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TIME AND CHANGE

OSU's Recruiting Efforts Remain On Culture Fits Amid Shifting Landscape

By BRADEN MOLES
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Editor

SONNY BROCKWAY

LEADING THE CHARGE — College football has changed rapidly during Ohio State head coach Ryan Day's time with the Buckeyes, but he is looking to help the program adapt as it continues its pursuit of the best talent on the recruiting trail.

Ohio State's 2024 recruiting class – most of whom signed with the Buckeyes back in December – is a diverse one, featuring 21 prospects from 10 different states. Rankings are rarely reflective of how Ohio State's coaching staff views a prospect, but the class includes recruits ranging from Miami Gardens (Fla.) Chaminade-Madonna Prep five-star wide receiver Jeremiah Smith (6-3, 214) – the consensus No. 1 overall player in the class – to Fort Myers (Fla.) Bishop Verot three-star safety Leroy Roker (6-1, 170), a recruit who is outside of the top 800 but has plenty of supporters inside the Woody Hayes Athletic Center.

Some of the signees played together, with four-star cornerback Bryce West (5-11, 177) and four-star tight end Damarion Witten (6-4, 215) hailing from Cleveland Glenville. A closer bond could not be formed than that of Deontae (6-6, 280) and Devontae (6-5, 297) Armstrong, identical twins and four-star offensive linemen from Lakewood (Ohio) St. Edward.

Others could not have been further apart, with Chandler (Ariz.) Basha four-star cornerback Miles Lockhart (5-10, 185) and West Orange (N.J.) Seton Hall Prep four-star safety Jaylen McClain (6-0, 185) – future teammates in the secondary – playing their high school football nearly 2,400 miles away from each other.

But those qualifiers will wash away once each player steps onto Ohio State's campus and into their first practice with the Buckeyes. No more rankings, no more high school accolades – just one common goal.

"They all want to be great," Ohio State head coach Ryan Day said on Dec. 20. "They all want the big stage. When you come to Ohio State, they have to think big because there's nothing you can't get done at Ohio State. You have to want the big stage. When you walk into the 'Shoe, you're going to play on the biggest stage in the country. We're the most watched team across America. I think 70 million viewers last year watched us play.

"You have to want to be great. You have to want to be elite. You have to want to walk in a room where you have a bunch of great players that are going to compete every day, and you've got to be competitive."

BSB'S 2024 RECRUITING WRAP-UP

Ohio State's class finished as the fifth best in the country, according to the 247Sports composite rankings, trailing No. 4 Miami (Fla.), No. 3 Oregon, No. 2 Alabama and No. 1 Georgia. But the Buckeyes' collection of talent, pound-for-pound, is among the elite, with an average player rating of .9280, trailing only Alabama (.9312) and Georgia (.9361).

"We try to identify the guys that we think are the right fit for us, and we go get them," Day said. "I'm really excited about the guys that we have. We think that they really fit well with what we're doing on offense. You have them in camp. You see what they're going

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FAN FORUM

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Amateur Student-Athletes: It's Been Nice Knowing You

For a very long time, athletic scholarships were seen as a means for students with athletic abilities to receive financial compensation in the form of tuition, room and board. In addition, the NCAA regarded the "student-athlete" as an amateur at the college level.

However, recently, athletes have been given the right to use their name, image and likeness (NIL) as marketing and promotional tools to earn money. This has led to lucrative deals for some and little or no opportunities for others, causing a paradigm shift from team success to individual branding and self-promotion. Some now decry the NIL landscape as the wild, wild west of unlimited possibilities and hidden dangers.

Case in point, as of Feb. 5, the National Labor Relations Board regional office in Boston ruled that the Dartmouth College men's basketball players can now be "employees" of the school (Boston Globe, Feb. 6). For the first time ever, this action removes obstacles permitting labor union membership for NCAA athletes. Unionizing also clears the way for players to negotiate salary and working conditions (e.g., practice routines and travel schedules). Moreover, this action also makes college athletes much more akin to professional athletes.

In time, athletes at other colleges and universities are sure to follow. We will no longer see amateur student-athletes pursuing a professional degree with the possibility a career in

professional sports, but rather, they will be seen as employees of a university under the auspices of a union contract and bargaining agreements.

In coming years, colleges and universities will be forced to change their athletic department's mission and value statements to label athletes as employee/professional athletes and not amateur/student-athletes. While we are at it, let's bid farewell not only to the amateur "student-athlete," but also to "team" sports, "team" spirit, school spirit, and school loyalty – as we once knew them.

Joseph Huber
Walpole, Mass.

Last Call For Holtmann

I'm writing after the men's basketball game at Iowa (on Feb. 2) and before the Indiana game (on Feb. 6). This is a premature post-mortem on the Chris Holtmann tenure, as I expect this season to be his last.

Holtmann reminds me of Eldon Miller, even beyond their bland personalities. Both are good, competent coaches and even much better human beings. Both can recruit good players. On the court, their teams seem to be "less than the sum of the parts."

No matter how good a coach is, and no matter how good the players are, a coach's fate is going to be determined by the team's wins and losses.

Postscript, assuming the players stay at Ohio State, it would have been interesting to see how the five sophomores and four freshmen would have performed in 2024-25 with Holtmann, but I don't expect to see it.

Steven K. Brown
Port Charlotte, Fla.

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. 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.

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From The Message Board

Ohio State completed the team's 2024 recruiting class on Feb. 7 with the signing of Painesville (Ohio) Riverside four-star defensive lineman Dominic Kirks (6-4, 255). With the 21-man class now in the books, we asked our readers and writers at the BuckeyeSports.com Fan Forum their thoughts on the class and who stands out to them. Here are some of the responses:

"I think Ohio State did great except for safety and defensive line. Miami Gardens (Fla.) Chaminade-Madonna Prep five-star wide receiver Jeremiah Smith (6-3, 214) is the best high school receiver since Julio Jones and I think he will have the most success."

– Tiffin Buckeye

"I think Jeremiah Smith will have success, and probably quickly. I don't know who's underrated but I expect that some player in the class will perform far beyond what we expect right now."

– Terrier Buck

"I am interested in seeing how Lakewood (Ohio) St. Edward four-star offensive linemen Devontae (6-5, 297) and Deontae (6-6, 280) Armstrong shake out. They both have good size with the ability to put on some muscle weight and are used to putting in the effort to win."

– BuckeyeScott

"A lot of the hype – deservedly so – has been fixated on Jeremiah Smith, but I could see Buford, Ga., five-star defensive end Eddrick Houston (6-3, 269) making a huge impact on Larry Johnson's defensive line in the future. I don't think Houston will play a large role in this year's squad with Ty Hamilton, Jack Sawyer, J.T. Tuimoloau and Tyleik Williams all returning to the fold, but he still is an elite talent at a premier position, making him a key component of Jim Knowles' defense moving forward. Ohio State and Johnson worked hard to keep Houston from flipping to Miami (Fla.) during the early signing period, so I can't see why they won't also work hard to bring the best out of him during his time in Columbus."

– Patrick Engels, BSB

"He's one of the underrated guys in the class, but I'm really excited to see how Ohio State utilizes Cleveland Glenville four-star tight end Damarion Witten (6-4, 215). He's more of a pass-catching tight end, which Ohio State has been no stranger to with the outstanding seasons Cade Stover has had recently. But he also lined up outside plenty for Glenville, so he offers a lot of versatility even if it will take some time to get him up to weight to realize his blocking potential."

– Braden Moles, BSB

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Warming Up Some Column Leftovers

With the exception of a couple of inches of snow and a weeklong cold snap in January, the central Ohio area hasn't experienced much in the way of winter weather. In fact, less than a week after Punxsutawney Phil and his Ohio counterpart Buckeye Chuck declared for an early spring, this part of the country was treated to a couple of 60-degree days.

There was plenty of news emanating from Ohio State athletics, including Ryan Day playing a form of musical chairs with his offensive coordinator position and the men's and women's basketball teams heading down the stretch of their respective seasons on decidedly different trajectories.

This is also the time of the year when I look back at leftovers from columns past and share what wound up on the cutting-room floor.

The first is from last fall after Ohio State squeezed out a 17-14 win at Notre Dame, a sixth straight victory for the Buckeyes in the rivalry between the college football titans as well as one that will likely be remembered as Kyle McCord's finest hour in scarlet and gray.

Anyone with a passing knowledge of OSU football history knows that Bill Shakespeare has through the years been credited with rallying the Fighting Irish to their 18-13 victory against the Buckeyes in 1935, one of the first college football contests to be referred to as "The Game of the Century." And while Shakespeare threw the winning touchdown pass – a 19-yard score to Wayne Millner with 32 seconds remaining – the quarterback had been in the game for only a few plays.

Notre Dame's second-half comeback from a 13-0 halftime deficit was engineered not by Shakespeare but by left halfback Andy Pilney. It was Pilney who had a long punt return late in the third quarter to set up the Irish's first touchdown. It was Pilney who made a touchdown-saving tackle on Ohio State's next possession. It was Pilney who connected on three straight passes, including a touchdown to fullback Mike Layden, younger brother of Notre Dame head coach Frank Layden. And it was Pilney who scrambled 32 yards to push the ball to the OSU 19 with just seconds to play, setting up the game-winning score.

But Pilney wasn't on the field when the Fighting Irish won the game. He suffered a knee injury on his 32-yard scramble and was replaced in the lineup by Shakespeare. And you know the rest.

Shakespeare went on to win consensus first-team All-America honors in 1935, finished third in the balloting for the inaugural Heisman Trophy, and was the third overall selection in the first-ever NFL draft. He was a U.S. Army captain in World War II, earning the Bronze Star for gallantry during the Battle of the Bulge, after which he was a successful businessman, rising to the presidency of the Cincinnati Rubber Co.

He died in 1974 at the age of 61 and nine years later was inducted into the College Football Hall of Fame.

Meanwhile, Pilney never played football again. He did, however, play Major League Baseball with the Boston Braves (who were then known as the Bees), appearing in three games during the 1936 season. Pilney debuted June 12 as a pinch hitter during a 17-1 loss to the Cubs in Chicago and pinch hit again five days later during a 10-2 loss to the Cardinals. He was hitless in both plate appearances.

Pilney's final game in the majors came June 26 as a pinch runner during a 2-1 loss to the Pirates. He returned to the minors the following season and played professionally for three more years before retiring from the game after batting .244 in 62 games with the Class C Erie Sailors in the Cincinnati Reds organization.

Pilney returned to football in 1942 as an assistant coach at Washington University in St. Louis and later spent eight seasons as head coach at Tulane from 1954-61, compiling a record of 25-49-6. He continued to live in the New Orleans area and died there in 1996 at the age of 83.

EDITOR'S NOTEBOOK
Mark Rea

Trio Of Misfires

When Purdue kicker Julio Macias missed three field goals during his team's 41-7 loss to the Buckeyes on Oct. 14, it got me wondering. Has an Ohio State kicker ever missed three field goals in a single game?

Turns out that it's happened a lot. In fact, it's happened seven times since 1970, including twice each to a pair of OSU kickers.

The most recent three-miss game came in 1989 when Pat O'Morrow failed to convert from 33, 39 and 48 yards during a 34-29 win at Boston College. O'Morrow also missed three long-range attempts – twice from 49 yards and once from 56 – the year before during a 31-12 loss at Illinois.

The other kicker with a pair of three-miss games since 1970 is Vlade Janakievski. He missed a pair of 42-yard tries as well as a 49-yarder as a freshman in 1977 during a 14-6 loss at Michigan and then flubbed on three relatively short ones – 32, 35 and 31 yards – three years later as a senior during a 21-0 win at Wisconsin.

There is only one Ohio State kicker since 1970 who has missed four field goals in a single game, and the name will likely surprise you. Tom Skladany, a three-time All-America punter who has for 48 years owned the program record for longest field goal with a 59-yarder at Illinois in 1975, missed attempts from 55, 38, 50 and 46 yards during a 24-3 win against Purdue in 1976.

In the spirit of fairness, it seems only right to mention the other two Ohio State kickers since 1970 who have missed three field-goal attempts in a single game.

Tom Klaban, who connected on four field goals to account for all of his team's points during a 12-10 win against Michigan in 1974, failed to convert attempts from 57, 52 and 38 yards during a 21-0 win at Michigan State in 1975.

And Rich Spangler missed from 35, 36 and 23 yards during a 26-21 win at Illinois in 1982.

Who's The Best?

While C.J. Stroud was putting the finishing touches on his march toward consensus NFL Rookie of the Year honors for 2023, there was discussion on the BuckeyeSports.com Fan Forum about whether Stroud had already claimed the mantle of being the most successful Ohio State quarterback in the pro ranks.

To be brutally honest, Stroud doesn't have much competition for that distinction.

Mike Tomczak enjoyed the longest NFL tenure of any former Ohio State quarterback. He played 15 seasons – mostly with the Bears and Steelers – and finished his career with 16,079 yards, 88 touchdowns and 106 interceptions.

Tomczak is remembered mostly as a career backup, probably because his rookie season in 1985 was spent holding the clipboard for Jim McMahon as the Bears stampeded their way to the Super Bowl championship. But Tomczak started 73 of his 185 career games and boasted a winning record of 42-31 as a starter.

You might win some prizes in a trivia contest if you knew that Kent Graham is second on the NFL longevity list among former Ohio State quarterbacks. Graham spent nine seasons in the league with the Giants, Cardinals, Steelers and Redskins. He logged 38 starts among his 81 career games, and finished his pro career with 7,801 yards, 39 TDs and 33 interceptions.

Only two other former Ohio State QBs lasted as many as five seasons in the NFL.

Bobby Hoying spent three years with the Eagles and two more with Raiders, finishing his career with 2,544 yards, 11 touchdowns 15 interceptions. And although Tom Tupa enjoyed a 16-year NFL career, most of that was as a punter for a host of different teams. Tupa technically spent only five seasons as a pro quarterback, throwing for 3,256 yards, 10 TDs and 24 interceptions as a quarterback for the Cardinals, Colts and Browns, though he did throw an occasional pass throughout the rest of his career.

Words Of Wisdom

Before the 2023 season began, I wrote that Ohio State's schedule contained a couple of nonconference stat-padders as well as a couple of marquee matchups. But they all paled in comparison to the contest that came at the end of the season, and I seriously doubted anyone needed to remind Day regarding the temperature under his seat if his team lost to Michigan for a third straight time.

But the coaching profession is not for the faint of heart and never has been.

In "Path Lit By Lightning," the superlative biography of Jim Thorpe written last year by Pulitzer Prize-winning author David Maraniss, there is a passage regarding Frank Cavanaugh, who had head coaching stops at Cincinnati, Holy Cross, Dartmouth, Boston College and Fordham. Known as the "Iron Major," Cavanaugh also served a stint as president of the American Football Coaches Association, the same AFCA that now administers the official national coaches' rankings.

Cavanaugh compiled a 145-48-7 record during his coaching career, good enough to earn induction into the College Football Hall of Fame in 1954. Unfortunately, he didn't live long enough to enjoy that honor. He died blind, penniless and all but forgotten in his native Massachusetts in 1933 at the age of 57.

To say that Cavanaugh had soured on the coaching profession in his later years would be something of an understatement. The Iron Major's advice to his contemporaries shortly before he died: "Get out of coaching while you can. The end of every coaching career is a disaster."

Top Dog To Assistant

In the space of just about three weeks, Ohio State tripled the number of former NFL head coaches who have left the professional ranks to become an assistant for the Buckeyes.

After four successful seasons as head coach at Oregon, new OSU offensive coordinator Chip Kelly was head coach of the Philadelphia Eagles from 2013-15 followed by a one-year stint piloting the San Francisco 49ers. Kelly succeeds Bill O'Brien, whose brief stay in Columbus ended when he was named head coach at Boston College. O'Brien has 13 years of NFL experience, including 6½ seasons as head coach of the Houston Texans.

Kelly and O'Brien were following in the footsteps of former Ohio State defensive coordinator Greg Schiano, who came to the Buckeyes in 2016 after spending two seasons as head coach of the Tampa Bay Buccaneers.

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O'Brien Leaves For BC, OSU Hires Kelly As OC

Ohio State's offensive staff experienced a whirlwind of change since Buckeye Sports Bulletin last went to press, with former offensive coordinator/quarterbacks coach Bill O'Brien leaving his position at Ohio State on Feb. 9 to become head coach at Boston College after spending just a few weeks with the program and the Buckeyes hiring former UCLA head coach Chip Kelly to fill the vacancy that same day.

O'Brien was initially hired by Ohio State on Jan. 19 and was expected to call plays for the Buckeyes after head coach Ryan Day had done so since taking over the program in 2019. He would have brought over 30 years of coaching experience, including runs as head coach at Penn State (2012-2013) and with the NFL's Houston Texans (2014-2020) and most recently serving as offensive coordinator for the New England Patriots.

But after former Boston College head coach Jeff Hafley – who was also Ohio State's co-defensive coordinator/secondary coach in 2019 – left his role with the Golden Eagles on Jan. 31 to become defensive coordinator for the Green Bay Packers, O'Brien jumped at the opportunity to return to the head coaching ranks.

Beyond the pull of becoming a head coach, another factor for O'Brien is that his family – including his son, Jack, who has a neurological disorder called lissencephaly – resides in the area and that much of O'Brien's coaching experience has come on the East Coast and in the Midwest. As rumors began to emerge in early February about O'Brien leaving Ohio State for Boston College, Day said on Feb. 7 that he and the program had plans to retain the longtime offensive coach but had plans in place should he depart.

"It isn't just one of those situations where you just take out one guy and put another guy in there and it's like, 'OK, move on.' It doesn't work that way," Day said. "We did talk to different people for that position, and we'll have contingency plans in place. Hopefully, we don't have to go down that road. But if we do, then we'll adapt."

That plan became obvious in the hours following the news of O'Brien's departure, when the team quickly pivoted and hired the longtime offensive-minded coach Kelly to fill the position with the team officially announcing the hiring – which includes a three-year deal through 2026 – later that night.

"We are extremely excited to have Chip and his wife, Jill, joining our program," Day said. "His experience as a head coach at Oregon, UCLA and in the NFL will bring immediate value to our entire team. I am really looking forward to reconnecting with Chip, introducing him to our staff and team and chasing a championship together."

As Day alluded to, Kelly comes to Ohio State after head coaching stints at Oregon and UCLA as well as in the NFL with the Philadelphia Eagles and San Francisco 49ers. One of Kelly's earliest coaching gigs was as offensive coordinator at New Hampshire from 1999-2006, where he coached Day before later hiring him in Philadelphia and San Francisco.

Kelly leaves UCLA after six seasons as head coach of the Bruins with a 35-34 record and is coming off an 8-5 campaign with a win in the LA Bowl. Kelly's most notable stint, however, was with the Ducks from 2009-12, where he led Oregon to a combined 46-7 record and a trip to the BCS National Championship Game in 2010, as well as wins in the Rose Bowl in 2011 and the Fiesta Bowl in 2012.

He engineered four top-eight offenses, including the nation's leading scoring offense in 2010 at 47.0 points per game and the second-leading scoring offense in 2012 at 49.6 points.

But Kelly's offenses did most of their work on the ground. Oregon running back LaMichael James led the nation in rushing yards in 2010 with 1,731 yards and 21 touchdowns and finished second in rushing (with 1,805 yards) the next season. In 2012, Oregon averaged 315.2 rushing yards per game behind 1,767 yards from Kenjon Barner, who was named an All-American and finished ninth in Heisman Trophy voting.

Now reuniting with Day at Ohio State, Kelly returns to the assistant coaching ranks for the first time since he was Oregon's offensive coordinator from 2007-2008, an unprecedented move considering Kelly would have coached UCLA as it began play in the Big Ten next season. But Kelly never appeared long for UCLA, as he interviewed with several NFL teams in recent weeks for open offensive coordinator roles.

Day Weighing Options With Final Assistant Coach Opening

Day is keeping his options open regarding how he will fill the 10th and final open assistant role on his staff for the 2024 season, leaving the door open for a new special teams coordinator or another defensive coach to fill the vacancy.

"We have some flexibility there," Day said on Feb. 7. "We've had multiple conversations. I think we can go in a couple different directions. But we're still not ready to make a decision there yet. We've certainly talked to people, and we're probably about a week away there."

In addition to the hiring of Kelly and departure of quarterbacks coach Corey Dennis, Day has made two other notable coaching moves since the team's Cotton Bowl loss to Missouri, relieving safeties coach Perry Eliano and special teams coordinator Parker Fleming of their duties.

Day has since replaced Eliano with former Indiana defensive coordinator Matt Guerrieri, but the program has yet to hire a new special teams coordinator. While the Buckeyes may very well fill that final assistant coaching vacancy with a new leader on special teams, Day hinted at having more involvement in that aspect of the game as he transitions to his "CEO" role.

"It allows you opportunities as someone who is managing the game to have an idea of when it's time to block a punt or return, those types of things," Day said. "Ideally, that's what

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 (Las Vegas)
Nov. 23	INDIANA	TBA	TBA	3-9, not eligible
Nov. 30	MICHIGAN	TBA	TBA	15-0, 34-13 win over Washington (CFP Champ.)

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Scarlet VIPS: William Adams, Willoughby, Ohio; Anthony Ananthanarayanan, Rochester, Mich.; Greg Brooks, Gahanna, Ohio; Marty Brumbaugh, Troy, Ohio; Donald Collins, Kenton, 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.

I would like to do. We'll just keep putting one foot in front of the other and go from there."

If Day – who also alluded to Guerrieri as someone who can take on some special teams responsibilities – were to use his final hiring on a defensive coach, it would balance the staff, giving Ohio State five assistants each on both sides of the ball.

That defensive assistant hiring could come with the program elevating graduate assistant James Laurinaitis to a full-time defensive role, a move that has been viewed as a likely option for Ohio State this offseason. Day said that Laurinaitis, a former linebacker with the Buckeyes, has grown as a teacher and recruiter since joining the staff last January.

"I've been very impressed," Day said. "I think he has a really bright future in coaching. He's only been doing it a couple years, but playing has allowed him an opportunity to give him perspective. But he also has credibility with the guys. That was good to get him out there (and recruit). He's done a really nice job. He's a big asset, and we will figure out what (his role) looks like moving forward."

Regardless of where Day and his staff stand regarding the final vacancy, the coach said that he has full faith that both he and the program will make the right decision to help put them in greater position to compete for a national championship in 2024.

"Both of those options are on the table," Day said. "I feel comfortable going either direction. But finding the right guy is going to be what is important."

Dennis Leaves OSU, Joins Utah As Analyst

Ohio State's offseason of staffing changes did not end with O'Brien and Kelly. Dennis, who had been expected to stay on staff following his demotion in January, instead accepted a position as an analyst at Utah on Feb. 6.

Dennis, who will be an offensive analyst for the Utes under head coach Kyle Wittingham, had been Ohio State's quarterbacks coach since 2020 but was stripped of his responsibilities following the hiring of O'Brien on Jan. 19. Dennis, the son-in-law of former Ohio State head coach Urban Meyer, had been with the Buckeyes since 2015, starting as an intern before working his way into a full-time assistant role under Day in 2020.

Following Ohio State's hiring of O'Brien, a statement from Ohio State said it would like to transition Dennis into a "still-to-be-determined role with the program," though that will not be the case as he departs after nine seasons at Ohio State.

While Whittingham has no connection to Ohio State's current coaches, other than suffering a loss to the Buckeyes in the Rose Bowl in 2021, he did serve as a defensive coordinator at Utah under Meyer from 2003-04 before taking over the program following Meyer's departure to Florida.

OSU's Spring Game Slated For April 13

Ohio State announced Feb. 6 that the football team's annual spring game is set for a noon kickoff on April 13 from Ohio Stadium and that tickets were available beginning Feb. 9.

General admission tickets are available for $10, while there are limited reserved seating options for $22 and $37, and parking is free, with tickets available for purchase at https://go.osu.edu/2024springgame. Broadcast information has not been announced, but it has traditionally aired on the Big Ten Network.

The year's spring game – which will cap off Ohio State's spring that includes 15 practices – figures to offer plenty of intrigue, with fans getting their first look at transfer additions such as quarterback Will Howard, running back Quinshon Judkins and safety Caleb Downs, as well as incoming freshmen such as quarterbacks Air Noland and Julian Sayin.

Gradishar Elected To Pro Football Hall Of Fame

Former Ohio State linebacker Randy Gradishar will receive his long-awaited bust in Canton, Ohio, after it was announced at the NFL Honors awards ceremony held on Feb. 8 that he had been elected to the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

Gradishar, a former Denver Bronco, will receive football immortality after being chosen as one of three senior finalists for this year's class, a group that also included former Chicago Bears defensive tackle Steve McMichael and New York Titans/Oakland Raiders wide receiver Art Powell. He had previously been tabbed as a finalist on three different occasions, becoming a modern-era finalist in 2003 and 2008 and a seniors candidate in 2020.

"Without question, Randy is one of the most impactful figures in Broncos history and one of the greatest linebackers of all time," Broncos CEO Greg Penner said. "The iconic 'Orange Crush' (defense) will now finally have its first Hall of Famer, and there could not be a better representative of our first Super Bowl team and this organization than Randy.

"He has waited 40 years for this moment, and we are excited to celebrate Randy this summer as he takes his well-deserved place in the Pro Football Hall of Fame."

Gradishar, 71, experienced a decorated 10-year career in the NFL, all with the Broncos. One of the stalwarts of Denver's patented "Orange Crush" defense, Gradishar earned seven All-Pro selections while becoming the franchise's all-time leader with 2,409 unofficial tackles, and he was named the NFL's Defensive Player of the Year in 1978.

"Knowing that now I'm in, I'm just hoping and praying that the 'Orange Crush' defense – or that team, certainly – will be considered more recognizable and having the opportunity to go in, similar to that 'Steel Curtain' guys (in Pittsburgh)," Gradishar said. "I'm very, very excited and again, it's a real blessing for me to be the first guy acknowledged and (selected) for this. I'm just hoping and praying that this leads into some other guys getting into the Hall of Fame."

Prior to his time dominating in the NFL, Gradishar made a name for himself in college football, where he was a two-time first-team All-American at Ohio State while playing under longtime head coach Woody Hayes. Playing from 1971-1973, he earned 320 total tackles – a school record at the time – and was named All-Big Ten in three seasons.

Gradishar's best year at Ohio State came in 1973, where he finished sixth in Heisman Trophy voting after leading a Buckeyes defense that earned four shutouts and relinquished just 64 points all season.

His efforts with the Scarlet and Gray allowed him to be inducted into the College Football Hall of Fame in 1998. With his election this winter, he will now become just the fourth Buckeye to be inducted in both the Pro

Continued On Page 6

Buckeyes In The Super Bowl

Super Bowl (Year)	Player	Postion	Team
I (1967)	Jim Tyrer	OT	Kansas City Chiefs
III (1969)	Tom Matte	RB	Baltimore Colts
	Matt Snell	RB	New York Jets
	Bob Vogel	OT	Baltimore Colts
IV (1970)	Jim Marshall	DE	Minnesota Vikings
	Jim Tyrer	OT	Kansas City Chiefs
V (1971)	Bob Vogel	OT	Baltimore Colts
VI (1972), VII (1973)	Paul Warfield	WR	Miami Dolphins
VIII (1974)	Jim Marshall	DE	Minnesota Vikings
	Paul Warfield	WR	Miami Dolphins
IX (1975)	Jim Marshall	DE	Minnesota Vikings
XI (1977)	Morris Bradshaw	WR	Oakland Raiders
	Neal Colzie	DB	Oakland Raiders
	Jim Marshall	DE	Minnesota Vikings
	Jack Tatum	S	Oakland Raiders
	Lenny Willis	WR	Minnesota Vikings
XII (1978)	Randy Gradishar	LB	Denver Broncos
XIV (1980)	Bob Brudzinski	LB	Los Angeles Rams
	Doug France	OT	Los Angeles Rams
XV (1981)	Morris Bradshaw	WR	Oakland Raiders
XVI (1982)	Archie Griffin	RB	Cincinnati Bengals
	Pete Johnson	RB	Cincinnati Bengals
	Ray Griffin	DB	Cincinnati Bengals
XVII (1983)	Bob Brudzinski	LB	Miami Dolphins
	Tom Orosz	P	Miami Dolphins
XIX (1985)	Bob Brudzinksi	LB	Miami Dolphins
	John Frank	TE	San Francisco 49ers
	Pete Johnson	RB	Miami Dolphins
XX (1986)	Shaun Gayle	DB	Chicago Bears
	Mike Tomczak	QB	Chicago Bears
XXI (1987)	Pepper Johnson	LB	New York Giants
	William Roberts	OG	New York Giants
XXIII (1989)	John Frank	TE	San Francisco 49ers
XXV (1991)	Pepper Johnson	LB	New York Giants
	William Roberts	OG	New York Giants
XXVI (1992)	Jim Lachey	OT	Washington Redskins
	Joe Staysniak	OT	Buffalo Bills
XXX (1996)	Mike Tomczak	QB	Pittsburgh Steelers
XXXI (1997)	Keith Byars	FB	New England Patriots
	Terry Glenn	WR	New England Patriots
	William Roberts	OG	New England Patriots
	Tom Tupa	P	New England Patriots
XXXIII (1999)	Tito Paul	DB	Denver Broncos
	William White	DB	Atlanta Falcons
XXXIV (2000)	Eddie George	RB	Tennessee Titans
	Joe Germaine	QB	St. Louis Rams
	Orlando Pace	OT	St. Louis Rams
	Chris Sanders	WR	Tennessee Titans
	Lorenzo Styles	LB	St. Louis Rams
XXXV (2001)	Joe Montgomery	RB	New York Giants
XXXVI (2002)	Orlando Pace	OT	St. Louis Rams
	Ryan Pickett	DT	St. Louis Rams
	Mike Vrabel	LB	New England Patriots
XXXVII (2003)	Rickey Dudley	TE	Tampa Bay Buccaneers
	Tom Tupa	P	Tampa Bay Buccaneers
XXXVIII (2004)	Mike Vrabel	LB	New England Patriots
	Nick Goings	RB	Carolina Panthers
XXXIX (2005)	Mike Vrabel	LB	New England Patriots
XLII (2008)	Mike Vrabel	LB	New England Patriots
XLIII (2009)	Santonio Holmes (MVP)	WR	Pittsburgh Steelers
XLIV (2010)	Malcolm Jenkins	CB	New Orleans Saints
	Will Smith	DE	New Orleans Saints
XLV (2011)	Will Allen	DB	Pittsburgh Steelers
	A.J. Hawk	LB	Green Bay Packers
	Ryan Pickett	DT	Green Bay Packers
	Matt Wilhelm	LB	Green Bay Packers
XLVI (2012)	Jake Ballard	TE	New York Giants
	Jim Cordle	C	New York Giants
XLVII (2013)	Alex Boone	OT	San Francisco 49ers
	Larry Grant	LB	San Francisco 49ers
	Ted Ginn Jr.	WR	San Francisco 49ers
	Donte Whitner	S	San Francisco 49ers
XLIX (2015)	Nate Ebner	DB	New England Patriots
50 (2016)	Corey "Philly" Brown	WR	Carolina Panthers
	Kurt Coleman	S	Carolina Panthers
	Ted Ginn Jr.	WR	Carolina Panthers
	Andrew Norwell	OG	Carolina Panthers
	Bradley Roby	CB	Denver Broncos
LI (2017)	Nate Ebner	DB	New England Patriots
LII (2018)	Malcolm Jenkins	DB	Philadelphia Eagles
LIII (2019)	Jake McQuaid	LS	Los Angeles Rams
	Nate Ebner	DB	New England Patriots
	John Simon	DE	New England Patriots
LIV (2020)	Nick Bosa	DE	San Francisco 49ers
	Darron Lee	LB	Kansas City Chiefs
LVI (2022)	Eli Apple	DB	Cincinnati Bengals
	Vonn Bell	DB	Cincinnati Bengals
	Joe Burrow	QB	Cincinnati Bengals
	Sam Hubbard	DL	Cincinnati Bengals
	Isaiah Prince	OL	Cincinnati Bengals
	Jordan Fuller	DB	Los Angeles Rams
LVII (2023)	Trey Sermon	RB	Philadelphia Eagles
LVIII (2024)	Nick Bosa	DE	San Francisco 49ers
	Chase Young	DE	San Francisco 49ers

OHIO STATE INSIDER

BSB Back To Its Biweekly Publishing Schedule

After the three-week gap caused by the late date of this year's traditional football National Signing Day, Buckeye Sports Bulletin is back to its biweekly publishing schedule. The next print issue of BSB will be mailed on Feb. 27. 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 next two weeks, including coverage of the ongoing Chris Holtmann saga, football recruiting and portal news along with other news from the football team as it prepares for spring practice and reports on the surging women's basketball team, 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 with the plight of Holtmann and the basketball team.

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 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.

If you are not already taking advantage of BuckeyeSports.com, BSB's 24/7 website, simply email your name, address and preferred email address to subscriptions@buckeyesports.com, and we will send back easy instructions on how to access the site. Don't forget, subscriptions@buckeyesports.com is our email address, not the website. We will send you directions on how to access the site.

If you are a current subscriber and have been unable to access all features on the site, please give us a call at (614) 486-2202 and we will help you gain access. If you have any questions about BuckeyeSports.com, our print schedule, or your mail service, feel free to call us at the above number.

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and College Football Halls of Fame, joining Orlando Pace, Jim Parker and Bill Willis.

Gradishar will be the 11th Buckeye inducted into pro football's most prestigious fraternity, joining the three previously mentioned names along with Cris Carter, Sid Gillman, Lou Groza, Dante Lavelli, Dick LaBeau, Ed Sabol and Paul Warfield. Gradishar will have his long-awaited formal induction into the Hall of Fame in Canton, Ohio, on Aug. 3.

Stroud Wins Several Top Rookie Awards

Former Ohio State and current Houston Texans quarterback C.J. Stroud turned in one of the greatest rookie NFL seasons in recent memory, and he was awarded for that performance on Feb. 8 when he was named NFL Offensive Rookie of the Year at the 2024 NFL Honors.

"This honor means a lot," Stroud said during his acceptance speech. "And to whatever kid is out there watching, you can do anything you put your mind to. I'm a living testimony to perseverance and just trusting your goals and your dreams, and I just thank God for this."

Stroud helped lead Houston to a 10-7 record and a playoff appearance in his rookie season, throwing for 4,108 yards – the third most ever by a rookie quarterback – with 23 touchdowns and just five interceptions, also setting the record for most passing attempts without an interception to start an NFL career with 191 attempts. He also set the rookie record for single-game passing yards (470) and touchdowns (five) in a 39-37 win over the Tampa Bay Buccaneers on Nov. 5.

At Ohio State, Stroud – in two seasons as the starter – threw for 8,123 yards and 85 touchdowns, and was a two-time Heisman Trophy finalist while winning a bevy of other conference awards.

"I want to thank Ohio State, Coach Day, (analyst) Todd Fitch and a ton of Buckeyes out here that have given me nothing but support and shown a young kid some love all the way 2,000 miles away from home," Stroud said.

The standout signal caller is the fourth former Buckeye to earn the award and second in as many years, joining wide receiver Garrett Wilson (2022), running back Eddie George (1996) and fullback John Brockington (1971).

He is also the sixth Buckeye in eight years to earn Rookie of the Year honors on either side of the ball, joining the previously mentioned Wilson, defensive ends Chase Young (2020), Nick Bosa (2019) and Joey Bosa (2016) and cornerback Marshon Lattimore (2017).

This was not the only award the former Buckeye took home in February. Since his rookie season ended on Jan. 20 with a loss to the Baltimore Ravens in the NFL playoffs, Stroud was also named NFL Pepsi Rookie of the Year, as voted on by fans on Feb. 8.

Additionally, he earned the Pro Football Writers Association's Rookie of the Year and Offensive Rookie of the Year awards on Jan. 23, and he was named to PFWA's all-rookie first-team, a group that also includes former Ohio State and current Cleveland Browns tackle Dawand Jones.

Heyward Named NFL Man Of The Year

Former Ohio State defensive lineman Cameron Heyward was named the NFL Walter Payton Man of the Year on Feb. 8, recognizing his off-field impact as well as his on-field contributions with the Pittsburgh Steelers.

Heyward, a six-time nominee for the award, is the founder of the Heyward House, which has launched initiatives to fight childhood hunger, support families of children diagnosed with cancer and encourage childhood education.

He has also held numerous community events, including a toy and coat drive as well as a Teachers' Appreciation Dinner, and will now have the capacity to do more good. Winning NFL Man of the Year comes with a $250,000 donation to a charity of the winner's choosing.

Heyward recently completed his 13th season with the Steelers and has appeared in 194 games with 647 tackles, 80½ sacks and 47 pass breakups. He is the second former Buckeye to win the award, after Carter received the honor in 1999.

Hall Named Top DL In Senior Bowl Practice

Former Ohio State defensive lineman Mike Hall Jr. made his presence known during the week of Senior Bowl practice held at Hancock-Whitney Stadium in Mobile, Ala., and he was tabbed as the event's top practice performer at his position during the event's Feb. 2 awards ceremony by the offensive lineman who lined up against him.

Hall, who earned an invitation to the predraft showcase after 24 tackles and 1½ sacks during his final season with the Buckeyes, turned heads during the one-on-one portion of the practices. He made headlines on social media during the first Senior Bowl practice on Jan. 30 after a video surfaced of him spinning off former Michigan left guard Trevor Keegan on a number of pash-rush attempts.

Hall continued that dominance into the second and third days of practice on Jan. 31 and Feb. 1, allowing him to earn high praise from NFL draft experts.

"One of the few underclassmen taking advantage of the new rule that allows juniors to participate in the Senior Bowl, Ohio State defensive tackle Michael Hall Jr. wasted little time in making his presence felt," ESPN NFL draft and college football analyst Jordan Reid wrote on Feb. 1 "He flashed on day one, but he really stood out on the second day. He popped in the one-on-one and team portions of practice, and his first step helps him win quickly. Hall was primarily seen as a third-round pick coming in, and he's only rising."

Hall did not play in the Senior Bowl, but that did not negatively affect his draft stock. According to NFLMockDraftDatabase.com, Hall's NFL draft projection jumped from the third round to the second round.

OL Leroux Retiring From Football

Offensive lineman Trey Leroux will forgo his final two years of collegiate eligibility and end his football career to pursue other professional opportunities.

Leroux, who graduated from Ohio State in December with a degree in finance and participated in the Buckeyes' Senior Day festivities before their final home game against Minnesota on Nov. 18, has reportedly begun his postgraduate job at JPMorgan Chase.

A former three-star prospect out of Norwalk, Ohio, in 2020, Leroux saw little action on the field during his four seasons at Ohio State. He appeared in just three games in 2021 before failing to see any playing time over the last two seasons. Leroux did excel in the classroom during his time at Ohio State, though, becoming an Ohio State scholar-athlete from 2020-2022 and earning Academic All-Big Ten honors in 2021 and 2022.

Schlegel Returns As Interim Strength Coach

Former Ohio State linebacker and assistant strength and conditioning coach Anthony Schlegel has reclaimed his role on an interim basis for the team's winter workouts, filling in for an unnamed strength and conditioning coach who is away from the team due to surgery.

Schlegel, whose voice could be heard leading the team through winter workouts in a video released by the team on social media on Jan. 25, returns to the program where he previously served as an assistant strength and conditioning coach from 2011-2015.

The Cedar Rapid, Iowa, native became a fixture on the Buckeyes' sideline during Meyer's tenure and even followed Meyer to the NFL to become the Jacksonville Jaguars' head strength and conditioning coach in 2021.

Schlegel played linebacker for the Buckeyes from 2003-05 and was selected in the third round of the 2006 NFL draft by the New York Jets, eventually playing with the Jets and Cincinnati Bengals from 2006-07.

It is currently unknown how long Schlegel will remain on staff. Schlegel also heads The Difference USA, a football equipment company he founded after earning his MBA from Ohio State in 2015. While running the company, Schlegel invented The Difference Striking Machine, a portable hand placement/striking machine that is used by football programs across the country.

Smith's Killer Found Guilty Of Manslaughter

Cardell Hayes, the man who shot and killed former Ohio State defensive end Will Smith after a traffic crash in 2016, was found guilty of manslaughter at a retrial held in New Orleans on Jan. 26. Hayes, 36, now faces up to 40 years in prison and will be sentenced in March following a jury deliberation that lasted more than four hours.

"Since April 9, 2016, my family and I have been living with a nightmare," the family of Smith wrote in a statement following the retrial. "In the eight years since losing Will, each life milestone and family memory brings heartache – We miss our Superman. ... All we have ever wanted was for Mr. Hayes to take accountability for his actions, and we hope that through this verdict, we are one step closer to that becoming a reality."

Hayes was originally convicted of manslaughter and attempted manslaughter in December 2016 after he shot and killed Smith – and wounded Smith's widow, Raquel Smith – that April during a road confrontation in New Orleans. But the conviction – which was determined by a 10-2 jury vote – was reversed after the U.S. Supreme Court outlawed nonunanimous verdicts in 2020. Hayes was then released on bond on March 18, 2021, af-

ter serving more than four years of his 25-year sentence.

Hayes was ordered for a retrial, but it was delayed on several occasions for various reasons, including court closures during the COVID-19 pandemic. But the trial went through on Jan. 26, and after multiple hours of deliberation, the defendant was found guilty of the killing. Prosecutors rested their case against Hayes after presenting that he did not act in self-defense.

"One gun was fired by one man," district attorney Jason Williams said while holding the evidence-tagged handgun used by Hayes, which hit Will Smith eight times – seven times in the back – and Raquel Smith once in the leg.

Will Smith, who was 34 at the time of his death, had a decorated career at Ohio State. The defensive end played in Columbus from 2000-03 and was an integral part of the Buckeyes' 2002 national championship team. He also won the Big Ten's Defensive Player of the Year award in 2003 along with a first-team All-American selection.

Smith was then selected with the 18th overall pick in the 2004 NFL draft by the New Orleans Saints, where he played all his nine professional seasons, earning a Pro Bowl nod in 2006 and a Super Bowl in 2010. Smith, who totaled 463 tackles and 67½ sacks in his NFL career, was inducted into the Saints' Ring of Honor in 2019.

Smith's son, Will Smith Jr., is a defensive end for Ohio State and is entering his redshirt freshman season for the Buckeyes.

Griffin Honored With Statue At Rose Bowl

Former Ohio State and two-time Heisman Trophy-winning running back Archie Griffin will be honored with a statue built outside the iconic Rose Bowl Stadium in Pasadena, Calif., the Rose Bowl Legacy Foundation announced on Feb. 2.

"I am humbled to have a statue in my honor at the Rose Bowl Stadium, one of the most prestigious stadiums in America," Griffin said. "Please know that when you honor me with this recognition, you also honor the teams that I played on during my four years at The Ohio State University. I was simply in the right place, at the right time, with the right people. That's what allowed me to enjoy the success that my teammates and I experienced. Again, I am extremely grateful to be honored in this manner."

Griffin, who turns 70 on Aug. 21, made his presence felt at the Rose Bowl during his illustrious Ohio State career. One of two players ever to start in four consecutive Rose Bowl – former USC linebacker Brian Cushing (2005-08) being the other – he rushed for a combined 412 yards on 79 carries in Pasadena, headlined by his 22 carries for 149 yards and one touchdown in Ohio State's 42-21 victory over No. 7 USC in 1974, Griffin's lone Rose Bowl win.

Griffin's efforts in those four games allowed him to be elected to the Rose Bowl Hall of Fame in 1990, four years after his induction into the College Football Hall of Fame in 1986.

The Rose Bowl Foundation will erect Griffin's statue in the stadium's Court of Champions, an outdoor space located underneath the Rose Bowl Stadium marquee that houses presentations and picnics, among other events. It is just the fifth statue on Rose Bowl stadium property, joining renderings of Jackie Robinson, the 1999 Team USA FIFA Women's World Cup Champions, broadcaster Keith Jackson and former UCLA head coach Terry Donahue.

The Rose Bowl will also honor Griffin in a brand-new Legends Walk located near the Court of Champions, which will feature displays and information on the 19 Heisman Trophy Winners who have played in the Rose Bowl Game.

"Archie Griffin is one of the greatest players in college football history, and we applaud the Rose Bowl Stadium for erecting his statue as part of the new Heisman Walk," said Steve Hatchell, National Football Foundation president and CEO. "As a College Football Hall of Fame inductee and long-standing member of the National Football Foundation board of directors, he has dedicated his life to promoting and protecting the game. Archie's statue will serve as a fitting tribute to a man whose legacy is something we can all celebrate."

