Feldman had a 16-3 lead after three minutes then had an escape and a quick takedown in the second period to finish the dual.

Even though Ohio State has had a strong first half of the season, Ryan knows that it's only going to get tougher as the Buckeyes get further into the conference schedule.

"As good as the team has looked, there's just another level of competition that we're going to face in the Big Ten," Ryan said. "You've got to be able to dominate at that level."

A visit by No. 11 Michigan is next on the schedule for Ohio State on Jan. 26 with the powerhouse No. 1 Penn State coming up after that on Feb. 2 on the road, and then a trip to Rutgers on Feb. 4.

Most of the Nittany Lions' wrestlers are in the top 10 of their weight classes, and the team has won 10 of the last 12 national championships, so it will be a huge test for the Buckeyes who have had to dig deep into their depth with multiple season-ending injuries to starters, including Paddy Gallagher at 157 pounds and Kharchla at 174 pounds. Also dealing with an injury is Gavin Hoffman, who is likely done for the season at 184 pounds.

There has been additional shuffling with Isaac Wilcox moving down to 157 pounds, Bryce Hepner taking his previous spot at 165 pounds, Welsh taking over for Kharchla and Seth Shumate getting the chance at 184 pounds since Hoffman went out. Ohio State has no other choice but to fight through those changes.

"It's hard to stay among the elite teams in the country with just one injury," Ryan said. "If any team lost their best guy, they would probably drop out of the top 10. We've lost three All-Americans. We have some really good depth. There's a high expectation here. These guys know it, and we just can't afford any more. We're in the Big Ten schedule now, and it doesn't get any easier."

### Sasso Honored By Team USA

Sammy Sasso continues to recover from being shot in the stomach in a carjacking attempt in August, and he still has the goal of wrestling at Ohio State again, though he was forced to miss the U23 World Championships in the fall.

Regardless, Team USA recognized him as an honorary member, presenting a world championship ring to him on Jan. 19 at the Buckeyes' dual against Maryland. Sasso was set to wrestle at 157 pounds for the team, mov-

ing up from 149 pounds, where he was a Big Ten champion and a national runner-up at the end of last season.

Ryan said Sasso's recovery has begun to stagnate some, with his leg still not back to where it was before the shooting, but he does believe Sasso is in a good place mentally.

"His healing was initially fast," Ryan said. "The slope was really steep, and it's leveled off. He's doing well emotionally, he's doing well with the team with his leadership. He's around talking to kids. He's doing clinics around the country and speaking the lessons that he's learned and how he's dealt with the adversity."

"We're praying he makes another jump from the use of his leg standpoint. He has to get back to where he was. That's his big dream. The main thing, though, is that he's doing really well emotionally. That's the biggest thing."

### Feldman Named BIG Wrestler Of The Week

In the Buckeyes' dual against No. 8 Cornell on Jan. 5, it came down to the final match in which Feldman matched up with No. 19 Lewis Fernandes. With the Buckeyes down 20-18, Feldman needed to win the match in any fashion to take down the Big Red for OSU's third top-10 win of the season.

Feldman was down late in the third period, but with under 30 seconds to go in the match, he got a takedown to secure the win for himself and for the team. Feldman was favored going into the match but had been dealing with an injury, and Ryan was impressed with what he saw from his heavyweight.

"I'm just really proud of Nick," Ryan said. "It was about as pressure filled of a situation, you can have. Twenty seconds to go and you need to get a takedown. And (Fernandes) has got a really good defense. He's got flexible hips, kind of loosey-goosey knees, which makes him relatively hard to finish on. We had been on a couple of attacks and didn't get it. Then he made a really good choice late. He made a choice to go to the other leg, finish with power. Those are moments as a little kid you dream about."

Feldman's performance earned him recognition as the Big Ten Wrestler of the Week on Jan. 11, which is nothing to scoff at given how great the conference is at wrestling. Ryan said he believes Feldman was able to get it done because he had a real belief in himself, noting that the topic of belief has been a conversation that has been had a lot in the room this year.

"Belief matters so much," Ryan said. "He had been out for a little while, and when you're out of training, like any competitor, negative thoughts can creep in. 'Am I ready? Is my leg going to hold up?'"