In addition to its appearance in Pasadena, the Rose Bowl Legacy Foundation will also gift a full-size replica of the statue to Ohio State, which will be placed in Columbus at an unknown location and time.

"On behalf of The Ohio State University and the Department of Athletics, I wish to extend our most sincere thanks and gratitude to the Rose Bowl Legacy Foundation for this wonderful honor of memorializing our all-time great, Archie Griffin, with a statue at the Rose Bowl Stadium," athletic director Gene Smith said. "Knowing Archie, he would want a statue for all the Heisman Trophy winners along the Legacy Walk. His accomplishments on and off the playing field are truly legendary and still one-of-a-kind 50 years later, and we are so proud and grateful that he is a Buckeye."

Riep To Participate In OSU's Pro Day

Former Ohio State cornerback Amir Riep, who was dismissed from the program in 2020 after being charged with rape but was acquitted last February, told The Draft Network on Feb. 5 that he will participate in Ohio State's pro day in March.

After being acquitted, Riep played football this past season at Lincoln University in Oakland, Calif., where he finished with 87 tackles, five sacks, four forced fumbles and five pass breakups. He previously played at Ohio State from 2017-19, appearing in 38 games with 33 tackles and three interceptions.

"I want to remind all the decision-makers that I'm still here," Riep said. "I once played at a high level at Ohio State. I made a lot of big plays in big-time moments. I've played on the biggest of stages. I'm just looking to remind everyone that I'm still that same player. I'm capable of showcasing my talent and athleticism."

Former OSU QB Schlichter Arrested

Former Ohio State quarterback Art Schlichter, who played for the team from

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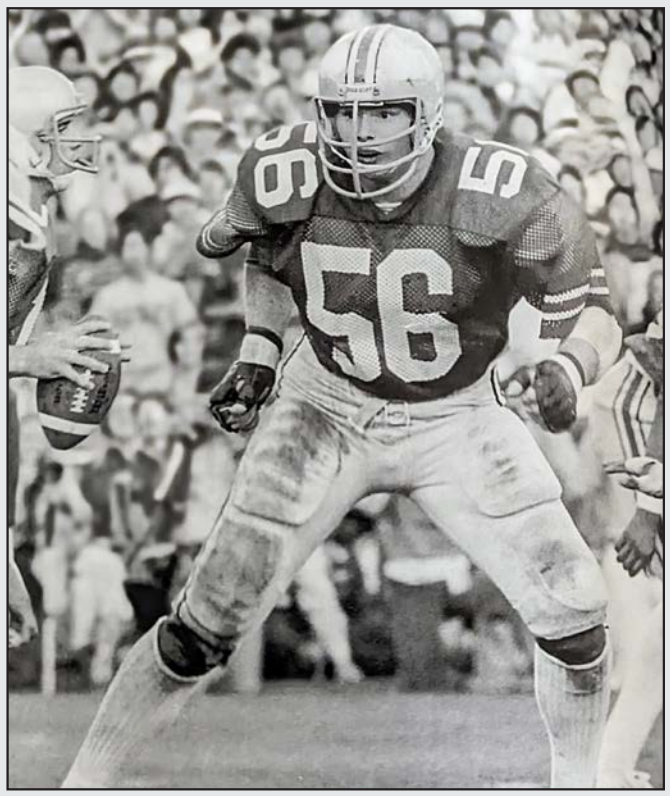
OSU All-America Guard Fritz Passes At 66



Former Ohio State offensive guard Ken Fritz earned two first-team All-Big Ten honors and was a consensus first-team All-American during the late 1970s. But the gentle giant who preferred to toil in anonymity was thrust into the spotlight in one of the most unfortunate moments in program history.

Fritz found himself between his head coach Woody Hayes and Clemson middle guard Charlie Bauman after Bauman grabbed a game-clinching interception at the end of the 1978 Gator Bowl. After being tackled by Ohio State quarterback Art Schlichter on the OSU sideline, Bauman got to his feet only to be grabbed from behind by Hayes, who swung his right arm at the Clemson defender, striking Bauman in the neck area.

As angry members of the Clemson defense surrounded Hayes, Fritz was one of several Buckeyes who attempted to defuse the situation with the offensive guard bear-hugging Hayes and pulling him away from the brewing melee. Photographs and videos of the incident appear to show Hayes continuing to flail away as Fritz restrained him, leading many to mistakenly believe the coach was attacking his own player.

But in keeping with his character, Fritz, who died Feb. 6 in suburban Columbus at the age of 66, always maintained Hayes wasn't trying to hurt anyone, and he never wanted to take credit for protecting his head coach.

"They always said I was restraining Woody," Fritz told BSB in 2008 on the 30th anniversary of the incident. "Anyone who knows anything knows Woody wasn't going to be restrained if he didn't want to be restrained. They also said he was grabbing me and punching me, but he was just in kind of a daze. I will admit he was trying to get loose of me, but that's all it was. He had no idea what he was doing."

Hayes was fired in the wake of the punch, leading to the hiring of Earle Bruce as Ohio State head coach. During his first season, Bruce led the Buckeyes to within a whisker of the national championship, losing a 17-16 decision in the Rose Bowl to third-ranked USC.

Fritz was one of the unsung heroes of that 1979 team, earning consensus first-team All-America honors after moving from left guard – where he was a first-team All-Big Ten performer the year before – to right guard.

"Kenny never said much, but he was undoubtedly one of our team leaders," former OSU wide receiver Doug Donley told BSB. "He didn't have to say much. One look and you knew. He was a team captain and deservedly so."

Kenneth Edward Fritz was born Nov. 21, 1957, in Ironton, Ohio, to Edward R. "Sonny" Fritz and his wife, Betty, but his early home life was anything but idyllic. When his parents separated, he was raised for a time by his grandparents and later spent almost five years living in a children's home.

But he managed to channel whatever childhood problems he suffered into athletics, making a name for himself at Ironton High School, where he won a total of nine varsity letters as a football, wrestling and track star.

As a senior for the Ironmen, he was named by United Press International as Ohio's top high school lineman and received several prep All-America honors. After signing with Ohio State, he was a four-year letterman and three-year starter at offensive guard, and he earned back-to-back first-team All-Big Ten honors as a junior and senior, becoming the first OSU guard to be named to the all-conference first team in consecutive seasons since Jim Parker in 1955 and '56.

Fritz was drafted by the Pittsburgh Steelers in the 10th round of the 1980 NFL draft, signing a pair of one-year contracts that included a $19,000 bonus. But he quickly discovered the world of professional football was not for him.

"There was a lot of people doing steroids and stuff, and it was just something I didn't want to get into," Fritz told BSB in 2008. "I wasn't making enough money to even be involved in that nor did I want to partake in any of that. So I just kind of felt like it was time for me to move on and go a different route, and I'm glad I did."

He returned to Ohio State to finish his degree work, and then spent more than 35 years in the financial services industry, working for several years alongside his sons, Kenny and Eric, who played college football at the University of Pittsburgh.

Severe arthritis, particularly in his lower back and hips, likely the result of the pounding his body took on the unforgiving artificial turf at Ohio Stadium during his playing days, took a painful toll on Fritz during his later years. But he was never one to indulge in self-pity.

"As long as I can eat and be happy and be comfortable in my life, I've got more than I deserve," he said. "And if I had an opportunity to play football again for The Ohio State University, I'd absolutely do it again. It was one of the greatest times in my life, and I would not trade any of it for anything in the world."

– Mark Rea

Continued From Page 7

1978-81, was arrested on Feb. 2 and charged with cocaine possession and possessing drug paraphernalia.

According to reports, Schlichter was found by Ohio Highway Patrol officers standing outside of a disabled vehicle in Columbus near East Hudson Street and Hamilton Avenue. Schlichter told officers he had hit something with his vehicle, and as Schlichter attempted to call someone to pick him up, officers identified drug paraphernalia on the car's floorboard.

After searching Schlichter, the officers found two glass pipes and later found cocaine in the vehicle. He was scheduled to appear in court on Feb. 12. At the time of his arrest, Schlichter, 63, was on probation following an incident in June 2022 when he was found unresponsive at a hotel in suburban Hilliard, Ohio.

That incident occurred less than a year after he was released from prison for federal fraud charges related to a ticketing scam, all part of a string of legal issues dating back through the years. During his time at Ohio State, Schlichter was a four-year starter and was taken with the fourth-overall pick by the Baltimore Colts in the 1982 NFL draft, though he was released by the Colts during the 1985 season for gambling.

Ohio State Athletics Revenue Nears $280 Million In 2023

Ohio State reported record revenue from the department of athletics during the 2023 fiscal year from July 1, 2022, to June 30, 2023, posting $279,549,337 in revenue, an 11 percent increase over the previous fiscal year revenue of $251,615,345.

"Ohio State athletics remain on a rock-solid foundation thanks to the tremendous support from our fans, students and alumni," Smith said. "They continue to show up, tune in and support our student-athletes, coaches and staff at our fields, stadiums and arenas."

The revenue was led by $73.3 million in ticket sales, with $64.3 million of that coming from football, which hosted eight games in 2022, including games against Notre Dame and Michigan. This was an increase from $59,649,921 in ticket sales the previous fiscal year.

Donations from individuals, foundations and companies contributed $57.8 million, while media rights – revenue from radio, television and digital – totaled $49,796,025, and royalties, licensing, advertisement and sponsorship resulted in $42,832,059. The football team accounted for $37,155,319 of the media rights revenue, with men's basketball accounting for $12,640,706.

The football team had the highest revenue at $127,355,182, followed by men's basketball with $24,162,936. Wrestling ($1,552,813), women's basketball ($1,277,841) and men's hockey ($1,264,139) also had revenue in excess of $1 million.

The university also reported $274,948,554 in operating expenses, with $23,829,914 in athletic student aid. Debt from new athletic facilities accounted for $45.3 million of that total, as according to a university release, additional principal payments were made to the Schumacher Complex, Covelli Center and other projects to reduce future payments.

The football program had the highest operating expenses at $72,382,343, followed by men's basketball with $14,491,760, women's basketball with $6,560,262 and men's hockey with $4,473,078. In total, football and men's basketball were the only programs to generate more revenue than expenses, with a surplus of $54,972,839 for football and $9,671,176 for men's basketball.

From The Pages Of BSB

40 Years Ago — 1984

It took a while, but Paul Pooley finally became Ohio State men's hockey's all-time leading scorer. The senior from Exeter, Ontario, scored his 107th OSU goal on Jan. 27 against Bowling Green, and 36 seconds into the third period on Feb. 4 at home against the RedHawks, he got No. 108, his 26th of the year, that broke the old mark set by Ray Meyers (71-74).

It was appropriate that longtime linemates Dave Kobryn and Andy Browne picked up assists on the play.

"It's been a long time coming," said Pooley after the Bucks' 8-3 win to snap a three-game losing streak. "I'd been pressing the last couple of games."

He admitted he thought about the record after an outstanding freshman year when he scored 28 goals. "I set it as a goal after the first year."

He knew he was going to do it this year: "To be honest, I figured that I could reach that; I knew I was going to get them." He was also the Bucks' career leader in total points and was running second to Kobryn in the all-time assist category.

35 Years Ago — 1989

The Boston Celtics and Los Angeles Lakers. Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier. Ohio State and Michigan. There are some great rivalries in sports. But perhaps one of the most under-publicized rivalries is between Iowa and Ohio State in women's basketball. It was certainly the top women's basketball rivalry in the Big Ten and one of the biggest in the nation.

Either Ohio State or Iowa had won or shared the Big Ten title every year since the conference went to a round robin format of 18 conference games in the 1982-83 season.

Ohio State head coach Nancy Darsch was somewhat of a newcomer to the rivalry, arriving in Buckeye country from Tennessee for the 1985-86 season. Her record against the Hawkeyes was 3-4, including this season's 84-70 loss in Iowa City on Jan. 15.

The rematch in St. John Arena was set for Feb. 21 in front of what was expected to be a sellout crowd. The intensity of the clash between the two women's teams was not lost on Darsch.

"It's very fair to say this is the Ohio State-Michigan of women's basketball," Darsch said. "What that rivalry is to football, ours with Iowa is to basketball. There are very few women's games in the country that get sellout crowds and the number of fans for a two-game series each year. I would have to say it is the most highly attended women's series in the country."

30 Years Ago — 1994

The Ohio State basketball team got a treat when former All-American Clark Kellogg dropped by practice Feb. 4 to look on and offer words of encouragement to the Buckeyes and head coach Randy Ayers.

Kellogg, who lived in Westerville, Ohio, when not announcing a game for the Indiana Pacers or ESPN, had become a little miffed by the local criticism of Ayers, whose team was 9-10 overall with a 2-6 record in conference play.

"I think it's crazy and ridiculous," Kellogg said. "But it's something that comes with the territory when you're a coach of a high-profile university. Fans are always going to have a second opinion, especially when you're struggling.

"There's not much to be said when you're winning back-to-back Big Ten championships. I understand that it's the nature of the beast, but that doesn't mean I have to like it."

25 Years Ago - 1999

The Ohio State men's basketball team had a whole week to prepare for its Feb. 6 game with Purdue, which also gave the Buckeyes a few extra days to catch their breath and realize their position in the upper division of the Big Ten.

Heading into the contest at Purdue, which resulted in a rousing, 80-69 win, OSU stood at 16-6 overall and 6-3 in Big Ten play. When asked what he would have said if he were offered those marks at the beginning of the season, head coach Jim O'Brien said, "Do it. Let's not even bother playing it.

O'Brien knew improvement was around the corner, but with the team somewhat healthy, confident and in line for a run at the NCAA Tournament, he was as thrilled as anyone with OSU's standing as February approached. Last year at this time, OSU was still searching for its first league win.

"I'm exceptionally happy, more so with how we have played," O'Brien said. "But when you win one and then you have six, that's six times better than what you did last year. Who's not happy about that?"

20 Years Ago — 2004

Whether Maurice Clarett ever really wanted to return to the Ohio State football team was probably rendered moot Feb. 5 when a U.S. district judge ruled him eligible for the upcoming National Football League draft, to be held April 24-25.

Clarett had sued the NFL the previous summer to challenge the league rule that a player must be out of high school at least three years for draft eligibility. The ruling, if not successfully appealed, could have allowed teenage football stars to take advantage of the opportunities available to young athletes in other sports.

The league had argued that Clarett should not be eligible because its rule resulted from a collective bargaining agreement with the players and was immune from antitrust scrutiny. The NFL also argued that its rule was reasonable and that Clarett could not bring such a lawsuit.

But in a 70-page ruling on Clarett's lawsuit against the NFL, U.S. District Court Judge Shira A. Scheindlin wrote, "While, ordinarily, the best offense is a good defense, none of these defenses hold the line." She said Clarett was well within his rights to sue the league because he was fighting a policy that excluded all players in his position from selling their services to the only viable buyer – the NFL.

"The NFL has not justified Clarett's exclusion by demonstrating that the rule enhances competition," Scheindlin wrote. "Indeed, Clarett has alleged the very type of injury – a complete bar to entry into the market for his services – that the antitrust laws are designed to prevent."

15 Years Ago — 2009

As the Ohio State men's basketball team continued to grow into a contender, the Buckeyes had Evan Turner to thank for a number of reasons. Twenty-two games into the 2008-09 season, Turner was proving to be the fuel that made the OSU engine run.

But a little more than a year and a half prior, Turner nearly found himself headed down a different path. As a freshman new to the campus, Turner had been at OSU for around three months when he came to a realization: Ohio State was not where he wanted to be.

"One of the coaches here that Evan played for called me and said, 'Have you talked to Evan?' " Turner's mother, Iris James, told BSB. "I said, 'Yeah I talked to Evan.' He said, 'Well, I'm concerned about him.' Evan's usually an up-tempo kind of guy. If someone calls me and says something's wrong, I was wondering what the heck was going on down there."

"I'd never been away from home, so it was tough," Evan Turner said. "I think in that situation I wasn't prepared for it and I was immature. All I had to do was toughen up and that helped a lot. It was a process.

More than a year later, Turner had matured into not only the best player on his team but one of the best in the entire conference. The sophomore was third in the league in scoring, tied for second in rebounding and eighth in field-goal percentage at 50.8 percent.

"Coach (Thad) Matta just told me when my mind is there, I'm one of the best players," Turner said. "When my mind's not there, I'm just average. He said, 'I can't afford to have you average.' I want to be a great player."

10 Years Ago — 2014

After 18 years on the other side of the border, it didn't take long for Larry Johnson Sr. to realize that he wasn't in Happy Valley anymore.

A Penn State assistant for the better part of the two decades, Johnson had built up a certain affinity for the color blue. But while he realized that would have to change when he accepted the position of defensive line coach at Ohio State in January, he learned on his first day on the job that the disdain that his new employer held for his former favorite color far exceeded his original expectations.

"I have a ton of blue stuff," Johnson noted. "I walk in on the first day and somebody says, 'Hey, Coach, no blue pens.' I didn't know that. There's little things that I've got to learn pretty fast."

Five Years Ago — 2019

Even before he officially took over as head coach, Ohio State's Ryan Day knew he'd have a huge hole to fill for 2019.

Quarterback Dwayne Haskins hadn't announced his decision to leave for the NFL just yet, but the writing was on the wall. Haskins was projected as the top quarterback in the draft, meaning his stock wouldn't improve with another year in school.

After succeeding Urban Meyer on Jan. 2, Day needed just two days to secure his quarterback of the future. The problem at the time was that there still was no guarantee Georgia transfer Justin Fields, the highest-rated prospect ever to enroll at Ohio State, would be allowed to play immediately.

By Feb. 8 – two days after Day had finalized his first recruiting class as head coach – his most important recruit became official when the NCAA granted Fields' waiver request for immediate eligibility. The signal caller could enter spring camp knowing what everyone thought they knew all along: If all went to plan, he would be leading the Buckeyes onto the field Aug. 31 against Florida Atlantic.

"I am happy for Justin and his family," Day said. "I also want to express my appreciation to the NCAA for its assistance in getting this matter resolved efficiently and with such a positive outcome for Justin."

One Year Ago — 2023

Day, who was facing his first legitimate quarterback battle since taking over for the Buckeyes, said on Feb. 1 that he hoped to name a starter by the end of spring practice between Kyle McCord and Devin Brown.

"I don't know where we will be," he said. "I hope that one of them emerges and we can name a starter. I really do. I think the way that our dynamic is, I think it would be great for our program to be able to do that.

"There were times in the past when I didn't see that happening. I'm hoping that can happen. If it doesn't, it doesn't. But some vision on who the starter is coming out of the spring would be nice. So I'm hoping that one of them emerges here in these 15 practices."

Harbaugh Off To NFL, Michigan's Staff In Flux

After winning the national championship with Michigan, the program's first since 1997, head coach Jim Harbaugh – after years of speculation – is off to the NFL, accepting the head coaching position with the Los Angeles Chargers on Jan. 24.

BIG TEN NOTES
Greg Wilson

"My love for Michigan, playing there and coming back to coach there, leaves a lasting impact," Harbaugh said. "I'll always be a loyal Wolverine. I'm remarkably fortunate to have been afforded the privilege of coaching at places where life's journey has created strong personal connections for me. ... When I played for the Chargers, the Spanos family could not have been more gracious or more welcoming. Being back here feels like home, and it's great to see those things haven't changed."

Harbaugh spent the past nine years with the Wolverines, amassing an overall record of 86-25 (60-17 in the Big Ten) along with three conference championships and three appearances in the College Football Playoff. Michigan athletic director Warde Manuel released a statement after the news that Harbaugh would be leaving the program.

"I want to thank Jim for everything he has done for our program, athletic department and the University of Michigan over the past nine years," the statement read. "Every day, he has worked extremely hard to elevate the stature of Michigan across the world, with the goal of winning championships and developing young men on and off the football field.

"We are working quickly to hire the next head coach for the program and will do everything possible to keep this current staff and team together."

Despite winning Michigan's last three games against Ohio State, he finished with a 3-5 record against the Buckeyes, officially getting credit for the win this past season even though he was suspended by the Big Ten for the game. That suspension was among the controversies that Harbaugh dealt with during his time at Michigan, including the alleged sign-stealing scandal which led to the three-game suspension at the end of the regular season.

He also served a three-game suspension to start the season due to recruiting violations during the COVID-19 dead period. Both NCAA investigations are still ongoing.

This isn't Harbaugh's first go-around in the NFL. Before he took the job in Ann Arbor, he was the head coach for the San Francisco 49ers from 2011-14, making three playoff appearances and losing Super Bowl XLVII to his brother John and the Baltimore Ravens.

Harbaugh had taken interviews multiple times over the past few seasons with different NFL teams and reportedly had a second interview scheduled with the Atlanta Falcons before coming to terms with the Chargers.

Harbaugh replaces former Chargers head coach Brandon Staley, who was fired after just a 24-24 record and a single playoff appearance in three seasons. The Chargers finished this past season with a 5-12 record after suffering several key injuries late in the season. Harbaugh inherits some good talent at quarterback in Los Angeles with Justin Herbert, the 2020 NFL Offensive Rookie of the Year and considered one of the top players at the position in the NFL.

Former offensive coordinator Sherrone Moore, who took over as interim head coach during Harbaugh's suspensions, was named Harbaugh's replacement as the new head coach of the Wolverines on Jan. 26, with Michigan looking to maintain coaching continuity coming off the team's national championship season.

"We will do everything each day as a team to continue the legacy of championship football that has been played here at the University of Michigan over the past 144 years," Moore said at his introductory press conference. "I prepared my entire coaching career for this moment, for this opportunity, and I can't think of a better place to do it than the University of Michigan."

Moore was the interim head coach for Michigan's 31-6 win over Bowling Green at the beginning of the season then two road wins over Penn State and Maryland before beating the Buckeyes in Ann Arbor. Taking over as offensive coordinator is former quarterbacks coach Kirk Campbell, who originally joined Michigan's staff in 2022 after spending two years as the offensive coordinator at Old Dominion.

"Coaching at Michigan is unique because of the rich football tradition and the commitment to excellence on the field, in the classroom and in the community," Campbell said. "My family and I feel so blessed to call Ann Arbor home, and we cannot wait to go to work with everyone associated with Team 145."

But Michigan has since lost several members of the coaching staff, with Harbaugh taking defensive coordinator Jesse Minter, defensive line coach Mike Elston and strength and conditioning coach Ben Herbert with him. Meanwhile, special teams coordinator Jay Harbaugh – Jim's son – is expected to join the Seattle Seahawks.

As Buckeye Sports Bulletin went to press, the only hiring besides Moore and Campbell reported was that of new defensive coordinator Don "Wink" Martindale, a Dayton native who has coached in the NFL since 2004 and also has college experience as an assistant coach at Defiance College, Notre Dame, Cincinnati, Western Illinois and Western Kentucky.

Expanded Tournament To Exclude Teams

With the expansion of the Big Ten beginning with the 2024-25 season, the conference announced on Jan. 30 that its expanded men's and women's basketball tournaments will include only the top 15 teams in the conference standings, leaving the remaining three out.

With Oregon, UCLA, USC and Washington included in the conference beginning next season, the scheduling would have required adding another day to the tournament. Each of the top four seeds will get a double bye, while seed Nos. 5-9 will get a single bye.

Under the new format, there will be one extra game on the first day of the tournament, with the No. 10 seed in the conference now playing against the No. 15 seed. This will be in addition to the traditional No. 11 vs. No. 14 and No. 12 vs. No. 13 games.

This isn't the first time a conference tournament hasn't allowed each team to participate. When the Big East grew to 16 teams in 2004, it included only 12 of those teams in the postseason tournament. Coaches at the time argued that being left out of the tournament hurt their job security and took away from college basketball, and the conference expanded the tournament again to include all teams beginning in 2009.

In another update to the Big Ten's scheduling, the conference also announced that the regular-season conference basketball schedule for the men and women will remain at 20 and 18 contests, respectively, for each school in the league, allowing for more nonconference flexibility.

Single-play home and away games will rotate locations annually, and two-play opponents will be determined with consideration for competitive balance, geography and rivalries in mind.

MSU's Izzo Sets Big Ten Record

Michigan State head coach Tom Izzo is now the conference leader in Big Ten games coached, leading the Spartans in his 505th game in a 59-56 loss to Minnesota on Feb. 6. He surpassed the record previously set by the late Bob Knight, who had coached in 504 games at Indiana.

Izzo is in his 29th season at Michigan State and holds a 339-166 record in conference play, just 14 wins shy of tying Knight for the most in conference history. Izzo also reached another milestone early this season, becoming just the 38th Division I coach to reach 700 career wins. Overall, Izzo had a 701-289 record as of Feb. 6.

Tom Izzo

"I mean, 700 wins is pretty impressive, even to me," Izzo said. "Seven hundred wins at the same school, that means a lot to me. That's probably what means the most to me. We – the players, the assistant coaches – we've won all of ours right here at Michigan State, and I'm really, really honored and proud and feel good."

Big Ten, SEC Form Advisory Group

The Big Ten and the SEC announced on Feb. 2 that the conferences are teaming up, forming a "joint advisory group of university presidents, chancellors and athletic directors to address the significant challenges facing college athletics and the opportunities for the betterment of the student-athlete experience."

"The Big Ten and the SEC have substantial investment in the NCAA, and there is no question that the voices of our two conferences are integral to governance and other reform efforts," Big Ten commissioner Tony Petitti said. "We recognize the similarity in our circumstances, as well as the urgency to address the common challenges we face."

"There are similar cultural and social impacts on our student-athletes, our institutions, and our communities because of the new collegiate athletics environment," SEC commissioner Greg Sankey said. "We do not have predetermined answers to myriad questions facing us. We do not expect to agree on everything, but enhancing interaction between our conferences will help to focus efforts on common-sense solutions."

While the group will have no voting power, serving only as a "consulting body," it will likely wield influence considering it will include the two largest conferences in the FBS, with both the Big Ten and SEC set to expand this summer.

"I support the leadership role that the Big Ten Conference and the Southeastern Conference are undertaking with the goal of improving our student-athlete experiences and also finding solutions to the challenges facing collegiate athletics today," Ohio State athletic director Gene Smith said in a statement. "I applaud Big Ten commissioner Tony Petitti and SEC commissioner Greg Sankey on their proactive partnership and leadership role that will address the issues and seek solutions within the current environment."

RU's Williams Ruled Eligible After Gambling Suspension

On Feb. 2, Rutgers guard Jeremiah Williams – who was suspended by the NCAA after pleading guilty to underage gambling in Iowa – was ruled immediately eligible to play after a judge in the United States District Court for the District of New Jersey issued a temporary restraining order in his lawsuit against the NCAA.

"We are thrilled that the Court has ordered the NCAA to reinstate Jeremiah Williams immediately and has ordered the NCAA not to punish him for doing so," attorney Kevin Marino said.

Williams' 15-game suspension was not handed down until Jan. 31, after the Scarlet Knights had already played 19 games. His legal team argued that the retroactive suspension should have been applied from the beginning of the season, making him immediately eligible.

If the court ruled against Williams, he would have had only 11 games retroactively served and would not have been able to return until Feb. 18. Initially, Williams was supposed to sit out the entire season as a two-time undergraduate transfer, playing at Temple in 2021-22 and spending a year at Iowa State last season, but he was cleared to play in December.

The gambling charges date back to Williams' time at Iowa State, where he was caught up in a sweeping gambling probe that resulted in student-athletes across several sports being charged. He was charged with tampering with records, and he admitted to using the FanDuel account of someone over the age of 21 to place wagers while he was underage.

NIL, Transfers Provide Unique Opportunities

Continued From Page 1

to do, and you project into what they're going to be, then, ultimately, fit the needs that you have. We always want to be the best in the country, and I think we have a great group coming in."

It's the fifth consecutive cycle that Ohio State has finished among the top five in the composite rankings, but even as the Buckeyes continue to set the standard on the trail from year to year, every recruiting cycle is stranger than the last.

This past National Signing Day – the actual one on Feb. 7, not the early signing period in December – received less fanfare than ever, with Day asked just a handful of questions about recruiting during an over hour-long media session at the Woody Hayes Athletic Center. But the lack of emphasis on National Signing Day is just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to changes in recruiting in recent years.

The transfer portal has completely shifted how college programs approach their pursuit of high school talent, with entire staffing departments now dedicated to assessing college players who might or who have already entered the transfer portal. It is viewed by many as an easy fix – at least when done right – that can make up for misses on the recruiting trail, with plug-and-play college talent available at the drop of a hat.

Beyond the program-building aspect of recruiting, the other significant change has been with name, image and likeness. Pay-for-play is an aspect of college football once considered unthinkable, but money on the table is now just as important a factor in recruiting as the relationship between a prospect and head coach or proximity to a college.

It is not lost on Ohio State and Day that this is now the way college football is conducted, at least at programs looking to compete for national championships. Look no further than the Buckeyes' movement in the transfer portal over the last two seasons, supplementing the depth chart with talent while showing willingness to take care of players' NIL needs. It is also evident on the recruiting trail, where Ohio State was able to finish strong in 2024 with players like Smith and Buford, Ga., five-star defensive end Eddrick Houston (6-3, 269). The Buckeyes were able to develop strong relationships with the star recruits, but in this day and age, neither came cheap.

SONNY BROCKWAY

DEFENSIVE ACE — Cornerbacks coach Tim Walton is on a run in recruiting, signing three impressive corners in the 2024 recruiting class, and he already has a pair of five-star cornerbacks pledged to Ohio State's 2025 recruiting class.

Being able to sell a vision of NFL preparedness and the ability to earn NIL in college already led to additions such as Houston and Smith, and Ohio State is off to a hot start in 2025 with two five-star cornerbacks – Birmingham (Ala.) Parker's Na'eem Offord (6-1, 185) and Houston North Shore's Devin Sanchez (6-2, 170) – in the fold.

But despite all of these changes in a relatively short period of time, Ohio State's focus on the recruiting trail – even if the pitch is now supplemented with talks of NIL – has remained steadfast in an attempt to ensure the roster is where it needs to be, and doing so with those who fit the bill of future Buckeyes.

"I just think that the way things are now with recruiting, there's just a lot of twists and turns along the way," Day said. "I just think about even five years ago, somebody would commit and the timing was their own, but then that was kind of it, you moved on. Now there's twists and turns along the way for a lot of different reasons. You just have to work through those and figure out who are the right guys for you at the time, and then you'll fill your 85.

"There's a lot of twists and turns along the way, and now you have to get the high school class and you have the portal and you have different parts to make sure your roster is right."

That deliberation of who is right for Ohio State begins early in the process, well before offers begin going out to potential prospects. Much of that responsibility belongs to Mark Pantoni, Ohio State's general manager who has been with the program since 2011.

"We take great pride," Pantoni said on Feb. 7. "We're very disciplined about who we bring into the program, who's going to fit into the locker room.

"When the kids come on campus, it's like a job interview for them. We're looking at how they interact with their parents, how they interact with the coaches, the guys on the team, so we pay a lot of attention to how their body language is, how they shake your hand. Those little things make a big difference of, are they a good fit for the program?"

There is more noise out there than ever for college prospects considering their school of choice, which is why the Buckeyes – even if they are adapting to the current landscape of college football under Day and Pantoni – are trying their best to focus on the basics as they seek a fit both on and off the field at Ohio State.

"I think relationships is the No. 1 thing I learned early on in this process," Day said. "There are more and more variables every year, there's more things that go on. But it comes down to relationships. Everybody's different – you look at the guys that we have from all kinds of different states, different backgrounds.

"But again, they all want the bright lights, they want to be relevant, they want big, and when you come to Ohio State, that's what you have to think. You've got to want all that, and I think that's the common thread that runs through these guys."

This is a class built for those bright lights. Beyond clear-cut stars such as Smith, Houston, New Haven, Ind., five-star wide receiver Mylan Graham (6-1, 170) and Springfield, Ohio, five-star cornerback Aaron Scott (6-2, 190), the class is supplemented with such future Buckeyes as Fairburn (Ga.) Langston Hughes four-star quarterback Air Noland (6-2, 195), New Palestine, Ind., four-star offensive tackle Ian Moore (6-6, 317) and Sunbury (Ohio) Big Walnut four-star linebacker Garrett Stover (6-0, 214) who are sure to become fan favorites.

It's an indisputable fact that not everyone in the class will pan out for the Buckeyes, even with the hundreds of hours of tape surely invested into every signee. But Day

and Ohio State can rest easy knowing that, even as the landscape of college football looks less recognizable by the day, those in and around Columbus who represent the Scarlet and Gray will continue to show how firm the culture is at Ohio State.

"It changes all the time," Day said on Feb. 7. "Boy, has it changed in the last year. It changed in December, and it's probably going to change again in May. It's something that we all have to adapt to. We're working hard, I think. Everybody involved is working really hard to make sure that we are where we need to be to be competitive. We'll keep trying to adapt the best we can, knowing that I'm sure there are changes coming again in the next couple of months.

"All that is very important, but what's most important is guys embracing the culture and knowing that when they come into the building every day that they're going to be part of the program that cares about each other. We've got a great locker room, a great staff and a fan base that's going to support them."

Walton Developing Into Key Recruiter

Ohio State co-offensive coordinator and wide receivers coach Brian Hartline, often considered one of the best recruiters in the country, could be facing some competition for his recruiting honors. And he wouldn't have to go far to find the competition, as it's Ohio State cornerbacks coach Tim Walton who has emerged as a dominant recruiter over the last year with the Buckeyes.

"Tim has done a great job of identifying talent early on and then building relationships," Day said. "And going from there, you're seeing Denzel (Burke), (Davison Igbinosun), Jordan Hancock starting to play at a high level. I think that's a big part of the recruiting process, seeing it on the field."

Walton, a former defensive back at Ohio State from 1990-93, returned to Columbus in a coaching capacity for the 2022 season. The cornerbacks coach had previously held the same position with the Jacksonville Jaguars and had worked as either a cornerbacks/defensive backs coach or defensive coordinator in the NFL dating back to 2009.

That means that before Walton joined Day's staff, he had not worked in college football since 2008, when he was a defensive coordinator at Memphis. Granted, Walton worked in the college ranks from 1995-08, getting his start as a graduate assistant at Bowling Green before taking on roles at Syracuse, LSU and Miami (Fla.) in addition to Memphis. But that long of a layoff from college coaching – and specifically recruiting – had many wondering whether Walton would have the chops to bring in high school talent in this day and age.

In just over two years since his hiring, Walton not only has eliminated those fears but has raised the bar of what cornerback recruiting can look like at Ohio State, much as Hartline has done over the past few years at wide receiver.

"We have a great history, a great tradition here that's unmatched," Walton said on Feb. 7. "There's a lot of great selling points, so there's a lot of things you can sell to the recruits and parents about the overall perspective of the school and career opportunities here at Ohio State."

Walton's first true recruiting class with the Buckeyes in 2023 featured two cornerback signees in Jermaine Mathews Jr. and Calvin Simpson-Hunt, the former establishing himself as an important member of Ohio State's secondary in his freshman season.

But with some experience under his belt with the Buckeyes, Walton turned in a masterclass on the recruiting trail in 2024, signing Scott, West and Lockhart. All fill a different need in the secondary, with Lockhart expected to play at nickel and Scott and West offering versatility on the outside.

All had positive things to say about Walton and the relationships they have been able to build with him in the relatively short time he's been on the recruiting trail for Ohio State, but the success in recruiting comes as no surprise to Day.

"First off, it's Walton's personality and his makeup, his character," Day said. "I can't say enough great things about Tim Walton. His background of developing secondary play in the NFL speaks for itself. The players that he's worked with and the testimony when you talk to the players, they speak glowingly of what he's done to help them.

"The next thing was the fact that Tim here, he's a Buckeye, and he wanted to help Ohio State win a championship, and that was a big part of it. But then when you get around him more you just realize he's talented, and he's good in a lot of areas. When you're evaluating coaches, the first thing is, OK, how are they on the field as a technician? How are they schematically? How are they with relating to players? How are they in recruiting? Tim does a lot of those things.

"Our guys have embraced his mentality. I think our secondary is super competitive. I think they want to compete in everything that they're doing. You watch them go through drills, I mean, they're going at it with each other, and I think that really reflects Tim's mentality."

Beyond the relationship-building, Walton has also been able to recruit using a proof of concept, with Burke, Igbinosun and Hancock all excelling this past season. But there is more in store for Walton, who has Ohio State's cornerbacks due for a big season in 2024 but has already moved his recruiting sights onto 2025.

In that class, he has already secured commitments from Offord and Sanchez in addition to Baltimore St. Frances four-star cornerback Blake Woodby (5-11, 175), and he has developed strong bonds with another pair of blue-chip cornerbacks in Conroe, Texas, five-star Dorian Brew (6-2, 185) and Cleveland Shaker Heights four-star Trey McNutt (6-0, 180), both of whom could also land with the Buckeyes.

When combining his success on the recruiting trail with the on-field results for the Buckeyes, Day believes Walton is head and shoulders above the rest.

"You can see we have an opportunity to have a really excellent secondary this year, and a big part of that is what Tim is doing," Day said. "Then you're seeing the recruiting that he's doing. I think all those things add up to Tim being the best secondary coach in America."

Kirks Signs To Complete 2024 Recruiting Class

National Signing Day has lost some luster in recent years with the advent of the early signing period in December, but Ohio State was still able to make one final splash this year, adding a signature from Painesville (Ohio) Riverside four-star defensive lineman Dominic Kirks (6-4, 255) on Feb. 7 to complete the 2024 recruiting class.

RECRUITING OUTLOOK
Braden Moles

Kirks is the No. 162 overall prospect and No. 24 defensive lineman in the class, and he committed to Ohio State on Jan. 20 after declining to sign with Washington – his original pledge – during the early signing period, eventually leaving the Huskies after head coach Kalen DeBoer left for the same job at Alabama.

"It was a little bit late (in the process), but we saw somebody that had a lot of talent," head coach Ryan Day said. "Then Larry (Johnson) spent some time with him, and then we brought him down here on a visit to see about the fit.

"I think that's important because the position coaches and (general manager Mark Pantoni) do a lot of the evaluating, and then it's my job as the head coach to see if he's a fit culturally and can embrace what it means to be a Buckeye."

Kirks showed talent as a senior despite dealing with injuries, recording 43 tackles (12 for loss) and 11½ sacks. But just as important as his talent was him showing Ohio State that he grasped what it meant to be a Buckeye, something he understood being from Ohio.

"I think when Dom came down, you quickly saw that this is what he wanted," Day said. "He wanted to be a Buckeye. He's from the state of Ohio. He understands the rivalry. There's a lot that was positive there. He knows he's going to have to work and compete. We're excited to see how things go with him."

With Kirks' signature, that was the final piece of Ohio State's recruiting class that featured 21 scholarship players and ranked fifth in the 247Sports composite rankings behind No. 4 Miami (Fla.), No. 3 Oregon, No. 2 Alabama and No. 1 Georgia.

The Buckeyes finished with four five-star prospects, including Miami Gardens (Fla.) Chaminade-Madonna Prep wide receiver Jeremiah Smith (6-3, 214); New Haven, Ind., wide receiver Mylan Graham (6-1, 170); Buford, Ga., defensive end Eddrick Houston (6-3, 269); and Springfield, Ohio, cornerback Aaron Scott (6-2, 190), with 14 additional four-star prospects. All told, Ohio State had an average player rating of .9280, which ranked third in the nation behind Alabama (.9312) and Georgia (.9361.)

Final 2024 247Sports Composite Ohio Rankings

Rank	Name	Position	High School	College
1.	**Aaron Scott**	**CB**	**Springfield**	**Ohio State**
2.	**Bryce West**	**CB**	**Cleveland Glenville**	**Ohio State**
3.	Jordan Marshall	RB	Cincinnati Moeller	Michigan
4.	Brian Robinson	DE	Westerville North	Kentucky
5.	Ethan Grunkemeyer	QB	Lewis Center Olentangy	Penn State
6.	Koy Beasley	SAF	Cincinnati LaSalle	Purdue
7.	**Garrett Stover**	**LB**	**Sunbury Big Walnut**	**Ohio State**
8.	**Dominic Kirks**	**DL**	**Painesville Riverside**	**Ohio State**
9.	Terhyon Nichols	CB	Cincinnati Withrow	Kentucky
10.	Reggie Powers	SAF	Dayton Centerville	Oklahoma
11.	William Satterwhite	OL	Akron Hoban	Tennessee
12.	Loghan Thomas	DE	Lakewood St. Edward	Notre Dame
13.	Elias Rudolph	DE	Cincinnati Taft	Miami (Fla.)
14.	**Deontae Armstrong**	**OL**	**Lakewood St. Edward**	**Ohio State**
15.	Luke Hamilton	OL	Avon	Michigan
16.	Tayvion Galloway	TE	Pickerington Central	Purdue
17.	Ted Hammond	DL	Cincinnati St. Xavier	Michigan
18.	**Devontae Armstrong**	**OL**	**Lakewood St. Edward**	**Ohio State**
19	**Damarion Witten**	**TE**	**Cleveland Glenville**	**Ohio State**
20.	Francis Brewu	DL	Columbus Thomas Worthington	Pittsburgh

Superlatives For Ohio State's 2024 Recruiting Class

Most Likely To Succeed: Ohio State has four five-star signees in the 2024 recruiting class, but it did not have to go far to find the one who may have the most impactful career with the Buckeyes. Springfield, Ohio, five-star cornerback Aaron Scott Jr., is Ohio State's first five-star signee at cornerback since Jeff Okudah and Shaun Wade in 2017, electing to stay in state with the Buckeyes despite a strong push in his recruitment from Michigan.

Beyond the in-state appeal, Scott has the makings of a shutdown cornerback for Ohio State with impressive ball skills and a large frame, coming into Columbus as an early enrollee at 6-2 and 190 pounds and likely to add some weight as he goes through his first college spring.

Ohio State has shown no qualms about playing freshman cornerbacks in recent years – Jyaire Brown and Jermaine Mathews Jr. have both started games as freshmen – which could open up early opportunities for Scott. But even if he takes a season to acclimate, Ohio State is likely looking at two open jobs at cornerback in 2025, so he will have a chance to establish himself early in what should be an impactful career.

"Aaron Scott was a huge addition for us," said Ohio State head coach Ryan Day. "(Cornerbacks coach) Tim Walton did a great job of recruiting Aaron. He's a big-time player out of the state of Ohio that's going to be a big part of our future. He was somebody who came to camp early on, and it was a hot day out there. He grinded. He went for like an hour with a broken wrist as a young player. We could tell there was a toughness there. He wanted to earn that scholarship, and he did that day. He's built himself into a really good football player."

Future Captain: Former Ohio State tight end Cade Stover was a two-time captain with the Buckeyes, including being one of just three captains this past season along with linebacker Tommy Eichenberg and wide receiver Xavier Johnson. But as Stover is set to depart the program, some reinforcements are on the way from Stover Farms.

Galena (Ohio) Big Walnut four-star linebacker Garrett Stover (6-0, 205) is arriving at Ohio State as an early enrollee. The cousin of Cade Stover, he was just the second player to join the Buckeyes' recruiting class, doing so on Nov. 21, 2022, an early hint of his dedication to Ohio State that is expected to shine through once he gets going in his first spring.

"Garrett is the cousin of Cade Stover and brings the same type of mentality," Day said. "He'll play linebacker for us or safety. He has some versatility there. He's a really talented player that's going to be a big part of our class."

First To The Field: Ohio State has had no shortage of game-changing wide receivers in recent years, including the likes of Marvin Harrison Jr., Chris Olave, Jaxon Smith-Njigba and Garrett Wilson, but Miami Gardens (Fla.) Chaminade-Madonna Prep five-star wide receiver Jeremiah Smith (6-3, 200) may be the most college-ready wideout of them all.

Smith had 151 receptions for 2,474 yards and 39 touchdowns over his final two seasons of high school football – played in one of the toughest divisions in Florida, no less – that led to him becoming the first wide receiver to be ranked No. 1 overall in the 247Sports composite rankings since Dorial Green-Beckham in 2012.

Ohio State returns a handful of wideouts from last season, including the veteran Emeka Egbuka, as well as sophomores Carnell Tate and Brandon Inniss, but Smith – who is enrolling early – will have an opportunity to make some early waves in Columbus.

Fan Favorite: Quarterbacks often become fan favorites due to the nature of their position, and Fairburn (Ga.) Langston Hughes four-star quarterback Air Noland (6-3, 195) has the poise and confidence that will endear him to Buckeye Nation once he arrives on campus.

Beyond his counting statistics – of which there are no shortage, considering he threw for over 10,000 yards and accounted for over 130 touchdowns in high school – the left-handed Noland has been noted for his leadership ability on the field.

There may not be many opportunities for Noland in his first season at Ohio State, but once he does take the field, his presence will be undeniable.

"He's somebody who is special in a lot of different ways," Day said. "The way he conducts and handles himself – he's very athletic and he's going to be the leader of this team."

Biggest Recruiting Win: The majority of Ohio State's recruiting struggles in recent years have centered on the defensive line, where five-star prospects have been few and far between over the last several cycles. That meant it was as important as any other addition in the class when Buford, Ga., five-star defensive end Eddrick Houston (6-3, 275) reaffirmed his pledge to the Buckeyes on Dec. 20.

It was a significant win for Ohio State to land Houston's original commitment, as the Georgia product received intense interest from the in-state Bulldogs and other SEC schools but opted for the Buckeyes in August. After several months of quiet, just ahead of the early signing period, word began spreading that Alabama was making a late push for the five-star recruit, and some even believed that Houston was headed to Tuscaloosa.

But the Buckeyes – spearheaded by defensive line coach Larry Johnson – were able to hold onto Houston's commitment, marking the highest-rated signee on the defensive line since Jack Sawyer and J.T. Tuimoloau in 2021. Houston has the makings of an instant impact player.

Underrated (For Now): Cade Stover has helped to change the reputation of tight ends at Ohio State in recent seasons, but the next evolution at the position could be from Cleveland Glenville four-star tight end Damarion Witten (6-4, 215).

Witten is not the highest-touted prospect in the class – in fact, he's not even Ohio State's highest-rated signee at tight end, with that honor belonging to Chattanooga (Tenn.) Baylor School four-star Max LeBlanc (6-4, 222) – but he offers dynamic ability as a pass catcher which could help him to see the field early in his career.

Witten's blocking is a work in progress, but considering the fact that Stover has turned in record-breaking seasons even with a middling blocking ability, there will be an opportunity for Witten to outshine his ranking.

"He's really dynamic on the perimeter," Day said. "It started early on when Coach (Ted Ginn Sr.) had him as a young player. He told me, 'This kid is special and could be the best receiver in the country.' When he said that, you take a step back. But you're seeing exactly what he's talking about. He's going to have to grow to play tight end if that's where he ends up getting down in there, but you can do multiple things with Damarion and he can be a matchup issue. His length and size and ability to play the ball is tremendous. His ceiling is really high."

— Braden Moles

Five-Star CB Offord Commits To OSU

Ohio State is building a strong secondary in 2025, adding a commitment on Feb. 4 from Birmingham (Ala.) Parker five-star cornerback Na'eem Offord (6-1, 185).

Offord is the fifth-ranked overall prospect in the class – the highest-rated so far for the Buckeyes – as well as the top-ranked cornerback in the cycle. He committed during a weekend visit to Ohio State, pledging to the Buckeyes over Alabama, Auburn and Georgia, among others.

This was Offord's second visit to Ohio State dating back to last July, during which he has built a strong relationship with cornerbacks coach Tim Walton.

"I wanted to get coached by the best (defensive backs) coach in college football," Offord told On3 after committing to Ohio State. "I know 100 percent if I do what I'm supposed to with the technique that he's teaching me, if I do everything he's telling me to do in the classroom and with my work and life, if I do all of that the right way, I know I'm going to be successful. He's going to push me to that level to be successful."

Last season at Parker, Offord helped lead the Thundering Herd to a 10-0 record in the regular season, finishing with 14 tackles and four interceptions on defense while carrying the ball 22 times for 182 yards and four touchdowns on offense.

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
Carter Lowe	OT	6-5	290	★★★★	Toledo Whitmer
Zahir Mathis	DL	6-6	225	★★★★	Philadelphia Imhotep Institute
Na'eem Offord	CB	6-1	185	★★★★★	Birmingham (Ala.) Parker
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

"A toolsy cornerback prospect with the size to match large perimeter weapons and the speed to cover the deep third," wrote 247Sports' Andrew Ivins. "Owns some of the best testing numbers that we have come across thus far in the 2025 cycle with a 4.5-second effort in the 40-yard dash on the ledger to go along with an 11-foot broad jump.

"(He is) already pretty versed in both press-man and off-man coverage. Rather fluid for someone that's over 6-foot and can quickly change directions with his agility. Not afraid to break on a ball and will play through hands at the catch point."

Offord is the eighth commitment in Ohio State's recruiting class and the third cornerback to commit to the Buckeyes along with Houston North Shore five-star Devin Sanchez (6-2, 170) and Baltimore St. Frances Academy four-star Blake Woodby (5-11, 175).

With just over 10 months until the early signing period, Ohio State has the makings of an elite group at cornerback. The Buckeyes continue to pursue Conroe, Texas, five-star Dorian Brew (6-2, 185) and Cleveland Heights four-star Trey McNutt (6-0, 180), though McNutt could also play at safety at the next level.

Should Ohio State land at least Offord and Sanchez, it would be the second time Ohio State has landed the top two cornerbacks in the 247Sports composite rankings. The Buckeyes also did so in 2017 by signing Jeff Okudah and Shaun Wade. But if the Buckeyes can also land Brew and sign Woodby, they would become the first team to land four top-10 cornerbacks in the same recruiting cycle.

In-State OT Lowe Joins Fray In 2025

Ohio State added its first pledge on the offensive line in 2025 on Jan. 27, nabbing a commitment from Toledo Whitmer four-star offensive tackle Carter Lowe (6-5, 290).

Lowe is the No. 79 overall prospect, the ninth-ranked offensive tackle in his class and the third-ranked prospect in Ohio. He selected the Buckeyes over Alabama, Georgia, Michigan – another top school in his recruitment, given his proximity in Toledo – and Tennessee.

Ohio State helped to secure his commitment after a visit just one day ahead of his announcement, with Day and offensive line coach Justin Frye – with whom Lowe has developed a positive relationship – visiting Whitmer, though Lowe has long been considered a favorite to become a Buckeye.

"I have a really good relationship with (Frye)," Lowe said last summer. "I love talking with him. I love speaking to him. I think he does a really good job coaching the offensive line, and I have a lot of respect for him."

Lowe, who also played basketball at Whitmer, was first offered by Ohio State last January and has since made several visits to Columbus, including multiple games this past fall.

Other targets in the trenches include Mobile (Ala.) Vigor four-star offensive tackle Micah DeBose (6-5, 315); Evans, Ga., offensive tackle Mason Short (6-6, 305); Franklin (Mich.) Wylie E. Groves four-star offensive tackle Avery Gach (6-5, 275); and Bradenton (Fla.) IMG Academy four-star interior lineman Kaden Strayhorn (6-3, 285), among others.

2025 LB Target Alford Committing March 30

Ohio State will soon learn whether or not it landed one of the program's top targets in 2025, as Vero Beach, Fla., four-star linebacker Tarvos Alford (6-2, 210) is set to announce his commitment on March 30.

Alford – no relation to running backs coach Tony Alford – is the No. 70 overall prospect and 10th-ranked linebacker in the class, and he will decide between Ohio State in addition to Florida, Florida State, Miami (Fla.), Tennessee and UCF.

Ohio State and several assistant coaches visited Alford in January, continuing to build a strong relationship dating back to his original offer in April and visits to campus since then. Alford has developed a bond with graduate assistant James Laurinaitis, who has helped Ohio State in recruiting linebackers over the last year.

"He did it at the highest level and won the Butkus Award and many other awards," Alford told 247Sports. "I feel that to be the best you have to be taught by the best. Back in the day, Ohio State was just an offensive school. I feel like since Coach (Jim) Knowles got their defense, it took a huge jump to be one of the best defenses in the nation."

Alford had a standout junior season at Vero Beach, totaling 114 tackles (12 for loss) with four sacks, an interception and six pass breakups.

Ohio State already has one pledge at linebacker from Akron Hoban three-star Eli Lee (6-3, 215) and is also continuing to recruit San Juan Capistrano (Calif.) Serra Catholic four-star Madden Faraimo (6-3, 210), among others.

St. Clair Talks O'Brien, Sayin

Bellefontaine, Ohio, four-star quarterback Tavien St. Clair (6-4, 210), who has been committed to Ohio State since June, thought he was getting to meet his offensive coordinator of the future when he met with now-former offensive coordinator Bill O'Brien on Jan. 20 and came away impressed.

"Me and Coach O'Brien spent most of the day together," St. Clair told 247Sports. "I really liked him. It was a really good first impression. We talked about how he coaches and his background, his time in New England with Coach (Bill) Belichick and with (former Alabama) Coach (Nick) Saban. He has an impressive résumé. I think we are going to have a close relationship."

That relationship will have to wait, after O'Brien departed to become the head coach at Boston College, while Ohio State has now replaced O'Brien with former UCLA head coach Chip Kelly. While St. Clair's comments on O'Brien are now moot, the same cannot be said for his reaction to the addition of quarterback Julian Sayin, the one-time Alabama signee who has since transferred to Ohio State.

"Me and Coach Day talked about it a little, the rumors going around," St. Clair said. "I talked with my parents about it. We're really excited to have him in Columbus. It elevates the quarterback room. I'm excited to have him in the competition."

There are likely to be transfers and/or other departures by the time St. Clair arrives at Ohio State. But if the departures are kept to a minimum, St. Clair could be stepping into a room that features himself and Sayin in addition to Devin Brown, Lincoln Kienholz and Air Noland, making for a challenging path – regardless of who is in the room – to compete for the starting quarterback job in the future.

Former Alabama WR Pledge Ffrench Visiting Ohio State

One of Ohio State's top targets at wide receiver is back on the market following Jacksonville (Fla.) Mandarin five-star Jaime Ffrench's decommitment from Alabama in January, and things are already heating up between him and the Buckeyes.

According to 247Sports, Ffrench said Ohio State is a lock for an official visit this spring along with Florida State, while Miami (Fla.) and Michigan are also in the mix.

"I am definitely hitting Ohio State," Ffrench said. "The receiver production with what Coach (Brian) Hartline has been able to do – there is no question about that one."

Ffrench is the No. 12 overall prospect and third-ranked wide receiver in the class. He had 62 receptions for 1,247 yards and 14 touchdowns last season and has surpassed 100 receptions, 2,000 receiving yards and 20 touchdowns during his three high school seasons.

Ohio State already has a commitment from Cocoa, Fla., three-star wide receiver

Continued On Page 14

Recently Offered 2025 DE Grady Plans Visit

Continued From Page 13

Jayvan Boggs (6-0, 188) and is also continuing to pursue Naples (Fla.) First Baptist Academy four-star Winston Watkins Jr. (5-10, 172); Mission Viejo, Calif., four-star Phillip Bell (6-2, 195); and Miami Central four-star Naeshaun Montgomery (6-0, 160), among others.

Offers Aplenty In 2025, 2026

The focus for Ohio State's recruiting efforts has now shifted to 2025 and beyond, and the Buckeyes have been out in full force in recent weeks sending out offers to new prospects.

Beginning in 2025, Ohio State offered Durham (N.C.) Southern four-star defensive lineman Isaiah Campbell (6-4, 260), who pledged to Clemson on Jan. 29; Warner Robins, Ga., four-star defensive end Isaiah Gibson (6-5, 250); Paramus (N.J.) Catholic offensive lineman Malachi Goodwin (6-5, 315); and Enterprise, Ala., five-star defensive end Zion Grady (6-4, 220).

Grady is of particular note, as he was committed to Alabama but decommitted following Saban's retirement. He is the No. 23 overall prospect and top-ranked defensive end in the class, and as a sophomore totaled 108 tackles and 22 sacks while being named Alabama Class 5A Lineman of the Year. Auburn, Florida State, Georgia and LSU were among the programs showing immediate interest after Grady decommitted, but the Buckeyes have now firmly entrenched themselves after sending out the offer.

"I'm excited about the offer," Grady told 247Sports. "It's one of the biggest offers you can get in college football. I definitely have to visit soon. I'm not sure on a date, but hopefully spring. Ohio State was actually my favorite school growing up. I liked Ezekiel Elliott."

Other offers in 2025 went out to Hillside, N.J., four-star defensive end Darren Ikinnagbon (6-5, 225); Minneapolis Robbinsdale Cooper three-star athlete Emmanuel Karmo (6-2, 210); Bradenton (Fla.) IMG Academy four-star wide receiver Donovan Olugbode (6-2, 175); Santa Ana (Calif.) Mater Dei three-star linebacker Abduall Sanders Jr. (6-2, 210); and Leo, Ind., four-star tight end Brock Schott (6-3, 215).

Schott is an intriguing prospect for Ohio State. While the Buckeyes have no shortage of tight ends being pursued in 2025, including Washington, Okla., four-star Nate Roberts (6-4, 235), West Chester (Ohio) Lakota West four-star Luka Gilbert (6-7, 233) and St. Louis University three-star Landon Pace (6-3, 215), Schott is the No. 187 overall prospect and eighth-ranked tight end in the class, potentially making him a priority for the Buckeyes.

During his junior season, Schott had 35 catches for 743 yards and six touchdowns while playing both ways, also totaling 67 tackles (32 for loss) and 19 sacks as an outside linebacker.

In 2026, offers included Suwanee (Ga.) Peachtree Ridge four-star cornerback Dorian Barney (6-1, 170); Jacksonville (Fla.) Bolles School safety Simeon Caldwell (6-3, 185); Ellenwood (Ga.) Cedar Grove four-star wide receiver Devin Carter (6-0, 165); Gainesville, Ga., athlete Xavier Griffin (6-4, 210); Tyrone (Ga.) Sandy Creek athlete Amari Latimer (6-0, 195); and Missouri City (Texas) Fort Bend Marshall safety Isaiah Williams (6-0, 185).

A Look Back At Recruiting From The Pages Of BSB

40 Years Ago — 1984

The Ohio State football team snapped up three USA Today first-team All-Americans as it harvested what appeared to be a solid crop of grid recruits on Feb. 8.

Heading the Ohio State list was Massillon (Ohio) Washington linebacker Chris Spielman, one of the most coveted prep players ever. Other first-team All-Americans included tight end Alex Higdon from Cincinnati Princeton and punter Tom Tupa out of Broadview Heights (Ohio) Brecksville, who also played quarterback.

Ohio State also landed second-team All-American wide receiver Cris Carter from Middletown, Ohio, and honorable-mention players Mike Bloemer, an offensive lineman from Cincinnati Aiken, and Greg Rogan, a defensive back from Urbana, Ohio.

The Buckeyes signed a total of 25 players, with emphasis on offensive linemen, defensive backs, linebackers, wide receivers and quarterbacks. OSU did not ink any defensive linemen, and it appeared that any running backs that they signed were projected as defensive backs.

35 Years Ago — 1989

John Cooper sat back in his St. John Arena office and drew a long breath.

Ten weeks of intensive recruiting had taken its toll on the Ohio State head football coach. Still, the tired and drawn Cooper managed quite a few smiles while talking about his staff's 1989 recruiting efforts.

Recruiting services varied in the exact positioning of Ohio State's recruiting efforts, but the Buckeyes most definitely finished with one of the best five classes in the nation.

Less than 12 hours after defensive back Darrell Lewis of San Diego became the last recruit to officially sign his letter of intent, Cooper talked about what many perceived as the Buckeyes' best recruiting season in over 20 years, highlighted by tailback Raymont Harris (6-1, 210), linebacker Alonzo Spellman (6-6, 265) and defensive back Tim Walton (6-0, 170).

"Now that it's over, you look back and, on paper, it's a great year," Cooper said. "I think it's a good, solid year. But I'm one of those guys who likes to temper it a little bit. Let's wait until these guys get in here and see if they're as big and strong and fast as advertised."

30 Years Ago — 1994

Cooper was finally beginning to enjoy himself.

On the heels of his best record, first postseason victory and first top-10 finish at Ohio State, Cooper reeled in one of the nation's finest recruiting classes, and after six long years on the job with the Buckeyes, he was finally beginning to enjoy some of the fruits of his labor.

So when someone mentioned that some of the recruiting experts had his class rated as high as number two nationally, including prospects such as offensive lineman Orlando Pace (6-8, 305) and wide receiver Dee Miller (6-1, 200), Cooper couldn't help but let a smile cross his lips.

"It's probably the best class we've had since I've been here," he said. "It's a good, solid group of players that a lot of other people wanted as well."

25 Years Ago — 1999

Cooper was all smiles on national signing day on Feb. 3 as he and his staff secured signed letters of intent from 24 players for their 1999 recruiting class, a collection of players judged as high as second nationally by recruiting experts.

Ohio State's only signing day suspense centered around a pair of players – Georgia wide receiver Reggie Brown and Florida defensive back Roshard Gilyard – neither of whom signed with the Buckeyes.

Still, OSUs class included 13 Super Prep All-Americans, including three players – Ohio defensive lineman Tim Anderson (6-4, 270), Florida lineman Bryce Bishop (6-5, 310) and Illinois defensive back Richard McNutt (6-0, 175) – who were considered All-Americans by every major service.

"Today was an outstanding day for us recruiting-wise," Cooper said. "Bill Conley, as the recruiting coordinator, and the rest of our coaches did an outstanding job recruiting. I think it's a good, solid class. Now, is it a top-five class or a top-one class? I can't answer that because I don't know the players Notre Dame signed or Florida State or Florida."

20 Years Ago — 2004

Ohio State head coach Jim Tressel scanned a list of his 2004 recruiting class and a smile crossed his lips.

Twenty-three names were on the list, including 14 of Ohio's best high school prospects and nine more from outside the state's borders, including the likes of quarterback Todd Boeckman (6-5, 235), linebacker Marcus Freeman (6-2, 240) and cornerback Ted Ginn Jr. (6-0, 170). The class was almost evenly divided among offensive and defensive players and included a healthy mix of power, speed and academic excellence.

"It's a very diverse class that we have," Tressel told reporters during his annual signing day news conference. "We have 14 players from the state of Ohio, four from Pennsylvania, two from Florida and several others. We have guys with all different kinds of academic interests. The positions are diverse and all across the board."

15 Years Ago — 2009

With 25 verbal commitments already in the fold as of Sept. 1, 2008, the Buckeyes continued to chase a number of highly rated prospects across the country while filling out the class. During the season, recruiting coordinator John Peterson told BSB that this class would be at the upper reaches of his comfort level, which he revealed to be in the 26- to 28-person range.

The final days leading up to signing day threatened to push Peterson's comfort level. Cleveland Glenville offensive lineman Marcus Hall (6-5, 300) became commitment No. 26 when he joined the class two days prior to signing day, and the Buckeyes were still in the running for five-star wide receiver Marlon Brown from Memphis (Tenn.) Harding Academy, who was set to pick a school on signing day.

But through it all, Tressel said the coaching staff was confident that things would eventually work themselves out.

"We were a little bit nervous," said Tressel, who ultimately signed 25 prospects following a late decommitment from defensive back Justin Green. "We were still involved with one or two more guys than we could fit."

10 Years Ago — 2014

When he took the microphone Feb. 5 to talk to the media about his 2014 Ohio State football recruiting class, Urban Meyer mentioned 11 players by name as candidates to play early or at least crack the depth chart this year.

Not surprisingly, the majority of those prospects were defensive players by trade, as a class that finished 2014's National Signing Day ranked fifth in the nation by Scout.com would be expected to help fill the needs that popped up as the Buckeyes went from a 24-game winning streak to a two-game losing streak at the end of the most recent campaign.

Linebackers Raekwon McMillan (6-2, 242) of Hinesville (Ga.) Liberty County, Sam Hubbard (6-6, 230) of Cincinnati Moeller, Kyle Berger (6-2, 225) of Cleveland St. Ignatius and Dante Booker (6-3, 215) of Akron St. Vincent- St. Mary entered a position group meeting room missing All-Big Ten performer Ryan Shazier and Mike Mitchell, who was reportedly set to transfer to be closer to his ailing father in Texas.

Senior Curtis Grant and junior Joshua Perry were returning starters, but both had their ups and downs in 2013. No one from the rest of the group had been able to make a mark yet, at least not on the positive side of the ledger.

"I'm putting pressure on them, (defensive coordinator and linebackers coach Luke) Fickell and myself to get ready for next year," Meyer said. "They have to play for us, in addition to the players we have on our roster already. So just so everybody knows, there's no redshirt plans for those players at all. We thought about that during the recruiting process. We want mature players."

Five Years Ago — 2019

Ohio State's second time through the early signing period was supposed to bring a better sense of what to expect on National Signing Day, but the Buckeyes had anything but ordinary circumstances between December and February.

In nine weeks since athletic director Gene Smith introduced Ryan Day as Meyer's successor, Ohio State lost three commitments but signed 17 prospects, adding two at the buzzer Feb. 6 to get the group the Buckeyes needed before spring camp.

"I think the biggest challenge early on is getting to know everybody," Day said. "Then when the staff got put into place, we still wanted those guys to make sure they built relationships with 2019s. The loyalty there was off the charts. The families we made connections with, recruiting, has been awesome. Then going with the 2020s.

"When you look at what we've done as a culture since August, with the coaching change, we've only had two guys leave the program – (senior linebacker) Keandre Jones, (sophomore quarterback) Tate Martell. One was a grad transfer, one a quarterback. When you keep the retention, it shows about the culture in the coaching change, but also it isn't about signing 27 guys because you're retaining guys. Guys want to stay in the program. That's the strength of our team right now."

One Year Ago — 2023

Fresh off receiving offers from Ohio State, the pair of three-star offensive linemen from St. Edward in Lakewood, Ohio, the Armstrongs – Deontae (6-7, 280) and Devontae (6-6, 288) – took unofficial visits to the school on Jan. 21.

The duo got the opportunity to spend some time with offensive line coach Justin Frye and several other offensive assistants while receiving a tour of campus.

"It went really well," Deontae told 247Sports. "We went to the basketball game (on Jan. 21). We talked to Coach Frye, Coach (Mike) Sollenne, Coach (Brian) Hartline. Ryan Day was sick so he wasn't there, but we talked to just about all of the coaches."

While the duo was not necessarily considered a package deal, they did cite the same set of programs that had stood out so far, including Michigan, Ohio State and Penn State, with official visits to those schools set for the summer.

ASK AN ANALYST

With Allen Trieu of 247 Sports

Ohio State's final addition to the class was Painesville (Ohio) Riverside four-star defensive lineman Dominic Kirks (6-4, 255). What do you make of his addition?

"He's a guy with a ton of upside. That word gets thrown out a lot during recruiting, but I think it's true with him. He was more of a basketball guy early on, and he's really started to dedicate himself to football. He knows where his bread is buttered. He's a developmental guy for Larry Johnson, who I think will do really well with him, and I just don't think you can let a guy like that get out of the state, especially at a position of need. I can see why early on Ohio State wouldn't have offered him during his junior year because he was still kind of coming into himself. But now that you've seen the progress that he's made as a senior, I think that's a guy you've got to take."

What are your overall thoughts on Ohio State's 2024 recruiting class?

"Overall they've done so well that it can be taken for granted that they just keep doing what they're doing. Everyone thinks, 'Well, it's just it's another great Ohio State class with another couple of top receivers, a couple of top quarterbacks.' Those are positions that they've traditionally recruited well. Maybe you take it for granted that you've still got to go win those battles. It's not easy to land and keep Miami Gardens (Fla.) Chaminade Madonna-Prep five-star wide receiver Jeremiah Smith (6-3, 214). And even though they're in-state guys, Springfield, Ohio, five-star cornerback Aaron Scott (6-2, 190) and Cleveland Glenville four-star cornerback Bryce West (5-11, 177), those were battles. It's not like these guys are just falling out of the sky. I think the staff continues to do a really good job.

"I've always said it before that I think Ohio State's one of the schools that does the best job of recruiting like they haven't made it yet, even though they have to an extent. They put in a ton of effort. And that goes from Mark Pantoni through the staff to Ryan Day. That's why they keep having success, and I don't think that that should be glazed over now just because they've consistently done it so many times."

Ohio State has received some criticism in recent recruiting cycles for slow finishes, specifically on the defensive line. Do you view this as a problem, and does it need to change for the Buckeyes?

"It's a little bit of a head scratcher, because Johnson has had a lot of success. He's recruited very well, and throughout his career Ohio State's done very well at that position. Defensive linemen are very much in demand, and I don't think that the region that I cover, which is Ohio State's home footprint, produces a ton of top-level defensive linemen. They're often having to go south or out west to get those guys. Buford, Ga., five-star defensive end Eddrick Houston (6-3, 269), as an example, J.T. (Tuimoloau) as another example.

"You're going to get yourself into some battles, and with NIL now, it's going to be hard to harder than ever before to get some of those guys to come to you out of the south or out of the West Coast. I don't know that it's anything Ohio State's doing wrong. It's more of when you go after these high-level guys at a premium position, sometimes you're going to strike out. When you look at what they're doing now with circling back on a guy like Dominic Kirks, that might be more of the blueprint moving forward, is you have to have a few guys from closer by as options on your board."

How do you assess the in-state talent in Ohio for the 2025 recruiting cycle?

"It's probably right about where we would expect it to be. We're looking at who has a chance to end up in the five-star range. I think Bellefontaine four-star quarterback Tavien St. Clair (6-4, 210) and Toledo Whitmer four-star offensive tackle Carter Lowe (6-5, 290) right now are in our top 32 (for 247Sports). Cleveland Shaker Heights four-star cornerback Trey McNutt (6-0, 180) could get there. He's in our top 32. (Those are) three guys potentially in the five-star range. That's a little bit more top heavy, probably, but it's not maybe as deep of a class as some of the recent ones at the moment. That ends up balancing itself out. But I would say that it's not a clear outlier, high or low, as far as talent."

How Big Ten Newcomers Fared In 2024 Cycle

Ohio State will have four additional teams to compete with inside the Big Ten for recruits beginning this summer, with Oregon, Washington, UCLA and USC set to join the conference, though the quality of recruiting by these newcomers is not built equally.

The Ducks present by far the biggest recruiting challenge coming in. They finished ahead of Ohio State in the final 247Sports composite rankings with the No. 3 class in the country. Although Oregon had no five-star signees, it did sign 22 four-star prospects – the most of any team in the country – including St. Louis Christian Brothers College four-star wide receiver Jeremiah McClellan (6-0, 190), whom Oregon flipped from Ohio State in December.

USC, another competitor on the recruiting trail, finished with the nation's No. 17 overall class with 13 four-star prospects. The Trojans had two top-100 prospects, including Atlanta Booker T. Washington four-star defensive end Kameryn Fountain (6-6, 241) and Chatsworth (Calif.) Sierra Canyon four-star wide receiver Xavier Jordan (6-1, 165).

USC also won a head-to-head battle with the Buckeyes for Bay City, Texas, four-star defensive lineman Carlon Jones (6-3, 285).

Next up was Washington, which signed the nation's No. 38 overall class. The Huskies signed five four-star prospects, headlined by Chandler (Ariz.) Basha four-star quarterback Demond Williams (5-9, 174). All but three of Washington's 17 signees came from either Arizona, California, Oregon or Washington.

Far and away the worst recruiting cycle, however, belonged to UCLA. The Bruins – with Kelly at the helm, who is now off to Ohio State – signed the nation's No. 87 class, the fourth worst among Power Five teams (ahead of No. 93 Oregon State, No. 94 Boston College and No. 117 Colorado).

UCLA's class featured just 10 signees and two top-500 recruits in Chatsworth (Calif.) Sierra Canyon four-star wide receiver Kwazi Gilmer (6-2, 180) and Mission Viejo, Calif., four-star offensive tackle Mark Schroller (6-6, 295). With UCLA's coaching staff in flux, things don't figure to look much better in 2025.

Compared to the rest of the Big Ten, Oregon would have had the top class in the conference. USC would have been fifth, with Washington checking in at No. 12 and UCLA ranking dead last at No. 18.

Other Notes And Tidbits

• Upper Marlboro (Md.) Dr. Henry Wise four-star defensive lineman Trent Wilson (6-3, 270) included Ohio State among his top eight schools on Jan. 23 along with Florida, Florida State, Maryland, Oklahoma, Penn State, Tennessee and Texas A&M. He is the No. 109 overall prospect and No. 10 defensive lineman in 2025.

• Norfolk (Va.) Maury four-star defensive end Ari Watford (6-5, 220), who held an Ohio State offer, committed to Clemson on Jan. 24. He is the No. 30 overall prospect and fourth-ranked defensive end in 2025.

• Wisconsin picked up pledges from a pair of Ohio prospects in recent weeks, adding Cleveland St. Ignatius three-star athlete Cody Haddad (6-1, 175) and Cincinnati Mt. Healthy four-star athlete Jaimier Scott (6-1, 177).

• Recruiting entered a dead period on Feb. 4 and will remain in one until March 3, meaning that there are no in-person visits between schools and prospects. A quiet period will then last from March 4 until April 14, which means that recruits can visit schools, but coaches are not allowed to travel and visit recruits.

• Ohio State's summer camp schedule has been released, and it includes a youth camp (fifth through eighth grade) from June 3-4; a middle school seven-on-seven competition on June 12; a high school seven-on-seven competition on June 18; and one-day camps for high school prospects on June 5-6, 11, 13 and 17.

For the latest in Ohio State football recruiting news, be sure to visit 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 entitlted "Coaching Youth Basketball: Coaching the Coaches" for sale on Amazon.com. Access to this instructional manual was previously limited to attendees of his basketball clinics and camps only.

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BUCKEYE GAMEDAY Memories: A new book of short stories about humorous gameday experiences in the 1960s through the 2010s by Tim Sullivan. Available on Amazon.com.

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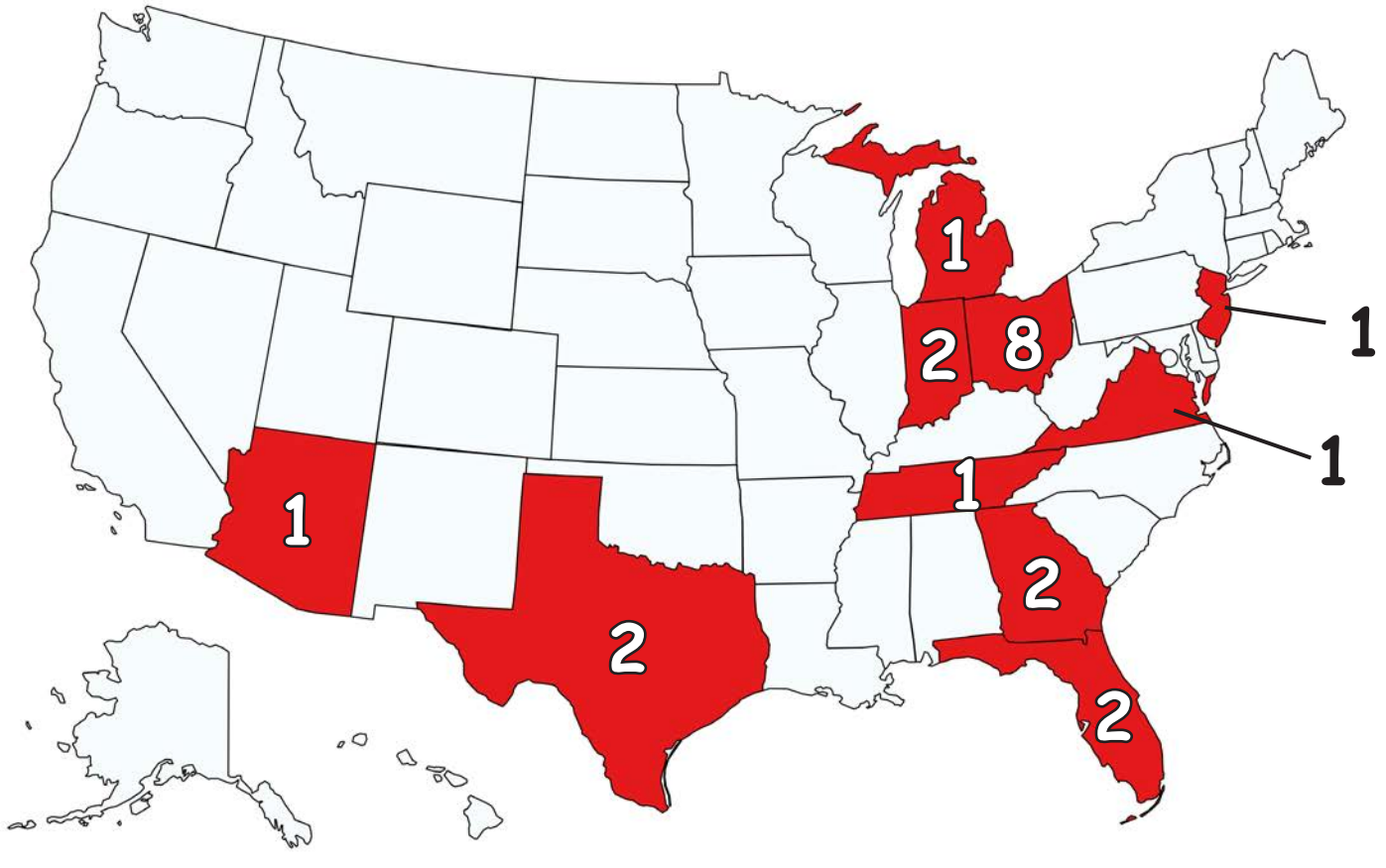
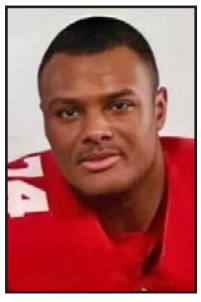
OSU's Class Of 2024



All rankings from the 247Sports composite. All statistics provided by Ohio State and MaxPreps.



DEONTAE ARMSTRONG

OL • 6-6 • 280
Elyria (Ohio)
St. Edward
Rank: OT 33, Overall 383, OH 14

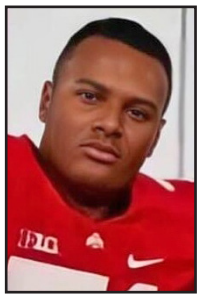
ACCOLADES: Armstrong was named first-team All-Region and first-team All-Ohio his senior season, helping lead St. Edward to the program's third consecutive state championship. He started at left tackle during the past three seasons alongside his twin brother, Devontae, who also signed with Ohio State.

ARMSTRONG SAYS: "I think we can really bring motivation and stuff like that to the guys in the locker room, who probably aren't from Ohio, who probably don't know much about the rivalry, and really just bring a fire to the game, bring that fire back up again. You watch guys like (former Ohio State tight end) Cade Stover trying to motivate the guys. It's important to have those Ohio guys who know about the rivalry, who care about the rivalry, who know what it feels like after you witness an Ohio State loss to Michigan."

EXPERT'S TAKE: "I really feel strongly about the Armstrong twins about the year they had and coming from a great program like St. Edward. What they did as a team this year, they led the way. The guys have been tremendous in terms of their development throughout their high school careers." – Ryan Day, Ohio State head coach

PERSONAL: He and his twin brother, Devontae, are both signed to play with Ohio State. Despite all their similarities, Deontae is said to be the more outgoing of the sibling duo. He is the son of Erica Kara and Antone Abram.

COMMIT DATE: March 27, 2023.



DEVONTAE ARMSTRONG

OL • 6-5 • 297
Elyria (Ohio)
St. Edward
Rank: OT 29, Overall 444, OH 18

ACCOLADES: Armstrong was named first-team All-District and first-team All-Ohio following his senior season, helping lead St. Edward to a state championship. He lined up at left guard over the last three seasons for the Eagles next to his twin brother, Deontae, who also signed with Ohio State. Behind Armstrong, St. Edward's rushing attack averaged 251.4 yards per game in the Ohio High School Athletic Association playoffs.

ARMSTRONG SAYS: "We can flip-flop back and forth as need be. We're really good at both left guard and right tackle. It's just being able to play inside and out, (and it) is really important that Coach (Justin) Frye really liked that."

EXPERT'S TAKE: "You're seeing them play their best football, and we're very excited for them. They have a great work ethic. You can see the improvement year in and year out, and they're becoming really good offensive linemen and football players. They're long body types and they're getting more comfortable playing their positions." – Ryan Day, Ohio State head coach

PERSONAL: Despite the similarities between Devontae and Deontae, Devontae is the more reserved of the sibling duo. He is the son of Erica Kara and Antone Abram.

COMMIT DATE: March 27, 2023.

MYLAN GRAHAM

WR • 6-1 • 185
New Haven, Ind.
Rank: WR 7, Overall 33, IN 1

ACCOLADES: Graham is one of two five-star wide receiver signees in this class for Ohio State. He collected over 2,000 career receiving yards and 24 touchdowns during his high school career, including a junior season in which he had 48 receptions for 1,149 yards and 13 touchdowns.

GRAHAM SAYS: "Every experience I've had with Coach (Brian) Hartline, whether he came to my school or I've worked out in front of him or something like that, on the phone, it's always been a good experience. He's always teaching me some knowledge or things like that. It really just poured into me the more I wanted to come here because I had really a great bond with him."

EXPERT'S TAKE: "He has a longer frame with good weight on him already and still room to grow. He shows very good acceleration which serves him well on (yards after catch) as well as in the return game. He gets off the line quickly and has suddenness and twitch in his route running. He shows the ability to high-point the ball and catch it away from his body. He should be an impact college player and potential early draft choice." – Allen Trieu, 247Sports

PERSONAL: Ohio State was the first Division I school to offer Graham during the recruiting process, getting ahead in the race for the eventual five-star prospect. He is the son of Marcy Graham and D'Angelo Hardy.

COMMIT DATE: April 4, 2023.

EDDRICK HOUSTON

DE • 6-3 • 275
Buford, Ga.
Rank: DE 7, Overall 26, GA 5

★★★★★

ACCOLADES: Houston was named a MaxPreps Junior All-American after his junior season in which he had 64 tackles (11 for loss), 10 sacks and 10 quarterback pressures. He followed it up with a senior season totaling 45 tackles (12 for loss) and five sacks.

HOUSTON SAYS: "(I like) the culture that they have set in their program. Also, just knowing that they can develop me on and off the field and make me the greatest I can be. Larry Johnson is an amazing coach that has shown multiple times that he can develop people into someone who can go to the next level."

EXPERT'S TAKE: "A young defensive line prospect with tools that has put strong spells of play on tape the past two years while competing in Georgia's highest classification. He could fit into a variety of different fronts and schemes depending on how the body fills out, but has found the most success to date crashing off the edge. He is not the most explosive individual, but has a rare top-end gear for someone his size, which allows him to get across the field and make plays in back-side pursuit." – Andrew Ivins, 247Sports

PERSONAL: Houston is a noted multisport athlete, also competing in wrestling, where he made it to the state semifinals as a sophomore, and track and field, where he registered a 55.70 in the 400-meter dash as a junior. His mother is Siobhan Leslie.

COMMIT DATE: Aug. 22, 2023.

DOMINIC KIRKS

DL • 6-4 • 255
Painesville (Ohio) Riverside
Rank: DL 24, Overall 162, OH 8

★★★★

ACCOLADES: Kirks had an impressive senior season for Painesville, registering 86 tackles (17 for loss) along with 11 sacks, an interception and four pass breakups.

KIRKS SAYS: "I am an Ohio kid and I love my state, so I get to stay close to home and play for Ohio State. 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."

EXPERT'S TAKE: "He comes from a basketball background but made big jumps as a football player from sophomore to junior year then from junior to senior year. He has a big frame and has filled that in to around 255 pounds as he enters college. He can win with finesse as well as power, and 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." – Allen Trieu, 247Sports

PERSONAL: Kirks was originally committed to Washington but did not sign with the Huskies during the early signing period, and he eventually decommitted following the departure of head coach Kalen DeBoer to Alabama. He is the son of Tiffani Allen and David Kirks.

COMMIT DATE: Jan. 20, 2024.

MAX LEBLANC

TE • 6-4 • 227
Chattanooga (Tenn.) Baylor School
Rank: TE 14, Overall 257, TN 5

★★★★

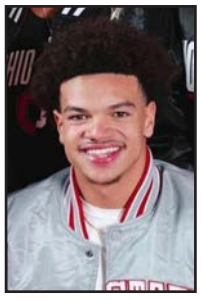
ACCOLADES: LeBlanc caught 39 passes for 695 yards and three touchdowns as a junior and helped lead Baylor School to the state championship game this past fall.

LEBLANC SAYS: "There was a lot of pressure with this decision for me and my family. But I knew after my visits that Ohio State is the right place for me. I've been a fan of the program growing up, and being there around the coaches and other players made me sure of my decision. I just really liked seeing the relationship the coaches have with the players, the energy at practice and the facilities. Ohio State has been known for player development, and I wanted to go somewhere that could make me the best I can be."

EXPERT'S TAKE: "His family is from Canada and Montreal. He's a really talented young man. Came down from Canada and had to make the transition to a school where he was on his own. But he did a great job when he was there. His film is tremendous. We think he brings a lot of versatility to the team." – Ryan Day, Ohio State head coach

PERSONAL: LeBlanc is from Saint-Bruno, Quebec, before he moved to Tennessee for his final two seasons of high school football. He has three older siblings who play college sports, including a brother who plays tennis at Kentucky; another brother who is a decathlete at High Point University; and a sister who plays tennis at Portland. He is the son of Christine and Sebastien LeBlanc.

COMMIT DATE: April 15, 2023.



MILES LOCKHART

CB • 5-10 • 185
Chandler (Ariz.) Basha
Rank: CB 33, Overall 398, AZ 9

★★★★

ACCOLADES: Lockhart finished with 39 tackles, a sack and seven pass breakups as a senior and was named to the Premier Regional first-team defense. In his junior season, he had 69 tackles and four interceptions.

LOCKHART SAYS: "I really felt it was the right fit for me. It feels like family there. It feels like home. They made sure I knew I was a priority for them. That was a big reason, and the family atmosphere. Coach (Tim) Walton and Coach (Ryan) Day really take care of you."

EXPERT'S TAKE: "He has a stout, solidly built frame, but has limited physical upside. He is a really smart cornerback with off-the-charts instincts. He flashes very good ball skills and toughness in one-on-one coverage, and displays sound tackling ability to clean up on the perimeter. He looks at home near the line of scrimmage. He has superb two-way production and is dangerous with the ball in his hands. He is a versatile defender who could fill a variety of roles within a secondary, and is equally comfortable in man and zone." – Blair Angulo, 247Sports

PERSONAL: Lockhart was a two-way player at Basha, also lining up at running back, and participated in track. He is the son of Stevie and David Lockhart.

COMMIT DATE: July 6, 2023.

JAYLEN MCCLAIN

SAF • 6-0 • 185
Rahway (N.J.) Seton Hall Prep
Rank: SAF 36, Overall 370, NJ 5

★★★★

ACCOLADES: McClain had a standout senior season at Seton Hall Prep, finishing with 126 tackles, three fumble recoveries, one blocked punt and a blocked field goal, earning first-team all-conference and all-state honors.

MCCLAIN SAYS: "Ohio State is not going to recruit you if they don't think highly of you. They don't recruit you if they don't feel you can play at a championship level. Getting that made me want to work even harder because I can't stay the same. I want to improve everything: my body type, my speed, my agility, all that type of stuff. So once I got that offer, I was like, 'Wow, a school like Ohio State believes I can play for them to help them win national championships.' "

EXPERT'S TAKE: "At his build, McClain is best fitted as a strong safety in defensive coordinator Jim Knowles' scheme. McClain has both speed to be adept in coverage, being clocked at 11.06 seconds in the 100-meter dash and 22.7 seconds in the 200-meter dash, but also the physicality needed to cover and jam tight ends or make plays in the run game. Given his edge awareness he displayed in high school, it wouldn't be surprising to see Knowles deploy him in the box when on the field." – Garrick Hodge, Eleven Warriors

PERSONAL: McClain was a two-way player at Seton Hall Prep, also lining up at wide receiver, and was a member of the track and field team. He is the son of Syreeta and Maurice McClain.

COMMIT DATE: June 12, 2023.

ERIC MENSAH

DL • 6-3 • 290
Stafford (Va.) Mountain View
Rank: DL 90, Overall 792, VA 13

★★★

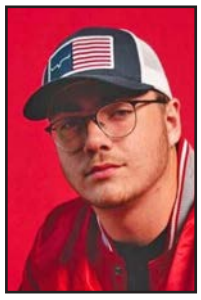
ACCOLADES: Mensah was named Commonwealth District Defensive Player of the Year and a first-team defensive lineman at the end of his senior season and was also named Class 6 Region B Defensive Player of the Year.

MENSAH SAYS: "My first semester, I want to set myself up high. I want a 4.0 GPA my first semester. I also want to see a change in myself being more independent now, so when I come back home, it'll be like, 'Oh, Eric is different physically, mentally and spiritually.' It will be a dream come true to play in college and participate in spring ball – especially coming in early to practice, condition and lift."