"The biggest thing we keep talking about for these guys and this team is the deep belief you've got to have before the match. That's been the biggest topic of conversation in our leadership meetings with our guys is having this belief in yourself, your teammates and your staff in what you're doing. All of us as spectators, as coaches and as fans, we know what belief looks like. You can see a team or an individual that deeply believes in themselves, and you can see a guy that might be a little bit hesitant."

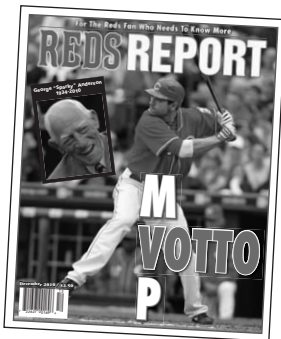
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# Bouzakis Turns Corner, Ready To Prove Himself

By **GREG WILSON**

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

When Nic Bouzakis committed to Ohio State in September of 2021, he was the second-overall pound-for-pound prospect in the 2022 recruiting class out of Wyoming Seminary College Prep in Kingston, Pa., where he was no stranger to winning championships.

He came out of high school with two state championships, one in 2020 at 126 pounds and another in his senior season in 2022 at 132 pounds. And before the Tampa, Fla., native moved to Pennsylvania, he won three state titles in the Sunshine State at 106 pounds in 2017, 120 in 2018 and 126 in 2019.

That success largely followed into Bouzakis' first season with the Buckeyes in which he took a redshirt, finishing with an 8-1 overall record and 4-1 record in dual meets. Of those eight wins, three were by pin and one was by major decision.

With winning coming so easily to Bouzakis – and largely in dominating fashion – his first campaign at Ohio State did not require much delving into the fine details. But now as a starter for the Buckeyes at 133 pounds this season, he and the coaching staff have looked to improve his decision-making on the mat as he fills a pivotal role for Ohio State.

"He's used to doing whatever he wants," said assistant coach Logan Stieber. "Picking people up, throwing them down with no thought of what happens next and knowing he's going to pin his opponent, crush his opponent. He's just making good decisions out on the mat."

Bouzakis agreed with Stieber that he has to become more mature on the mat, which is needed at the collegiate level, and especially in a conference like the Big Ten.

"I've gotten a lot better at it, just focusing on positions and listening to my coaches," Bouzakis said. "When I first came in, I was still that little rascal running around just being an idiot half the time. But now I've gotten a lot better, more mature and more focused on my craft."

That jump in maturity and focus was necessary after a slow start to the season. He came in fourth place at the Clarion Open with a 3-2 record, making it to the semifinals before losing two straight bouts. He followed that up with a close 7-5 loss to No. 7 Sam Latona of Virginia Tech and three straight wins in duals against Edinboro, Columbia and Hofstra.

Those three early losses culminated in another defeat at the Cliff Keen Invitational from Dec. 1-2 in his first match of the tournament to unranked Tyler Knox from Stanford by an 11-3 major decision. Bouzakis said that was a wake-up call.

"When we were out in Vegas, I dropped my first match," he said. "I'm thinking, 'Well, I shouldn't have lost that.' I don't know what was going on with me. I was upset, angry. I sat on the blowup couch thinking, 'Screw it, I'm going to get as many points as I can for my team.'"

And that's exactly what Bouzakis did for the rest of the tournament. He came back in the consolation bracket with something

to prove, immediately forcing consecutive 21-4 technical falls. He followed that with two major decisions to make it to the consolation quarterfinals and pinned Ethan Oakley of Appalachian State in just 1:28 to make it to the semifinals, where he pinned Derrick Cardinal of South Dakota State in 3:39.

In the third-place match, he defeated No. 14 Domenic Zaccane 4-2 to finish off an impressive run through the bracket.

"Putting (the) team first in my mind just seemed to pull me out of a funk," Bouzakis said. "I had the most pins in that whole tournament after that. I feel like I should have won all of those matches. I should have been the champ in Vegas, but you need those humbling moments."

Head coach Tom Ryan said he believed Bouzakis could have won the whole thing, but after losing his first match, he was happy with how he came back.