EXPERT'S TAKE: "He came to camp and worked with Larry (Johnson). He comes from a great family. At Mountain View High School in Virginia, he was a strong player and had a good year. He's played multiple positions in his high school career and brings a lot of positional versatility there." – Ryan Day, Ohio State head coach

PERSONAL: Mensah, who is fluent in the African language "Twi," was originally committed to Virginia Tech before flipping to Ohio State. He is the son of Barbara Agyemang and Kwabena Mensa.

COMMIT DATE: Sept. 15, 2023.



IAN MOORE

OL • 6-5 • 305
New Palestine, Ind.
Rank: OL 5, Overall 166, IN 4

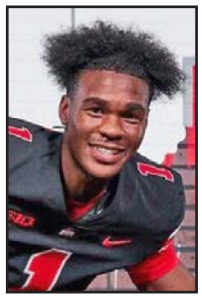
ACCOLADES: Moore was named Indiana's Mr. Football Offensive Lineman and was a finalist for Indiana's Mr. Football award. He helped lead New Palestine's rushing attack for 255 yards per game during his senior season and was named first-team All-Indiana.

MOORE SAYS: "Every time I would try and compare a school, I'd always compare it to Ohio State. And every time I'd see something that this one school did, I'd be like, 'Ohio State didn't do that.' … I just kept circling back to there's no point, I know where I want to go."

EXPERT'S TAKE: "Tall offensive lineman with ready-to-play size on paper. He possesses enough length to remain outside, especially at the college level, but long-term projection could be even higher at guard. He thrives as a drive-blocking presence in the run game who will finish to the ground and also looks for extra work when available. He has encouraging body control and a flat-backed stance in pass pro. His body control and balance can improve when engaged. He is not necessarily a 'catcher,' but more wrestler than puncher at the point of attack. He is still working on hand placement and violence, but his feet get him to his spots on schedule in myriad situations." – Gabe Brooks, 247Sports

PERSONAL: Moore was a two-way player for New Palestine, also lining up on the defensive line where he collected 37 tackles (9½ for loss) and 3½ sacks. He is the son of Sherri and Terry Moore.

COMMIT DATE: Oct. 20, 2022.



AIR NOLAND

QB • 6-3 • 195
Fairburn (Ga.)
Langston Hughes
Rank: QB 4, Overall 56, GA 8

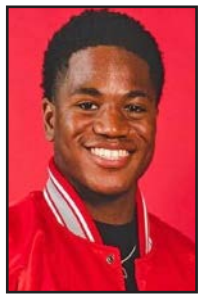
ACCOLADES: Noland, considered one of the top quarterbacks in his recruiting class, threw for 2,140 yards and 22 touchdowns as a senior and was named an Elite 11 finalist last summer. He finished his high school career with over 10,000 passing yards and 100 touchdowns, including 4,095 yards and 55 scores as a junior.

NOLAND SAYS: "Of course, Coach Ryan Day, Coach (Corey) Dennis and Coach (Brian) Hartline, the three-headed snake at Ohio State speaks for itself. They develop quarterbacks, Black quarterbacks, into NFL-caliber quarterbacks in the quarterback-oriented offense they have. Jelani (Thurman)'s up there, so I have a teammate of mine up there, but the people around Ohio State, they're very welcoming."

EXPERT'S TAKE: "A productive southpaw with a quicker release that can attack all different levels of the field. He loves to pick apart defenses from the pocket and doesn't take long to process. His natural arm talent flashed multiple times during in-person evaluations as he had the pace to get balls out to the numbers and the touch to drop them in over coverage. He is elusive enough to get away from trouble and can move the chains every now and then with his legs. He must get better at limiting mistakes, but at the same time has shown that he's not afraid to take a risk, which in turn allows him to play a bit more freely than others." – Andrew Ivins, 247Sports

PERSONAL: Noland was a teammate of current Ohio State tight end Thurman at Langston Hughes. Noland is the son of Audrey Gill.

COMMIT DATE: April 8, 2023.



JAMES PEOPLES

RB • 5-10 • 203
San Antonio
Veterans Memorial
Rank: RB 8, Overall 114, TX 19

ACCOLADES: Peoples rushed for 1,904 yards and 28 touchdowns during his junior season in which he was a finalist for the San Antonio Express-Times Offensive Player of the Year, and he averaged over 10.0 yards per carry in his junior and senior seasons.

PEOPLES SAYS: "There's a lot of great things about Ohio State, but they always have a great offensive line. To be able to run behind a crew like that and play with the best in the nation is one of the most important things about Ohio State. But my parents were both born in Ohio, and something that's big on my list is my family making it to my games, so that's appealing about Ohio State, too."

EXPERT'S TAKE: "Peoples exhibits excellent initial burst. Once he penetrates the line of scrimmage, he promptly locates gaps and exploits defenses with quick north-south bursts. He demonstrates great decision-making abilities, whether to hit the hole or employ his explosive lateral agility to break out wide. His ability to accelerate quickly and maintain speed throughout the play is impressive, and he possesses deceptive top-end speed that can catch defenses off guard." – Greg Powers, Dave Campbell's Texas Football

PERSONAL: Peoples was a participant in the All-American Bowl in his hometown of San Antonio on Jan. 4. He is the son of Nakisha and James Peoples II.

COMMIT DATE: April 2, 2023.

PAYTON PIERCE

LB • 6-1 • 220
Lucas (Texas)
Lovejoy
Rank: LB 15, Overall 203, TX 33

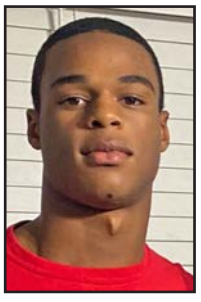
ACCOLADES: As a senior, Pierce – who had 181 tackles (40 for loss) and eight sacks – was named a finalist for the High School Butkus Award and was named District 7 5A Most Valuable Player. His junior season was equally impressive with 131 tackles (21 for loss) and six sacks.

PIERCE SAYS: "I think the type of players that they have on the team and just how competitive the environment is, it just really fits me the way that they're coached, the way they practice and the way their defense is run. The environment is one I want to be in. You're with a bunch of guys that want to be the best, have the standard of being the best and are going to college to be the best. I want to be a part of it and lead those guys in my class."

EXPERT'S TAKE: "Pierce displays great awareness as plays develop and a quick first step that is instrumental to his success as a run-stopper. He can hit like a truck. He often creates havoc at the line of scrimmage and is adept at shedding blocks and making plays for his defense. He may need time to develop his coverage skills against faster players at the collegiate level, but Pierce has the potential to be a future starting linebacker in OSU's defense." – Garrick Hodge, Eleven Warriors

PERSONAL: Pierce suffered an ankle injury in his final high school game, which is expected to keep him out through his first spring at Ohio State. He is the son of Jamie and Geno Pierce.

COMMIT DATE: April 11, 2023.



LEROY ROKER

SAF • 6-1 • 175
Fort Myers (Fla.)
Bishop Verot
Rank: SAF 88, Overall 832, FL 114

ACCOLADES: Roker finished with 54 tackles, one sack and seven interceptions in his senior season at Bishop Verot, helping him pick up a handful of Division I offers including Iowa, Miami (Fla.) and Old Dominion, in addition to Ohio State. He also helped Bishop Verot reach the state regional finals in his senior season, contributing beyond defense as he had nearly 600 all-purpose yards between receiving, rushing and kick returns.

ROKER SAYS: "When I realized I was offered, I was so excited considering that I could be playing for a top-ranked school in the country and be developed into a great player."

EXPERT'S TAKE: "He's someone we got on late. He had a really good senior year, and we've had good luck with guys we've evaluated late in their senior year. He's a guy that was very productive down there, and we're excited to add him to the back end." – Ryan Day, Ohio State head coach

PERSONAL: Roker is an accomplished multisport athlete, also competing in basketball, where he averaged 16 points per game throughout his career, and track and field. He played his first three seasons at Canterbury High School in Fort Myers before transferring to Bishop Verot for his senior season.

COMMIT DATE: Oct. 11, 2023.

AARON SCOTT

CB • 6-2 • 190
Springfield, Ohio
Rank: CB 6, Overall 36, OH 1

ACCOLADES: Scott finished with two interceptions this past season as he helped lead Springfield to the state championship game. He also moved to quarterback midseason for the Wildcats, accounting for nine touchdowns.

SCOTT SAYS: "I feel like just being from Ohio and just knowing what they could do for me, they made me feel like I'm needed. I just went with that right there."

EXPERT'S TAKE: "He has a hyper-competitive nature you like to see on the outside. He plays aware with obvious anticipatory instincts. He has shown competency in a variety of coverages and has also played over the top on occasion. He is a terrific functional athlete whose verified markers in testing and track suggest room for improvement in overall explosiveness, including top-end gear. He is strong in coverage but needs to add mass and strength as a tackler to be more consistent in that department. He is a bona fide high-major defensive back prospect who can probably live at corner in the long run, but may also provide roster value as a secondary chameleon. He has the potential to become a multiyear impact player with NFL draft upside." – Gabe Brooks, 247Sports

PERSONAL: Scott is the first scholarship player from Springfield to play at Ohio State since Braxton Miller (2011-15), who attended Huber Heights Wayne High School, and the first scholarship player from Springfield High School since wide receiver Dee Miller (1995-98). He is the son of Christa Dearmond and Aaron Scott Sr.

COMMIT DATE: July 30, 2023.

JEREMIAH SMITH

WR • 6-3 • 200
Miami Gardens (Fla.)
Chaminade-Madonna Prep
Rank: WR 1, Overall 1, FL 1

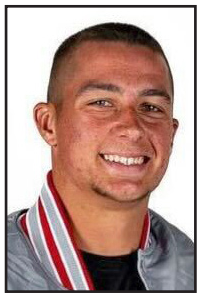
ACCOLADES: Smith collected 88 receptions for 1,376 yards and 19 touchdowns as a junior, leading Chaminade-Madonna Prep to a state championship. He was named MaxPreps' Florida Player of the Year and was one of five finalists for 247Sports' National Player of the Year. Over the past two seasons, he had 151 receptions for 2,474 yards and 39 touchdowns.

SMITH SAYS: "I just want to go up there, build my own legacy up there in Ohio, be a first-round draft pick and be developed not only as a player, but as a man as well. It's been crazy. I just took it day by day. I just kept God first, prayed he'd lead me in the right direction. It was Ohio for me this whole time, so that's where I'm going."

EXPERT'S TAKE: "One of the top prospects to come out of South Florida in the modern recruiting era and the type of wide receiver that will give opposing defenses fits given the rare combination of his size, speed and hands. He can simply overpower defensive backs with his imposing frame, but is way more than just some contested-catch specialist as he has proven to be a dynamic route runner that will attack leverage and sink his hips to create separation. He has made a number of highlight-reel worthy grabs over the years and tends to come down with whatever enters his orbit as he uses superb body control and impressive concentration to secure the prize." – Andrew Ivins, 247Sports

PERSONAL: Smith is the first wide receiver to earn the No. 1 overall ranking in the 247Sports composite rankings since Dorial Green-Beckham in 2012. He is the son of Lativia Newberry and Chris Smith.

COMMIT DATE: Dec. 14, 2022.



GARRETT STOVER

LB • 6-0 • 205
Galena (Ohio)
Big Walnut
Rank: LB 10, Overall 141, OH 7

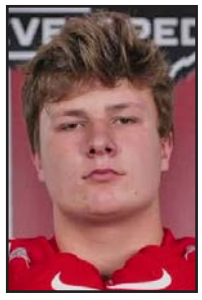
ACCOLADES: Stover earned All-Ohio honors as a senior after finishing with 89 tackles (three for loss), three sacks and two interceptions. He was also named first-team All-Ohio as a junior, with 92 tackles (12 for loss) and seven pass breakups.

STOVER SAYS: "I love James Laurinaitis to death. He's great. I first met him when he was at Notre Dame and I went to their camp, and he really took me under his wing and really liked how I play the game and how I was coachable and everything, and we kind of built the relationship right from there. We stayed in touch after that, and when I knew he was coming to Ohio State, it made my commitment that much better. So he's another one of those dudes where you just, you fall in love with."

EXPERT'S TAKE: "Very good athlete who has a track background as a sprinter as well as a high and long jumper. In high school he has moved around from safety to linebacker as well as getting snaps on offense. He has all the athletic gifts but will have to add weight and bulk to transition to linebacker. He will likely be a Will or Mike. Getting stronger will be important for him but he is the type of three-down defender that can play in any scheme with matching up with today's offenses." – Allen Trieu, 247Sports

PERSONAL: Stover began his high school career at safety before transitioning to linebacker beginning in his junior season. He is the cousin of Ohio State tight end Cade Stover. Garrett Stover is the son of Lindsey and Bubba Stover.

COMMIT DATE: Nov. 21, 2022.



GABE VANSICKLE

OL • 6-5 • 315
Coopersville, Mich.
Rank: OL 17, Overall 282, MI 6

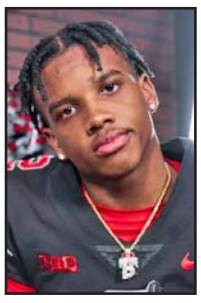
ACCOLADES: VanSickle lined up at left tackle as a senior for Coopersville, helping lead the Broncos to an 8-3 record and a league-best 35.3 points per game, though he projects as either a guard or center for the Buckeyes once he arrives on campus.

VANSICKLE SAYS: "The brotherhood is the biggest thing for me – how the offensive line acts and their relationship together, how they brought me in there and treated me like I was already there. The coaches made me feel at home."

EXPERT'S TAKE: "He's another one that we looked at late. Justin (Frye) evaluated him, and we see a really athletic guard that could eventually move to center. But he's very athletic and has huge upside." – Ryan Day, Ohio State head coach

PERSONAL: VanSickle was a multisport athlete at Coopersville, also participating in basketball and track. He was committed to Northwestern before changing his commitment to Ohio State just three days after decommitting from the Wildcats, and he is the Buckeyes' only signee this cycle from Michigan. He is the son of Amy and Lynn VanSickle.

COMMIT DATE: Nov. 23, 2023.



BRYCE WEST

CB • 5-11 • 183
Cleveland Glenville
Rank: CB 9, Overall 64, OH 2

ACCOLADES: West was named Northeast Lakes District Defensive Player of the Year as a senior and helped lead Glenville to back-to-back state championships during his junior and senior seasons. He was also named first-team All-Ohio as a junior and senior.

WEST SAYS: "I just felt that was the place I needed to be. Just all the development that's come through Ohio State and the Glenville pipeline with all the first-rounders they've had, and you've got a defensive backs coach like Coach (Tim) Walton. He's been in the league for so many years and coached guys like Jalen Ramsey. You'd love to play for a guy like that."

EXPERT'S TAKE: "He has enough size and measurables to project to a high major level. Has a track background and has run as fast as 10.93 in the 100-meter dash and 6.96 in the 60-meter dash. He shows good ball skills and will put his nose in the action and lay a hit. He doesn't show a single elite trait but is solid in every area. Continuing to add polish while building upon his quicks and long speed, which are already good, are keys for his developmental future." – Allen Trieu, 247Sports

PERSONAL: West also participated in track and field at Glenville and was a member of the Tarblooders' state championship-winning 4x200-meter relay team. He is the son of Shemika Scott and Bryan West.

COMMIT DATE: June 24, 2023.

SAM WILLIAMS-DIXON

RB • 5-11 • 203
Pickerington (Ohio) North
Rank: RB 48, Overall 659, OH 24

ACCOLADES: During his senior season, Williams-Dixon averaged 6.7 yards per carry while adding nearly 1,000 receiving yards and 10 touchdowns. Williams-Dixon's junior season had him collect nearly 1,800 yards from scrimmage and 41 touchdowns, and he accounted for 76 touchdowns in his sophomore and junior seasons.

WILLIAMS-DIXON SAYS: "Long story short, I've got to be ready. That's what Coach (Tony) Alford has been telling me. We've got to get me ready, got to get me started and that's what I'm going to do coming into the spring."

EXPERT'S TAKE: "He's a local guy who has some versatility. He was listed as an athlete at one point, but we're going to start him at running back. But he brings versatility, and you can do some different things with him." – Ryan Day, Ohio State head coach

PERSONAL: Williams-Dixon, who grew up rooting for Ohio State, played his first three seasons of high school football at Millersburg (Ohio) West Holmes before moving to Pickerington North for his senior season, where he helped lead the team to the first state playoff semifinal appearance in program history. He is the son of Roddreka Dixon.

COMMIT DATE: April 15, 2023.

DAMARION WITTEN

TE • 6-4 • 215
Cleveland Glenville
Rank: TE 28, Overall 462, OH 19

ACCOLADES: Witten helped lead Glenville to a state championship in his junior and senior seasons, including an 86-yard, two-touchdown performance in the title game in his senior season. He was also named Most Valuable Player in the U.S. Army Bowl following his senior season, with four catches for 96 yards and three touchdowns.

WITTEN SAYS: "Me and Coach (Keenan) Bailey got really close over time since he got the job. He said I was the first tight end he called and he wanted to keep working with me. Ever since that day, he's been truly showing me that he cares."

EXPERT'S TAKE: "While Witten is a tight end capable of being a dynamic pass-catcher, his biggest strong suit, he's also very willing to learn to improve his craft as a blocker. He's shown great playmaking ability, both from winning contested jump balls to also making long plays in the screen game. Last season, Witten took a screen pass 99 yards for pay dirt, showing greater-than-average speed for a tight end. On rare occasions, Witten even took handoffs for Glenville in the backfield as the Tarblooders took advantage of his size and athleticism as a ball carrier." – Garrick Hodge, Eleven Warriors

PERSONAL: Witten, who goes by the nickname "Toe" and also played basketball for Glenville, is one of now 26 former Glenville players to have signed with Ohio State dating back to 2002. He is the son of Crystal Hopgood and Dale Witten.

COMMIT DATE: June 24, 2023.

Ohio State Ranks Third In Consensus Poll

By PATRICK ENGELS
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

National Recruiting Experts' Rankings

247Sports	Rivals	On3	ESPN
1. Georgia	1. Georgia	1. Georgia	1. Georgia
2. Alabama	2. Alabama	2. Alabama	2. Alabama
3. Oregon	3. Texas	**3. Ohio State**	**3. Ohio State**
4. Miami (Fla.)	**4. Ohio State**	4. Oregon	4. Oregon
5. Ohio State	5. Miami (Fla.)	5. Miami (Fla.)	5. Texas
6. Texas	6. Oregon	6. Texas	6. Miami (Fla.)
7. LSU	7. Oklahoma	7. LSU	7. LSU
8. Oklahoma	8. Auburn	8. Auburn	8. Oklahoma
9. Notre Dame	9. Notre Dame	9. Oklahoma	9. Auburn
10. Auburn	10. Clemson	10. Florida	10. Florida

Following a disappointing end to the 2023 season that included a third consecutive loss to Michigan and a Cotton Bowl defeat to Missouri, Ohio State and head coach Ryan Day rebounded through the world of recruiting, signing the third-best class nationally in this year's edition of the Buckeye Sports Bulletin consensus poll.

The Buckeyes – who earned their highest ranking in the poll since their No. 2 finish in 2021 – hauled in 21 scholarship signees, an impressive group that includes four five-stars, 14 four-stars and a trio of three-stars. Day's class begins – like many years recently – at the wide receiver position, where offensive coordinator/wide receivers coach Brian Hartline once again proved his worth as an elite recruiter.

Despite late-arriving rumors of a flip, Ohio State signed Miami Gardens (Fla.) Chaminade-Madonna Prep five-star wide receiver Jeremiah Smith (6-3, 214), the No. 1 overall prospect in the entire 2024 class and the highest-rated wide receiver recruit since Missouri's Dorial Green-Beckham in 2014. Smith was not the only premier wide receiver prospect the Buckeyes signed in this year's class. They also added New Haven, Ind., five-star wideout Mylan Graham (6-1, 170), the nation's 33rd-best overall prospect and seventh-best receiver.

Smith and Graham are two of six top-100 prospects signed by Ohio State, including Buford, Ga., five-star defensive lineman Eddrick Houston (6-3, 269); Fairburn (Ga.) Langston Hughes four-star quarterback Air Noland (6-2, 195); Springfield, Ohio, five-star cornerback Aaron Scott (6-2, 190); and Cleveland Glenville four-star cornerback Bryce West (5-11, 177).

Ohio State also made a concerted effort to recruit and retain players from the Buckeye State, hauling in eight in-state prospects for the second year in a row. Joining Scott and West in this group of homegrown talent are Lakewood St. Edward four-star offensive linemen Deontae (6-6, 280) and Devontae (6-5, 297) Armstrong, Pickerington North three-star running back Sam Williams-Dixon (5-11, 203), Painesville Riverside four-star defensive lineman Dominic Kirks (6-4, 255), Sunbury Big Walnut four-star linebacker Garrett Stover (6-0, 214) and Cleveland Glenville four-star tight end Damarion Witten (6-4, 215).

While Ohio State secured another considerable haul of top talent, the Buckeyes still fell short of the standard set by the two recruiting juggernauts in the SEC. For the second straight year, the unanimous top two across the four major recruiting services – 247Sports, ESPN, Rivals and On3 – were Alabama and Georgia, with the Bulldogs this time taking the No. 1 spot for the first time since 2020.

Despite falling short of a College Football Playoff bid for the first time since the 2021 season, Georgia still brought in a monster recruiting class that featured five five-stars, 19 four-stars and four three-stars. The Bulldogs earned an average player rating of .9361, which also led the nation.

Headlining Georgia's 28-prospect class is Bradenton (Fla.) IMG Academy five-star cornerback Ellis Robinson IV (6-1, 185), the nation's second-best overall prospect behind Smith and the top-rated corner. He is also the second-highest recruit to sign with the Bulldogs in program history, trailing only former Buckeye quarterback Justin Fields.

Robinson is one of six top-50 recruits for head coach Kirby Smart's program, a list that includes Buford, Ga., five-star safety K.J. Bolden (6-1, 187), a cousin of recently-fired Ohio State safeties coach Perry Eliano, who originally picked Florida State over both the Buckeyes and Bulldogs on Aug. 5 before flipping to Georgia on Dec. 20.

Despite the retirement of longtime head coach Nick Saban on Jan. 10, Alabama held strong at No. 2 behind a loaded class of five five-stars, 17 four-stars and six three-stars. This group was highlighted by Saraland, Ala., five-star wide receiver Ryan Williams (6-1, 165), who recommitted to new head coach Kalen DeBoer's Tide on Jan. 24 after initially decommitting from the program just hours after Saban's retirement.

DeBoer's program is bringing in eight top-100 prospects, a list that includes the previously mentioned Williams as well as Pinson (Ala.) Clay-Chalkville five-star cornerback Jaylen Mbakwe (5-11, 170), the nation's 12th-best prospect and second-best corner.

Oregon followed Ohio State at No. 4 despite signing zero five-stars, the only school to do so out of the top five in our poll. The Ducks' class did have 22 four-stars – the most out of any program in our top 25 – along with five three-stars.

This talented grouping was boosted by the late commitment of Burley, Idaho, four-star wide receiver Gatlin Bair (6-1, 194), who pledged to Oregon just four days before National Signing Day, choosing the Ducks over Michigan. Bair is the school's top-ranked 2024 signee, entering the program as the nation's 43rd-best prospect and 10th-best wide receiver.

Oregon's class also featured a late boost at the expense of the Buckeyes after St. Louis Christian Brothers College four-star wide receiver Jeremiah McClellan (6-0, 190) flipped to the Ducks from Ohio State on Dec. 20. McClellan, the nation's 65th-best prospect and 14th-best wide receiver, originally committed to the Buckeyes on Aug. 13.

Rounding out the top five is Miami (Fla.), which also made a series of late splashes at the expense of the Buckeyes. The Hurricanes flipped two premier prospects from Ohio State in December, first earning a signature from Fort Lauderdale (Fla.) St. Thomas Aquinas four-star running back Jordan Lyle (6-0, 180) on Dec. 18 after he originally committed to the Buckeyes last April, then signing Chicago St. Ignatius five-star defensive lineman Justin Scott (6-4, 310) on Dec. 20, who had pledged to the Buckeyes on July 2.

Scott is the No. 10 overall prospect in the nation and third-best defensive lineman. He is one of three five-star defensive players signed by the Hurricanes, including Miami Central defensive lineman Armondo Blount (6-4, 250) and Chicago Kenwood Academy edge rusher Marquise Lightfoot (6-4, 212).

In total, the top five programs in our consensus poll signed 22 of the top 50 prospects and 39 of the top 100 prospects, both of which were lower than last year's totals. The rest of the top 10 is rounded out by No. 6 Texas, No. 7 LSU, No. 8 Oklahoma, No. 9 Auburn and No. 10 Notre Dame. All except Notre Dame signed at least one five-star prospect for the second year in a row, with Texas hauling in four.

Texas and Oklahoma both landed within the top eight of the poll for the third straight year after hauling in a combined nine top-100 prospects. The Sooners landed the highest-ranked recruit of the rival schools, signing Bradenton (Fla.) IMG Academy five-star defensive lineman David Stone (6-4, 275), the nation's ninth-best prospect. Stone is the only five-star prospect the Sooners signed in this year's class, however, which included 19 four-stars and eight three-stars.

Texas had the better overall class, finishing with a .9237 average player rating after hauling in five top-50 prospects. Three of those five players are in-state talent, a grouping that includes Duncanville five-star linebacker Colin Simmons (6-2, 230), Waco Connally five-star cornerback Kobe Black (6-0, 190) and McKinney five-star safety Xavier Filsaime (6-1, 180).

Perhaps the most significant addition for the Longhorns came out of state, where Steve Sarkisian's team signed Santa Ana (Calif.) Mater Dei five-star offensive tackle Brandon Baker (6-5, 285). Baker picked Texas over Georgia, Nebraska, Ohio State and Oregon, with the Buckeyes appearing to finish second in his recruitment. Baker is one of two out-of-state signees for the Longhorns in the top 50, joining St. Louis University four-star wide receiver Ryan Wingo (6-2, 210), the nation's 39th-best prospect.

The top 10 also included LSU, which

Consensus Poll Fast Facts

- The SEC once again dominated the consensus poll with 11 teams in the top 25, the most out of any conference. Arkansas, Mississippi State and Vanderbilt were the only schools to miss the cut.
- No. 1 Georgia led the way in the poll for the first time since the 2020 season and the third time in seven years. The only other teams who have ranked No. 1 in the consensus poll since 2018 were Alabama (2019, 2021, 2023) and Texas A&M (2022).
- The Big Ten had the second-most teams represented in the poll with five, a one-school increase from last season. Ohio State led the way at No. 3, followed by No. 15 Penn State, No. 16 Michigan, No. 19 Nebraska and No. 23 Wisconsin.
- Michigan's No. 16 ranking was the lowest for a reigning national champion in the last seven seasons. The previous six national champions all finished in the top 10 of the consensus poll, with Clemson coming in at No. 7 in 2018, Alabama at No. 1 in 2019 and 2021, LSU at No. 4 in 2020 and Georgia at No. 3 and No. 2 in 2022 and 2023, respectively.
- The ACC and Big 12 each had three teams in the consensus poll. No. 5 Miami was the ACC's highest-ranked team after signing three five-stars and 11 four-stars, followed by No. 12 Florida State and No. 13 Clemson, while No. 6 Texas and No. 8 Oklahoma spearheaded the Big 12 with Texas Tech trailing at No. 24.
- The Pac-12 had just two teams crack the top 25 in what is likely the conference's last year of existence. No. 4 Oregon had its highest ranking in the last seven seasons after finishing third in the nation, while USC trailed at No. 17. Both the Ducks and Trojans will represent the Big Ten beginning next season.
- Notre Dame was the only non-Power Five team to make the top 25, coming in at No. 10. Despite dropping one spot from last year, the Fighting Irish made the top 10 for the fourth straight year.
- Four newcomers joined this year's poll, including No. 19 Nebraska, No. 21 Missouri, No. 23 Wisconsin, and No. 25 Kentucky. Four teams dropped out of this year's poll after being ranked last season, including Arkansas, Michigan State, TCU and Utah.
- Of the teams that appeared in both this year's and last year's polls, Florida experienced the highest jump, going from No. 21 to No. 12 after reeling in four top-100 prospects and 16 four-stars.
- USC, meanwhile, saw the largest drop, falling from No. 12 to No. 17 after failing to sign a five-star prospect for the first time since the 2020 season.

— Patrick Engels

BSB Consensus Poll

Rk.	Team	Pts.
1.	Georgia (4)	100
2.	Alabama	96
3.	**Ohio State**	**89**
4.	Oregon	87
T5.	Miami (Fla.)	84
T5.	Texas	84
T7.	LSU	72
T7.	Oklahoma	72
9.	Auburn	69
10.	Notre Dame	63
T11.	Florida	55
T11.	Florida State	55
13.	Clemson	54
14.	Tennessee	50
15.	Penn State	45
16.	Michigan	44
17.	USC	33
18.	Texas A&M	28
19.	Nebraska	25
20.	Ole Miss	24
T21.	Missouri	19
T21.	South Carolina	19
23.	Wisconsin	15
24.	Texas Tech	9
25.	Kentucky	6

Teams received points based on their placement in four top-25 polls. Points assigned to teams are inversely proportional to their placement in a poll (25 points for first, 24 for second, etc.) First-place votes are in parentheses. Also receiving votes was North Carolina (3).

signed Lafayette (La.) Acadiana five-star defensive lineman Dominick McKinley (6-6, 280), and a surprise team in Auburn, which surged eight spots to No. 9, the second-highest jump by any team in our poll. Head coach Hugh Freeze's team was aggressive in its recruiting pursuit, gaining a signature from Phenix City (Ala.) Central five-star wide receiver Cam Coleman (6-3, 180) – the No. 3 overall prospect in the class – and flipping Clinton, N.C., four-star edge rusher Amaris Williams (6-2, 257) from Florida.

Coleman and Williams were part of a deep class that signed 14 four-stars, a grouping that included Clanton (Ala.) Chilton County linebacker Demarcus Riddick (6-2. 216), the nation's 63rd-best prospect and seventh-best linebacker.

The SEC was well-represented in the middle part of the poll, occupying four of the 10 spots from Nos. 11-20. This includes No. 11 Florida, No. 14 Tennessee, No. 18 Texas A&M and No. 20 Ole Miss, while No. 12 Florida State, No. 13 Clemson, No. 15 Penn State, No. 16 Michigan, No. 17 USC and No. 19 Nebraska rounded out the other spots.

Florida and Tennessee both brought in strong classes, with the two rival programs adding a combined four five-stars and four top-100 players. The Gators signed the highest-ranked recruit out of the two schools in Willis, Texas, five-star quarterback D.J. Lagway (6-2, 225), the nation's seventh-best prospect and second-best signal caller. Lagway is one of two top-20 additions for Florida, as it also signed Daytona Beach (Fla.) Mainland five-star defensive lineman LJ McCray (6-5. 279), the No. 20 overall prospect in the class.

The Volunteers and head coach Josh Heupel brought in two five-star prospects in Lilburn (Ga.) Parkview wide receiver Mike Matthews (6-1, 180) and Birmingham (Ala.) Vestavia Hills defensive end Jordan Ross (6-5, 233) along with 11 four-stars.

Florida State had one of the largest surges in the consensus poll, jumping nine spots from No. 21 to No. 12. The Seminoles did not sign a five-star but still held a deep class with deep Southern roots, with 13 of its 16 four-star prospects hailing from either Florida or Georgia. The Seminoles' class was headlined by a quartet of top-100 players, including Venice, Fla., four-star cornerback Charles Lester III (6-1, 171) and Savannah (Ga.) Benedictine Military School four-star quarterback Luke Kromenhoek, the fifth-ranked signal caller in the class.

Clemson rose to No. 13 in this year's rankings behind a class of two five-star recruits and 11 four-star prospects, highlighted by Jefferson, Ga., five-star linebacker Sammy Brown (6-2, 230), a former target of the Buckeyes.

The middle portion of the rankings also included several Big Ten teams, but for a more in-depth breakdown of Ohio State's recruiting competition in the conference, visit pages 24-26 for a full accounting of the Big Ten's recruiting efforts.

USC also had significant change, as it fell five spots from No. 12 to No. 17 in this year's poll. The Trojans also failed to bring in a five-star prospect this year and signed just two players within the top 100, those two being Atlanta Booker T. Washington four-star edge rusher Kameryn Fountain (6-6, 241) and Los Angeles Sierra Canyon four-star wide receiver Xavier Jordan (6-1, 165), the nation's 66th- and 83rd-best prospects, respectively.

Head coach Lincoln Riley's program was also victimized by a number of decommitments throughout this year's recruiting cycle, with seven prospects signing with other schools after originally pledging to the Trojans. Five of those players were four-stars, including top-100 prospect and Gardena (Calif.) Junipero Serra four-star cornerback Dakoda Fields (6-2, 185), who decommitted on Aug. 7 and signed with Oregon in December.

Texas A&M landed at No. 18 behind a class that features one five-star signee in Timpson, Texas, cornerback Terry Hussey (5-11, 180) and 15 additional four-star recruits. It was followed closely in the poll by a fellow conference mate in Ole Miss at No. 20, as the Rebels built upon their 11-win season with a strong recruiting class of 11 four-stars and 10 three-stars, which allowed them to return to the poll following a one-year hiatus.

Ole Miss' top five prospects are all in-state, a group that includes Lake Cormorant four-star defensive lineman Kamarion Franklin (6-5, 265) – the lone top-100 player in the Rebels' class – Houston four-star interior offensive lineman William Echoles (6-2, 312) and Goodman Holmes Community College four-star wide receiver Deion Smith (6-4, 190), the top-rated JUCO player in the class.

The Cornhuskers, No. 21 Missouri, No. 23 Wisconsin and No. 24 Kentucky were all newcomers in this year's poll. Missouri – which was left out of our consensus poll in each of the last six seasons – continued to build upon its 11-win 2023 campaign with a strong recruiting class that finished with a .8935 average playing rating.

The Tigers signed a single five-star in Summit (Mo.) North edge rusher Williams Nwaneri (6-7, 260), the nation's eighth-best prospect and top-ranked player at his position. Nwaneri is also Missouri's second-highest recruit in program history behind Green-Beckham. The Tigers' recruiting success did not end with Nwaneri, as head coach Eliah Drinkwitz and his program secured another top-100 prospect in Pine Bluff, Ark., four-star wide receiver Courtney Crutchfield (6-0, 179). Crutchfield is one of seven four-stars signed by Missouri.

No. 24 Texas Tech and the Wildcats, the final teams in the poll, combined to secure one five-star prospect – that being Temple (Texas) Lake Belton wide receiver Micah Hudson (6-0, 190), who signed with Texas Tech – and 12 four-star prospects.

The 25 teams in our consensus poll combined to sign 96 of the top 100 prospects of the class, with Arkansas, Colorado and Minnesota as the only programs outside of the top 25 to sign a top-100 recruit. Colorado, as it did last season, made its presence felt in the 2024 recruiting cycle despite not receiving a single top-25 vote in the consensus poll. Second-year head coach Deion Sanders signed just seven freshmen to his 2024 class after an eventual 4-8 campaign in 2023, but he still managed to bring in elite talent, adding two top-100 players to the program.

Colorado swooped in with the college football powerhouses and signed Bradenton (Fla.) IMG Academy five-star interior offensive lineman Jordan Seaton (6-5, 287) on Dec. 22, who stuck with Sanders and the Buffaloes despite late reports of a potential flip to Maryland.

North Carolina received three votes for our consensus poll but found itself on the outside looking in at our top 25. The Tar Heels, who were the only program outside of the poll to receive a vote, failed to sign a top-100 prospect but added a talented crop of six four-stars and 21 three-stars, headlined by Charlotte (N.C.) Providence Day School four-star wide receiver Jordan Shipp (6-1, 190) and Fuquay Varina, N.C., four-star safety Malcolm Ziglar (6-3, 195).

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OSU Looking For More After Hot Start In 2025

By BRADEN MOLES
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Editor

Ohio State signed 20 members of the program's 2024 recruiting class on Dec. 20 and added a signature from Painesville (Ohio) Riverside four-star defensive lineman Dominic Kirks (6-4, 255) on Feb. 7, completing the 21-man class.

With 2024 in the books, the focus for Ohio State now shifts to 2025, where the Buckeyes are already off to a solid start on the recruiting trail. Ohio State has eight pledges who have catapulted the Buckeyes to fourth in the 247Sports composite rankings, trailing only No. 3 Clemson, No. 2 LSU and No. 1 Notre Dame with over 10 months until signing day.

On the offensive side, the Buckeyes have verbal pledges from Bellefontaine, Ohio, four-star quarterback Tavien St. Clair (6-4, 210) – the No. 56 overall prospect and fourth-ranked quarterback in the class – along with Toledo Whitmer four-star offensive tackle Carter Lowe (6-5, 290) and Cocoa, Fla., three-star wide receiver Jayvan Boggs (6-0, 188).

But in a shift from past recruiting cycles, the strength of Ohio State's class is being built on defense. The Buckeyes already hold commitments from two five-star cornerbacks, including Houston North Shore's Devin Sanchez (6-2, 170) and Birmingham (Ala.) Parker's Na'eem Offord (6-1, 185), and have an additional pledge from Baltimore St. Frances Academy's cornerback Blake Woodby (5-11, 175), a four-star prospect in his own right. Sanchez and Offord, in addition to being the No. 1 and 2 cornerbacks in the class, respectively, are both top-10 overall recruits.

In addition to a commitment from Akron Hoban three-star linebacker Eli Lee (6-3, 215), Ohio State also received a verbal pledge from Philadelphia Imhotep Institute four-star defensive end Zahir Mathis (6-6, 225), the No. 40 overall prospect and fifth-ranked edge rusher in his class.

All told, it's an impressive start for Ohio State, but the Buckeyes are nowhere near done in what should be a large class. Here's a look at some top-150 prospects of note whom Ohio State is expected to be involved with throughout this cycle. All ratings come from the 247Sports composite rankings, and prospects are listed alphabetically.

Class Of 2025 National Prospects

Ten of the top players OSU is pursuing in the 2025 class from around the nation, as rated in the 247Sports composite rankings.

Overall Rk.	Player	Pos.	Ht.	Wt.	Stars	High School	Top Colleges
2.	David Sanders Jr.	OT	6-6	270	*****	Charlotte (N.C.) Providence Day School	ALA, CLE, UGA, OSU
12.	Jaime Ffrench	WR	6-1	185	*****	Jacksonville (Fla.) Mandarin	ALA, UGA, MIA, OSU
21.	Dorian Brew	CB	6-2	185	*****	Conroe, Texas	UM, OSU
25.	Faheem Delane	SAF	6-3	195	*****	Olney (Md.) Good Counsel	ALA, LSU, OSU, VT
27.	Nasir Wyatt	DE	6-3	210	****	Santa Ana (Calif.) Mater Dei	UGA, UM, OSU, TENN
28.	Micah DeBose	OT	6-5	315	****	Mobile (Ala.) Vigor	ALA, AUB, LSU, OSU
45.	Jordon Davison	RB	5-11	203	****	Santa Ana (Calif.) Mater Dei	OSU, TX, TAM
70.	Tarvos Alford	LB	6-2	210	****	Vero Beach, Fla.	FLA, MIA, OSU
73.	London Merritt	DE	6-3	235	****	Atlanta Woodward Academy	ALA, OSU, USC
107.	Nate Roberts	TE	6-4	235	****	Washington, Okla.	OSU, OKLA, ORE

Tarvos Alford, LB
Vero Beach, Fla.

With Lee already in the fold, Ohio State will be looking to add at least one more linebacker in 2025, and Alford (6-2, 210) fits the bill as a potential addition for the Buckeyes.

Alford – no relation to running backs coach Tony Alford – is the No. 70 overall prospect and 10th-ranked linebacker in the class. He has visited Ohio State twice over the last year and is planning a return visit in the spring, while Ohio State's coaches – including head coach Ryan Day and graduate assistant James Laurinaitis – visited Alford in January.

In his junior season, Alford finished with 114 tackles (12 for loss), four sacks, an interception and six pass breakups, and he is projected as a Will linebacker at the next level. He is also a multisport athlete, running track at Vero Beach.

The Buckeyes will find out where they stand with Alford on March 30, when he plans to announce between his top six schools of Florida, Florida State, Miami (Fla.), Ohio State, Tennessee and UCF, though the Buckeyes are viewed as the favorite.

Dorian Brew, CB
Conroe, Texas

Ohio State already has what will be the best group of corners in 2025 with Offord, Sanchez and Woodby, but it will continue to pursue Brew (6-2, 185) as the cherry on top.

Brew is the No. 21 overall prospect and fourth-ranked cornerback in the class – potentially giving Ohio State three of the top four corners in 2025, should Brew join Offord and Sanchez – and is viewed as a heavy favorite to land with the Buckeyes, though he did indefinitely postpone his commitment initially set for Jan. 24. Once he does set a commitment date, he will decide between Ohio State in addition to Michigan, Oregon, Penn State and Texas.

Throughout his recruitment by the Buckeyes, Brew has built a strong relationship with the coaching staff and specifically cornerbacks coach Tim Walton.

"He's hard on the technique," Brew said after camping at Ohio State 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."

In addition to being from Ohio, Brew has an additional connection to Ohio State in that his mom, Donica Merriman, is a former track and field athlete with the Buckeyes and is in the Ohio State Athletics Hall of Fame. He moved to Texas before his junior season but has still made several visits to Columbus in the past six months.

Jordon Davison, RB
Santa Ana (Calif.) Mater Dei

Ohio State's big board at running back is fairly open with over a dozen offers given out to tailbacks in 2025 – including two in Ohio, but more on them later – but for an out-of-state running back, Davison (5-11, 203) is at the top of the list for the Buckeyes.

Davison is the No. 45 overall prospect and second-ranked running back in the class. He was offered by Ohio State all the way back in April 2022, utilizing the past couple of years to develop a strong relationship with Tony Alford.

"I want a coach that can push me and that will push me to be the greatest I can be," Davison said after camping at Ohio State last summer.

Davison does not have a commitment date in mind and has a visit planned to Ohio State this spring. He rushed for 662 yards and 10 touchdowns on 101 carries last year while splitting time with two seniors, so a feature role should be available for his senior season.

Micah DeBose, OT
Mobile (Ala.) Vigor

Offensive tackle will always be at a premium on the recruiting trail, and few come in higher regard in 2025 than DeBose (6-5, 315).

A former Georgia pledge who left the Bulldogs' class in December, DeBose is the No. 28 overall prospect and fifth-ranked offensive tackle in the class. He was offered by the Buckeyes last July and returned to campus in November, and he has long felt a connection to Ohio State given that he was born in Cleveland before moving to Alabama.

"He is a big-bodied offensive lineman with left tackle experience who could potentially play outside or on the interior at the high-major level," wrote 247Sports recruiting analyst Gabe Brooks. "He plays with adequate bend but sometimes stands up and gets out over his feet when engaged, which compromises body control and leverage. He flashes some jarring punch power and drive-blocking conviction that will finish targets to the ground. His size and functional strength often overwhelm high school opponents."

DeBose intends to take official visits in the spring – with Alabama, Auburn, LSU, Ohio State and USC among the potential trips – before making a decision. With Lowe already in the fold, Ohio State would have the makings of an impressive pair at offensive tackle.

Faheem Delane, SAF
Olney (Md.) Good Counsel

Ohio State already has an impressive collection of talent at cornerback and is looking to extend that good fortune throughout the secondary with a safety such as Delane (6-3, 195).

He is the No. 25 overall prospect and top-ranked safety in the class. He is also considering Oregon, but the Buckeyes have emerged as a leader, evidenced by a crystal ball prediction by 247Sports recruiting analyst Steve Wiltfong for Delane to land at Ohio State.

Delane was offered by Ohio State in May 2022, before his sophomore season in which he had 41 tackles. During his junior season, he helped lead Good Counsel to a conference championship, finishing with 69 tackles and 18 pass breakups.

"An aggressive back-seven defender that can cover the pass, defend the run, and get home on the blitz," wrote 247Sports recruiting analyst Andrew Ivins. "He is quick to trigger and tends to play with tons of confidence. He has been utilized primarily as a box safety and a slot corner at the prep level and found plenty of success in both roles. He is physical more times than not and is always looking to deliver a blow."

Five-star safeties – especially one who is out of state for the Buckeyes – are traditionally tough for Ohio State to land, so it would represent a significant win on the recruiting trail early in the career of safeties coach Matt Guerrieri, who appears to be building strong bonds in the 2025 class and beyond.