"Nic, to me, was the best guy in the weight," Ryan said. "He didn't win the weight, but he did the best thing you could have after losing. He wasn't really ready in his first match the way he should have been, and he got beat in a match where he had plenty of chances to score but just didn't get it. Nic is a team guy. Nic has pride. It's personal. He cares. And when you have all those things, you typically fight back for the bracket. He came back roaring for the bracket."

Ryan agreed that Bouzakis was humbled, but in a way that helped him realize he needed to be working as hard as possible to win every single time he gets on the mat.

"He doesn't walk around with his chest out," Ryan said. "When I think of him being humbled, it's just surrendering to the reality that at this level of wrestling, you can't get away with small shortcuts. You can't get away with it."

"I think that's where he's probably humbling himself the most, where it's like, 'I've got to be at my best,' where in high school, if he was at 75 percent, nobody could beat him because he was just so much better than everybody. We as a staff, it was on us to keep a closer eye on him and make sure he's hitting his weight markers that we have for him and increasing his cardio training. He's looked good."

It was a humbling moment that Bouzakis said was important for him to have since it was his first full season at the college level. After the loss, he said it was teammate Jesse Mendez who pulled him out of the funk and made him realize that all he needed to do was continue to work.

"Having a match that's going to humble you and make you realize, 'All right, I'm not all that.' It's good for you," Bouzakis said. "It makes you really start striving to get better. Jesse, after my match was talking to me and said, 'All right bud, we've got a lot of work to do,' and I agreed with him. I have a lot of stuff I need to get better at."

Bouzakis and Mendez were in the same recruiting class – Bouzakis at No. 2 and Mendez at No. 3, pound-for-pound – and they knew each other well since they were both wrestling around the country in different weight classes. Ryan said coming to Ohio State was a decision they made together, to an extent.

"Jesse and Nic, the lightweights work together a lot," Ryan said. "Those two guys came here together. They were seniors in high school that were ranked No. 2 and No. 3 in the country pound for pound. Both of them were ranked No. 1 in their weight class."

"They chose Ohio State, and part of it was, 'Let's go together.' They wrestled their senior year in high school to make the U.S. World team. They were both in the finals. We knew they wouldn't be the same weight class."

"Jesse's a great leader, and I think a lot of the best leaders are just really good followers. They follow the right people, and following Jesse you can't go wrong, so that's what Nic needs to keep doing, listening to him."

When the Buckeyes came back from Vegas, their first match was against then-No. 18 Pittsburgh, and they ended up losing at the Covelli Center. Bouzakis, though, continued his winning streak, beating No. 23 Vinnie Santaniello by a 5-2 decision. He said just like he was able to use his loss in Las Vegas as a humbling moment, the team was able to do the same with the loss to the Panthers.

"They had a game plan to wrestle each one of us, and for the majority of that it worked," Bouzakis said. "It sucks, but we needed it to fix the mindset we have going into duals. We need to put everything we have, throw the kitchen sink at these people. We want to win and we want to be dominant. That was a little bit of an eye opener."

"After that, the team has been changed. If

we're not huffing and puffing and can't stand up after we're done with a practice, then we're still going. It's a job to us right now."

At the Collegiate Duals in Nashville, Tenn., on Dec. 19, Bouzakis lost one more match to No. 17 Julian Farber from Northern Iowa but kept it close in a 5-1 decision.

Since then, he picked up an unexpected pin in taking down No. 5 Kai Orine from NC State, also in the Collegiate Duals, needing only 51 seconds to end the bout. After a fall in 1:48 in the next dual against Cornell and wins by decision at the start of Big Ten action against Illinois and Maryland, Bouzakis acknowledged how he has bounced back from his slow start.

"The last few matches I have been fantastic," Bouzakis said. "I feel like I've really gotten into a groove. This match wasn't the 'Nic Bouzakis go out there and try to pick him up and smash him,' and that shows I still have a lot of work to do in the room. I have a very long way to go until I'm one of the best in the country, but I know one day I'll be there."

The road ahead only gets tougher, especially when the Big Ten tournament and NCAA championships come around, but there's nothing Bouzakis wants more than to prove he belongs.

"I want to prove myself," Bouzakis said. "I want to show that I belong at Ohio State. I want to go out there and just give it everything I have. I want to work hard, and I want to be one of those guys that's feared out there."