Jaime Ffrench, WR
Jacksonville (Fla.) Mandarin

Even after signing two five-star wide receivers in 2024, receivers coach Brian Hartline is showing no signs of slowing down, continuing to put a strong push on Ffrench (6-1, 185). The former Alabama pledge is the No. 12 overall prospect and third-ranked wide receiver in the class.

Ohio State is one of two schools – along with Florida State – expected to receive an official visit from Ffrench this spring, with Miami (Fla.) and Michigan also in the mix. Ffrench had originally committed to the Crimson Tide in July but backed off his pledge in January following head coach Nick Saban's retirement.

Through his first three seasons of high school football, Ffrench has 114 receptions for 2,034 yards and 21 touchdowns, including his most recent junior season in which he had 62 catches for 1,247 yards and 14 scores. Ffrench is also active in the seven-on-seven scene with South Florida Express – whose alumni include Buckeyes Jeremiah Smith and Carnell Tate, among others – and is often seen wearing Ohio State apparel.

London Merritt, DE
Atlanta Woodward Academy

Merritt (6-3, 235) landing at Ohio State appears to be a matter of when, not if, as the

Buckeyes are in a solid position to land the four-star defensive end.

He is the No. 73 overall prospect and ninth-ranked edge rusher in the class, with Alabama, Auburn, Clemson, Miami (Fla.), Michigan, Notre Dame and USC among other programs in pursuit. But giving the Buckeyes an advantage is Merritt's relationship with defensive line coach Larry Johnson, who has prioritized Merritt for this class.

"I really built a good relationship with him the first time I visited," Merritt said last summer. "It was a great time. We sat down and went over my film. He did things that no other coaches have done at colleges, so it really stood out to me."

Merritt finished with 31 tackles, five sacks and an interception last season, building on his sophomore season in which he had 33 tackles (15 for loss) with nine sacks.

Nate Roberts, TE
Washington, Okla.

Ohio State is looking to take two tight ends for the second cycle in a row, and at the top of the list is Roberts (6-4, 235). He is the No. 107 overall prospect and fourth-ranked tight end in his class, and he was originally committed to Notre Dame before backing off his pledge in August.

Roberts has narrowed his list of scholarship offers down to Michigan, Ohio State, Oklahoma, Oregon and Penn State, and he is expected to commit sometime before his senior season. He was offered by the Buckeyes in June and has continued to build a relationship with tight ends coach Keenan Bailey.

"Coach Bailey is doing a great job," Roberts told 247Sports. "Ever since he offered me, he's shown that he has the personality of a coach I want to play for. He's all over me. We've built a great relationship through the process."

Roberts operates both in-line and out wide for Washington, and he hauled in 33 receptions for 705 yards and 11 touchdowns during his sophomore season.

David Sanders Jr., OT
Charlotte (N.C.) Providence Day

Sanders (6-6, 270) probably has the lowest likelihood on this list of ending up at Ohio State, but given the Buckeyes' struggles in the trenches on the recruiting trail over the last couple of years, it would be prudent for them to pursue the top-ranked tackle in the class.

Beyond earning his status as the top offensive tackle in the class, he is also the second overall player in 2025, trailing only Belleville, Mich., five-star quarterback Bryce Underwood (6-4, 205), who is committed to LSU. He is understandably being pursued by several top-level programs, including Alabama, Clemson, Georgia and Tennessee in addition to the Buckeyes.

He visited for Ohio State's spring game last year, and the coaches returned the favor by visiting Sanders in January. It's a long way to go until Sanders signs on the dotted line, but Ohio State is doing all the right things so far as his recruitment takes off.

Nasir Wyatt, DE
Santa Ana (Calif.) Mater Dei

Wyatt (6-3, 215) is one of the premier edge rushers in 2025, checking in as the No. 27 overall prospect and second-ranked defensive end in the class. Wyatt's recruitment has been a slow burn, initially releasing a top eight that included Alabama, Michigan, Notre Dame, Ohio State, Oregon, Tennessee, Texas and USC, but he has since opened his recruitment back up following staffing changes at Alabama, Michigan and USC.

It opens up an opportunity for Ohio State, which is hoping to get Wyatt on campus this spring. He is coming off a monster junior season in which he collected 41 tackles (21 for loss) with 14 sacks, seven pass breakups and three forced fumbles.

"Wyatt is one of the elite pass rushers not just locally but nationally as well," wrote 247Sports recruiting analyst Greg Biggins. "He plays violently and is one of the more aggressive players you'll see at the high school level. He relies on a lightning-quick first step, an ability to bend and dip around the edge and can really close on the ball. His motor is always going and he plays with a maniacal effort to him."

Depending on the recruiting service, Wyatt is listed as either a defensive end or a linebacker. He is being recruited by Laurinaitis, which would indicate Ohio State is looking to put him at linebacker considering his smaller frame, though he could ultimately make the transition to defensive end at the college level if he can put on some weight.

Good Year For Talent In Ohio

Ohio State's recruiting efforts will always have a significant focus on its home turf, and there's good reason to focus on the Buckeye State for this cycle, as a talented group of Ohioans will soon be joining top-level programs.

Ohio is host to four top-100 prospects, according to the 247Sports composite rankings, along with nine total top-200 prospects and 13 four-star prospects. The numbers are similar to 2024, which featured five top-100 players, eight top-200 prospects and 19 four-star recruits, both up from a down cycle in 2023 with just two top-100 recruits and three top-200 players.

The Buckeyes already hold pledges from Lee, Lowe and St. Clair, and in total they have offered nine of the top 15 prospects in Ohio. Just three top-15 prospects from Ohio – Cleveland St. Ignatius three-star athlete Cody Haddad (6-1, 175), Cincinnati Mt. Healthy four-star athlete Jaimier Scott (6-1, 177) and Cincinnati Withrow four-star wide receiver Quintin Simmons Jr. (6-0, 175) – have committed to other schools, with Haddad and Scott pledging to Wisconsin and Simmons off to Kentucky, though Ohio State had offered only Haddad.

Here is a look at some of the top uncommitted prospects from Ohio in 2025.

Class Of 2025 In-State Prospects

The top 10 players in the state of Ohio for the 2025 class, as rated in the 247Sports composite rankings.

Overall Rk.	Player	Pos.	Ht.	Wt.	Stars	High School	Top Colleges
36.	Trey McNutt	DB	6-0	180	****	Cleveland Shaker Heights	UM, OSU, TENN
56.	Tavien St. Clair	QB	6-4	210	****	Bellefontaine	Committed to Ohio State
79.	Carter Lowe	OT	6-5	290	****	Toledo Whitmer	Committed to Ohio State
97.	Dawayne Galloway	CB	6-1	175	****	Columbus Marion-Franklin	UK, PUR, CUSE
101.	Bo Jackson	RB	6-1	190	****	Cleveland Villa Angela-St. Joseph	UK, OSU, TENN
140.	Justin Hill	DE	6-3	220	****	Cincinnati Winton Woods	UK, OSU, ORE
167.	Marquise Davis	RB	6-0	190	****	Cleveland Heights	UM, OSU, TENN, USC
183.	Luka Gilbert	TE	6-7	233	****	West Chester Lakota West	UK, MIA, OSU
199.	Ryan Montgomery	QB	6-3	215	****	Findlay	AUB, FLA, UGA, MSU
245.	Quintin Simmons Jr.	WR	6-0	175	****	Cincinnati Withrow	Committed to Kentucky

Marquise Davis, RB
Cleveland Heights

Ohio State has worked hard to develop a relationship with Davis (6-0, 190), especially after missing out on a key in-state running back in 2024 with Jordan Marshall out of Cincinnati Moeller, and has made Davis a priority in 2025.

Davis is not as highly rated as other tailbacks being pursued by the Buckeyes. He is the No. 167 overall prospect and No. 13 running back in the class, but he is receiving interest from schools such as Michigan, Penn State, Tennessee and USC. Ohio State has remained consistent in contacting him, however, including several visits to Davis in January from Alford.

Davis, who was offered by Ohio State last January, rushed for 2,087 yards and 32 touchdowns last season. He has visited Columbus several times over the past year and plans a return visit in the spring, and he plans to take his official visits before deciding on a school.

Justin Hill, DE
Cincinnati Winton Woods

If Ohio State is looking for a high-level edge rusher in 2025, it won't have to go far with Hill (6-3, 220) just down the road in Cincinnati.

Like Wyatt, Hill could conceivably line up at linebacker or defensive end – or maybe even the "Jack," if it makes a return to defensive coordinator Jim Knowles' system – depending on where his frame ends up. He has taken several visits to Ohio State over the last year, including most recently on Jan. 20, and is also receiving interest from Kentucky and Oregon.

He is the No. 140 overall prospect and No. 13 defensive end in the class, and pairing Hill with the likes of Mathis and Merritt could be an impressive haul for Johnson.

Bo Jackson, RB
Cleveland Villa Angela-St. Joseph

Much of what was said about Davis applies to Jackson (6-1, 190), and if Ohio State is looking to pair an in-state running back with Davison, it could be a matter of who jumps into the class first between Davis or Jackson.

Jackson is the higher-rated between himself and Davis, checking in as the No. 101 overall prospect and eighth-ranked running back in the class. Georgia, Kentucky and Tennessee are the other programs that have invested the most resources into Jackson.

He has made several visits to Ohio State since being offered in June 2022 – just his second Division I offer at the time, along with Kentucky – and the Buckeyes appear in prime position to pick up Jackson depending on how the numbers and timing work out.

Trey McNutt, DB
Cleveland Shaker Heights

Last but not least is McNutt (6-0, 180), who could be considered a luxury with Offord, Sanchez and Woodby already in the class but is still among the key targets for Ohio State.

McNutt – considered a general defensive back by some, meaning he could also play at safety if he were to play at Ohio State – is the No. 36 overall prospect and is considered by 247Sports as the second-ranked safety in the class, as well as the top-ranked prospect in Ohio. But plenty of other schools are reaching into the Buckeye State to try to secure McNutt, including Michigan, Oregon and Tennessee.

Like Brew, McNutt is an in-state defensive back who grew up rooting for Ohio State and has a connection with the Buckeyes. His father, Richard, played defensive back for Ohio State from 1999-02 and later got into coaching, and he is currently the defensive backs coach at Tennessee State under head coach Eddie George.

Should McNutt decide to play at safety, the decision seems easy for both him and Ohio State. But if he hopes to play at cornerback, the numbers may be tighter, and he could look at other schools outside of his home state.

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Top-Heavy Big Ten Carried By OSU, U-M, PSU

By GREG WILSON
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

For the fifth straight year, Ohio State finished at the top of the Big Ten with the 2024 recruiting class ranked as the fifth-best in the country with 289.13 points, according to the 247Sports team composite rankings. That included a .9280 average player rating, which was third in the nation and far ahead of any other team in the conference.

Despite the Buckeyes leading the Big Ten again, there were still solid classes around the conference. No. 15 Penn State, No. 16 Michigan, No. 18 Nebraska and No. 23 Wisconsin were each in the top 25 recruiting classes for the 2024 cycle, and all but three schools – No. 51 Illinois, No. 59 Indiana and No. 77 Northwestern – finished inside the top 50.

Buckeye Sports Bulletin took a look at the recruiting class of each Big Ten school outside of Ohio State, and a more in-depth breakdown of Michigan's class is featured on page 26. The teams are ordered by the final composite rankings, with the number of signees in parentheses. Player and team rankings are as of Feb. 8.

Big Ten Team Rankings

Overall Rk.	Team	Signees	Avg. Player Rating
5	**Ohio State**	**21**	**0.9280 (1)**
15	Penn State	25	0.9059 (2)
16	Michigan	27	0.9029 (3)
18	Nebraska	31	0.8824 (5)
23	Wisconsin	22	0.8933 (4)
29	Purdue	26	0.8707 (8)
32	Iowa	21	0.8764 (7)
36	Minnesota	20	0.8771 (6)
37	Rutgers	24	0.8689 (9)
39	Maryland	24	0.8681 (10)
43	Michigan State	21	0.8653 (12)
51	Illinois	19	0.8675 (11)
59	Indiana	17	0.8598 (13)
77	Northwestern	17	0.8480 (14)

**247Sports composite rankings*

15. Penn State (25)

The Nittany Lions were second in the conference when it came to their team score of 265.61 and their average player rating at .9059.

The class was led by Erie (Pa.) McDowell four-star interior offensive lineman Cooper Cousins (6-6, 323), the No. 57 player in the class and first at both his position and in Pennsylvania.

Cousins was one of eight players in the Lions' class who is homegrown in Pennsylvania. The Lions were able to sign four of the top 10 players from the state and three of the top four. That group also included Belle Vernon, Pa., four-star running back Quinton Martin (6-2, 200) and Drexel Hill (Pa.) Monsignor Bonner four-star defensive end Mylachi Williams (6-3, 215).

For the second straight year, Penn State brought in a solid offensive line with four four-star recruits. The three joining Cousins are Brookline (Mass.) Dexter School offensive tackle Liam Andrews (6-5, 260), Hartland (Wis.) Arrowhead offensive tackle Garrett Sexton (6-7, 265) and Waukesha (Wis.) Catholic Memorial interior offensive lineman Donovan Harbour (6-3, 320). Also on the offensive end, one of the biggest signings came out of Columbus, with Lewis Center (Ohio) Olentangy four-star quarterback Ethan Grunkemeyer (6-2, 190) signing with the Nittany Lions.

On the defensive side of the ball, Penn State's class is led by Jacksonville (Fla.) Mandarin four-star cornerback Jon Mitchell (6-0, 177), who is No. 15 at his position and No. 127 overall. Irvington, N.J., four-star safety Vaboue Toure (6-0, 195) adds to a good class of defensive backs as well. Williams and Gaithersburg (Md.) Quince Orchard four-star defensive end Jaylen Harvey (6-2, 250) add to what is a good class in the trenches for the Lions.

Overall, Penn State finished with 15 four-star recruits compared to 14 for Ohio State, though the Buckeyes landed four five-star recruits while the Lions didn't have any.

18. Nebraska (31)

When head coach Matt Rhule took over last offseason, the Cornhuskers went for quantity over quality with their recruits, signing the nation's 25th-ranked class with 28 signees. Nebraska went for quantity as well in this cycle with 31 players but upped the quality, finishing with the fourth-best class in the Big Ten, a team score of 247.50 and an average player rating of .8824.

They were able to take the spot largely because of Buford, Ga., five-star quarterback Dylan Raiola (6-3, 230), who finished as the No. 21 overall player in the country, the No. 3 quarterback and the third-ranked player in Georgia. Raiola had been committed to both Ohio State and Georgia during the recruiting process before ending up at Nebraska where his uncle, Donovan Raiola, coaches the offensive line.

Two of the seven four-star players the Cornhuskers signed are offensive linemen, with Logan (Iowa) Magnolia four-star offensive tackle Grant Brix (6-5, 278) and Waipahu, Hawaii, four-star interior offensive lineman Preston Taumua (6-4, 315) ready to shore up the trenches.

Raiola, Brix and Ainsworth, Neb., four-star tight end Carter Nelson (6-4, 216) each are ranked in the top 100, but it is a top-heavy class for the Cornhuskers since the next best prospect is Taumua, who is ranked No. 272 in the country.

The Huskers' class was also heavy in the secondary. They signed four cornerbacks and two safeties in addition to DeSoto, Texas, four-star athlete Mario Buford (5-11, 165) and Garwood (Texas) Rice Con-

SONNY BROCKWAY

BADGERING THE TRAIL — Wisconsin head coach Luke Fickell (pictured) signed the No. 23 class in the country, including a top-100 prospect in Royersford (Pa.) Pope John Paul II four-star offensive tackle Kevin Heywood (6-7, 299).

solidated four-star athlete Roger Gradney (6-1,190), both of whom lined up in the secondary in high school and could do so at Nebraska.

23. Wisconsin (22)

Head coach Luke Fickell has had a full year now to recruit, and he was able to bring in a solid 2024 class, improving from the No. 58 class last year to No. 23 this time around, checking in as the fifth-best class in the Big Ten. The Badgers have a team score of 239.10 and an average player rating of .8933, which is fourth best in the conference.

Leading the way in their class was Royersford (Pa.) Pope John Paul II four-star offensive tackle Kevin Heywood (6-7, 299), the No. 85 overall recruit and sixth-ranked tackle in the class.

Three more players were inside the top 200 for Wisconsin, including Olney (Md.) Good Counsel four-star running back Dilin Jones (5-11,180), Towson (Md.) Concordia Prep four-star defensive lineman Ernest Willor Jr. (6-3, 255) – who had an offer from Ohio State – and Saint Paul (Minn.) Irondale four-star offensive tackle Emerson Mandell (6-5, 300).

Heywood, Jones, Willor and Mandell are four of 11 four-star recruits in the class that boasts a strong group in the trenches, where nine of the 22 recruits the Badgers landed will play. That includes Joliet (Ill.) Catholic Academy four-star defensive lineman Dillan Johnson (6-2, 287) in addition to Willor and the previously mentioned tackles.

Wisconsin also signed a new signal-caller in Woodlands, Texas, four-star quarterback Mabrey Mettauer (6-5, 215) but was light at wide receiver, landing only Bolingbrook, Ill., three-star receiver Kyan Berry-Johnson (5-10, 162), as well as two tight ends.

29. Purdue (26)

Purdue struggled to hold on to recruits last cycle because of an unexpected coaching change, but it was able to finish the 2024 cycle with the sixth-best overall team score out of the 14 Big Ten teams with 217.17 points and an average player rating of .8707, which was eighth in the conference.

Head coach Ryan Walters, in his first full season as head coach, landed Cincinnati LaSalle four-star safety Koy Beasley (5-10, 170), the No. 126 overall recruit and ninth-ranked safety in the class as well as the top recruit for the Boilermakers, though he was the only signee for Purdue inside the top 300.

Beasley was one of four defensive backs in the top six recruits in Purdue's class along with Naperville (Ill.) North four-star safety Luke Williams (6-1, 174), Fort Lauderdale (Fla.) St. Thomas Aquinas three-star cornerback Earl Kulp (6-0, 175) and Clinton, Tenn., three-star safety D'Mon Marable (6-2, 190). The Boilers also landed the No. 27 quarterback in the class in Midland (Texas) Legacy four-star Marcos Davila (6-2, 239), who also had offers from many other Power Five programs around the country.

While it wasn't one of the top classes in the Big Ten, it was a significant improvement from last year's class that finished 70th in the nation and dead last in the conference.

32. Iowa (21)

The Hawkeyes were focused a little more on quality than quantity, and it worked out to an extent, coming in at the seventh-best team score in the conference with 215.41 points while the average player rating was seventh in the Big Ten at .8764.

They weren't able to land a player inside the top 200, but 17 of the 21 players who signed their letter of intent were in the top 1,000, making it a solid haul for head coach Kirk Ferentz.

The future of the offensive line looks solid for Iowa with Arlington Heights (Ill.) John Hersey four-star offensive tackle Will Nolan (6-6, 275) coming in as the top-rated recruit in the bunch at No. 247 nationally and the 20th-best at his position and Winthrop (Iowa) East Buchanan four-star interior offensive lineman Cody Fox (6-4, 275) also checking in as a top-500 prospect.

One position where the Hawkeyes did well was at linebacker, where they landed Winfield (Iowa) Mount Union four-star Cam Buffington (6-3, 200), who is the No. 33 linebacker in the class, and Williamsburg, Iowa, four-star Derek Weisskopf (6-3, 202), who is one spot behind Buffington in the rankings. They were the No. 2 and No. 3 players in Iowa, respectively.

The Hawkeyes did very well in-state, landing Buffington, Fox and Weisskopf along with four more players in the top 10 of the state, including Cedar Falls three-star edge rusher Drew Campbell (6-4, 225), Adel ADM three-star running back Brevin Doll (6-1, 190), Monticello three-star athlete Preston Ries (6-2, 205) and Rock Rapids Central Lyon three-star wide receiver Reece Vander Zee (6-5, 190).

In terms of the skill positions on offense, Iowa signed Jacksonville (Fla.) Bishop Kenny three-star quarterback James Resar (6-4, 199) – the No. 709 overall recruit and No. 52 signal caller – Saint John (Ind.) Lake Central three-star running back Xavier Williams (6-0, 220), Elmhurst (Ill.) Immaculate Conception three-star wide receiver KJ Parker (5-11, 165) and Vander Zee, the latter three barely cracking the top 1,000.

36. Minnesota (20)

Coming in at eighth in the Big Ten were the Golden Gophers, with an overall team score of 211.38, but they were able to make the top 50 in the nation because of the average player rating, .8771 ahead of both Iowa and Purdue for sixth in the conference.

Their top recruit is one whom Ohio State tried hard to flip before the early signing period but to no avail, as Esko (Minn.) Lincoln four-star safety Koi Perich (6-1, 199) decided to stay in his home state where he was the top prospect. He was the biggest reason Minnesota's average player rating was so high. He was the No. 70 overall prospect and fifth best at his position.

He was one of just two recruits in the top 400 for Minnesota along with Mukwonago, Wis., four-star offensive tackle Nathan Roy (6-5, 275), who was the top recruit in Wisconsin and No. 181 overall. The only other four-star player was Kindred, N.D., four-star defensive lineman Riley Sunram (6-4, 275), the top prospect out of North Dakota.

Perich staying in his home state was part of a trend for Minnesota, which landed six of the top 10 players in the state, with four of them inside the top 1,000.

37. Rutgers (24)

The Scarlet Knights were able to bring in four four-star recruits to earn an overall team score of 210.48 while the average rating is .8689, both ninth in the Big Ten.

Leading that group of players is the No. 296 recruit in the country, Melville (N.Y.) St. Anthony's four-star tight end Korey Duff Jr. (6-5, 207). Lilburn (Ga.) Parkview four-star wide receiver Antonio White (6-3, 170), Lawrenceville (N.J.) Notre Dame four-star quarterback AJ Surace (6-2, 210) and Oradell (N.J.) Bergen Catholic four-star athlete Kaj Sanders (6-1, 185) are the only other players to make the top 500 for Rutgers.

On the defensive side of the ball, Rut-

Continued On Page 26

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New MSU Coach Nabs Late Commitments

Continued From Page 25

gers landed five linemen, but only two of them cracked the top 1,000. Brooklyn (N.Y.) Erasmus Hall three-star Aaris Bethea (6-2, 250) was at the top of that group at No. 935 nationally, along with Miami Norland three-star Tycoolhill Luman (6-3, 239). Head coach Greg Schiano also signed Luman's brother, three-star edge rusher Tyclean Luman (6-3, 250).

The Knights landed just one running back in Port Charlotte, Fla., three-star Edd Guerrier, who is the No. 96 recruit at the position and No. 1,359 overall. It's a stronger class than last year's was for Rutgers that checked in at No. 57 in the country, though just 11 of the 24 players it brought in were ranked inside the top 1,000 in the country.

39. Maryland (24)

Maryland finished with an overall team score of 209.92, which was 10th in the conference, while the average player rating was .8661, also 10th in the Big Ten.

The Terrapins landed just three four-star prospects, with none cracking the top 300. Maryland's top recruit was Orlando (Fla.) Evans four-star safety Brandon Jacob (6-2, 170), the No. 320 overall prospect in the class, to top a solid class of defensive backs.

Along with Jacob, the Terrapins' other two four-star prospects were both cornerbacks, including Upper Marlboro (Md.) Charles Herbert Flowers four-star Braydon Lee (6-0, 163) and Baltimore St. Frances Academy four-star cornerback Kevyn Humes (5-11, 185), part of a seven-man class at defensive back.

Only 10 of the 24 signees made the top 1,000, with Baltimore St. Frances Academy three-star running back DeJuan Williams (5-11, 195), No. 489 overall, and King George, Va., three-star athlete Mekhai White (6-3, 185), No. 491, barely sneaking into the top 500.

Maryland did well at home by landing 12 recruits, although none of them were in the top 10 in the state and only five of the 12 signees made the top 25 in-state rankings.

Along with defensive back, the Terrapins went heavy on offensive line, signing seven linemen in the cycle. Laurel (Md.) St. Vincent Pallotti three-star offensive tackle Ryan Howerton (6-5, 315) led that group, and Annapolis (Md.) St. Mary's three-star offensive tackle Davon Watkins (6-4, 315) was the only other to be listed in the top 1,000.

At quarterback, Maryland added Highland Springs, Va., three-star Khristian Martin (6-3, 215), who is the No. 1,469 recruit in the country and No. 81 at quarterback.

43. Michigan State (21)

After finishing with the nation's No. 23 class last year, Michigan State – following the firing of head coach Mel Tucker – was unable to carry that recruiting momentum into this class, finishing with a team score of just 203.52 which was 11th in the Big Ten, and an average player rating of .8653, which was 12th in the conference.

But even through a cycle of uncertainty, new head coach Jonathan Smith was able to come in and hold on to River Rouge, Mich., four-star wide receiver Nick Marsh (6-3, 200), the second-best recruit in the state of Michigan and the top signee for the Spartans.

The only other four-star the Spartans landed is Honolulu St. Louis offensive tackle Rustin Young (6-5, 275), who decommitted from Oregon State to follow Smith and his gaggle of coaches to East Lansing, including offensive line coach Jim Michalczik.

Of the 21 signees in the class, 10 of them flipped their commitments in December or later, with Smith putting together the best class he could in the little amount of time he had. Seven of those flips were players who followed Smith and his staff from Oregon State.

Along with Young, three-star offensive tackle Mercer Luniewski (6-7, 300) and three-star interior lineman Charlton Luniewski (6-5, 280) – both from Cincinnati Hills Christian Academy – led the class of five offensive linemen for the Spartans.

They also brought in two quarterbacks in Wheaton (Ill.) St. Francis three-star Alessio Milivojevic (6-3, 220), who is No. 53 at quarterback, while La Mesa (Calif.) Helix three-star Ryland Jessee (6-3, 200) is No. 90 at the position. Those two, plus the addition of former four-star Aidan Chiles in the transfer portal from Oregon State, make up for the three quarterbacks who transferred out after the season ended.

51. Illinois (19)

The top 13 recruits in Illinois each went somewhere other than to the Fighting Illini, who had a tough time recruiting in-state and finished just 12th in the conference with an overall team score of 196.69 while the average player rating of .8675 was 11th in the Big Ten.

Mount Pleasant, Mich., four-star interior offensive lineman Andrew Dennis (6-5, 275) was the highest-ranked recruit in the class for the Illini as the No. 264 overall prospect and No. 14 interior lineman in the class. Dennis is one of just two four-star recruits in the class, joining Chandler, Ariz., running back Ca'Lil Valentine (6-0, 180).

Since they weren't very successful in Illinois, the Illini had to go elsewhere to fill out the 19 signees in the class. They pulled their recruits from 13 different states, including four from Illinois, two each from Florida, Kansas and Ohio and one each from Arizona, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Nebraska, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Texas and Utah.

The defensive line was where they focused their energy, signing five recruits led by La Grange (Ill.) Lyons Township three-star Eddie Tuerk (6-4, 280) and Hutchinson (Kan.) three-star defensive end Daniel Brown (6-1, 240), the latter the top edge rusher in the JUCO rankings.

At quarterback, Illinois brought in Starkville, Miss., three-star Trey Petty (6-0, 200), who also had an offer from Indiana.

59. Indiana (17)

The majority of the Hoosiers' additions over the offseason have come from the transfer portal after Curt Cignetti became the next head coach of the program, with 10 players following him from James Madison and 12 others coming from elsewhere. But when it comes to the high school ranks, the Hoosiers signed just 16 prospects, resulting in a team score of 185.30 and an average player rating of .8598, both ranking second-to-last in the conference.

The only four-star player in the class is Greenwood (Ind.) Center Grove quarterback Tyler Cherry (6-5, 205), the 14th-ranked quarterback in the class and No. 233 overall.

Of the 17 recruits, only six of them rank in the top 1,000, including West Palm Beach (Fla.) Cardinal Newman three-star Josh Philostin (5-11, 165) and Carmel, Ind., three-star Christian Peterson (6-0, 180) topping a class of four defensive backs.

The three defensive linemen the Hoosiers signed were all outside of the top 1,000, making for a weak class for that group. The best of them by the rankings was Moline, Ill., three-star defensive end William Depaepe (6-6, 225), the No. 1,145 overall prospect in the class, but it was one of multiple position groups where Indiana struggled.

77. Northwestern (17)

By far the worst team in the Big Ten in terms of recruiting rankings for the 2024 class was Northwestern, which finished with a team score of 165.73 and an average player rating of .8480, both dead last in the conference.

Former head coach Pat Fitzgerald was fired in July, but new head coach David Braun, who held the interim tag through most of the season, wasn't able to recover from that blow, unable to bring in a single four-star player despite winning eight games, making a bowl game and being named Big Ten Coach of the Year.

Only one player – Northbrook (Ill.) Glenbrook North three-star defensive end Patrick Schaller (6-5, 210) – was ranked in the top 1,000 in the country. He was one of six defensive linemen signed by the Wildcats, including Lakewood (Ohio) St. Edward three-star interior lineman Troy Regovich (6-5, 255).

Five of Northwestern's 17 signees were either not included in the 247Sports composite ranking or were ranked outside of the top 2,000, including Cleveland St. Ignatius three-star athlete Sean Martin (6-1, 175), Durham (N.C.) Hillside three-star linebacker Matthew Smith (6-2, 208), and Eden Prairie, Minn., three-star defensive lineman Dennis Rahouski (6-6, 253).

While the Wildcats signed plenty of defensive linemen, the same was not true on the offensive line with signatures from only Canton (Mich.) Plymouth three-star interior offensive lineman Idrys Cotton (6-4, 280) and Austin (Texas) Lake Travis three-star offensive tackle Adrian Oratokhai (6-4, 295).

Michigan Finishes With Nation's No. 16 Class

During a 15-0 national championship season filled with scandal, the Wolverines were still able to bring in the third-best class in the Big Ten with a team score of 263.07 and an average player rating of .9029, which also ranked third in the conference.

Eighteen of the 27 players who signed their letters of intent to Michigan were rated four-star prospects, seven more than in the previous recruiting cycle, and 10 of those recruits were ranked in the top 300 players, with four of them making it inside the top 150.

The Wolverines' best recruit came out of the Buckeye State in Cincinnati Moeller four-star running back Jordan Marshall (5-11, 193), who led the way as the No. 77 overall recruit in the country, the fourth best at his position and third best in Ohio. Marshall was one of four recruits in the class from Ohio, more than any other state for the Wolverines in this cycle.

Two more of the recruits out of Ohio were ranked in the top 500, with Avon four-star offensive tackle Luke Hamilton (6-5, 290), No. 405 overall, and Cincinnati St. Xavier four-star defensive lineman Ted Hammond (6-5, 258), No. 430, making the cut. Lakewood St. Edward three-star offensive tackle Ben Roebuck (6-7, 320), No. 538, also signed with Michigan.

Charlotte (N.C.) Providence Day School four-star quarterback Jadyn Davis (6-1, 202) could line up under center in the future with Kansas City (Mo.) Rockhurst four-star offensive tackle Andrew Sprague (6-7, 286) protecting him as the third-best player Michigan signed.

Rochester (Mich.) Adams four-star tight end Brady Prieskorn (6-6, 225) highlighted a group of four-star pass catchers, though he does project to be a good blocker as well. Michigan also signed Chicago Kenwood Academy four-star wide receiver I'Marion Stewart (5-10, 180); Bellevue, Wash., four-star tight end Hogan Hansen (6-6, 220); and Charlotte (N.C.) Providence Day School three-star wide receiver Channing Goodwin (6-1, 180).

Hamilton and Sprague were among the five offensive linemen the Wolverines signed, highlighting a large group in the trenches that includes seven defensive linemen as well. District Heights (Md.) Bishop McNamara four-star defensive end Lugard Edokpayi (6-6, 230) headlines that group, which includes four top-500 players.

Despite Michigan's program now being led by head coach Sherrone Moore following the departure of Jim Harbaugh to the NFL, Charlotte (N.C.) West Charlotte four-star athlete Jaden Smith (6-3, 201) is the only signee to break his letter of intent and enter the transfer portal at time of press.

— Greg Wilson

Ohio State Suffers Five-Game Losing Streak

By PATRICK ENGELS
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

Ohio State's season took a dramatic turn for the worse since Buckeye Sports Bulletin last went to press, with the Buckeyes dropping five of their last six games to plummet to 13th in the Big Ten standings. Three of those five conference losses came by double digits, while the stretch also included a 76-73 defeat to Indiana on Feb. 6 where Ohio State squandered an 18-point second-half lead at home.

The Buckeyes' three road losses to Nebraska on Jan. 23, Northwestern on Jan. 27 and Iowa on Feb. 2 also extended Ohio State's road losing streak to 15 games, a stretch that dates back to Jan. 1, 2023. Despite the dismal play, the program snapped the five-game losing streak in dramatic fashion on Feb. 10, defeating Maryland 79-75 in double overtime.

Blitzed From Deep In Lincoln

Ohio State's road woes continued on Jan. 23 in front of 14,408 fans at Pinnacle Bank Arena, succumbing to another blown first-half lead and a career night by Nebraska forward Rienk Mast in an 83-69 loss to the Cornhuskers.

The Buckeyes (13-6, 3-5) led Nebraska (15-5, 5-4) by nine points with 11:36 remaining in the first half but trailed 43-35 at the break. The Cornhuskers then built upon their lead after halftime, getting 21 second-half points from Mast and shooting 55.6 percent from the field (15 of 27) and 7 of 10 from three to earn the blowout victory. Mast was 9 of 10 from the field in the final 20 minutes.

"Across the board, we just weren't nearly tough enough," said Ohio State head coach Chris Holtmann. "Ultimately, that's my fault. I take responsibility for that. We just weren't as physical and as tough as we needed to be. Give Nebraska credit. They took advantage."

Ohio State and Nebraska got off to solid starts, combining to make seven of the game's first eight shots, leading to a 9-7 lead for the Buckeyes with 17:18 left in the half. Nebraska then took a 10-9 lead off a three-pointer from guard Brice Williams, but the Buckeyes bounced back with a 13-3 run to go up 22-13 with 11:36 left after a pair of Bruce Thornton free throws.

The Huskers broke a 3:45 scoring drought with a free throw by Sam Hoiberg, kick-starting an 8-0 run that allowed them to cut the deficit to 22-21 after a second-chance make from guard Eli Rice. Nebraska's run was broken by a basket from sophomore guard Roddy Gayle Jr. Ohio State made three of its next four shots to go up 30-26 with 4:57 left before the break.

The Cornhuskers answered with two triples from Mast on consecutive possessions to put Nebraska up front 32-30, and later, after Dale Bonner missed all of his free-throw attempts upon being fouled on a three, Mast hit his third triple in 2:10 of game action to push the Cornhusker lead to 37-32 with 2:20 left, an advantage they later pushed to 43-35 at halftime.

The Buckeyes came out of the locker room scoring eight of the period's first 11 points – including triples from Thornton, who had 11 points in the first half, and Jamison Battle – to trail 46-43 with 17:25 left. But that was the closest Ohio State got all half.

Nebraska answered with a pair of threes from guard C.J. Wilcher, which – after four points from the Buckeyes – was followed by a two and a three from Mast, giving the Cornhuskers a 57-47 advantage with 12:08 left. Nebraska – or perhaps more aptly, Mast – continued its three-point barrage in the ensuing minutes when the forward hit his fifth and sixth triples on consecutive possessions, extending the lead to 65-49.

"When he's making threes, it just spreads everybody out," Holtmann said. "You have to look at different ways to guard it. (Defending on the perimeter) is something that we have not been great with this year with Felix (Okpara) and Zed (Key). So we have to get better at it."

Ohio State tried to end the onslaught by inserting sophomore guard Bowen Hardman with 7:35 left, and he provided a spark with two threes in his first five attempts. But his efforts did little to shrink the deficit, as Mast scored three more baskets in that stretch to maintain a 76-59 advantage with 4:15 left.

Ohio State was led by Thornton, who scored 16 points on 5-of-9 shooting while Battle and Hardman each reached double figures with 11 points. Nebraska was powered by Mast, who recorded a career-high 34 points on 13-of-17 shooting, including a career-best six makes from three on eight attempts. He made it a double-double with a game-high 10 rebounds. Thanks to Mast, Nebraska shot better than 50 percent from beyond the arc (14 of 26), while the Buckeyes shot 34.8 percent (8 of 23) from deep.

Nebraska 83, Ohio State 69

Jan. 23, 2024
Pinnacle Bank Arena • Lincoln, Neb.

	1	2	F
Ohio State (13-6, 3-5)	35	34	69
Nebraska (15-5, 5-4)	43	40	83

Ohio State	Total Min	FG M-A	FT M-A	Reb. O-D	A	PF	Pts.
Thornton	34	5-9	4-5	1-2	6	1	16
Battle	28	4-8	0-0	2-5	0	2	11
Mahaffey	30	4-4	0-0	0-5	4	2	8
Gayle Jr.	30	3-9	0-0	0-4	8	1	6
Okpara	16	3-5	0-0	1-0	0	3	6
Hardman	7	4-8	0-0	0-0	0	0	11
Key	19	2-6	3-4	1-5	1	2	7
Bonner	20	1-3	0-3	0-1	0	1	2
Middleton	14	1-4	0-0	0-0	0	0	2
Royal	2	0-0	0-0	1-0	0	1	0
Totals	**200**	**27-56**	**7-12**	**6-22**	**19**	**13**	**69**

Percentages: FG: 48.2%. **FT:** 58.3%. **Three-point field goals:** 8-23 (Hardman 3-7, Thornton 2-4, Battle 3-4, Middleton 0-3, Bonner 0-2, Gayle 0-2, Key 0-1). **Team rebounds:** 0. **Blocked shots:** 7 (Key 2, Okpara 2, Battle, Mahaffey, Middleton). **Turnovers:** 9 (Battle 3, Gayle, Okpara, Key, Bonner, Royal, Team). **Steals:** 2 (Thornton 2).

Nebraska	Total Min	FG M-A	FT M-A	Reb. O-D	A	PF	Pts.
Mast	33	13-17	2-2	1-9	4	1	34
Williams	27	5-9	2-2	2-5	4	1	14
Allick	24	2-6	2-4	1-2	0	1	7
Tominaga	14	2-6	0-0	0-1	2	2	5
Lawrence	31	1-6	0-0	1-3	6	3	2
Wilcher	30	6-12	0-0	0-1	3	0	16
Rice	14	1-3	2-2	1-2	0	1	4
Hoiberg	27	0-2	1-2	1-3	0	2	1
Totals	**200**	**30-61**	**9-12**	**9-26**	**19**	**11**	**83**

Percentages: FG: 49.2%. **FT:** 75.0%. **Three-point field goals:** 14-26 (Mast 6-8, Wilcher 4-7, Williams 2-4, Tominaga 1-3, Allick 1-2, Lawrence 0-1, Rice 0-1). **Team rebounds:** 2. **Blocked shots:** 2 (Mast 2). **Turnovers:** 6 (Williams 2, Mast, Allick, Lawrence, Hoiberg). **Steals:** 5 (Hoiberg 2, Williams, Tominaga, Wilcher).
Officials: Dorsey, Lenox, Oglesby. **Attendance:** 14,408.

OSU Crushed At Northwestern

Ohio State increased its road losing streak to 14 games on Jan. 27 in front of 6,218 fans at Welsh-Ryan Arena, falling to Northwestern 83-58 due to a sluggish offensive performance and a strong shooting night from the Wildcats.

The Buckeyes (13-7, 3-6) shot just 14 of 41 from the field (34.1 percent), their lowest field-goal total in a game in the Holtmann era. Meanwhile, Northwestern (15-5, 6-3) shot an excellent 57.7 percent from the field (30 of 52) and made 10 of its 19 tries from three (52.6 percent), while it also held a 34-18 advantage in paint points.

"I'm not sure I really saw this coming, to be honest with you," Holtmann said. "I thought we were pretty engaged in practice. Our effort was good. Sometimes you can see a game like this coming. I think our coaching staff would feel like we had a pretty engaged two days, but obviously we need to be better."

The Buckeyes' offense struggled from the onset, with the team connecting on just one of its first five shots and committing two turnovers to trail 8-4. Ohio State responded with baskets from Key and Battle along with three free throws to cut the deficit to 13-12, but it then went on another scoring drought, missing the next four attempts, and Northwestern capitalized with a 7-0 run.

Ohio State received a spark off the bench from Hardman, who hit his first three-point attempt to cut the deficit to 20-15. This kick-started the Buckeyes on offense. They made three of their next five shots, but the Wildcats were still able to maintain a 31-25 lead with 4:12 left. Northwestern extended its lead to 36-25 after an and-one by forward Luke Hunger and an acrobatic layup from guard Boo Buie, eventually taking a 41-30 lead into the half.

Northwestern continued to build upon its double-digit lead coming out of the break with back-to-back baskets including a three-pointer by Ty Berry. Ohio State answered with a trio of free throws, but it was held scoreless for the next 2:35 of the half, allowing the Wildcats to go up 52-33. The Buckeyes earned their first field goal of the half with 14:34 left off a driving layup from Gayle, but it was followed by another three-pointer from Buie on the other end and the score was 55-36.

Northwestern 83, Ohio State 58

Jan. 27, 2024
Welsh-Ryan Arena • vanston, Ill.

	1	2	F
Ohio State (13-7, 3-6)	30	28	58
Northwestern (15-5, 6-3)	41	42	83

Ohio State	Total Min	FG M-A	FT M-A	Reb. O-D	A	PF	Pts.
Thornton	34	3-9	11-12	0-3	2	1	18
Gayle Jr.	34	4-8	6-6	0-1	3	3	15
Battle	25	1-6	2-2	0-3	1	1	5
Okpara	24	2-4	1-2	0-5	0	3	5
Mahaffey	21	0-1	2-7	2-2	1	3	2
Royal	14	1-3	2-2	1-1	0	1	4
Key	14	1-2	1-2	0-3	1	2	3
Middleton	12	1-2	0-0	0-0	0	2	3
Hardman	11	1-2	0-0	0-1	0	0	3
Bonner	10	0-3	0-0	0-0	1	0	0
Chatman	1	0-1	0-0	0-0	0	0	0
Totals	**200**	**14-41**	**25-33**	**8-20**	**9**	**16**	**58**

Percentages: FG: 34.1%. **FT:** 75.8%. T**hree-point field goals:** 5-21 (Battle 1-6, Gayle 1-4, Thornton 1-3, Hardman 1-2, Middleton 1-2, Bonner 0-2, Royal 0-1, Chatman 0-1). **Team rebounds:** 6. **Blocked shots:** 4 (Okpara, Mahaffey, Royal, Key). **Turnovers:** 11 (Gayle 3, Thornton 2, Battle 2, Okpara, Mahaffey, Key, Team). **Steals:** 5 (Gayle 2, Thornton, Okpara, Mahaffey).

Northwestern	Total Min	FG M-A	FT M-A	Reb. O-D	A	PF	Pts.
Buie	31	6-10	5-6	1-4	5	5	19
Langborg	35	5-8	0-0	0-4	1	3	14
Barnhizer	35	5-10	0-0	0-5	6	2	11
Berry	20	2-4	5-5	0-4	1	2	10
Nicholson	15	2-4	0-2	1-2	1	1	4
Martinelli	28	5-8	1-1	0-2	1	4	12
Hunger	23	4-6	2-3	1-2	1	4	11
Preston	2	1-1	0-0	0-0	0	2	2
Clayton	9	0-1	0-0	0-0	0	0	0
Mullins	1	0-0	0-0	0-1	0	0	0
Hurlburt	1	0-0	0-0	0-0	0	0	0
Totals	**200**	**30-52**	**13-17**	**4-26**	**16**	**23**	**83**

Percentages: FG: 57.7%. **FT:** 76.5%. **Three-point field goals:** 10-19 (Langborg 4-6, Buie 2-3, Hunger 1-3, Barnhizer 1-2, Berry 1-2, Martinelli 1-2, Clayton 0-1). T**eam rebounds:** 3. **Blocked shots:** 2 (Langborg, Barnhizer). **Turnovers:** 7 (Hunger 2, Buie, Langborg, Berry, Nicholson, Team). **Steals:** 4 (Buie, Langborg, Barnhizer, Nicholson).
Officials: Curry, Floyd, Riley Sr. **Attendance:** 6,218.

Scotty Middleton responded with a triple, but the Wildcats' Brooks Barnhizer scored on the ensuing possession, prompting an 11-0 run that gave Northwestern a commanding 66-39 advantage with 10:12 left after another bucket by Barnhizer. After a Thornton free throw, Northwestern took off again, this time on a 9-0 run to lead 75-40. The Buckeyes went 6:53 without a basket during the extended 20-1 run.