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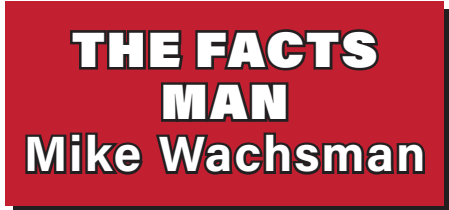


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# Buckeyes Appear Serious About Success In 2024

When last we left Ohio State football, it was in the process of stumbling its way to a lackluster, angst-inspiring bowl-game loss to Missouri.

The Buckeyes looked uninterested, unprepared and unwilling to fight against a Tigers team that didn't play great, but well enough to get a victory that in the long run means more for their program than a victory by Ohio State would have.



There were many who felt, shortly after the final gun, that it was time to “burn it down,” to start over. Not only had Ryan Day turned into the antithesis of what OSU fans demand from their coach – successful and focused – he had become what they would label as “soft.”

Ohio State got pushed around in the fourth quarter against Michigan, allowing a third straight loss to its hated rival. Day watched as Kyle McCord and his dad used a power play to gain assurances that he would be the starter in 2024, and when told no, he transferred to Syracuse. Recurring coaching issues were allowed to linger with nothing being done.

It was all a perfect storm, and Buckeye Nation was hopeful it would blow Day and company away.

Fast-forward to now, and it's amazing what has happened. Day has worked himself and the program out of the debris and almost like a phoenix has brought Ohio State back to where it is once again the talk of the college football world – now for the right reasons.

He did the hard thing and got rid of a pair of coaches who were, in his eyes, underperforming, in Perry Eliano and Parker Fleming. He also approved the move of Corey Dennis from quarterbacks coach to a yet-to-be-determined position within the program and hired veteran offensive coordinator Bill O'Brien to take play-calling duties off his plate so that he can better manage things on the sideline.

After reluctance to fully embrace the transfer portal, Day has proved to be all in. No longer are feelings being considered, which was hammered home when veteran quarterback Will Howard transferred in from Kansas State. More from the J.T. Barrett than Dwayne Haskins school, Howard (6-4, 230) is big, can run and throws the ball better than people give him credit for. He completed 61.3 percent of his passes in 2023, but the Wildcats were among the top 10 in the nation in dropped passes, so better hands would have meant better numbers for Howard.

Beyond his stats, he has something that can't be found in a stat sheet – toughness. That seemed to be lacking on too many occasions last season, so when your quarterback has it, it's a positive sign. And Howard alone would have been a positive, but his transfer led to other high-profile players

wanting to come aboard.

Perhaps the most surprising was star running back Quinshon Judkins from Ole Miss. In his two seasons in Oxford, Judkins has led the SEC in rushing touchdowns twice (31 total) and has churned out 2,725 yards. Having him in the same backfield with TreVeyon Henderson will not only give the Buckeyes the best running back combo in college football, but it will also make for many sleepless nights for opposing defensive coordinators. One great note about Judkins is he was second in America in missed tackles forced with 78, and he has also lost zero fumbles in his career, including 271 totes without dropping the ball in 2023.

Shortly after, Alabama center Seth McLaughlin – who has allowed just one sack in three seasons as a starter – decided to move north to Columbus. And the cherry on top was when Crimson Tide teammate and safety Caleb Downs, the nation's top freshman this past season, left Tuscaloosa for Columbus, and he was followed two days later by former Alabama quarterback Julian Sayin, a five-star in the 2024 recruiting class.

Oh, and did I mention that Ohio State also convinced nearly every player with a draft decision to make to return for 2024? Yeah, that happened.

So in the span of just under a month, the Buckeyes have gone from laughingstocks to Tyrannosaurus Rex, a squad that has the attention of everyone and which may just run roughshod through college football in 2024.

## Breaking Down O'Brien

Day's hiring of O'Brien was about as polarizing as any in recent memory.

While a number of football folks applauded the move, noting O'Brien's NFL chops and veteran perspective, many fans were less than impressed. Social media responses showed that they believe O'Brien is “terrible” (despite averaging 40.4 points per game in two seasons as Alabama's play caller) and that “Ohio State fans better get used to three-and-outs” (even though the Tide converted 49.4 percent on third down in O'Brien's tenure).

It seems that fans wanted someone who plays a bit more wide open, but what they fail to realize is that those wide-open, gimmicky offenses seldom work.

And until last year, Day had been a pretty good play caller himself, guiding Ohio State to an average of 44.9 points per game in his first four seasons. It was the dip to 30.5 this year that was most concerning, though a decent amount of that can be chalked up to subpar quarterback play from McCord.

There has been talk that Day brought O'Brien in merely as a play caller, that he will be running Day's offense. I suppose that could be true, but it makes no sense. Why would a guy come to a program to be a caretaker rather than being allowed to implement his system? If it turns out that he is merely Day's proxy and it's still the head coach's offense, then this has a chance to be a real disaster. But I don't believe that's the case, at least not until I see otherwise.

I delved into O'Brien's time at Alabama and came up with a breakdown of what Buckeyes fans can expect.

When he has had high-end talent, his offenses have been very good, and that's because he has experience and creativity in his play sequencing. He uses the same pre-snap motion to set up different play designs, and showing the defense the same motion by the tight end sets up subsequent plays, with the defense trying to adjust to the previous scheme that was run out of the same look. Running complementary plays out of the same formation to put defenses in a bind is something experienced play-callers have a knack for, which gives the offense continuity.

O'Brien may not throw the ball deep as often as some, preferring to win with the passing game over the middle portion of the field. His passing system is timing-based and is unlocked by playing matchups and attacking space that he knows will be there based on coverages. He also likes to add in the element of tempo, which makes it even tougher on defenses that already have enough to think about with different plays being run out of the same formations and with the same motion.

Look for Howard to be in a lot of empty formations, as O'Brien will want him to have a myriad of options pre-snap and answers against any coverage. Where a lot of coordinators tell a quarterback to go through progressions from deep to shallow, O'Brien goes from vertical to horizontal. If it's a left-to-right progression, the verticals will be on the left and the horizontals on the right.

He does a lot of scheming tight ends open, which should do wonders for a position that until very recently has had great talent but has not utilized it. O'Brien can get his tight ends open with nub formations (having the tight end be the farthest outside player), and he will also use a lot of 12 personnel (one running back, two tight ends). He also isn't afraid to use 11 (one running back, one tight end) and 10 (one running back), the latter especially when he has an abundance of playmakers at his disposal.

Alabama's run-pass options often had the pass option include downfield routes – slants or seam routes. O'Brien will have a more expansive RPO package than Ohio State has had in a few seasons, and motion will help shape all of it. He will also go downfield out of RPO sets.

With the bevy of talent in the backfield, people will be dying to see Henderson and Judkins on the field at the same time. Based on his history, that doesn't look very likely to happen, unless Henderson is set out as a receiver and Judkins is behind Howard.

O'Brien's system has always been more one-back runs with multiple tight ends. That could mean utilizing the tight end as a flexible in-line or off-the-line blocker, and he has built his rushing attack off the abilities of the quarterback (DeShaun Watson with the Houston Texans and Bryce Young at Alabama). He was able to strike a balance in play calls at Alabama, with 1,005 runs and 1,009 passes in his two seasons.

The hire may lack flash, but given

O'Brien's history and his ability to get play-makers out in space and not put such a heavy load on the quarterback from a read standpoint, it would be wise for fans to at least see how things look before throwing up their hands in disgust.

## NIL Does Nil For A Lot Of People

While Day and his staff need to get an “attaboy” for the Buckeyes' recruiting class, retention and transfer additions, it's no secret that much of that happened because Ohio State's NIL department has finally been allowed to operate unencumbered.

Outgoing athletic director Gene Smith at one time said he wanted people to donate directly to the athletic department rather than the NIL collectives, providing an almost adversarial relationship. Whether it was a change of heart by Smith or a clarification of rules or just more of a commitment from fans donating and collectives becoming more streamlined, the groups have been able to get the job done in getting the Buckeyes' most important pieces back for another run at things, and the transfers.

And while it's not something that I particularly like – a college football world where it appears the highest bidders win – I realize that it's now part of the game. Schools that embrace NIL will gain the most talent, and those who don't will be left behind. Speaking of embracing NIL, Ohio State's new athletic director Ross Bjork is someone who does just that.