"Bottom line (is) we just have to be better across the board," Holtmann said.

Ohio State broke the drought with an Okpara dunk to make it 75-42, allowing it to finish the game on a 16-8 run. But that

Continued On Page 28

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18-Point Lead Vanishes At Home Vs. Indiana

Continued From Page 27

sequence only made the final score appear less lopsided on the stat sheet, as both teams emptied the benches in the final minutes.

The Buckeyes were led in the loss by Thornton, who had 18 points – with 11 coming at the free-throw line on 12 shots – and Gayle was the only other Buckeye to reach double figures with 15 points. Northwestern was led by Buie, who scored a game-high 19 points on 6-of-10 shooting, while five other Wildcats finished in double figures.

Struggles Come Home Against Illini

Ohio State (13-8, 3-7) suffered its third straight loss on Jan. 30 in front of a sparse Value City Arena crowd of 10,285 fans, falling 87-75 to then-No. 14 Illinois (16-5, 7-3).

The Buckeyes shot 30 of 60 (50.0 percent) from the field and went 11 of 15 on free throws but allowed Illinois to shoot 31 of 60 (51.7 percent) and go 18 of 20 at the charity stripe.

"I think everybody on this team wants to win so bad," Gayle said. "We have everybody doing whatever they can in their power to win, but we're just not getting the results we want. I feel like we put ourselves in a position to be able to make a play, and we had a chance to go and get it. But we just fell short."

Despite the late-arriving crowd, both teams raced out to fast starts on offense with six lead changes before the game was tied up at 14 with 12:22 left in the first half. Battle hit a three with 11:39 left in the half that started a 14-7 run for the Buckeyes, giving them a 28-23 lead with Battle closing the sequence on a layup. But the Illini provided an immediate answer, going on a 7-0 run to retake a 30-28 lead with a jumper by Marcus Domask.

After Gayle was fouled on a triple and made all of his free throws, Domask hit a three on the other end, beginning a 9-1 run for the Illini that pushed their advantage to 39-32 with 2:40 left. Evan Mahaffey stopped the burst with a jumper, but Illinois closed the half with a layup by Amani Hansberry to hold a 41-34 lead heading into the break.

The Buckeyes made just one of their final 10 shots from the floor while Illinois hit on seven of its final 10 shots, allowing it to outscore Ohio State 18-6 in the final 6:47 of the period.

"It was a critical stretch," Holtmann said. "We missed two front-end one-and-ones, we had a wide-open three we missed and we had a pull-up that we missed. That was a critical momentum stretch, for sure."

Illinois increased its lead coming out of the locker room, scoring four early baskets to go up 49-39. Ohio State later cut the deficit to 56-48 with 14:01 left on a jumper by Middleton, but that was the closest it got all half, with the Illini going on a 12-4 run to go up 68-52 on a Terrence Shannon Jr. three-point play.

Ohio State showed some life in the middle portion of the period with a quick 8-2 run, but Illinois answered with a wide open three from Shannon, who then hit an and-one to push the lead back up to 76-60 with 6:59 left.

Shannon later hit his third three of the game to go back up 79-64, a sequence that sent many of the Scarlet and Gray faithful to the exits before the final media timeout ended. Ohio State cut the lead to 83-73 with 1:54 left after another Battle three, but it was not enough to spur a comeback by the Buckeyes.

Ohio State was led by Battle and Gayle, who contributed 21 and 20 points, respectively, while Mahaffey added 13 points on 6-of-7 shooting. Illinois was powered by Domask and Shannon, who each scored 23 points and grabbed three rebounds. Ty Rogers had a double-double with 13 points and 10 rebounds, helping the visitors to a 36-28 edge on the boards. Battle led the Buckeyes with six off the glass.

Buckeyes Lose Nail-Biter At Iowa

Ohio State's road losing streak reached 15 games on Feb. 2 in a back-and-forth contest in front of 9,986 fans at Carver-Hawkeye Arena, that Iowa won, 79-77.

The Buckeyes (13-9, 3-8) – who also dropped their fourth straight contest – had four players score in double figures but allowed Iowa (13-9, 5-6) to shoot 53.7 percent from the field and make 18 of its 22 free throws in a game that featured 10 lead changes and 15 ties. Ohio State was also pummeled in transition, with Iowa totaling 17 fastbreak points to none for the Buckeyes.

"We showed what we can do today, especially when we play in different stretches," Battle said. "But those stretches have to be longer. That belief, it has to circulate around our locker room, and I think it is, but it has to be more."

Both teams got off to hot starts on offense, with Iowa and Ohio State combining to make 14 of the game's first 22 shots before the first media timeout, a sequence that ended with a layup from Hawkeye forward Ben Krikke that put them up 17-15.

Ohio State reclaimed the lead coming out of the break with consecutive layups from Royal, who earned a season-high 17 minutes to make up for the loss of the injured Middleton. Iowa later connected on a jumper by Krikke to lead 23-21, but the Buckeyes tied the game after Royal made his third basket at the 8:09 mark.

After four Hawkeye points, the Buckeyes went on a 9-2 run, with five points coming from Gayle, to lead 32-29 with 3:34 left. Iowa later tied the game at 36 after a three-pointer from guard Josh Dix, but the Buckeyes closed the half with a left-handed hook shot and block by Okpara to hold a 38-36 advantage at the intermission.

The game continued to seesaw back-and-forth coming out of the break. Iowa went up 51-48 at the 14:18 mark on a layup by Krikke, but the Buckeyes responded with six straight points to go back up 54-51 with 11:45 left.

The pendulum swung again after Iowa took off on an 8-0 run for a 59-54 lead, the largest advantage held by either team all game. Ohio State broke the run with two free throws from Okpara, which allowed it to claw back again and eventually cut the deficit to 63-61 with 7:26 left after Battle banked in a three.

"We have no chance if we don't compete at the level that we have to compete at, and our guys competed tonight," Holtmann said. "We have to compete longer and harder and for longer stretches, but it doesn't mean that we dismiss what we did today for stretches of the game that put us in position to win the game."

Ohio State tied the game at 67 with 4:07 left on a Thornton jumper. After both teams scored on their next possession, Ohio State on a pair of free throws by Thornton, Iowa created some separation by going up 73-69 on a pair of free throws by Tony Perkins with 2:06 remaining. But the Buckeyes responded with a Battle hook shot, and after an Iowa free throw, Okpara dunked to trail 74-73 with 1:04 left.

Ohio State had a chance to take the lead on its next possession, but it squandered the opportunity after Okpara was called for a double-dribble Iowa then made five of its final six free throws to preserve a 79-76 advantage with seven seconds left. Bonner made one free throw and missed the second on purpose at the other end, leading to a scrum for the ball until time expired.

The Buckeyes were led in the loss by Battle, who scored 17 points on 6-of-12 shooting, including 3-of-5 shooting from three. Thornton (14), Okpara (14) and Gayle (12) all reached double figures, while Royal added nine points and three rebounds. Thornton dished out five assists, and Okpara had a game-high eight rebounds and a pair of blocks. Iowa was powered by Perkins, Dix and Sandfort, who added 20, 15 and 15 points, respectively.

Second-Half Collapse Drowns Buckeyes Vs. IU

Ohio State (13-10, 3-9) dropped its fifth straight game on Feb. 6 in demoralizing fashion, squandering an 18-point second-half lead in a 76-73 loss to Indiana (14-9, 6-6).

The Buckeyes jumped out to a 42-29 lead at the half and increased their advantage to 49-31 with 17:39 remaining before being outscored 45-24 the rest of the way at Value City Arena. The Buckeyes briefly reclaimed a 73-71 lead with 37 seconds left after two Battle free throws, but Indiana scored the final five points of the game.

Ohio State's second-half collapse can be attributed to its lackluster offense, which shot just 8 of 25 (32.0 percent) from the field and 3 of 11 (27.3 percent) from deep in the final 20 minutes. Meanwhile, Indiana shot 16 of 29 (55.2 percent) in the second half and connected on four of its six threes, while also outrebounding the Buckeyes 17-10 in the final frame including seven off the offensive glass.

"We weren't as detailed as we needed to be or as tough as we needed to be late," Holtmann said.

The game was tight to start, and Ohio State led 11-10 at the 15:00 mark. It remained close until the middle portion of the half when the Buckeyes went on a 9-0 run capped by a Thornton three, and aided by a 2:51 Indiana scoring drought, to take a 25-15 lead with 8:21 left, forcing a timeout by the Hoosiers.

The Buckeyes' advantage then increased to 13 on two separate occasions, the latter

Illinois 87, Ohio State 75

Jan. 30, 2024
Value City Arena • Columbus

	1	2	F
Illinois (16-5, 7-3)	41	46	87
Ohio State (13-8, 3-7)	34	41	75

Illinois	Total Min	FG M-A	FT M-A	Reb. O-D	A	PF	Pts.
Domask	35	7-12	8-8	2-1	2	0	23
Shannon Jr.	32	7-17	6-6	0-3	3	3	23
Rodgers	26	5-6	3-3	4-6	2	0	13
Hawkins	25	2-3	0-0	0-2	0	4	5
Guerrier	22	2-5	0-1	0-2	0	1	5
Dainja	11	3-5	1-1	3-2	0	3	7
Harmon	24	3-6	0-0	1-3	1	0	6
Goode	18	1-3	0-0	0-3	0	2	3
Hansbury	4	1-2	0-1	0-0	0	1	2
Gibbs-Lawson	3	0-1	0-0	0-1	0	1	0
Totals	**200**	**31-60**	**18-20**	**11-25**	**8**	**15**	**87**

Percentages: FG: 51.7%. **FT:** 90.0%. **Three-point field goals:** 7-17 (Shannon 3-7, Guerrier 1-3, Goode 1-2, Domask 1-2, Hawkins 1-1, Harmon 0-1, Hansberry 0-1). **Team rebounds**: 4. **Blocked shots:** 4 (Shannon 2, Hawkins, Dainja). **Turnovers:** 6 (Shannon 2, Domask, Rodgers, Guerrier, Dainja). **Steals:** 2 (Rodgers, Dainja).

Ohio State	Total Min	FG M-A	FT M-A	Reb. O-D	A	PF	Pts.
Battle	37	8-15	2-2	0-6	2	2	21
Gayle Jr.	38	8-14	4-4	0-2	2	2	20
Mahaffey	31	6-7	1-2	1-2	1	4	13
Thornton	31	3-11	0-0	0-4	5	3	7
Okpara	18	0-2	0-0	0-3	0	3	0
Royal	7	3-4	1-2	1-0	0	0	7
Key	10	1-5	3-5	3-1	0	2	5
Middleton	20	1-1	0-0	1-0	1	2	2
Bonner	5	0-0	0-0	0-0	0	0	0
Hardman	3	0-1	0-0	0-1	0	0	0
Totals	**200**	**30-60**	**11-15**	**8-20**	**9**	**18**	**75**

Percentages: FG: 50.0%. **FT:** 73.3%. **Three-point field goals:** 4-12 (Battle 3-6, Thornton 1-5, Gayle 0-1). **Team rebounds:** 3. **Blocked shots:** 4 (Okpara 2, Key 2). **Turnovers:** 6 (Battle, Gayle, Mahaffey, Thornton, Okpara, Royal). **Steals:** 4 (Mahaffey 2, Thornton, Royal). **Officials:** Anderson, Comer, Kissinger. **Attendance:** 10,285.

Iowa 79, Ohio State 77

Feb. 2, 2024
Carver-Hawkeye Arena • Iowa City, Ia.

	1	2	F
Ohio State (13-9, 3-8)	38	39	77
Iowa (13-9, 5-6)	36	43	79

Ohio State	Total Min	FG M-A	FT M-A	Reb. O-D	A	PF	Pts.
Battle	26	6-12	2-2	1-2	0	2	17
Thornton	35	4-8	4-4	0-2	5	3	14
Okpara	32	5-7	4-6	7-1	2	3	14
Gayle Jr.	38	4-12	3-3	1-3	3	2	12
Mahaffey	30	3-7	0-0	2-3	4	5	6
Royal	17	4-8	1-2	1-2	0	3	9
Bonner	13	1-3	2-4	0-1	0	0	5
Hardman	6	0-0	0-0	0-0	0	0	0
Key	3	0-1	0-0	0-2	1	0	0
Totals	**200**	**27-58**	**16-21**	**13-17**	**15**	**18**	**77**

Percentages: FG: 46.6%. **FT:** 76.2%. **Three-point field goals**: 7-16 (Battle 3-5, Thornton 2-4, Gayle 1-4, Bonner 1-2, Royal 0-1). **Team rebounds:** 2. **Blocked shots:** 3 (Okpara 2, Gayle). **Turnovers:** 10 (Battle 4, Okpara 2, Gayle 2, Royal, Team). **Steals**: 4 (Okpara 2, Battle, Gayle).

Iowa	Total Min	FG M-A	FT M-A	Reb. O-D	A	PF	Pts.
Perkins	32	6-12	8-9	1-6	4	1	20
Sandfort	38	6-11	1-2	0-3	2	3	15
Dix	27	7-10	0-0	0-0	1	0	15
Krikke	33	4-9	0-0	1-1	3	1	8
Freeman	22	3-5	1-2	2-5	1	3	7
McCaffrey	15	1-3	8-8	0-2	0	3	10
Dembele	20	1-2	0-0	3-2	0	4	2
Bowen	5	1-1	0-1	0-0	0	0	2
Sandfort	5	0-0	0-0	0-0	0	1	0
Harding	3	0-1	0-0	0-0	2	0	0
Totals	**200**	**29-54**	**18-22**	**9-19**	**13**	**16**	**79**

Percentages: FG: 53.7%. **FT:** 81.8%. **Three-point field goals:** 3-10 (Sandfort 2-6, Dix 1-2, Perkins 0-1, McCaffrey 0-1). **Team rebounds:** 2. **Blocked shots:** 6 (Sandfort 2, Krikke, Freeman, McCaffrey, Dembele). **Turnovers:** 9 (Freeman 2, Sandfort 2, Bowen, Dembele, Dix, McAffrey, Team. **Steals:** 6 (Sandfort 2, Perkins, Krikke, Freeman, Dembele).
Officials: Gaffney, Sirmons, Wells. **Attendance:** 9,986.

Indiana 76, Ohio State 73

Feb. 6, 2024
Value City Arena • Columbus

	1	2	F
Indiana (14-9, 6-6)	29	47	76
Ohio State (13-10, 3-9)	42	31	73

Indiana	Total Min	FG M-A	FT M-A	Reb. O-D	A	PF	Pts.
Reneau	38	8-15	10-15	5-9	2	4	26
Galloway	38	9-15	4-4	3-3	4	0	25
Mgbako	31	3-12	2-2	1-3	0	4	9
Ware	26	3-10	0-0	1-0	1	4	6
Cupps	26	1-3	0-0	0-1	2	4	2
Leal	25	1-1	3-6	2-4	2	2	6
Walker	8	0-0	1-2	0-0	1	1	1
Sparks	1	0-0	1-2	0-0	0	1	1
Gunn	7	0-0	0-0	0-1	0	1	0
Totals	**200**	**25-56**	**21-31**	**12-24**	**12**	**21**	**76**

Percentages: FG: 44.6%. **FT:** 67.7%. **Three-point field goals:** 5-13 (Galloway 3-4, Mgbako 1-4, Reneau 0-2, Leal 1-1, Ware 0-1, Cupps 0-1). **Team rebounds:** 3. **Blocked shots:** 3 (Leal 2, Reneau). **Turnovers:** 11 (Reneau 3, Galloway 2, Gunn 2, Mgbako, Ware, Leal, Team). **Steals:** 5 (Leal 2, Mgbako, Cupps, Gunn).

Ohio State	Total Min	FG M-A	FT M-A	Reb. O-D	A	PF	Pts.
Battle	36	4-11	10-10	1-3	1	0	19
Gayle Jr.	33	6-10	6-6	1-2	4	4	19
Thornton	36	4-13	1-2	0-3	0	3	11
Mahaffey	32	3-7	2-3	0-6	2	4	8
Okpara	23	2-2	3-4	2-2	0	4	7
Key	13	2-4	2-2	1-3	0	3	6
Bonner	14	1-2	0-0	0-0	3	1	3
Middleton	6	0-2	0-0	0-0	0	1	0
Royal	6	0-2	0-0	0-0	0	3	0
Parks	1	0-0	0-0	0-1	0	0	0
Totals	**200**	**22-53**	**24-27**	**7-23**	**10**	**23**	**73**

Percentages: FG: 41.5%. **FT:** 88.9%. **Three-point field goals:** 5-17 (Thornton 2-7, Battle 1-5, Gayle 1-2, Bonner 1-1, Mahaffey 0-1, Middleton 0-1). **Team rebounds:** 5. **Blocked shots:** 4 (Okpara 2, Gayle, Royal). **Turnovers:** 12 (Gayle 5, Battle 2, Thornton 2, Mahaffey, Royal, Team). **Steals:** 4 (Mahaffey 2, Battle, Gayle).
Officials: Dorsey, Szelc, Walton. **Attendance:** 11,157.

Ohio State 79, Maryland 75

Feb. 10, 2024
Value City Arena • Columbus

	1	2	OT	OT2	F
Maryland	32	29	10	4	75
Ohio State	33	28	10	8	79

Maryland	Total Min	FG M-A	FT M-A	Reb. O-D	A	PF	Pts.
Young	47	8-22	6-7	1-6	4	3	26
Scott	48	5-9	7-10	2-5	1	2	19
Reese	49	4-15	5-11	4-9	2	4	13
Traore	20	4-6	0-0	3-2	0	2	8
Kaiser	11	0-0	0-0	0-0	1	3	0
Long	28	2-4	2-2	0-0	0	4	6
Harris-Smith	41	1-5	0-0	1-7	3	1	3
Batchelor	5	0-1	0-0	0-0	0	0	0
Swanton-Rodger	1	0-0	0-0	0-0	0	1	0
Totals	**200**	**24-62**	**20-30**	**11-31**	**11**	**20**	**75**

Percentages: FG: 38.7%. **FT:** 66.7%. **Three-point field goals:** 7-17 (Young 4-8, Scott 2-4, Harris-Smith 1-4, Batchelor 0-1). **Team rebounds:** 2. **Blocked shots**: 1 (Reese). **Turnovers:** 12 (Reese 4, Young 3, Scott 3, Harris-Smith 2). **Steals:** 3 (Young, Reese, Harris-Smith).

Ohio State	Total Min	FG M-A	FT M-A	Reb. O-D	A	PF	Pts.
Thornton	44	10-20	2-2	0-7	4	1	24
Gayle Jr.	37	4-12	8-8	0-2	3	3	17
Battle	43	4-11	0-0	0-6	0	2	8
Okpara	33	2-3	3-4	2-4	0	5	7
Mahaffey	30	3-5	0-0	0-7	1	5	7
Bonner	37	3-8	1-2	0-0	0	2	7
Royal	13	1-2	3-4	2-4	1	4	5
Key	8	2-3	0-0	1-0	0	3	4
Middleton	3	0-1	0-0	0-1	0	0	0
Hardman	2	0-1	0-0	0-0	0	0	0
Totals	**200**	**29-66**	**17-20**	**6-33**	**9**	**25**	**79**

Percentages: FG: 43.9%. **FT:** 85.0%. **Three-point field goals:** 4-17 (Thornton 2-5, Gayle 1-4, Battle 0-3, Mahaffey 1-2, Bonner 0-2, Middleton 0-1). **Team rebounds:** 3. **Blocked shots:** 5 (Okpara 2, Mahaffey, Key, Middleton). **Turnovers:** 9 (Okpara 3, Gayle 2, Thornton, Battle, Bonner, Key). **Steals:** 6 (Royal 2, Thornton, Battle, Okpara, Bonner).
Officials: McJunkins, Simpson, Riley. **Attendance**: 13,471.

33-20 at 5:53, but the Hoosiers managed to cut the deficit back down to 33-24 after a layup from forward Mackenzie Mgbako with 5:03 left. Ohio State extended the lead back up to double digits from the charity stripe, with the Buckeyes hitting seven of eight free throws – sandwiched around four Hoosier points – to go up 40-28 with 59 seconds left. Indiana continued the end-of-half foul fest with a make at the line from forward Malik Reneau, but the Buckeyes responded with a driving layup from Gayle on the other end to take a 42-29 lead into the half.

The Buckeyes built upon their lead after the break, scoring seven of the half's first nine points to go up 49-31. That was the largest advantage they held all game, though, as Indiana began its comeback with a 7-2 run of its own, with Trey Galloway scoring all seven of the IU points.

The Hoosiers continued to chip away, cutting the deficit to 55-47 after a Reneau free throw with 11:37 left. The Buckeyes answered to go back up 60-47 on a Bonner three, but the Hoosiers weren't deterred. After a pair of Key free throws pushed the Buckeyes' lead to 65-53 with 7:42 left, Indiana stormed back on a 10-0 run to trail just 65-63 with 5:00 left, with Galloway scoring seven.

The Buckeyes answered with a pair of Gayle free throws, but the Hoosiers followed with a triple from Galloway on the other end to trail 67-66. After the teams traded baskets, Indiana then took a 70-69 lead off a layup from forward Kel'el Ware with 2:46 left.

After a Hoosier free throw by Anthony Leal, Ohio State tied the game with a Battle jumper and later took the 73-71 lead with 37 seconds left on a pair from the charity stripe by Battle. Out of a timeout, Galloway found Leal for a corner three, giving Indiana a 74-73 lead with just 22 seconds left. Battle then dribbled it off his foot, turning it over and leading to two free throws from Leal to close out the game.

"We have the youngest team in the Big Ten, so we have a lot of guys who get inside their heads," Gayle said. "We had a lot of manageable things that we did to lose this game. I think we had a lot of mistakes that we could have corrected. So we need everybody to keep their heads up and stay together moving forward."

Ohio State was led in the loss by Battle and Gayle, who each tallied 19 points, with Battle going 10 for 10 from the line. Thornton scored 11 points, while Mahaffey had a team-high six rebounds. Indiana was led by Reneau (26) and Galloway (25), who scored a combined 35 of their points in the second half, outscoring the Buckeyes with their 31 in the stanza. Reneau also had a game-high 14 rebounds for a double-double.

Ohio State Snaps Skid In Double Overtime

Ohio State (14-10, 4-9) needed two extra periods and some late-game heroics from Thornton to break its five-game losing streak on Feb. 10 in front of 13,471 fans at Value City Arena, picking up a 79-75 win over Maryland (13-11, 5-8) in double overtime.

Thornton, who had 24 points on 10-of-20 shooting, helped the team send the game into overtime with a three-pointer to tie the game at the end of regulation, before providing the game-winning layup with 1:11 left in the second extra period.

"I feel like I'm one of the best guards in the Big Ten and also in the country," he said. "I carry that swag, that confidence that I can do it on any given night, and tonight I showed it."

"He just played with a degree of confidence that he's earned the last couple of practices," Holtmann added. "It was good to see him play that way."

Ohio State started slow, missing its first six shots and committing two turnovers as the Terrapins jumped out to a 13-4 lead with 14:42 left. The Buckeyes then woke up on offense, connecting on four consecutive shots to spark a 10-2 run, with Thornton scoring five of those points.

An errant pass from Bonner allowed Maryland to break the run with a Jahmir Young fastbreak layup and create more separation in the ensuing minutes, extending its lead to 28-18 with 8:02 left following a putback layup from forward Mady Traore.

Ohio State soon cut the deficit to 30-24 thanks to four combined free throws from Gayle and Royal along with a Mahaffey basket, the team's first field goal in over three minutes. Following a Traore dunk with 5:36 left, the home team closed the half on a 9-0 run to hold a 33-32 lead at the break, with Thornton scoring six on the run.

The second period began much like the first, with Ohio State held scoreless for the first 2:25, allowing Maryland to take a 37-33 lead. Thornton broke the drought with a midrange jumper as Ohio State eventually went back up 38-37, and both teams stayed within one point of each other until Maryland made two straight baskets, including an old-fashioned three-point play by Julian Reese to lead 46-42 with 11:11 left, and later pushed the lead up to 51-45 with 8:55 remaining on a three by Donta Scott.

Unlike other games, Ohio State provided an answer to the opponent's run, outscoring Maryland 13-9 over the next 5:06 to trail 60-58 with 3:49 left after an Okpara jumper. A driving Gayle later found Thornton in the corner for a triple that tied the score at 61 with 1:03 left, forcing a Maryland timeout. The score managed to stay the same until the end of regulation, with the teams missing on each of their final possessions of the half to force overtime.

Both teams came into overtime firing, making their first two shots and Ohio State held a 67-66 lead with 3:04 left. Maryland hit five of its next six free throws to lead 71-69, but Thornton tied the score again with a driving layup with 1:05 left to force a second overtime.

The second extra frame was more of the same, with the two teams trading baskets in the early going to leave the game tied at 75 with 1:59 remaining. The game took a final turn in Ohio State's favor when Thornton put the team on his back again and made an underhand layup to put them up 77-75. Key blocked Maryland forward Scott's shot attempt on the other end, leading to a thunderous dunk from Gayle to close the game and send the crowd into a frenzy.

"(That dunk) felt like everything," Gayle said. "I feel like it's been a while since we've felt that much energy in the building. So it just felt amazing."

"As a coach, in this position, you're happy for the 13,000 that were here supporting us," Holtmann said. "But you're happy, most importantly, for your kids and for your staff to be able to go back and enjoy a drink and enjoy your family. These last two years, personally, have been a challenge. They've been probably the hardest thing I've went through. So I think as much as anything, you're glad for your guys to enjoy this."

Ohio State was led in the win by Thornton's 24 points. He also had a team-high seven rebounds, as did Mahaffey, and four assists, while Gayle added 17 points. Maryland was spearheaded by Young, who recorded 26 points and added seven rebounds in the loss.

Ohio State will play four more conference games before BSB goes to press, with the Buckeyes going on the road against Wisconsin on Feb. 13 (9 p.m., Peacock), hosting Purdue on Feb 18 (1 p.m., CBS) and playing at Minnesota on Feb. 22 (8 p.m., BTN) and Michigan State on Feb. 25 (4 p.m., CBS).

Smith Not Ready To Make Decision On Holtmann

Ohio State athletic director Gene Smith is not ready to make any significant decisions regarding the future of the men's basketball team and head coach Chris Holtmann but will be closely monitoring how the rest of the regular season transpires, he told The Columbus Dispatch in late January.

COURT REPORT
Patrick Engels

"We have a lot of this season left to play, and we have coaches and players that are focused on winning every day," Smith said. "I'm looking forward to seeing how this turns out."

Smith, who is set to retire from his position on June 30 and will be replaced by Texas A&M athletic director Ross Bjork, has consistently offered support for the 52-year-old coach amid the program's recent struggles. Smith rated Holtmann as "excellent" in his 2022-23 performance review following the team's subpar 16-19 season – which included a stretch of 14 losses in 15 games – and also told Buckeye Sports Bulletin in June that he was pleased with the coach's ability to lead his young team through a difficult year.

"I feel great about Chris' on-floor coaching," Smith told BSB. "He's a very good teacher. But we needed to get to a point where our roster was being managed appropriately, and I feel that happened, so I'm really excited about the future, too.

"People aren't giving him the respect he deserves," he continued. "From a recruiting point of view, we've had two top-five classes back-to-back and two one-and-dones (in Malaki Branham and Brice Sensabaugh). We have a group of young men that really bought in and they'll be our leadership for the future."

This year, however, Holtmann and his team have encountered a similar set of struggles – particularly in Big Ten play – that has placed mounting pressure and criticism on the coach as the season progresses into February.

After a 12-2 start that included a quality win over then-No.17 Alabama, Ohio State hit a wall in Big Ten play, dropping eight of 10 games from Jan. 6 through Feb. 10. This stretch was highlighted by perhaps the Buckeyes' two worst losses of the season – an 83-58 blowout at Northwestern on Jan. 27 and a 76-73 home loss to Indiana on Feb. 6 where the team squandered an 18-point second-half lead.

Holtmann – whose team sat at 13th place in the Big Ten standings and held just a 9-24 conference record dating back to 2022-23 as BSB went to press – acknowledged after the Indiana loss that the stretch has frustrated him, a feeling that he added can only end if the entire program makes vast improvements for the rest of the season.

"I think it's frustrating for everybody," Holtmann said on Feb. 6. "It's obviously been a really tough stretch for our players and our coaches, so we have to find a way out of it."

Holtmann, who is in his seventh season at Ohio State, agreed to a multiyear extension in 2022 that put him under contract through 2027-28. If Smith – or Bjork, after he takes over – decides to terminate Holtmann's contract before then without cause, he would be owed his full remaining salary, which is currently around $15 million.

2023-24 Ohio State Men's Basketball Statistics

14-10 Overall (4-9 Big Ten)
Statistics through games of Feb. 10

Player	G-GS	Min.-Avg.	FG-FGA	Pct.	3P-3PA	Pct.	FT-FTA	Pct.	Rebounds O-D	Rebounds T-Avg.	PF-FO	A	TO	BS	ST	Pts.-Avg.
THORNTON, Bruce	24-24	801-33.4	122-295	.414	42-129	.326	92-111	.829	7-72	79-3.3	41-1	101	24	1	31	378-15.8
GAYLE JR., Roddy	24-24	779-32.4	117-261	.448	21-75	.280	89-103	.864	23-84	107-4.5	55-0	78	64	2	15	344-14.3
BATTLE, Jamison	24-24	749-31.2	119-260	.458	64-148	.432	38-40	.950	28-98	126-5.3	43-1	28	39	5	10	340-14.2
KEY, Zed	24-1	387-16.1	60-112	.536	2-7	.286	57-79	.722	48-59	107-4.5	49-0	15	18	15	5	179-7.5
OKPARA, Felix	23-23	537-23.4	63-102	.618	0-2	.000	26-41	.634	56-100	156-6.8	65-2	12	23	56	9	152-6.6
MAHAFFEY, Evan	24-24	579-24.1	51-107	.477	2-13	.154	22-34	.647	34-72	106-4.4	60-2	43	25	15	30	126-5.3
BONNER, Dale	24-0	455-19.0	38-121	.314	17-60	.283	19-31	.613	5-52	57-2.4	26-0	31	12	3	15	112-4.7
MIDDLETON, Scotty	21-0	325-15.5	30-82	.366	15-42	.357	7-15	.467	10-20	30-1.4	21-0	16	11	7	4	82-3.9
ROYAL, Devin	21-0	172-8.2	25-49	.510	2-8	.250	15-25	.600	18-23	41-2.0	28-0	7	13	7	4	67-3.2
HARDMAN, Bowen	11-0	41-3.8	8-17	.471	6-13	.462	0-0	.000	0-3	3-0.3	0-0	0	0	0	0	22-2.0
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
PARKS, Austin	7-0	15-2.2	0-0	.000	0-0	.000	1-2	.500	0-4	4-0.6	2-0	1	1	0	1	1-0.1
CHATMAN, Taison	8-0	26-3.2	0-8	.000	0-7	.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								43-33	76			12				
Total	**24**	**4880**	**633-1418**	**.446**	**171-507**	**.337**	**370-485**	**.763**	**274-624**	**898-37.4**	**399-6**	**337**	**248**	**111**	**125**	**1807-75.3**
Opponents	**24**	**4875**	**614-1420**	**.432**	**169-469**	**.360**	**284-407**	**.698**	**244-569**	**813-33.9**	**445-10**	**265**	**251**	**63**	**117**	**1681-70.0**

Ohio State On Pace For Record-Low Attendance

Ohio State's midseason struggles have been reflected not only in the Big Ten Standings, but also in the program's home attendance.

Through 14 home games this season, Ohio State has drawn in an average of 10,786 fans at Value City Arena. This puts the program on pace to have the lowest attendance average in the program's history while playing at the 18,809-seat venue, which the Buckeyes have called home since the 1998-1999 season.

While the Buckeyes have welcomed a few respectable crowds this season, totaling 12,704 fans on Nov. 10 against then-No.15 Texas A&M and 15,267 spectators on Jan. 20 against Penn State, they have played in front of sparse crowds more often than not. Eight of their first 14 home games this season had an attendance of 11,000 or fewer, including the Buckeyes' Nov. 15 contest against mid-major Merrimack that drew in 7,929 fans, the smallest crowd for a men's basketball regular-season game in Value City Arena history.

Ohio State's lack of fan enthusiasm this season was perhaps most evident during the team's 87-75 home loss to then-No. 14 Illinois on Jan. 30. Despite the Illini entering the contest with a 16-4 overall record and top-15 national ranking, Ohio State welcomed a late-arriving and early-exiting crowd of 10,285, the team's lowest attendance for a conference game this season.

These types of crowds have the Buckeyes on pace to break the program's previous record-low attendance average of 12,181, which was set a season ago during Ohio State's lackluster campaign. This continues a steady decline in attendance for Holtmann's program since the COVID-19 pandemic, with attendance also dropping from 14,531 in 2019-20 to 13,276 in 2021-22 before falling again last season.

Despite the steady decline, both Holtmann and his staff have consistently expressed their appreciation toward the Scarlet and Gray faithful – particularly with the "Buckeye NutHouse" student section – for their efforts and participation this season.

"I will say this, our NutHouse, our student section, they've been phenomenal," Holtmann said on Jan. 16. "I want to give a shout-out to them. I love that we've had such phenomenal support from our students. They bring so much energy to the game, you miss them when they're not here. We had a great home crowd against Wisconsin."

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

Holtmann Questions Team's Toughness After Huskers Loss

Throughout most of the season, Holtmann has remained steadfast in his support of his team, even saying after Ohio State's home loss to Wisconsin on Jan. 12 that he has a "high-level belief" his squad will emerge from a tough early January stretch.

That unwavering confidence seemed to waver in the minutes after the Buckeyes' disappointing loss to Nebraska on Jan. 23, where his team jumped out to a nine-point first-half lead before being outscored 70-47 in the final 31:36 of game action.

Holtmann expressed his dissatisfaction in his team's performance to 97.1's Paul Keels and Ron Stokes, specifically pointing to their overall lack of toughness and inability to rebound as two key qualms for the head coach.

"We weren't physical or tough enough," Holtmann said. "That is ultimately on me. We were too soft at times with the ball, soft with our cuts and soft defensively. We have to be better in that area. That was clear. I think you saw it on the glass, for sure."

Ohio State had just six offensive rebounds and 28 total rebounds, two areas the coach has consistently established as a major emphasis for his team all season. He said these efforts, which allowed the Buckeyes to be out-rebounded 35-28 by the Cornhuskers – who entered the contest tied for 118th in the nation in rebounding margin at 2.8 – were simply inexcusable.

Chris Holtmann

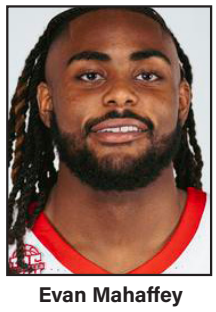
"For us to only have six offensive rebounds, that is a joke for us right now," Holtmann said. "We are a better rebounding team than that. Across the board, we have to be better. We are not playing with the kind of force we need to, and that falls on me."

Despite the change in tune toward his team, Holtmann said these shortcomings fall on the head coach himself, who has received a considerable share of criticism from fans and those who closely follow the program for his midseason struggles.

"Across the board, we just weren't nearly tough enough," Holtmann said. "Ultimately, that's my fault. I take responsibility for that. We just weren't as physical and as tough as we needed to be. And give (Nebraska) credit, they took advantage. Good team."

Mahaffey's Father Recovering After Heart Transplant

Sophomore guard Evan Mahaffey and his family received some much-needed positive news on Jan. 21 when his father, Jamie, underwent a successful heart transplant at Vanderbilt University Medical Center following a long battle with heart disease. The elder Mahaffey had initial complications from the surgery and was put on life support for two days but is now on the road to recovery and in stable condition.


Evan Mahaffey

"He is awake and talking," Jamie Mahaffey's wife, Robyn, wrote on the family's GoFundMe page on Jan. 29. "They removed the ventilator a couple of hours ago ... Another step in the right direction.

"Slow and steady right now. One step at a time. Praying for all systems in the body to work as God planned. Praying for Jamie's renewed strength."

Jamie Mahaffey, a former basketball player at Ohio University and head coach at North College Hill High School in Cincinnati – where he won three state championships and coached future NBA players O.J. Mayo and Bill Walker – was first diagnosed with heart disease in 2012. His health took a downturn in 2022 when he developed congestive heart failure, a condition that doctors deemed serious enough for him to begin the long process of getting a heart transplant,

While waiting for the transplant, the Mahaffey family organized a GoFundMe page in January to directly aid their medical needs, including the costs associated with his left ventricular assist device (LVAD), an electromechanical device that provides support for cardiac circulation. As of Feb. 9, the fundraiser earned nearly $69,000 in donations – still shy of its $150,000 goal – including contributions from teammates Jamison Battle, Roddy Gayle Jr. and Zed Key.

"That means the world," Evan Mahaffey told The Columbus Dispatch. "Coming in as a transfer, finding your niche with the team, I effortlessly clicked into this team and it makes it way easier that you have these guys around me. Knowing how much they support me and care, it's amazing. They could just say, 'We're praying for you,' and that would be enough, but they wanted to give money and I love them for it."

According to the GoFundMe, Jamie Mahaffey was able to watch his son compete in the Buckeyes' Jan. 30 game against Illinois from the hospital. Evan Mahaffey totaled 13 points on 6-of-7 shooting in the loss and said after the game that he spoke with his father over the phone before taking the floor, which he acknowledged as a special moment for him and his family.

"It's really exciting to have my dad (watching)," he said. "Knowing that he can watch the games a little bit more makes me really happy. I was able to talk to him a little before the game. That's why I do it, for my family. Being able to hear his voice really made me smile."

According to multiple reports, Jamie Mahaffey is continuing his road to recovery and is expected to be released from the hospital in February. He is also expected to stay in Nashville until March before returning home to Cincinnati.

Other Notes And Tidbits

• Holtmann provided his first comments on Bjork on Jan. 22: "I talked to Ross and had a great conversation. We had an introductory, really good conversation. I've heard really good things about his abilities for fundraising and NIL in this new space. I talked to some industry people who have all said really positive things, so I'm looking forward to it."

• Former Ohio State players Meechie Johnson and Seth Towns are both excelling on their new teams this season. Johnson, who transferred to South Carolina last season after spending two years with the Buckeyes, is leading the Gamecocks in minutes (29.0) and points (14.1) while also adding 4.2 rebounds and 3.0 assists. He helped South Carolina take down then-No. 6 Kentucky on Jan. 23, totaling 14 points, three rebounds and four assists. Towns, who is in his eighth year of college basketball and was at Ohio State from 2020-2022, is contributing 15.2 points, 6.5 rebounds and 2.5 assists per contest for Howard.

• Battle was named on Feb. 1 as one of 10 players on the Julius Erving Award watch list, which recognizes the top small forward in all of college basketball. The fifth-year ranks third on the team in scoring at 14.2 points per game and first in the Big Ten in three-point shooting percentage at 43.2 percent.

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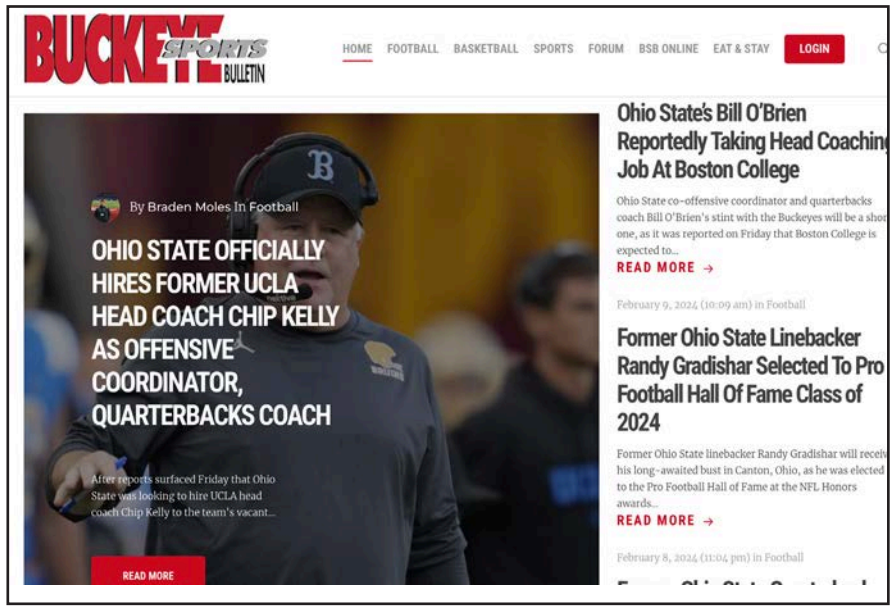

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Holtmann On Thin Ice As Tough Season Rolls On

By PATRICK ENGELS
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

Fresh off perhaps one of the worst losses in his seven years as head coach of the Ohio State men's basketball program, a visibly frustrated Chris Holtmann stepped up to the lectern inside Value City Arena on Feb. 6 to field questions from a set of eager reporters.

Just prior to taking the stand, Holtmann and the Buckeyes saw an 18-point second-half lead turn into a three-point loss to then 13-9 Indiana, a significant turn of events that extended Ohio State's losing streak to five games and dropped its conference record to 3-9.

The loss was an all-too familiar feeling for the sparse crowd of 11,157 fans inside Value City Arena that night. Not only did it give Ohio State its second defeat of the season where it held an 18-point lead – the other being an 83-80 loss to Penn State on Dec. 9 – but it continued a downward trend for the program that consists of strong starts to the season followed by a collapse in conference play, with Holtmann's squad earning an 18-4 record in the nonconference but just an 9-24 record in the Big Ten over the last two seasons.

For Holtmann, the blown lead to the Hoosiers – and perhaps this extended stretch of poor play – left him searching for answers after the game, leading to a short six-minute press conference that included many questions and as many quick responses from the coach.

"I think it's frustrating for everybody," Holtmann said. "It's obviously been a really hard stretch for all of our players and coaches, so we have to find a way out of it."

247Sports beat writer Patrick Murphy, who has covered Ohio State for each of Holtmann's first seven seasons, told Buckeye Sports Bulletin that the Indiana postgame press conference was as close to rock bottom as he remembered for the Holtmann-led Buckeyes. To him, it seemed like the beginning of the end for Holtmann's tenure as Ohio State's head coach, one which may ultimately be defined more so by his recent disappointing seasons rather than his more successful campaigns during his first five years at the helm.

"That press conference felt as close to the end as I remember thinking," Murphy said. "It felt very similar to the last year with (former Ohio State head coach Thad) Matta. Everyone in the room kind of knew what was coming. This one felt different, especially blowing an 18-point lead at home for the second time this year."

A Breath Of Fresh Air

That low point was reached a mere 21 months after Holtmann received a three-year contract extension from athletic director Gene Smith, signaling a belief in Holtmann's future at Ohio State. And contrary to the current public sentiment, both Murphy and 247Sports beat writer Steve Helwagen said they sensed great optimism among both fans and those close to the program when Holtmann was hired by Smith to take over on June 9, 2017.

Ohio State had experienced great success under the leadership of Matta, who led the Buckeyes to two Final Four appearances (2007, 2012), nine NCAA Tournaments and five Big Ten regular-season championships from 2004-17. But the program fizzled under the leadership of the hampered coach during his last two seasons, causing Ohio State to miss the NCAA Tournament in 2015 and 2016 and compile just an 18-18 conference record.

FILE PHOTO

CLOCK IS TICKING — The season is beginning to wind down for the Ohio State men's basketball team, and the same may be true for head coach Chris Holtmann's tenure with the Buckeyes.

This stretch compelled Smith to make a change and ultimately bring in the then-45-year-old Holtmann, who had previously led Butler to three straight NCAA Tournament berths and a combined 70-31 record while leading the Bulldogs from 2014-17.

"The hope was that (Holtmann) would get the program back on solid ground," Helwagen said. "Thad had a problem at the end, health-wise, and he wasn't able to recruit to the level that he had previously, and the talent just wasn't coming in the door like it had been previously. They needed a coach to come in and solidify things, and I think he did that. I think there were a lot of high hopes that he'd be the guy to get it back up to where Thad had it."

While Holtmann may not have been the most popular option amongst fans to replace Matta – then-Chicago Bulls and West Virginia head coaches Fred Hoiberg and Bob Huggins circulated as potential names that offseason – Murphy said that Holtmann helped manufacture some added excitement around the program with his actions during the beginning of his coaching tenure, particularly with his approach on the recruiting trail.

He said Holtmann placed a major emphasis early in his Ohio State tenure on recruiting and retaining high school prospects in Ohio, in addition to across the country, an area that he thinks the program struggled to find success with during the final two seasons under Matta.