He comes over from Texas A&M, which had one of the most robust NIL programs in college football, and knows that it's here to stay. In his introductory press conference, he spoke of how much he respects Day, that he is an “outstanding football coach,” and that he expects great things from the program going forward. He has also overseen improvement in A&M academics, with Aggies athletes putting up record-high academic progress rate numbers.

While Bjork said all of the right things, there are a couple of things that at least give pause. He presided over Ole Miss getting sanctioned for recruiting violations under coach Hugh Freeze, and he backed Freeze (and denigrated prior coach Houston Nutt, saying he was to blame) until evidence came out showing Freeze's guilt – at which point Bjork had no other recourse but to fire him. He also signed off on the ill-advised contract extension for Jimbo Fisher at Texas A&M, which was over \$75 million and which the school will be feeling the pain of for some time given that it will be paying the since-fired Fisher all of it.

Athletic directors are behind the scenes, which means that most people don't really know how to judge them. With Bjork it will be easy. Does football still roll along like a juggernaut? Can the basketball program be fixed, whether by getting in Chris Holtmann's ear or by firing him and bringing in someone else? And does the money still flow in?

If the answer to all of these is yes, then it was a good hire.

# Buckeyes Can See Day Light From Darkest Hours

I always marvel at the fact that even though he has been gone as Ohio State football coach for almost a quarter of a century now, I still find myself frequently quoting John Cooper. You know, things like, "You guys want to gamble, but you want to gamble with my chips."

This week, for me it is, "One day you're sipping the wine, and the next day you are stomping the grapes."

Boy, have we seen an example of that adage – only in reverse – with Ryan Day and his Ohio State football team. After one of the worst months in Ohio State football history starting with a third straight loss to archrival Michigan and going even beyond the Cotton Bowl, when punter Jesse Mirco after one of his best games as a Buckeye, jumped ship – a transfer that on a smaller scale I found to be as stunning as the departure of quarterback Kyle McCord – the calendar flipped to 2024 and suddenly Day and his Buckeyes could do no wrong. And so far, this hot streak has shown no signs of letting up.

Ohio State, which has had mixed success (or less) in the transfer portal, is suddenly bringing in the likes of Caleb Downs, Quinshon Judkins, Seth McLaughlin, Will Howard and finally Julian Sayin (I say "finally," but who knows who is still on the way). These guys are among the cream of the portal crop. And after the failed Kyle McCord experiment, the additions of quarterbacks Howard and Sayin are really going to shake up a quarterbacks room that already includes Devin Brown, Lincoln Kienholz and Air Noland.

But the thing that really blew me away is the fact that virtually every Buckeye who had a legitimate shot at leaving for the NFL elected to come back and take care of unfinished business. You just don't see that anymore, at any school. I noted in this space last issue that I was beginning to believe the "brotherhood" really existed after these very same players elected to play in the Cotton Bowl, rather than opt out. Maybe the brotherhood wasn't just lip service while the real priority for the players was NIL to NFL.

The amount of talent that is coming back for one more round is even better than a huge recruiting haul, because guys like J.T. Tuimolotau, Jack Sawyer, Denzel Burke, Emeka Egbuka, Tyleik Williams and TreVeyon Henderson are proven NFL-caliber talent, rather than unproven players with a bunch of stars after their names.

The return of so much talent hoping to make one last grab at the gold – and maybe even improve their draft stock along the way – caused many to think back to this time 22 years ago, when Buckeye All-American safety Mike Doss surprised most by announcing his return to the Buckeyes.

In retrospect, many consider Doss' decision the first step for the Buckeyes on their way to the 2002 national championship. Personally, I consider beating Michigan in Ann Arbor after 310 days to have been the first step, but Doss' announcement was certainly the second.

Here's what I had to say in this space about Doss' decision in the Jan. 19, 2002, issue of BSB.

"From a team standpoint, the Buckeyes retain a bona fide star and proven big-play maker," I said of Doss.

"I think there is something more important than that, however. Doss' decision gives the team something to build on as it heads into Jim Tressel's second year. And it gives validation to the idea that things are going to be different under Tressel than in the past regime, when players going pro early was the norm and provided

## THE VIEW FROM 15TH & HIGH Frank Moskowitz, Publisher

a convenient excuse for various failures."

If Doss' return in 2002 jump-started Ohio State toward the national championship, what might the return of a bevy of stars do for the 2024 Buckeyes?

Stories about Doss' decision to return were reprinted in the Jan. 18 edition of Reprint Thursday at BuckeyeSports.com. Also included were stories on Tressel's first year as head coach at Ohio State, as well as a bonus recruiting profile on Troy Smith, the quarterback out of Cleveland Glenville who was trying to decide between Ohio State and Iowa, Toledo and West Virginia. All these stories are archived for your information and entertainment. Simply click on the BSB Online tab and go to "BSB Reprints" on the drop-down menu.

### Recruiting Wrap-Up Coming

I wouldn't normally put a note like this so high up in my column, but I wanted to make sure you saw it and save you the inevitable phone call.

The late date of this year's traditional football National Signing Day has caused BSB to have to tinker with its winter/spring biweekly printing schedule to make sure our 24 print issues are allotted properly. The next issue, the popular Recruiting Wrap-Up, will be mailed on Feb. 13, three weeks from the mailing of this issue. Readers will still be receiving the full 24 issues this year.

Please note that the BSB print schedule can always be found in the credit box on page 3 of each issue. If you have any questions, feel free to call us at (614) 486-2202.

### O'Brien Takes Over As OC

I don't know that much about Bill O'Brien, Day's new offensive coordinator.

My greatest exposure to him would have been when he was in the Big Ten as head coach of Penn State, taking over for the legendary Joe Paterno in the midst of the Jerry Sandusky scandal. Not only did O'Brien hold the fabled program together in the face of scholarship reductions, the fallout from the scandal and the departure of Paterno, but he thrived. In his first season in Happy Valley, the Lions went 8-4, and in his second season they went 7-5, with a combined 10-6 record in the Big Ten. Of course, the Lions did not go to a bowl game either year, due to an NCAA-imposed bowl ban.

Regardless, I was impressed with the job he did at Penn State before he left for the NFL then, and I remain impressed now. And I must not have been the only one because he was named Big Ten and national coach of the year that first season at PSU.

Since then, he has served as head coach of the Houston Texans from 2014 to 2020, offensive coordinator and quarterbacks coach at Alabama (2021-22) and offensive coordinator and quarterbacks coach (for the second time) with the New England Patriots last season.

I repeat, I am not that familiar with his actual work with these teams, short of his time at Penn State, but if he is good enough for Bill Belichick (twice) and Nick Saban, two of the greatest coaches of all time, he is probably good enough for me.

However, on the BuckeyeSports.com Forum, I seem to be the only one who is concerned about Brian Hartline feeling like he is being jerked around. He is arguably the most

important piece of Ohio State's coaching puzzle. At this time last year, it was Hartline who was named offensive coordinator and who was supposed to get a shot at calling plays in light of Day trying to ease his workload. Hartline never called plays, and Day never lightened his workload.

Now O'Brien is coming in, essentially over Hartline (I don't care if Hartline is the dreaded "co" offensive coordinator). O'Brien was brought in, after more than 30 years coaching at the highest college and pro levels, to run the offense. Hopefully Hartline was kept in the loop on this hiring decision and is comfortable, or as comfortable as he can be, with the situation.

How well the offense produces this upcoming season will go a long way toward determining the compatibility of the coaching staff – winning tends to cure all – but frankly, for me, if it came down to Hartline or O'Brien, I'd take Hartline.

One caution to O'Brien and anyone else who is interested. Day is in his second year of saying he is going to give up play-calling, but he has yet to do it. He didn't do it with Kevin Wilson, who has even more coaching experience than O'Brien (40 years) and mentored a Heisman Trophy winner in Sam Bradford at Oklahoma in 2008. He didn't do it for Hartline, who was portrayed as Ohio State's offensive guru when he was promoted last winter. How is O'Brien going to take it if, come opening day against Akron on Aug. 31, or sometime later in the season, Day starts calling the plays? Day is obviously having a hard time giving that duty up.