"They had to repair some of the relationships with high schools in Ohio but also nationally," he said. "Especially the ones out of Ohio that had kind of fallen at the wayside towards the end of the Matta era because Thad wasn't on the road recruiting due to his health. The assistant coaches were doing it but probably weren't doing as good of a job.

"Chris and his staff had to hit a cultural reset, both within the program with some guys who weren't maybe a good fit, but also (being able to) establish themselves like any new coach does at a program and also put the Ohio State name back in people's minds. I do know that there were some things that had to be massaged over early on in recruiting."

Holtmann made his recruiting intentions clear during his first few years at Ohio State. Following Matta's final class in 2016 that ranked 42nd nationally, Holtmann signed top-30 classes in each of his first three seasons, an impressive haul that included six top-100 prospects. These three classes consisted of several Buckeyes who would make significant impacts for the program during their respective careers, such as center Kaleb Wesson (2017), forwards Kyle Young (2017) and E.J. Liddell (2019), and guard Duane Washington Jr. (2018).

Due to the development and leadership of these recruits – along with the players Holtmann inherited from Matta, including future NBA players Keita Bates-Diop and Jae'Sean Tate, among others – Holtmann experienced major success at the start of his coaching career.

He won 66 of his 100 games from 2017-2020 and led the Buckeyes to the round of 32 of the NCAA Tournament in each of his first two seasons, excluding the COVID-19-affected 2019-2020 campaign when Ohio State was projected as a No. 5 seed by many experts. It was a strong start to his tenure that Murphy took as a sign of more positive things to come.

"The fact that they were able to kind of right the ship after those last couple of years and get this team back to tournament contention consistently was certainly a positive start," Murphy said. "That second year when they upset Iowa State and then lost to Houston, to get in as an 11-seed and beat a five, people were really excited about that."

Holtmann and the Buckeyes continued that positive momentum into 2020-21, where, led by the trio of Liddell, Washington and Young, they earned a fourth consecutive 20-win season, finished in fifth place in the Big Ten and had their ranking soar to as high as No. 4 in the AP top 25 in February. Ohio State' strong regular season – along with its conference tournament run to the Big Ten Championship Game – gave them a No. 2 seed in the NCAA Tournament, its highest ranking since earning a No. 1 seed in 2010-11.

"(In 2020-21), it was such a weird year," Helwagen said. "They got a two-seed, but down the stretch, they were spewing oil. They were losing to good teams at home – Michigan, Illinois beat them in Columbus. But they also gutted out some games on the road that gave you the hope that maybe they were pretty good."

A Sign Of Things To Come?

Ohio State did enough that year to give Holtmann his highest seeding in the Big Dance, but the program's positive momentum seemed to hit a screeching halt in the Buckeyes' first-round NCAA Tournament matchup.

Facing off against No. 15 Oral Roberts – led by guard Max Abmas, the NCAA's leading scorer – at Purdue's Mackey Arena, the Buckeyes saw a late second-half lead turn into a shocking 75-72 overtime loss. It was a stunning end to the season that sent the Buckeyes home before the tournament's second weekend for the third time in as many tries under Holtmann, a reality Murphy said not only marked a major turning point for the program, but put the coach under intense fire for the first time in his tenure.

"I've said this to a lot of people – if you are measuring entire success in college basketball on the NCAA Tournament, it's going to be difficult," Murphy said. "Because the tournament, as we know from filling out brackets and whatnot, it's a crapshoot. Teams that make deep runs aren't always the best teams. Should that team have beaten Oral Roberts? Yes. No doubt about it.

"But I always felt that reaction to that (loss), there was more vitriol behind it. E.J. Liddell is getting death threats and things like that after that game. From a perception standpoint, there were already people who were upset with Holtmann. But that was when it really started to turn into more people being upset with Holtmann, and people who were already upset with Holtmann wanting him gone."

While the upset loss to Oral Roberts led to heightened pressure and criticism directed toward Holtmann, Helwagen said the defeat was the start of more dire things to come for the Buckeyes on the court. He said that the team giving up a combined 59 points to Abmas and Oral Roberts forward Kevin Obanor reflected some of the team's most glaring struggles during the past two seasons, particularly with their tendency of allowing lesser-known players to have strong games and showing little situational awareness on the floor.

"They lead the world in getting beat by journeyman guys," Helwagen said. "With Oral Roberts, it was Abmas and Obanor. At some point, somebody has to take a stand, and his teams never do. They never do in that moment, and they never have – at least in the last four years they haven't. It's a recurring theme. They find ways to lose games. That was a perfect example of it.

"That was the day that public sentiment turned against Chris Holtmann. Against a 15-seed, you have to win that game 99 times out of 100, and they lost that game. And then you have games in the years that have followed that have just followed that same blueprint."

The loss to Oral Roberts started a downward spiral for Holtmann's program. The Buckeyes had another good regular season in 2021-22 behind the dynamic duo of Liddell and true freshman standout Malaki Branham, holding a 19-11 record and earning another top-five finish in the Big Ten standings in the regular season.

But, like in previous years, the team's success faded in the postseason, where it fell to 12th-seeded Penn State in the first round of the conference tournament before failing to see the second week of the NCAA Tournament for the fourth time in as many tries.

Then, with Liddell and Branham moving on to the NBA, the program took another considerable dip last season, with the Buckeyes jumping out to a 10-3 start in the nonconference before losing 14 of their next 15 conference games and missing the NCAA tournament for the first time in the Holtmann-era with a 16-19 overall record.

While many believed Ohio State would bounce back this season, the team has instead turned into a carbon copy of last year's squad. Like last season, the Buckeyes – led by sophomore guards Roddy Gayle Jr. and Bruce Thronton – started strong, holding a 12-2 record and a quality win over then-No.17 Alabama before the second week of January. But the team has since sputtered again in Big Ten play, dropping eight of its last 10 games from Jan. 6 to Feb. 10 and falling to 13th place in the conference as Buckeye Sports Bulletin went to press.

According to Helwagen, Ohio State's extended struggles – particularly in the Big Ten – stem from a series of roster management mistakes Holtmann and his staff made in the past four seasons. The roster has been hindered by the NBA draft and transfer portal in recent years, with star players such as Branham, Liddell and Brice Sensabaugh taking their talents to the next level and promising youngsters such as D.J. Carton (Marquette), Alonzo Gaffney (Arizona State) and Meechie Johnson (South Carolina) all finding more favorable fits at other schools.

Helwagen admitted that many of these departures are merely bad luck and circumstances that fall out of the head coach's control, but he did say that Holtmann is to blame for his inability to adapt and bring in the right players to replace them through both the transfer portal and through recruiting, an area where his colleagues are finding success.

"There have been a number of guys who have been in and out of the lineup over his time as the coach. He's had a lot of bad luck, a couple of one-and-dones that I don't think anybody foresaw with Malaki Branham and Brice Sensabaugh.

"The issue in college basketball today is you have to embrace the churn. You lose three guys, you have to bring in four guys. And not only do you have to bring in four guys, but you have to bring in four guys who can play. That's been the issue, I think, with Holtmann.

"They've gone to the transfer portal and just gotten bodies. But they didn't get people who could do both, play offense and defense. Too many one-dimensional players, too many role players and not enough frontline guys that are going to help you win critical Big Ten games and have success in the NCAA Tournament. The recruiting classes looked great. But it never translated to a requisite amount of success on the court, and that's a problem."

Murphy also alluded to these roster management issues as a major reason for the downturn of the program, specifically pointing to the areas where Holtmann has fallen flat in recruiting. Since 2021, Ohio State has brought in a strong group of premier talent, adding eight top-100 players, including three top-50 prospects during the 2023 recruiting cycle with four-stars Taison Chatman, Scotty Middleton and Devin Royal.

But despite these talented classes, the Buckeyes have still failed to bring in and develop players who can meet the physical demands of a grueling season in the Big Ten, something Murphy thought was on full display in Ohio State's Feb. 6 loss to Indiana.

"You look at Indiana that night, they're just bigger," Murphy said. "I think Bruce is a really good point guard. But physically, you watch him stand next to (Indiana guard Trey Galloway) and he doesn't seem to stand up stature-wise. It's basketball. Size matters. So in recruiting, you obviously want to find talented players, and I think they've done that. But just the physical side of it, I wonder if they have (fallen flat).

"People have complained about Zed (Key) for the last four years about how he's not a Power Five-level center because he's not tall enough. And that's not his fault. You needed more big men, like actually big men. They've gotten that in Felix (Okpara), for sure. There's just not enough. Roddy looks like a basketball player, but he's kind of skinny. He's put on more weight, but when he gets stuck in the paint – some guys, especially in the Big Ten, top guards, just physically dominate their way to the basket. And he's just not able to do that at this point."

Those are among the big-picture issues that have negatively impacted Ohio State in recent years, but Murphy also listed some ways the program has fallen short with its performance and execution on the court. He argued that Holtmann's teams have particularly struggled throughout to provide a counter to the opponent's original gameplan and come up with the necessary adjustments when they begin to assert their will.

"(Indiana) just ran pick-and-roll with (forward Malik) Renaeu and Galloway the entire second half, and Ohio State couldn't stop it," Murphy said. "You have to be in the huddles to know what they're talking about, but eventually you have to have a plan to stop it when the opponent is doing the same thing over and over and over again and having success."

These types of struggles have put mounting pressure and criticism on Holtmann by fans and those who closely monitor the team, with many believing that his final coaching days at Ohio State are inching closer and closer as the losses continue to pile up. Helwagen, who has seen Ohio State cut ties with multiple head coaches since he began covering the team – including Matta in 2016, Jim O'Brien in 2004 and Randy Ayers in 1997 – said he thinks Ohio State's extended stretch of poor team performance may have Holtmann on track to lose his job at the end of the season, which he gives about an 80 percent chance of happening if they continue their losing ways.

"The overall story just hasn't had a happy ending," he said. "Every year becomes unfulfilling. And to have the first losing season in 19 years, they're going to have back-to-back losing seasons in the Big Ten, almost certainly. Even though it's not there yet, it's almost certain to happen. That is a certainty at this point, with the teams they still have to play. They are going to have a losing record in the Big Ten two years in a row.

"Ordinarily, that's been a recipe to lose your job. Randy Ayers, they abided him. He went several years that way, three or four years, before they finally fired him. O'Brien had the off-the-court issues but things were trending poorly for him. Matta had two years where he didn't make the NCAA Tournament and his health dictated what happened with him. Now you're just flat-out not winning games, and that can't go on forever."

Decision Looms For New AD

Although many fans are in favor of Ohio State making a change at the top of the men's basketball program, the decision on whether to relieve Holtmann of his duties may be more challenging than the general public thinks. In addition to the $15 million buyout the university would have to pay if the school decides to make a change before April 1, Ohio State is undergoing a whirlwind of change at both the academic and athletic level, with William "Ted" Carter already taking over as university president on Jan. 1 and Smith handing over the reins to former Texas A&M athletic director Ross Bjork on July 1.

"Look, he seems like a great guy," Bjork said on Jan. 18. "He seems like he's doing a great job. Obviously, I don't like losing that game (at Michigan on Jan. 15). We talked about how does he build chemistry and culture on the stretch run. You've got basically 2½ months left of the regular season or so, so I know he's looking to finish strong."

With the athletic department currently heading into the transition phase toward the end of Ohio State's season – Bjork plans to step in as an advisor to Smith in March – the decision to fire Holtmann after the season may not be an obvious one. While Bjork comes in with a clean slate, even if he maintains that, decision-making will be Smith's through June 30. Smith has remained steadfast in his support for Holtmann throughout his tenure, meaning several factors will complicate the eventual decision.

Despite the gradual change in leadership in Ohio State's athletic department, both Helwagen and Murphy anticipate a change to be made at the end of this season – barring a significant change in direction for the program to end the year – with the move likely to be made right after the Buckeyes are eliminated from the Big Ten tournament.

"Unless they are able to start winning some games, I would say he has about a 20 percent chance of coming back," Helwagen said. "If a move is to be made, it will be made as soon as the team is eliminated from the tournament and there's no hope of an NCAA (Tournament) berth, which would be the earliest possible moment. You have to start that transition. You have to get somebody hired, you have to start recruiting. You have to hit the road, get in the portal. Either Holtmann has to rebuild the roster, or whoever they hire – as soon as humanly possible, as soon as whatever team that coach is done with their postseason, you make the move.

"You back up the Brinks truck and you quit screwing around with men's basketball. Men's basketball at Ohio State has been an afterthought for so long. This is the administration, the marketing support. They never retrofitted the building the way it needed to be fitted to have a great atmosphere. Trying to get to a game is a pain-in-the-behind for fans. They've laid down on the vine, from the top down. Maybe Bjork will pick up that ball and run with it."

Regardless of what happens with the men's basketball program moving forward, the last few years have cast a negative light on his run leading the Buckeyes. Despite the early successes and the crop of talented players he has developed during his reign, Holtmann's time at Ohio State is being defined by his failures more than his successes, a reality that may cost him his job at the end of the season.

"I think that his tenure at Ohio State has been diminished by injuries to key players, unfulfilled promise for some players – the vagaries of 20-year-old kids that just expect too much too soon, who aren't patient," Helwagen said. "And yet he probably needed to do a better job of managing that and overcoming some of that, and it just hasn't worked out.

"You're left where you're at, in your sixth and seventh seasons. You're under .500 in the Big Ten. That's not acceptable. At a place with resources like Ohio State, it's not a basketball school like Indiana or Kentucky, but it's not a poverty school like Rutgers or some of these other schools that are being propped up on Big Ten's TV money. Ohio State's not that way. Ohio State is a cash machine that has the resources to win in any sport it chooses to win in. And for whatever reason, it hasn't happened in men's basketball.

"It's unfortunate for him that it's just never gotten where it needed to be. He seems like a really good person. He's been great, by and large with the media, and he just had some really bad luck with injuries and guys choosing to leave, the one-and-dones. It just never clicked."

McMahon Hitting Another Level Since Christmas

After Ohio State forward Cotie McMahon's outstanding freshman season, it was impossible not to wonder if a sophomore slump might be in store for the Big Ten Freshman of the Year. Teams that previously had no film on McMahon would suddenly have a full season's worth, and there would be no overlooking her as they prepared for Ohio State this season.

DOUBLE DRIBBLE
Braden Moles

McMahon had an admirable start to this year's campaign, averaging 16.9 points and 5.3 rebounds on 55.6 percent shooting through Dec. 10. Fifth-year guard Jacy Sheldon, not surprisingly, was the team's leading scorer, but McMahon was more than holding her own, including separate outings of 27, 24 and 22 points through the first nine games of the season.

But after that 27-point outing against Penn State on Dec. 10, McMahon cooled off. The next four games were undoubtedly the worst stretch of her career, as she totaled just 19 points and 16 rebounds over 92 combined minutes, including in losses to UCLA on Dec. 18 and at Michigan on Dec. 30. She attempted 31 shots during those four games but connected on just four – 12.9 percent from the field – including an 0 for 4 outing against Belmont on Dec. 22 in which her lone point of the contest came at the free-throw line.

"She was kind of in a little bit of a funk there," Ohio State head coach Kevin McGuff said on Jan. 21. "She wasn't playing real well."

But the flip to January seemed to flip a switch in McMahon. Beginning with a 10-point outing in Ohio State's 90-60 win at Northwestern on Jan. 5, McMahon has scored in double digits in every game since, averaging 14.5 points, 8.3 rebounds and 2.9 assists on 45.9 percent shooting from Jan. 5 through Feb. 11, a far cry from her slow December.

Perhaps the most significant sign that McMahon had returned to her freshman form came on Jan. 21, when Ohio State hosted then-No. 2 Iowa at Value City Arena. The Hawkeyes had won the last time they were on the Buckeyes' home court last season, snapping Ohio State's 19-game winning streak, and Iowa guard Caitlin Clark gave the Buckeyes some added momentum heading into this year's matchup.

"Caitlin Clark took the 'Dub Chain' shirt, as a little joke or whatever, which is cool," McMahon said. "I was just thinking in my head, seeing that, we just have to smile through it and move on to the next."

That boost was evident for McMahon against the Hawkeyes this time around. She finished with a career-high 33 points on 12-of-23 shooting along with 12 rebounds in the 100-92 win in overtime, beginning a streak of four consecutive double-doubles for the sophomore. She also came through for the Buckeyes in crunch time, scoring 22 of the team's 42 points in the fourth quarter and overtime.

"She has practiced extremely hard and extremely well every single day since we came out of Christmas break," McGuff said, "and so I'm really happy to see her be able to apply that to the game today. She was just so effective around the rim."

It was a welcome return to the spotlight for McMahon, who figures to be a significant part of Ohio State's success this season as it looks to return to the top of the Big Ten and build on last season's run to the Elite Eight. But even though it took time for McMahon to return to form, her teammates were confident she would come around.

"She's come a long way," Sheldon said. "She had a heck of a game (against Iowa) today, and she does so much for us and is so special and important to this team. I told her it was eventually going to come and she's eventually going to go off, and she did. She helped us win."

Iowa-OSU Most-Watched In-Season Game Since 2010

Ohio State's win over Iowa on Jan. 23 had a record-breaking crowd of 18,660 fans, but the records were not limited to those inside Value City Arena. The broadcast of Ohio State and Iowa on NBC averaged 1.93 million viewers, making it the most-watched regular-season women's college basketball game since 2010.

Viewership for the contest peaked at 3.9 million viewers right as the game went to overtime, where the Buckeyes outscored the Hawkeyes 17-9 in the extra frame. The average viewership was the most since No. 9 Stanford's win over No. 1 UConn on Dec. 30, 2010, drew 2.11 million viewers as the Cardinal snapped the Huskies' 90-game winning streak.

While Ohio State has brought in impressive ratings over the past few seasons, much of the added attention was attributed to Clark, who has consistently brought in crowds both in-person and over the airwaves. In the loss to the Buckeyes, she still finished with 45 points on 12-of-25 shooting

2023-24 Ohio State Women's Basketball Statistics

21-3 Overall (12-1 Big Ten)
Statistics through games of Feb. 11

Player	G-GS	Min.-Avg.	FG-FGA	Pct.	3P-3PA	Pct.	FT-FTA	Pct.	Rebounds O-D	Rebounds T-Avg.	PF-FO	A	TO	BS	ST	Pts.-Avg.
SHELDON, Jacy	24-24	781-32.6	152-303	.502	40-112	.357	79-91	.868	24-54	78-3.3	45-0	79	59	3	53	423-17.6
MCMAHON, Cotie	24-24	671-28.0	117-252	.464	11-47	.234	86-135	.637	38-117	155-6.5	62-2	51	63	12	27	331-13.8
THIERRY, Taylor	24-24	638-26.6	99-160	.619	12-23	.522	75-97	.773	59-78	137-5.7	58-1	38	26	13	42	285-11.9
TAYLOR, Celeste	24-24	674-28.1	87-218	.399	26-87	.299	35-56	.625	25-81	106-4.4	70-2	75	55	24	48	235-9.8
MIKULASIKOVA, R.	23-23	553-24.1	85-174	.489	27-69	.391	23-26	.885	7-56	63-2.7	40-1	60	37	9	13	220-9.6
SHUMATE, Emma	22-0	227-10.3	35-75	.467	27-58	.466	3-6	.500	9-14	23-1.0	20-0	9	8	8	4	100-4.5
HARRIS, Rikki	23-0	413-18.0	30-74	.405	17-54	.315	24-35	.686	6-40	46-2.0	36-0	29	16	6	20	101-4.4
COLLINS, Diana	15-0	168-11.2	20-64	.313	6-26	.231	8-11	.727	8-13	21-1.4	22-1	4	9	1	8	54-3.6
PARKS, Taiyier	22-0	216-9.8	30-63	.476	0-2	.000	14-24	.583	18-34	52-2.4	32-1	8	10	5	9	74-3.4
WALKER, Eboni	19-1	219-11.5	23-51	.451	0-2	.000	10-13	.769	23-31	54-2.8	18-0	26	14	1	6	56-2.9
GREENE, Madison	16-0	202-12.6	14-42	.333	7-20	.350	8-10	.800	5-10	15-0.9	17-0	30	12	1	14	43-2.7
VRES, Karla	6-0	17-2.9	3-3	1.000	0-0	.000	0-0	.000	1-2	3-0.5	3-0	1	1	0	0	6-1.0
HENDERSON, Kaia	13-0	64-5.0	6-16	.375	0-2	.000	0-0	.000	1-9	10-0.8	5-0	6	5	0	0	12-0.9
CARSON, Faith	5-0	08-1.7	0-1	.000	0-0	.000	2-2	1.000	1-4	5-1.0	2-0	3	2	0	0	2-0.4
Team									30-43	73			7			
Total	**24**	**4853**	**701-1496**	**.469**	**173-502**	**.345**	**367-506**	**.725**	**255-586**	**841-35.0**	**430-8**	**419**	**324**	**83**	**244**	**1942-80.9**
Opponents	**24**	**4860**	**540-1344**	**.402**	**124-432**	**.287**	**303-414**	**.732**	**251-602**	**853-35.5**	**450-9**	**281**	**504**	**55**	**138**	**1507-62.8**

Plank's Cafe

Cotie McMahon
Sophomore Forward
Centerville, Ohio

PLANK'S LADY BUCK OF THE MONTH FOR JANUARY

with three rebounds and seven assists.

Morrow Identified As Rising Star In Coaching

Ohio State associate head coach Carla Morrow, who is in her fifth season with the Buckeyes, was identified by The Athletic's Chantel Jennings on Jan. 29 as a rising star in the coaching industry and one who could soon be courted to lead another program.

"With four West Coast teams entering the Big Ten, the conference's recruiting footprint is expanding, but athletic directors will value coaches who have a foothold in a specific area," Jennings wrote. "Morrow, who has spent the majority of her career in Ohio, has just that."

Prior to arriving at Ohio State, Morrow was an assistant coach under McGuff at Xavier from 2007-11. But even after McGuff left to become the head coach at Washington, Morrow was retained by not just one, but two coaching staffs, remaining with the program until leaving to become an assistant with the WNBA's Chicago Sky in 2017.

"A sign of how well respected she was and how well she fit into different staffs, she remained at Xavier with the next two head coaches before departing in April 2017 to coach with the Chicago Sky," Jenning's wrote. "Morrow's WNBA experience will be attractive to athletic directors, as it shows a deep understanding of getting players to the next level."

The last assistant of McGuff's to grab a head coaching position was Tamika Williams-Jeter, who worked under McGuff at Ohio State from 2019-21 before becoming head coach at Wittenberg and later becoming the head coach at Dayton before last season.

2024 Commit Cambridge Named McDonald's All-American

Montverde (Fla.) Academy five-star point guard Jaloni Cambridge (5-6), a member of Ohio State's 2024 recruiting class who will sign her national letter of intent in April, was named a McDonald's All-American on Jan. 23 and will participate in the McDonald's All-American Game on April 2 in Houston.

Cambridge, the No. 3 overall recruit in 2024 according to ESPN, averaged 26.9 points, 7.6 rebounds, 4.3 steals and 3.8 assists last season for Ensworth High School in Nashville, Tenn., before she transferred to Montverde Academy for her senior season. At Montverde, she is averaging 20.1 points, 6.6 rebounds, 8.3 assists and 3.0 steals per game.

A former Tennessee Gatorade Player of the Year, Cambridge is the 14th pledge to Ohio State to be named a McDonald's All-American.

She joins a star-studded list that includes Kierstan Bell (2019), Tori McCoy (2016), Kelsey Mitchell (2014), Sierra Calhoun (2014), Linnae Harper and Stephanie Mavunga (2013), Tayler Hill (2009), Samantha Prahalis (2008), Alison Jackson and Jantel Lavender (2007), Marscilla Packer (2004) and Brandie Hoskins and Jessica Davenport (2003).

Ohio State Up To No. 2 Seed In Women's Bracketology

According to ESPN women's bracketologist Charlie Creme's most recent update as of Feb. 9 – at which time the Buckeyes had a 20-3 overall record – Ohio State is viewed as a No. 2 seed in the upcoming NCAA tournament.

Securing a top-four seed would ensure that Ohio State gets to host the opening weekend of the tournament. The Buckeyes had a three seed last season, winning opening-weekend games against James Madison and North Carolina.

Curiously enough, Creme's bracketology includes South Carolina, NC State, Stanford and Iowa – which Ohio State beat on Jan. 21 – as his No. 1 seeds, with Colorado, UCLA and Texas as the No. 2 seeds joining Ohio State.

The Buckeyes and Hawkeyes are on a collision course for the Big Ten regular-season championship on March 3 in Iowa City, Iowa, but it could also serve as a de facto play-in game for one of the tournament's No. 1 seeds.

Elsewhere in Creme's bracketology, the Big Ten is represented by seven teams in total, including No. 4 Indiana, No. 7 Michigan State, No. 8 Penn State, No. 10 Nebraska and No. 11 Michigan, with Maryland one of the first four out and Minnesota in the next four out.

McMahon Is Plank's Lady Buck Of The Month For January

After a slow December, McMahon has taken off over the past several weeks to turn in a handful of impressive performances for Ohio State, earning the Plank's Lady Buck of the Month honor for January.

During the opening month of 2024, McMahon averaged 15.1 points and 8.3 rebounds on 42.2 percent shooting. Her month was highlighted by her career-high 33-point outing in Ohio State's win in overtime over Iowa on Jan. 21 in which she also had 12 rebounds. That was one of three double-doubles posted by McMahon in January.

McMahon also had a shot at the record book in Ohio State's 71-68 win at Purdue on Jan. 28, finishing with 10 points, 12 rebounds and eight assists, just a couple of dishes off only the fourth triple-double in program history.

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 (14-10, 4-9)

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, L 83-69; **27** at Northwestern, L 83-58; **30** ILLINOIS, L 87-75.

Feb. 2 at Iowa, L 79-77; **6** INDIANA, L 76-73; **10** MARYLAND, W 79-75 (OT); **13** at Wisconsin; **18** PURDUE; **22** at Minnesota; **25** at Michigan State; **29** NEBRASKA

March 3 MICHIGAN; **10** at Rutgers.

WOMEN'S BASKETBALL (21-3, 12-1)

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, W 67-59; **28** at Purdue, W 71-68.

Feb. 1 WISCONSIN, W 87-49; **4** INDIANA, W 74-69; **8** at Minnesota, W 71-47; **11** at Michigan State, W 86-71; **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.; M 4-1, W 2-3 **24-25** Central Collegiate Fencing Conference Championships.

MEN'S ICE HOCKEY (9-15-4, 1-15-2)

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, L 5-2; **19** Minnesota, L 5-2, L 6-3; **26** Penn State, L 4-3, L 4-3 .

Feb. 2-3 MICHIGAN, L 4-2, L 4-1; **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 (26-2-0, 23-1-0)

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, W 4-2, W 3-2.

Feb. 2-3 BEMIDJI STATE, W 11-1, W 9-1; **9-10** Minnesota State, W 3-0, W 6-2; **16-17** ST. THOMAS; **24-25** Wisconsin.

MEN'S SWIM & DIVE (5-0)

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., 2nd.

Feb. 2 PITTSBURGH, W 179-121; **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 (6-0)

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.m 1st.

Feb. 2 PITTSBURGH, W 202-97; **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 (9-0)

Sept. 18-24 COLUMBUS CHALLENGER, NTS. **30** ITA All-Amercian Championship at Tulsa, Okla., NTS.

Oct. 1-8 ITA All-Amercian 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. 21 Eastern Illinois, W 7-0; Xavier, W 7-0; **24** Northern Kentucky, W 4-0; Toledo, W 7-0; **27** VANDERBILT, W 4-0; **28** BOISE STATE, W 4-0.

Feb. 2 VIRGINIA, W 7-0; **4** WAKE FOREST W 6-1; **11** SOUTH CAROLINA, W 6-1; **16-19** National Team Indoor Championship at New York, N.Y.

OSU First In B1G, Win Streak Up To 11 Games

By BRADEN MOLES
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Editor

It's been a successful stretch for No. 2 Ohio State since Buckeye Sports Bulletin last went to press, winning its last six games to take sole possession of first place in the conference standings and extend the team's winning streak to 11 games.

The recent run includes four wins on the road over Illinois, Purdue, Minnesota and Michigan State, while the Buckeyes also defended their home turf against Wisconsin and Indiana, the latter a top-10 matchup at Value City Arena.

Ohio State Overcomes Big Deficit At Illinois

Ohio State (16-3, 7-1) overcame an 11-point deficit against Illinois (8-10, 2-6) on Jan. 25, coming back for a 67-59 win on the road before 3,254 in the State Farm Center.

Despite committing 15 turnovers for the game and facing a 33-22 deficit at the half, Ohio State outscored Illinois 45-26 in the second half – and forced 21 turnovers of its own in the contest – to secure the victory and increase the team's winning streak to six games.

Ohio State's two leading scorers this season – Jacy Sheldon and sophomore Cotie McMahon – got off to a hot start, combining for the Buckeyes' first 14 points of the game, and they jumped out to a 14-8 lead. Junior guard Taylor Thierry then got on the board, though Ohio State's only other points of the frame were a layup from Taiyier Parks as the Buckeyes led 18-13 at the end of the first.

Illinois forward Kendall Bostic scored out of the break, and the Buckeyes got an ensuing score from Sheldon to make it 20-15, but it began an extended stretch of offensive struggles for Ohio State. After Sheldon's basket, the Fighting Illini took off on a 14-0 run, with the Buckeyes missing on their next seven shots and committing three turnovers.

Ohio State's next score did not come until a layup from Parks with just 1:12 left in the half, ending a 7:55 long scoring drought, though Illinois held a 29-22 lead at that point before going into the locker room up 33-22.

The Buckeyes were outscored 20-4 in the second quarter and shot just 22.2 percent (2 of 9) from the field, and they were out-rebounded 22-13 in the first half. The scoring output in the second frame also set a new program record for the fewest points in a single quarter.

Sheldon was motivated coming out of the half, connecting on back-to-back baskets – the first a three-pointer – that kick-started a 7-1 run to cut the deficit to 34-29 with 8:05 left in the quarter. Illinois responded with back-to-back scores, but Ohio State answered with a 9-0 run – capped by a triple from Celeste Taylor – to make it 39-38.

"We know we can hit shots," Taylor said. "We know that anybody can go up any given night. As long as we're taking the right shots and executing plays, the shots are going to fall."

Illinois forced a pair of turnovers and scored two baskets in the ensuing minutes to maintain a 43-38 lead with 2:51 left in the quarter. The three-pointer by Taylor was ultimately Ohio State's final basket of the frame, and it trailed 45-42 heading into the fourth after free throws from McMahon and Sheldon.

Ohio State stormed back to tie the contest up at 49 with 7:47 left in the game on a jumper by Taylor. The teams then combined to miss their next five shots before McMahon broke through with a bucket to give the Buckeyes a 51-49 lead. Ohio State then scored the next five points to take a 56-49 lead on a three-pointer by McMahon with 4:39 left, a 14-4 run dating back to the beginning of the quarter.

"Once we started moving (the ball), we started getting each other open, started making some really good passes and settling down," Sheldon said. "Taking what they gave us was key."

Illinois responded with a three-pointer from guard Makira Cook and a layup by Bostic to cut the deficit to 58-54 with 2:53 left, but it was held scoreless for nearly two minutes and Ohio State maintained a 61-56 lead with 51 seconds left before closing it out at the line.

Ohio State was led in the win by Sheldon, who had 25 points on 9-of-19 shooting, while McMahon had a double-double with 17 points and 11 rebounds. Taylor also had 14 points for the Buckeyes. Rebeka Mikulášiková passed out six assists but was held to just two points on 1 of 5 shooting. Cook led Illinois with 16 points, and Bostic had a 13-point, 18-rebound double-double, helping the Illini to a 42-34 edge on the glass.

Ohio State 67, Illinois 59

Jan. 25, 2024
State Farm Center • Champaign, Ill.

	1	2	3	4	F
Ohio State (16-3, 7-1)	18	4	20	25	67
Illinois (8-10, 2-6)	13	20	12	14	59

Ohio State		Total	FT	Reb.			
	Min	M-A	M-A	O-D	A	PF	Pts.
Mikulášiková	19	1-5	0-0	0-0	6	4	2
McMahon	37	6-14	3-5	4-7	0	2	17
Thierry	30	1-2	3-4	3-3	1	1	5
Sheldon	40	9-19	5-6	2-4	3	1	25
Taylor	32	5-12	2-2	1-4	2	3	14
Greene	8	0-2	0-0	0-1	0	1	0
Harris	19	0-1	0-0	0-1	0	1	0
Parks	10	2-3	0-1	1-2	0	1	4
Shumate	3	0-0	0-0	0-0	0	0	0
Walker	2	0-1	0-0	0-0	0	0	0
Totals	**200**	**24-59**	**13-18**	**11-23**	**12**	**14**	**67**

Percentages: FG: 40.7%. **FT:** 72.2%. **Three-point field goals**: 6-23 (McMahon 2-5, Sheldon 2-8, Taylor 2-5, Greene 0-1, Harris 0-1, Mikulášiková 0-3). **Team rebounds:** 1. **Blocked shots:** 6 (Harris 2, McMahon 2, Thierry 2). **Turnovers:** 15 (Mikulášiková 4, Taylor 3, McMahon 2, Parks 2, Greene, Harris, Sheldon, Team). **Steals:** 10 (Sheldon 3, Greene 2, Mikulášiková 2, McMahon, Taylor, Thierry).

Illinois		Total	FT	Reb.			
	Min	M-A	M-A	O-D	A	PF	Pts.
Bostic	40	6-8	1-2	5-13	2	3	13
Hobby	27	2-6	0-0	3-3	0	2	4
Bryant	39	5-18	2-4	1-1	1	3	14
Cook	37	7-19	0-0	2-5	5	1	16
McKenzie	25	2-5	3-4	0-1	2	5	7
Dolan	25	2-4	1-2	0-2	1	2	5
Shoup-Hill	7	0-1	0-0	0-1	0	0	0
Totals	**200**	**24-61**	**7-12**	**15-27**	**11**	**16**	**59**

Percentages: FG: 39.3%. **FT:** 58.3%. **Three-point field goals:** 4-14 (Bryant 2-7, Cook 2-5, Hobby 0-1, Shoup-Hill 0-1). **Team rebounds:** 5. **Blocked shots:** 4 (Bostic, Bryant, Dolan, Hobby). **Turnovers:** 21 (Cook 5, McKenzie 5, Bryant 3, Dolan 3, Bostic 2, Hobby 2, Team). **Steals:** 4 (Bostic 2, Bryant 2).
Officials: McConnell, Berger, Knight. **Attendance:** 3,254.

Ohio State 71, Purdue 68

Jan. 28, 2024
Mackey Arena • West Lafayette, Ind.

	1	2	3	4	F
Ohio State (17-3, 8-1)	20	13	20	18	71
Purdue (9-11, 2-7)	19	8	19	22	68

Ohio State		Total	FT	Reb.			
	Min	M-A	M-A	O-D	A	PF	Pts.
Mikulášiková	29	6-10	3-3	0-1	2	5	15
McMahon	29	3-8	4-5	4-8	8	3	10
Thierry	24	5-8	4-4	0-0	0	2	14
Sheldon	40	3-6	2-2	0-1	3	0	9
Taylor	28	2-7	0-2	0-3	4	4	6
Harris	23	2-7	2-2	0-3	1	3	8
Greene	13	1-4	0-0	0-1	3	1	3
Parks	7	0-1	1-2	0-1	1	0	1
Shumate	7	2-2	0-0	0-0	0	0	5
Totals	**200**	**24-53**	**16-20**	**6-23**	**22**	**18**	**71**

Percentages: FG: 45.3%. **FT:** 80.0%. **Three-point field goals:** 7-21 (Harris 2-7, Taylor 2-5, Greene, 1-3, Sheldon 1-2, Shumate 1-1, McMahon 0-1, Mikulášiková 0-2). **Team rebounds:** 7. **Blocked shots:** 4 (Harris, Shumate, Taylor, Thierry). **Turnovers:** 12 (McMahon 3, Mikulášiková 3, Taylor 3, Thierry 2, Sheldon). **Steals:** 6 (Sheldon 3, Harris, Mikulášiková, Thierry).

Purdue		Total	FT	Reb.			
	Min	M-A	M-A	O-D	A	PF	Pts.
Stevenson	17	4-8	4-4	5-2	1	4	12
Harper	23	2-7	4-4	0-4	2	3	8
Terry	40	3-6	2-4	3-5	5	1	8
Ellis	32	5-10	0-2	1-4	1	4	14
Ma. Layden	34	0-4	2-2	0-3	2	2	2
Jones	24	5-11	3-3	0-3	2	2	13
Smith	3	0-1	0-0	0-0	0	0	0
Mc. Layden	11	1-2	0-0	0-0	1	0	3
Reynolds	14	2-3	0-0	1-0	0	1	5
Swanson	2	1-2	0-0	0-0	0	0	3
Totals	**200**	**23-54**	**15-19**	**11-23**	**14**	**17**	**68**

Percentages: FG: 42.6%. **FT:** 78.9%. **Three-point field goals:** 7-21 (Ellis 4-6, Mc. Layden 1-2, Reynolds 1-2, Swanson 1-2, Harper 0-4, Jones 0-1, Ma. Layden 0-3, Terry 0-1). **Team rebounds:** 3. **Blocked shots:** 2 (Reynolds 2). **Turnovers:** 17 (Terry 6, Ellis 2, Harper 2, Stevenson 2, Jones, Ma. Layden, Reynolds, Swanson). **Steals:** 4 (Jones 2, Harper, Terry).
Officials: Pethtel, Daley, Tieman. **Attendance:** 7,132.

Ohio State Holds On For Late Win At Purdue

Ohio State (17-3, 8-1) extended its winning streak to seven games with a 71-68 win at Purdue (9-11, 2-7) on Jan. 28, holding onto the win despite the Boilermakers having a chance to tie the game on the final possession.

The Buckeyes held the Boilermakers to 42.6 percent shooting (23 of 54) and forced 17 turnovers that resulted in 20 points in the road victory at Mackey Arena in front of 7,132.

"This is a tough environment and it's hard to win on the road, so I'm really proud of our team for being able to win close games," head coach Kevin McGuff said. "I think it speaks to our leadership and some of the experience that we have."

Ohio State jumped out to a quick 7-0 lead behind a pair of baskets from Thierry and a three-pointer from Taylor. Purdue responded with a 10-6 run and remained close throughout the rest of the opening quarter, even tying the game up at 17 with 47 seconds left in the frame on an old-fashioned three-point play by Rashunda Jones, but a three-pointer from Rikki Harris helped give Ohio State a 20-19 lead going into the second.

Harris connected on another three-pointer to put the Buckeyes up 23-19. Purdue responded with a three-pointer from guard McKenna Layden, but it was one of just three made shots by the Boilermakers during the second quarter. Purdue also scored a triple from guard Mila Reynolds with 5:42 left to pull to within 27-25, though it was answered by a pair of baskets from Ohio State's Emma Shumate, including a three, to put the Buckeyes up by seven.

The only other points of the half from Ohio State came on a free throw from Parks, giving the Buckeyes a 33-27 lead going into the break.

The Boilermakers started the second half off with a triple from guard Abbey Ellis, beginning a 7-0 run that gave them a 34-33 lead – their first of the game – with 7:54 left in the third. Ohio State regained the lead after a pair of free throws from McMahon, and a layup from Thierry following a steal by Sheldon put the Buckeyes up 37-34.

Purdue tied the game twice in the period, but the Buckeyes were able to hold onto the lead, eventually going up 53-46 entering the fourth after a triple from Sheldon with just 11 seconds left in the third to cap off a 12-5 run.

Ohio State maintained its lead to begin the fourth, getting an early layup from McMahon and a three-pointer from Taylor to go up 58-50 with 7:47 left, but the Boilermakers responded with a 7-2 run to make it just 60-57 with 5:10 remaining. McMahon then converted an and-one opportunity to make it a two-possession game, and Sheldon turned her own steal into a basket to put Ohio State up 65-57 with 4:36 left.

"I was really proud of (McMahon) because she's done a great job attacking through the middle of the zone and they took it away," McGuff said. "She didn't force things. She gave it up to her teammates and really provided them with some great opportunities."

But following Sheldon's basket, the Buckeyes were held without a point for over two minutes, during which the Boilermakers cut the deficit to 65-61. Ohio State got back on the board with a pair of free throws from Thierry to go up 67-61 with 2:10 remaining, and Purdue responded with four free throws to make it 67-65 with 21 seconds left.

After a pair of free throws each by Sheldon and Thierry, the Boilermakers trailed 71-68 with just seven seconds remaining after a three from Ellis and had a chance to tie following a pair of missed free throws by Taylor, but they were unable to get a shot off on their final possession.

Mikulášiková led the Buckeyes with 15 points, while Thierry had 14 points. McMahon nearly posted a triple-double with 10 points, 12 rebounds and eight assists – the latter two leading both teams – while Ellis led the Boilermakers with 14 points. Jones added 13 and Mary Ashley Stevenson had 12.

Record-Breaking Quarter Highlights Win Over Badgers

Ohio State (18-3, 9-1) took advantage of a dominant third quarter in an 87-49 win over Wisconsin (10-10, 3-7) on Feb. 1, extending the team's winning streak to eight games in front of 6,672 in Value City Arena.

After leading just 31-26 at the half, Ohio State outscored Wisconsin 39-11 in the third quarter, tying the most points in a single frame in program history.

"We came out at halftime, I thought we really moved the ball, made the extra pass," McGuff said. "It led to a lot of really open shots."

Both teams came to play early, trading three-pointers to begin the contest, and Ohio State eventually worked to an 11-9 lead with 4:55 left in the first. Wisconsin forward Serah Williams, the Badgers' leading scorer and re-

Ohio State 87, Wisconsin 49

Feb. 1, 2024
Value City Arena • Columbus

	1	2	3	4	F
Wisconsin (10-10, 3-7)	16	10	11	12	49
Ohio State (18-3, 9-1)	15	16	39	17	87

Wisconsin	Min	Total M-A	FT M-A	Reb. O-D	A	PF	Pts.
Williams	30	6-13	4-5	4-7	1	1	16
Schramek	28	2-7	0-0	1-1	2	1	5
Porter	31	2-3	1-2	3-3	3	2	6
Copeland	29	2-8	2-2	0-0	1	2	6
Leuzinger	17	1-4	0-0	0-0	0	1	2
Grady	19	1-6	0-0	0-1	0	2	3
Jimenez	15	0-4	2-2	0-2	0	1	2
Douglass	16	1-3	0-0	2-2	3	2	3
Krahn	5	0-0	2-2	0-0	0	0	2
Patibandla	5	0-1	0-0	0-1	0	0	0
Guillen	5	2-3	0-0	3-1	0	1	4
Totals	**200**	**17-52**	**11-13**	**16-24**	**10**	**13**	**49**

Percentages: FG: 32.7%. **FT:** 84.6%. **Three-point field goals:** 4-18 (Douglass 1-3, Grady 1-6, Porter 1-1, Schramek 1-1, Copeland 0-3, Jimenez 0-1, Leuzinger 0-1, Patibandla 0-1). **Team rebounds:** 9. **Blocked shots:** 3 (Williams 2, Schramek). **Turnovers:** 27 (Porter 7, Williams 5, Douglass 4, Schramek 4, Jimenez 3, Leuzinger 2, Copeland, Team). **Steals:** 4 (Copeland 2, Grady, Williams).

Ohio State	Min	Total M-A	FT M-A	Reb. O-D	A	PF	Pts.
Mikulášiková	20	4-7	0-0	0-3	2	1	8
McMahon	30	5-13	4-5	3-7	4	3	15
Thierry	17	2-5	1-1	2-1	2	0	5
Sheldon	27	6-12	4-5	1-2	5	1	17
Taylor	19	4-7	1-1	0-1	2	2	10
Greene	17	3-4	0-0	0-0	2	1	7
Harris	17	1-2	0-0	0-0	4	1	3
Parks	2	0-0	0-0	0-0	0	1	0
Shumate	17	2-5	0-0	1-0	0	1	6
Walker	18	4-5	3-4	3-4	1	1	11
Collins	12	1-4	0-0	0-1	1	1	3
Henderson	2	1-2	0-0	0-0	0	1	2
Carson	2	0-0	0-0	0-0	1	0	0
Totals	**200**	**33-66**	**13-16**	**11-20**	**24**	**14**	**87**

Percentages: FG: 50.0%. **FT:** 81.3%. **Three-point field goals:** 8-21 (Shumate 2-3, Collins 1-3, Greene 1-2, Harris 1-1, McMahon 1-3, Sheldon 1-4, Taylor 1-3, Henderson 0-1, Mikulášiková 0-1). **Team rebounds:** 2. **Blocked shots:** 2 (McMahon, Taylor). **Turnovers:** 8 (McMahon 4, Sheldon 2, Greene, Walker). **Steals:** 13 (Sheldon 3, Taylor 2, Collins, Greene, Harris, McMahon, Parks, Shumate, Thierry, Walker).
Officials: McConnell, Jones, Broderick. **Attendance:** 6,672.

bounder this season at 17.9 points and 10.4 rebounds per game entering the contest, then gave Wisconsin the lead with an and-one.