### Speaking Of Heismans

Speaking of mentoring Heisman winners, Wilson is not the only recent or current Buckeye coach who developed a winner of college football's most prestigious award. O'Brien was the offensive coordinator and quarterbacks coach at Alabama when Bryce Young won the Heisman in 2022, going on to be the top pick in the NFL draft to the Carolina Panthers over C.J. Stroud at No. 2 to the Houston Texans.

Is there any question now as to who was the top quarterback in the draft? Is there any Buckeye fan who is surprised at Stroud's success?

For the record, Stroud was 319 of 499 passing, good for 4,108 yards and a 63.9 completion percentage with 23 TDs and only five interceptions. Young, on the other hand, was 315 for 527 (59.8 percent), for 2,877 yards, 11 touchdowns and ten interceptions. As big a disparity as that is, that is not the most compelling statistic.

Stroud was 9-6 in his 15 starts and led the Texans to the playoffs (including an impressive victory over Cleveland) after the team finished 3-13-1 last year. The Panthers, who finished 7-10 in 2022, dropped to 2-15 behind Young.

Winning is the most important statistic of all.

For more on Stroud, see page 15 of this issue. One quote from that story really stood out to me:

"I wish you guys could be in the huddle and around him," tight end Brevin Jordan of the Texans said of Stroud. "The dude is unbelievable – how he moves, how he talks, everything. You can tell from training camp that he was a captain and a QB1, since like day two. You could tell how he moved, how he walks around the locker room and talks to guys. When you have a humble, confident guy who loves to work, the

sky's the limit."

The sky's the limit!

One also wonders if that type of personality is what Kyle McCord may have been lacking.

### Saban And The Buckeyes

This may be Buckeye Sports Bulletin, but I have to mention the retirement of Alabama's Nick Saban, which took me by surprise.

As mentioned previously, most would acknowledge Saban one of the greatest – if not *the* greatest – coaches of all time. His path intertwined with Ohio State many times through the years.

He was defensive backs coach at Ohio State in 1980 and '81, not the greatest pass defense era in Buckeye football history, and he was fired by Earle Bruce after the 1981 season. It was one of the few failures in Saban's fabled career.

By the time 1998 rolled around, Saban had been head coach at Toledo, moved on to the NFL as defensive coordinator for the Cleveland Browns, among other stops, and was in his fourth season as head coach at Michigan State. It was that year that his Spartans, who would finish their season just 6-6, scored one of the biggest upsets of the Buckeyes in Ohio State history, knocking off the nation's top-ranked team, 28-24 in Ohio Stadium.

Ohio State would get its revenge 16 years later with Saban at Alabama. Urban Meyer's Buckeyes upset the Crimson Tide in the CFP semifinals, 42-35, perhaps the biggest victory of the Meyer era. In a game that was almost anti-climactic, the Buckeyes would go on to defeat Oregon, 42-20, to win the first CFP national championship. Ohio State would play Saban and his Tide one more time, falling 52-24 in the national championship game in 2020. It would prove to be the last of Saban's seven national championships, including one at LSU in 2003.

### Saban And Me

On a more personal note, I took notice of one of the primary reasons Saban gave for his sudden retirement, and I found it relevant to both me and the continuing discussion we have been having in this space about the future of Buckeye Sports Bulletin.

"Last season was difficult for me from just a health standpoint, not necessarily having anything major wrong, but just being able to sustain and do things the way I want to do them, the way I've always done them," Saban said upon announcing his retirement. "It just got a little bit harder. So, you have to decide, 'OK, this is sort of inevitable when you get to my age.'"

Nick Saban, at 72, is one year older than I am.

Now I am not suggesting that being the publisher of Buckeye Sports Bulletin is as difficult as being the head coach of one of the most powerful and successful football programs in the country. But anyone who has ever worked at BSB will tell you, football season around here is nothing short of grueling and a lot less lucrative than being the head football coach at Alabama.

Saban's statement made me stop and think. And I realized that I don't feel the way Saban does at all. I still wake up each morning wanting to come to work at BSB. Maybe next year, when I am Saban's age, I will feel differently.

But right now, I want to continue to try to put out a quality publication, work with the writers to improve their craft and be good teammates (two of my great joys) and I hope to continue to do that as long as you, the loyal readers (and the staff), are still interested.

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