Sheldon took the lead back with a layup off a turnover by the Badgers, but it was the last basket by the Buckeyes until a jumper from Mikulášiková with just four seconds left in the frame. Her score was preceded by a triple from the Badgers, giving Wisconsin a 16-15 lead heading into the second.

Offense was hard to come by in the second quarter. The teams combined to miss their first seven attempts from the field with Wisconsin getting off only one shot. McMahon broke through after getting to the free-throw line, going 1 of 2 to tie it at 16 at the 7:40 mark, but the Badgers responded with a triple by Tessa Grady to retake the lead.

But after the slow shooting start to the frame, Ohio State responded with a 9-2 run – a stretch during which it knocked down both shot attempts and went 5 of 5 at the line – to take a 25-21 lead with 4:45 left in the frame. The Buckeyes were then held without a basket for 2:50 – though fifth-year forward Eboni Walker did knock down a pair at the line – until McMahon hit a layup to go up 29-24 with 1:55 left. Walker turned the ball over with 1:09 remaining but bounced back on the next possession to hit a jumper for a 31-26 lead at the break.

"(McGuff) said firstly, get ourselves together because we were not playing to our capabilities," Madison Greene said of the message at halftime. "I feel like what he said motivated us to play better."

Thierry – who had no points in the first half – started the third quarter off strong, scoring five straight points out of the break. That was followed by a layup from McMahon that extended Ohio State's run to 7-0 and a 38-26 lead, resulting in a timeout by Wisconsin.

Williams scored after a timeout, but Ohio State responded with a 12-0 run that featured triples from Taylor and Sheldon, as well as four turnovers by Wisconsin, to give the Buckeyes a 50-28 lead with 6:04 left in the quarter. After a Badger triple by Ronnie Porter, McMahon converted an and-one that started another big run for Ohio State, which utilized a 17-4 stretch to go up 67-35 with 1:31 left. Shumate then hit a triple with 11 seconds left to take a 70-37 lead into the fourth.

In the record-breaking quarter, the Buckeyes shot 66.7 percent from the field (16 of 24) and 62.5 percent from three (5 of 8), and they had 13 assists while forcing 12 turnovers and converting them to 29 points. Led by Sheldon's 11 points, nine different players scored for Ohio State during the frame.

Ohio State cleared the bench in the fourth quarter, with Greene, Shumate, Walker and sophomore guard Kaia Henderson all getting on the board as the Buckeyes outscored the Badgers 17-12.

Sheldon led the Buckeyes with 17 points on 6-of-12 shooting and had five assists, while McMahon added her fourth double-double of the season with 15 points and 10 rebounds. Walker and Taylor reached double digits with 11 and 10 points, respectively, while Williams led the Badgers with 16 points and 11 rebounds. The Buckeyes also forced 27 turnovers in the win that resulted in 36 points, with the Badgers tallying just six points off eight Buckeye miscues.

Ohio State 74, Indiana 69

Feb. 4, 2024
Value City Arena • Columbus

	1	2	3	4	F
Indiana (18-3, 9-2)	11	26	10	22	69
Ohio State (19-3, 10-1)	18	14	23	19	74

Indiana	Min	Total M-A	FT M-A	Reb. O-D	A	PF	Pts.
Holmes	33	6-12	2-4	1-8	4	4	14
Bargesser	31	2-6	2-3	0-4	1	3	6
Garzon	37	5-10	1-1	1-8	0	3	14
Scalia	38	8-17	6-7	1-3	1	3	25
Moore-McNeil	38	4-7	2-3	1-2	5	4	10
LaMendola	3	0-1	0-0	1-1	1	0	0
Beaumont	13	0-1	0-0	0-0	1	0	0
Meister	7	0-0	0-0	0-2	0	2	0
Totals	**200**	**25-54**	**13-18**	**7-31**	**13**	**19**	**69**

Percentages: FG: 46.3%. **FT:** 72.2%. **Three-point field goals:** 6-16 (Garzon 3-4, Scalia 3-8, Bargesser 0-1, Beaumont 0-1, Holmes 0-1, Moore-McNeil 0-1). **Team rebounds:** 5. **Blocked shots:** 2 (Holmes, Moore-McNeil). **Turnovers:** 23 (Garzon 6, Holmes 5, Moore-McNeil 5, Scalia 3, Bargesser 2, Beaumont, Team). **Steals:** 6 (Bargesser 2, Beaumont, Garzon, Moore-McNeil, Scalia).

Ohio State	Min	Total M-A	FT M-A	Reb. O-D	A	PF	Pts.
Mikulášiková	36	4-11	0-0	0-5	4	3	11
McMahon	30	9-13	2-4	1-6	5	5	20
Thierry	31	3-5	3-4	1-4	0	3	11
Sheldon	38	8-20	6-8	1-1	4	2	25
Taylor	30	2-9	0-0	0-4	0	4	5
Harris	22	1-1	0-0	0-3	2	0	2
Greene	6	0-0	0-0	0-1	0	1	0
Shumate	3	0-0	0-0	0-1	0	0	0
Walker	4	0-1	0-0	0-0	1	1	0
Totals	**200**	**27-60**	**11-16**	**4-25**	**16**	**19**	**74**

Percentages: FG: 45.0%. **FT:** 68.8%. **Three-point field goals:** 9-21 (Mikulášiková 3-6, Sheldon 3-8, Thierry 2-2, Taylor 1-3, McMahon 0-2). **Team rebounds:** 1. **Blocked shots:** 4 (Greene, Shumate, Taylor, Thierry). **Turnovers:** 13 (McMahon 5, Greene 2, Mikulášiková 2, Sheldon 2, Taylor, Thierry). **Steals:** 10 (Sheldon 3, Taylor 3, McMahon 2, Thierry 2).
Officials: Dickerson, Thompson, Berger. **Attendance:** 10,130.

OSU Stifles Holmes In Win Over Indiana

Ohio State (19-3, 10-1) continued rising up the Big Ten standings on Feb. 4, picking up a 74-69 win over No. 10 Indiana (18-3, 9-2) to take control of first place in the conference behind 45 combined points from Sheldon and McMahon.

The Buckeyes – winners of nine straight games – were able to stifle the Hoosiers defensively, forcing a season-high 23 turnovers for Indiana that resulted in 21 points for Ohio State. The Buckeyes were also able to hold star Indiana forward Mackenzie Holmes – who averaged 20.5 points per game entering the contest – to 14 points on 6-of-12 shooting.

"(Holmes is) really hard to match up with," McGuff said. "She's a great player, one of the best in the country. We've certainly seen a lot of her over the years and she's been very effective against us. Overall, we did a good job. Rebeka (Mikulášiková) did a great job making her work."

The top-10 teams went back and forth in the early stages of the contest, with the lead changing hands nine times through the first eight minutes of the game and the Hoosiers held an 11-10 lead with 2:09 left in the first. Ohio State then began to take over, utilizing an 8-0 run over the final 1:49 of the frame – including triples from Sheldon and Mikulášiková – to lead 18-11 at the end of the period.

Indiana guard Sara Scalia went on a personal 7-0 run early in the second quarter to cut the deficit to just 20-18. Harris responded for the Buckeyes with a basket on a fast break, and on the ensuing possession, Indiana guard Chloe Moore-McNeil had the ball stolen by McMahon, who scored and was fouled on the other end, hitting the free throw to lead 25-18 with 7:48 left. But the Buckeyes then missed three of their next four shots, and Indiana took off on a 9-2 run to tie the game at 27.

After a jumper from Mikulášiková, Indiana guard Yarden Garzon hit from deep to give IU a 30-29 lead with 5:10 left. Thierry responded with a triple, but Indiana closed on a 7-0 run, holding Ohio State scoreless over the final 4:09 of the quarter to lead 37-32 at the break.

Thierry knocked down a pair at the line to start the third quarter, and after Sheldon and Scalia traded threes, McMahon began to take over, contributing eight points to an 11-0 run as Ohio State went up 50-42 with 3:45 left in the frame.

"We were much more energetic and aggressive in our press" McGuff said. "We turned Indiana over, or at least took them out of their rhythm, because they're really hard (to defend)."

Moore-McNeil broke the run with a jumper, but Mikulášiková hit from deep and Taylor got a steal followed by the ensuing basket in transition before a triple by Scalia made it 55-47 in favor of the Buckeyes heading into the fourth.

Sheldon extended Ohio State's lead to

Continued On Page 38

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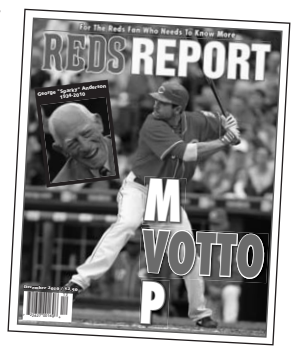

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Road Wins Catapult OSU To Top Of Big Ten

Continued From Page 37

double digits with back-to-back baskets including a three to begin the fourth quarter, kick-starting an 8-2 run for a 63-49 lead with 7:32 left in the game. But after McMahon was forced to the bench with her fourth foul, Indiana took off on an 8-2 run of its own to cut the deficit to 65-57 with 4:14 left, leading to a timeout by McGuff.

Out of the break, the Buckeyes turned the ball over but responded on the next possession with a triple by Thierry to lead 68-57 with 3:03 left. Holmes scored at the other end, and McMahon later fouled out with 1:45 remaining. The Hoosiers got back-to-back triples from Garzon – with a layup from Sheldon in between – to make it 70-66 with 28 seconds left.

Sheldon hit a pair at the line following a foul by Indiana, but Taylor fouled Scalia at the other end on a three-point attempt that led to three makes at the line, making it 72-69 with just 16 seconds on the clock. After another foul by the Hoosiers and Thierry going 1 of 2 at the charity stripe, Indiana missed at the other end and Harris rebounded for the Buckeyes. Sheldon closed it out at the line making one of two.

Sheldon led the Buckeyes with 25 points on 8-of-20 shooting while McMahon had 20 points on 9-of-13 shooting with a team-high seven rebounds and five assists, and Thierry and Mikulášiková each finished with 11 points. Scalia led Indiana with 25 points, while Garzon added 14 points and nine rebounds.

Ohio State 71, Minnesota 47

Feb. 8, 2024
Williams Arena • Minneapolis

	1	2	3	4	F
Ohio State (20-3, 11-1)	14	15	26	16	71
Minnesota (14-9, 4-8)	13	11	7	16	47

Ohio State		Total	FT	Reb.			
	Min	M-A	M-A	O-D	A	PF	Pts.
Mikulášiková	21	4-9	0-0	0-0	3	1	11
McMahon	29	5-8	3-3	2-7	1	2	13
Thierry	24	1-3	1-2	2-1	3	2	3
Sheldon	30	4-13	2-2	2-1	6	1	12
Taylor	30	7-16	0-2	0-5	2	2	14
Harris	15	1-1	0-0	0-2	0	2	3
Shumate	15	3-5	0-0	0-0	1	1	8
Walker	18	2-5	0-0	2-3	4	4	4
Greene	13	1-1	0-0	0-0	2	0	3
Collins	3	0-0	0-0	0-0	0	2	0
Henderson	1	0-0	0-0	0-0	0	0	0
Carson	1	0-0	0-0	0-0	1	1	0
Totals	**200**	**28-61**	**6-9**	**9-24**	**23**	**18**	**71**

Percentages: FG: 45.9%. **FT:** 66.7%. **Three-point field goals:** 9-27 (Mikulášiková 3-8, Sheldon 2-8, Shumate 2-4, Greene 1-1, Harris 1-1, Taylor 0-5). **Team rebounds:** 6. **Blocked shots:** 2 (Taylor 2). **Turnovers:** 12 (Taylor 6, Carson, Greene, Harris, Mikulášiková, Sheldon, Walker). **Steals:** 12 (Thierry 3, Greene 2, Harris 2, McMahon 2, Sheldon 2, Taylor).

Minnesota		Total	FT	Reb.			
	Min	M-A	M-A	O-D	A	PF	Pts.
Heyer	38	2-9	0-0	3-4	1	0	5
Grocholski	35	3-10	0-0	0-4	1	2	8
Hart	23	2-6	3-6	3-3	0	2	7
Battle	33	2-6	2-2	0-7	6	2	7
Sanders	28	5-9	6-8	0-3	0	4	16
Johnson	7	0-0	0-0	0-2	0	1	0
Czinano	18	1-1	0-1	0-1	0	2	2
Holloway	17	1-4	0-0	0-0	1	3	2
Senden	1	0-0	0-0	0-0	0	0	0
Totals	**200**	**16-45**	**11-17**	**7-25**	**9**	**16**	**47**

Percentages: FG: 35.6%. **FT:** 64.7%. **Three-point field goals:** 4-16 (Grocholski 2-7, Battle 1-3, Heyer 1-4, Sanders 0-2). **Team rebounds:** 2. **Blocked shots:** 1 (Hart). **Turnovers:** 23 (Battle 8, Sanders 6, Hart 4, Heyer 2, Czinano, Grocholski, Holloway). **Steals:** 4 (Battle 2, Czinano, Hart).
Officials: Gross, Krommenhoek, Daley. **Attendance:** 3,572.

OSU Wins 10th Straight Big Ten Game At Minnesota

Ohio State (20-3, 11-1) improved its winning streak to 10 games on Feb. 8, coming away from a trip to Minnesota (14-9, 4-8) with a 71-47 victory over the Gophers.

The Buckeyes featured a well-rounded effort with four scorers – including McMahon, Mikulášiková, Sheldon and Taylor – all finishing in double digits while outscoring Minnesota 42-23 in the second half.

"I need to borrow somebody's pregame speech because mine aren't working," McGuff joked. "We were really lethargic in the first half. We just didn't have the energy we normally have and I don't think we were really moving the ball or getting much balance in our offense. But we did a really good job of that in the second half."

Ohio State nearly led wire-to-wire, but Minnesota responded to an early basket with a three-pointer by Grace Grocholski to go up 3-2. Mikulášiková answered with a three-pointer of her own, starting a 9-3 run capped by another triple from Mikulášiková to go up 11-6 with 5:08 left in the first.

The Buckeyes later utilized a three-pointer off the bench from Shumate to go up 14-10, but those were the last points of the quarter for Ohio State, which was held scoreless over the final 2:22 of the frame, eventually holding a 14-13 lead going into the second quarter.

Ohio State played strong defense out of the quarter break, forcing a turnover that Walker turned into a fastbreak jumper. Thierry scored on the next possession to go up 18-13, and after a responding three-pointer from Minnesota guard Amaya Battle, the Buckeyes used a 7-0 run capped by a Sheldon three to go up 25-16 with 5:25 left in the half.

The Buckeyes were then held scoreless for the next 2:19, but the Gophers – who were without star guard Mara Braun, who is averaging 17.8 points per game this season – were unable to take advantage, nabbing only a layup by Mallory Heyer during that period. Sheldon broke the scoring drought with a jumper, and following a layup from Taylor with just 48 seconds remaining, Ohio State went into the half up 29-24.

After a back-and-forth opening half, Ohio State broke things open early in the third quarter, beginning on a 9-0 run capped by a Mikulášiková layup to take a 38-24 lead with 6:12 left and holding Minnesota scoreless until a layup with 5:45 left in the frame by Sophie Hart. But off that basket, the Buckeyes responded with another big run – this time an 11-3 stretch – to lead 49-20 with 2:23 left in the quarter. McMahon scored the final four of the spurt, with a bucket and two free throws. The Gophers knocked down a pair at the line, but Harris and Shumate knocked down back-to-back triples to extend the lead to 55-31 entering the fourth.

"I think all around that second half was definitely how we want to play," Taylor said. "Fast pace and definitely getting the shots and taking the shots we want to take, not just what the other team is giving us."

Ohio State and Minnesota each notched 16 points in the fourth quarter, with the Buckeyes shooting 58.3 percent from the field in the frame (7 for 12) to close out the contest and win their 10th straight game in conference play, the first time Ohio State has done so since 2017.

The Buckeyes shot 45.9 percent (28 of 61) from the field and were led by Taylor, who had 14 points on 7-of-16 shooting, while McMahon had 13 points and a game-high nine rebounds, Sheldon scored 12 points with six assists, and Mikulášiková pitched in 11 points. Minnesota was led by guard Janay Sanders, who had 16 points on 5-of-9 shooting. The Buckeyes held the Gophers to just 35.6 percent shooting from the floor (16 of 45), including only 4 of 16 from distance.

OSU Takes Over First In B1G With Win At MSU

Ohio State (21-3, 12-1) cruised to an 86-71 win at Michigan State (17-7, 7-6) on Feb. 11 to extend its winning streak to 11 games despite several key players relegated to the bench in the contest that produced 35 fouls between the Buckeyes and the Spartans before 5,763 at the Breslin Events Center.

Taylor and Mikulášiková were the keys for Ohio State, combining for 39 points on 17-of-27 shooting with McMahon, Sheldon and Thierry on the bench for much of the first half.

Thierry set a physical tone for the game early, fighting through contact and a foul for a basket on Ohio State's first possession of the contest, adding the free throw. After a layup from Sheldon, Taylor then took over for the Buckeyes, scoring the team's next 10 points and Ohio State held a 15-13 lead with 3:31 left in the first quarter.

Ohio State and Michigan State then traded three-pointers, after which McMahon was called for her second foul of the game and also received a technical foul, giving her three and sending her to the bench for the rest of the first half. The Buckeyes persisted without McMahon, however, outscoring the Spartans 8-3 over the final 1:19 – a stretch in which Sheldon also picked up her second foul – to lead 26-19 entering the second frame.

The Buckeyes scored on four consecutive possessions out of the break, using baskets from Sheldon (two), Taylor and Mikulášiková to go up 34-19 with 7:46 left in the half, but Michigan State then used a 9-4 run to cut the deficit to 38-28.

Ohio State, with McMahon, Sheldon and Thierry on the bench with foul trouble, responded with an 11-0 run – featuring triples from Shumate and Harris off the bench – to lead 49-28 with 2:04 left, and eventually led 53-31 going into the half. Taylor was a particular standout with 16 points on 6-of-9 shooting in the first half, including 2 of 3 from beyond the arc.

"My teammates were just putting me in open spots, and my coaches were calling plays for me," Taylor said. "My pull-up (shot) was there, so I just took it."

The Buckeyes carried that momentum into the second half, opening the third quarter on a 10-1 run to lead 63-32 with 7:04 left in the frame. Michigan State scored the next three baskets, but Sheldon answered with a second-chance three-pointer and added another triple just 1:29 later to put the Buckeyes up 71-40. Mikulášiková connected on a pair of baskets in the final three minutes to send Ohio State to the fourth with a 75-47 lead.

McMahon, Taylor and Thierry added some insurance baskets early in the fourth to go up 86-57 before Ohio State cleared the bench, though the Spartans did close on a 14-0 run.

Taylor led the Buckeyes with 20 points while Mikulášiková added 19 points and Sheldon finished with 18 points in 25 minutes on the floor. Sheldon, Mikulášiková, and all passed out five assists. McMahon also had a game-high seven rebounds in her 19 minutes of action.

The Spartans were led by guard Theryn Hallock with 18 points.

Ohio State shot 57.6 percent (34 of 59) from the floor and 57.1 percent (8 of 14) from deep, while Michigan State shot just 43.4 percent (23 of 53) from the field and 35.3 percent (6 of 17) from three. Combined with a loss by Iowa (22-3, 11-2) earlier in the day, Ohio State took over first place in the Big Ten standings.

"That game got over before we started, so we were aware," McGuff said. "But our big point of emphasis today was, we've been coming out of halftime and playing really well, but we hadn't been playing great in the first half. So we wanted to get closer to 40 minutes."

Ohio State will play three more games before Buckeye Sports Bulletin goes to press again, hosting Nebraska on Feb. 14 (7 p.m., Peacock); at Penn State on Feb. 22 (6 p.m., Big Ten Network); and home against Maryland on Feb. 25 (2 p.m., Big Ten Network).

Ohio State 86, Michigan State 71

Feb. 11, 2024
Breslin Events Center • East Lansing, Mich.

	1	2	3	4	F
Ohio State (21-3, 12-1)	26	27	22	11	86
Michigan State (17-7, 7-6)	19	12	16	24	71

Ohio State		Total	FT	Reb.			
	Min	M-A	M-A	O-D	A	PF	Pts.
Mikulášiková	34	9-14	0-0	1-1	5	3	19
McMahon	19	2-5	2-2	0-7	5	3	6
Thierry	20	4-5	3-3	0-3	2	4	12
Sheldon	25	8-13	0-0	1-3	5	3	18
Taylor	36	8-13	2-2	1-4	3	3	20
Harris	19	1-3	3-4	0-5	2	1	6
Shumate	14	1-3	0-0	0-0	2	1	3
Walker	8	1-1	0-0	1-2	0	1	2
Greene	17	0-0	0-0	0-0	4	2	0
Collins	4	0-2	0-0	0-0	0	1	0
Parks	4	0-0	0-0	0-1	0	1	0
Totals	**200**	**34-59**	**10-11**	**5-26**	**28**	**23**	**86**

Percentages: FG: 57.6%. **FT:** 90.9%. **Three-point field goals:** 8-14 (Sheldon 2-2, Taylor 2-3, Harris 1-3, Mikulášiková 1-2, Shumate 1-2, Thierry 1-1, Collins 0-1). **Team rebounds:** 1. **Blocked shots:** 2 (Mikulášiková, Thierry). **Turnovers:** 15 (Taylor 3, McMahon 2, Mikulášiková 2, Sheldon 2, Taylor 2, Collins, Greene, Parks, Walker). **Steals:** 8 (Green 2, Taylor 2, Thierry 2, Harris, Sheldon).

Mich. State		Total	FT	Reb.			
	Min	M-A	M-A	O-D	A	PF	Pts.
Hagemann	29	2-4	5-6	0-1	4	2	10
Kimball	23	2-3	0-0	0-1	2	1	6
Tate	32	3-7	2-5	2-0	1	3	8
Joiner	29	3-9	1-2	2-4	0	2	9
Ayrault	24	4-11	2-2	1-6	3	3	10
Ozment	28	2-6	3-4	0-3	3	0	8
Hallock	24	7-11	4-4	1-1	1	1	18
Robinson	3	0-1	0-0	0-1	1	0	0
Ross	8	0-1	2-2	0-0	1	0	2
Totals	**200**	**23-53**	**19-25**	**7-20**	**16**	**12**	**71**

Percentages: FG: 43.4%. **FT:** 76.0%. **Three-point field goals:** 6-17 (Joiner 2-5, Kimball 2-3, Hagemann 1-1, Ozment 1-2, Ayrault 0-3, Hallock 0-1, Ross 0-1, Tate 0-1). **Team rebounds:** 4. **Blocked shots:** 3 (Ayrault, Hagemann, Tate). **Turnovers:** 16 (Hallock 4, Ayrault 3, Tate 3, Hagemann 2, Joiner 2, Kimball, Ozment). **Steals:** 5 (Hallock 2, Tate 2, Joiner).
Officials: Enterline, McConnell, Tieman. Attendance: 5,753.

Freshman Wallberg Makes Name For Himself

No matter how you pronounce his first name, freshman Theo Wallberg has been a bright spot in an otherwise dour season for Ohio State.

The rookie defenseman from Sweden has stepped into a revamped backline and logged significant minutes while recording 16 points (two goals, 14 assists) in 28 games to rank fourth on the team.

IN THE CREASE
Craig Merz

"He makes mistakes like any freshman, but for stepping into this league and stepping into this level of play, he's carried himself very well," coach Steve Rohlik said.

While Wallberg is adjusting to college life and competing in the Big Ten, those around him had to relearn his name. For the first month of the season he was Theo, with the conventional English T-H sound. But eventually he got around to asking everyone to refer to him in the proper Swedish pronunciation: Tee-Oh

"Everybody was calling him something different, and he wasn't one to step up and say, 'No, it's this' or 'No, it's that,' " Rohlik said. "He knew who we were talking about."

Wallberg said his father finally convinced him to make the correction.

"I didn't really think about it that much, but my dad was on me to make it the right way," he said.

It was another example of being far from home, but one teammate has helped provide a bit of Sweden in Columbus. Freshman goalie Kristoffer Eberly, from Pinckney, Mich., has Swedish lineage, and the spelling of his first name (which is pronounced Christopher) comes from his mother, who was born in Sweden.

"My grandma and my cousins live over there," Eberly said. "My cousins are also goalies over there so they were kind of the ones that pushed me into the position. It's awesome to go out and see them every year in the summer when I get the chance."

Eberly can speak some Swedish, although Wallberg ribs him for his American accent.

"Since day one here, me and him have been super tight and he actually ended up coming out home with me for Christmas," Eberly said. "We were able to have a little bit of Swedish tradition in the house and make him hopefully feel like he was at home even though he was still in the U.S., so it was awesome. We had Swedish meatballs, the smorgasbord and a lot of fish."

However, even Eberly mispronounced Wallberg's name at first.

"My mom told me I was wrong," the goalie said. "When I was calling her, I'd say, 'Theo and I and are doing this, Theo and I are doing that,' and she'd be like, 'No, no. That's not how you say it. It's (Tee-Oh)' and would correct me. I think everyone around here was surprised it was called like that."

Coming To America

Wallberg is accustomed to being away from home. He left Stockholm at age 15 to play for club teams around Sweden and last season played for Dubuque (Iowa) of the United States Hockey League.

He was a sixth-round pick (168th) in the 2022 NHL draft by the Ottawa Senators and chose Ohio State in part because of the recruitment by former Buckeye Swedish forward Gustaf Westlund, who exhausted his eligibility after last season.

"It's a whole different world coming over here and leaving your country and taking a chance to play junior hockey and not knowing really where things end up," Rohlik said. "I really believe that connection with Gustaf was something that gave (Wallberg) a comfort level, and the parents being able to communicate and ask questions in Swedish, I think that really helped. I also think he had a comfort level with some of the Dubuque kids that were here as well."

Wallberg held video discussions with Westlund before making his official visit.

"He really helped me understand what it was like here, and when I did make my visit, he made it really comfortable for me," Wallberg said. "My English was getting better, but we also could talk some Swedish so he played a big part for sure."

Wallberg also spent time last summer with another Ottawa draftee, Ohio State sophomore forward Stephen Halliday, at the Senators' development camp for prospects.

"It was great. He talked to me a lot about Ohio," Wallberg said.

He said the Senators gave him simple instructions for the start of his Buckeye career: "Try to play as much as I can and gain some weight to turn my body around."

Wallberg is 6-5 and 203 pounds but is not a physical player. He turned 20 on Dec. 4 and is often going against players two or three years older and physically more mature.

"He's still a young kid," Rohlik said. "He's going to be a different person within a year or two as far as when he fills out. He's going to add 15-20 more pounds of muscle on his body over the next couple of years. That will translate to a whole different deal."

Wallberg stepped into an ideal situation for a young player looking for playing time because the Buckeyes after last season on defense lost Mason Lohrei (Boston Bruins) and Cole McWard (Vancouver Canucks) to early departures and Tyler Duke transferred to Michigan.

While Wallberg is third on the team in assists and has shown the poise to run the power play, he is reluctant to shoot. His two goals have come on 22 shots while defenseman Scooter Brickey is tied with Halliday for the team lead in goals with nine on 70 shots. Also, defenseman Brent Johnson has taken 46 shots and scored four times.

"I feel like I've always been a pass-first player," Wallberg said. "It's almost more fun to pass than score goals, but shooting more, I want to do that, too. I'm just playing confident with the puck, trying to see the ice well, and I feel like that kind of translated well here, too. I'm trying to keep that up, and having good players around me helps."

Slippery Slope

It's been all downhill for the Buckeyes (9-15-4, 1-15-2 Big Ten) since Buckeye Sports Bulletin last went to press.

After being swept at Penn State by 4-3 scores on Jan. 26-27, they lost twice to No. 12 Michigan, 4-2 and 4-1, before large crowds at Value City Arena on Feb. 2-3 to extend their losing streak to seven games. The matchups against the Wolverines drew 8,131 the first night followed by 8,789.

"It's the rivalry, right?" forward Patrick Guzzo said. "It's definitely the biggest rivalry I've been a part of, and it's pretty special to get everybody here and just to cheer us on. It means a lot."

"Kudos to the student section," Rohlik added. "Kudos to everybody that showed up this weekend. You get goosebumps when you walk out and you see the crowd and the electricity. I'm just disappointed that we couldn't get them a win because we know how important it is to us but I know how important it is to them as well."

If there was a consolation in the losses to Michigan it is that the Buckeyes' struggling penalty kill was superb. The Wolverines (14-9-3, 7-7-2) began the weekend with the top power play nationally at 38.0 percent. Ohio State was up to the challenge, going 3-for-3 on the kill in both games. They allowed a total of 14 shots in 13:25 of power-play time combined.

The most impressive stretch for Ohio State came in the third period of the second game when Joe Dunlap was given a five-minute major for a cross check and Michigan managed only four shots on goal.

"Our PK was dynamite right to the end," Rohlik said. "Our PK dug in and did a great job."

Unfortunately for Ohio State, it went 0 for 7 on the power play in the series. And the Buckeyes could have used a few goals because of their penchant for playing from behind.

In the opener at Penn State (12-11-3, 4-9-3), Ohio State scored first but allowed the next three goals. After pulling to within 3-2, Penn State scored before Thomas Weis made it 4-3, but the Buckeyes could not find the equalizer. The next night, Ohio State rallied from a 3-0 deficit only to have the Nittany Lions score the winner with less than five minutes to play.

It was a similar story against Michigan. The Wolverines jumped to a 3-0 lead in the first game. Ohio State got two goals from Max Montes in the second period, but the Wolverines scored an empty-netter with 1:27 left in the third. In the rematch, the Buckeyes trailed 2-0 when Montes scored early in the third. However, goals 15 seconds part by Michigan iced the win.

"It's kind of tough just to come from behind," Guzzo said. "We had our chances, and kudos to their goalie. He made some good saves."

B1G Men's Hockey

	GP	Pts.	W	L	T	OW	OL	SW
Michigan State	20	46	14	4	2	0	1	1
Wisconsin	18	41	13	4	1	1	1	1
Minnesota	20	35	11	5	4	2	0	0
Notre Dame	20	27	8	10	2	0	0	1
Michigan	18	25	7	9	2	0	1	1
Penn State	18	17	4	11	3	0	0	2
Ohio State	**18**	**7**	**1**	**15**	**2**	**0**	**0**	**2**

Overall records — Wisconsin 22-6-2, Michigan State 20-7-3, Minnesota 18-7-5, Notre Dame 14-14-2, Michigan 14-11-3, Penn State 12-13-3, **Ohio State 9-15-4.**

- standings courtesy of College Hockey Inc.

Next

The Buckeyes entered the open weekend of Feb. 9-10 firmly entrenched in last place with a slim chance of moving past Penn State with six games remaining.

It doesn't get easier with the Buckeyes hosting No. 4 Wisconsin on Feb. 16 (6:30 p.m.) and 17 (4:30 p.m.). They travel to No. 9 Michigan State on Feb. 23 (7 p.m.) and 24 (6 p.m.) before hosting Penn State in the final regular-season series on March 1 (6 p.m.) and 2 (5 p.m.).

Halliday Season

Halliday is the Varsity Club Icer of the Month for January after scoring 13 points (four goals, nine assists) in eight games, topped by four assists against Bowling Green on Jan. 5. He also had a goal and an assist against Notre Dame (Jan. 12), Minnesota (Jan. 19) and Penn State (Jan. 27).

For recaps of the Penn State and Michigan series go to BuckeyeSports.com, free to all Buckeye Sports Bulletin subscribers.

VARSITY CLUB ICER OF THE MONTH
For January

Stephen Halliday,
sophomore forward
Glenwood, Md.

Ohio State Takes Down Michigan In Columbus

If Ohio State fans were still feeling the effects of a loss to Michigan in football, the wrestling team was able to fill that void with an exciting down-to-the-wire win over the No. 11 Wolverines on Jan. 26, sending them packing with a 20-19 win.

ON THE MAT
Greg Wilson

Heavyweight Nick Feldman, ranked No. 16 in his weight class, showed up in a big way for Ohio State yet again, needing a win of any kind to secure the team victory in the dual with the Buckeyes trailing 19-17 heading into the final match of the evening. He took on No. 4 Lucas Davison and came out with a 4-3 decision, the third time this year Feldman has carried the Buckeyes to a win in the last bout of a dual.

"There's an old Navy SEAL quote," head coach Tom Ryan told BSB. "We have it above one of the water fountains in our restroom. 'You don't rise to the occasion, you sink to the level of your training.' And that's Nick. We recruited him with the belief that when you get someone of this caliber, talent and character, you have a game-changer in your program. Not only will he do well for himself, but he will pull others. He's the right guy to follow."

Feldman, a redshirt freshman, came to Ohio State as the No. 1 overall pound-for-pound recruit in the country out of high school, but he suffered a neck injury that almost ended his career. It's been an extensive recovery process, but Ryan now believes that Feldman is finally starting to get back to being the wrestler he expected the heavyweight to be.

"In my 30 years of coaching and 18 years of wrestling, I've never had an injury like this," Ryan said. "He's out all summer, and he's out all season last year. And for him to compete as well as he did coming off that injury is a tribute to who he is.

"The number of incredible decisions that he had to make from the time he was injured to the time he walked on that mat was enormous. We don't see that as spectators, we just see a great performance. But so much went into a performance like that."

Against Davison, there were no points scored in the first due to Feldman avoiding a takedown in the final seconds of the period after being flipped onto the mat. For the entire second period, Davison rode Feldman but was given two stalling warnings, resulting in a single point for Feldman who went into the third period with a 1-0 lead.

Davison tied it up immediately in the third with an escape, but Feldman was able to get a takedown followed by a late escape from Davison for the final decision. With the win, Feldman won Big Ten Wrestler of the Week for the second time this season, the first coming after he secured a team victory against then-No. 8 Cornell on Jan. 5.

The victory sent the sold-out crowd of 4,759 fans into a frenzy, something Ryan said was great to see in the Covelli Center and helped Ohio State get the late win.

"It was as loud as I've ever experienced in a wrestling event in any venue I have ever been in," Ryan said. "And it lasted, that's the other thing. It was loud. We had to ride him. We had to hold him off for a little bit longer, too. It was just a great event for our team and a great event for the fan base."

With the excitement of Feldman's match, the other winning Buckeyes went under the radar. Chief among them was freshman Ryder Rogotzke, who earned five team points with a 21-0 technical fall win over No. 15 Jaden Bullock at 184 pounds in just his fourth dual bout of his college career. Rogotzke, unranked in his weight class, was an underdog going in, so even though Ryan thought Rogotzke could beat Bullock, he didn't see a shutout coming.

"Those five points really put some pressure on (Michigan's) last couple of guys," he said. "Nobody saw that coming. Nobody could have predicted a 21-0 win for us."

At 165 pounds, No. 21 Bryce Hepner also provided a necessary spark for the Buckeyes after they had won only one of the first five individual matches of the dual, the lone win coming by forfeit. The junior started his match poorly, suffering an early takedown and a four-point near fall to Beau Mantanona, putting him down 7-0 in the first period.

Hepner had an escape and a takedown of his own to finish the first period with just a three-point deficit. Mantanona began the second with a reversal, and Hepner escaped for a 9-5 score with just two minutes remaining. Hepner then had a reversal of his own to start the third period. Mantanona escaped, but Hepner's takedown and two-point near fall late in the bout secured a 12-10 win for the Buckeyes and kept the dual within reach.

"It was impressive. (Michigan) had kept the crowd out of it, forfeiting to (Jesse) Mendez. That was a match we were quite frankly, relatively heavily favored. The crowd didn't get a chance to cheer for anything in the first half. They were quiet until they weren't, and Bryce really got that going."

No. 22 Luke Geog also picked up a win at 197 pounds with a 9-4 decision over Rylan Rogers, one of five Buckeyes – along with Hepner, Mendez, Rogotzke and Feldman – to notch a victory in the dual, including the last three matches to secure the win.

Win Streak Ends Against Powerhouse Penn State

After eight straight dual wins dating back to Dec. 19, Ohio State went on the road to University Park, Pa., where it matched up against top-ranked Penn State. The Nittany Lions have won 10 of the last 12 national championships and haven't lost a dual since Nov. 22, 2019.

"They've been the best the last 10 years," Ryan said. "They're really a true measuring point of where your team is and where you are as individuals. What I liked about our team is we didn't back down."

With the two winning streaks colliding, Penn State came out on top with a 28-9 win over Ohio State, though it was closer on an individual basis than the final score seemed, even with the Buckeyes losing eight of the 10 bouts.

Freshman Vinny Kilkeary started it off for the Buckeyes at 125 pounds to set the tone, and he found himself in a close 4-3 match against No. 3 Braeden Davis. With seconds left in the third period, Kilkeary took Davis down to the ground and it appeared he scored the winning points, but no takedown was called. After a challenge from Ryan and a review, it was ruled not to be a takedown, giving the win to Davis and the Nittany Lions.

Ryan wasn't happy with the call and believes Kilkeary rightfully won that match, and if the takedown had been called, the dual might have looked differently the rest of the way.

"It wasn't a bad call – it was a terrible call," Ryan said. "When you look back at the call on video it should have been an easy call, and it wasn't made. We were probably a two- or three-point underdog in that match. If you don't get that one, how are you going to get the ones where you're a seven- or eight-point underdog?"

Mendez also lost a close match to No. 2 Beau Bartlett at 141 pounds, needing extra time to decide a winner, ultimately ending in a 4-1 loss after Bartlett scored a takedown in the sudden victory period. Ryan said with the Big Ten and NCAA tournaments coming up in a month, Mendez is learning from this loss.

"We've just got to be more attack-minded," Ryan said. "These guys' defenses are so good, that you can't just hedge your bet that you're going to score with a one-leg attack and that's it. Sometimes it takes five or six times before you break the code of how you're going to finish. 'He did this to me the first time. He reacted this way the second,' and by the third time, you're ahead of him mentally."

True freshman Rocco Welsh went to-to-toe with one of the best pound-for-pound wrestlers in the country in No. 1 Carter Starocci at 174 pounds, and he showed yet again that his future at Ohio State is very bright. He didn't come out on top, but he was a late takedown away from a huge upset in a 4-2 loss.

Since Welsh took over at 174 pounds, he has faced off against multiple top-ranked wrestlers and has kept himself in it every time. Ryan said the experience he's getting right now in his first year in college is going to be a big deal for him moving forward.

"It's priceless," Ryan said. "Rocco is so good at wrestling. He's tough, he's physical, he's fit. You're wrestling a three-time reigning NCAA champion, who arguably was the best wrestler in the country last year, pound-for-pound, and you're actually backing him up in the last minute of the match. Get a takedown and you upset him. (Starocci) has won 63 straight matches, and you put yourself in position to win the match."

The two victories in the dual belonged to No. 12 Nic Bouzakis, as the redshirt freshman took down No. 5 Aaron Nagao by a 12-10 decision at 133 pounds, and Rogotzke, who picked up a pinfall victory in 3:59 over No. 5 Bernie Truax.

OSU Beats RU In Piscataway

Ohio State won seven out of 10 bouts against then-No. 14 Rutgers on Feb. 4 in a 22-12 victory. Senior Isaac Wilcox started the dual off with a win at 157 pounds, and Geog, Feldman and Brendan McCrone each upset a higher-ranked wrestler to get back into the win column.

Welsh and Mendez also picked up ranked wins, while Rogotzke, Bouzakis and redshirt senior Dylan D'Emilio suffered the lone defeats in the dual.

OSU Wins Home Finale Over IU

On Senior Day Feb. 11, the Buckeyes won eight out of 10 duals for another conference win to bring their record to 14-2 overall with just one more dual to go until the Big Ten tournament.

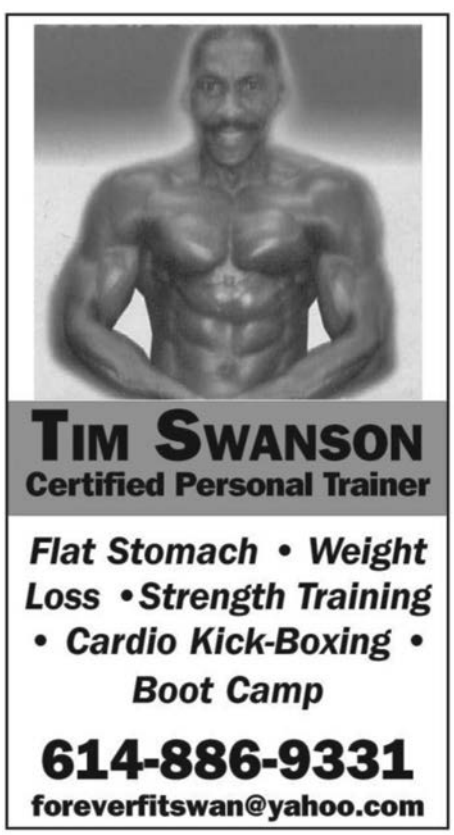
Sammy Sasso, Nick Boykin and Gavin Hoffman were seniors honored prior to the dual along with managers Destinee Fry and Lily Voellm. Hoffman and Boykin are in their last year at Ohio State while Sasso said he still plans on trying to make it back next year if he can get close to the level he was wrestling after being shot in August.

Ohio State took the dual 32-6 over Indiana with only Wilcox and Gavin Bell suffering individual losses. Bouzakis led the Buckeyes with a pin over Isaac Thornton in 4:03 at 133. Feldman, McCrone, Mendez, Hepner and Welsh all had major decisions.

Up Next

Ohio State will finish the regular season at Michigan State on Feb. 16 at 7 p.m., with the dual set to be broadcast on the Big Ten Network.

For in-depth recaps of the dual wins over Rutgers and Indiana and detailed coverage of every dual, be sure to visit BuckeyeSports.com.



The Ever-Changing Face Of College Recruiting

Recruiting never ends in the world of college football. No time is more hectic and critical for a football staff than the months of November and December. Coaches are finalizing their playing seasons trying to win games, making it to a postseason bowl game or even the playoffs, and hopefully having enough success to keep from getting fired.

COACH'S CORNER
Bill Conley

As the regular season comes to a close, the intensity of the recruiting process is also elevated. Coaches must bring in recruits for official and unofficial visits, try to lock in verbal commitments with the early signing period, along with managing the winter portal period. Staffs attempt to lure transfers from other programs while trying to hold on to some of their own players who are thinking of transferring themselves or entering the NFL draft.

The time period from the first part of January until the end of the official recruiting period on the first Wednesday of February is somewhat anticlimactic but challenging for college coaches to finish strong and lock in their roster for the upcoming spring. They must lock in and sign the last of the high school recruits but also be alert to other available transfers who may come on the market if a head coach from another program leaves as Nick Saban did this year.

Portal Pickups

The college football portal has changed the entire face of the game. This year, the Buckeyes were hit especially hard with players leaving and transferring to other schools.

Even players with significant playing time decided to transfer out. Higher-profile players such as Julian Fleming, Kyle McCord, Evan Pryor, Noah Rogers, Joe Royer, Chip Traynum and even punter Jesse Mirco decided to take their talents elsewhere. The number of skilled athletes who transferred out left the Buckeyes short, in terms of experience, at several positions.

Of the 20 who left the program, there were two wide receivers, two running backs, four defensive backs, two tight ends and one quarterback. To add to the dilemma, Ohio State lost Marvin Harrison Jr. and Cade Stover to the NFL.

Fortunately, the Buckeye coaching staff landed some quality transfers themselves. In number, Ohio State picked up fewer than a third of the number who transferred out, but the talent level brought in was exceptional. Of the portal pickups, no one is more impressive than Caleb Downs, a safety from Alabama. Downs was SEC Freshman of the Year. He was only in the portal for two days when he committed to the Buckeyes. Ryan Day and the staff had been recruiting Downs out of high school, and Downs and his family were impressed the first time around with Coach Day, which was instrumental in Downs' decision to sign with the Buckeyes.

Downs should fit in well at the adjuster/free safety position in Jim Knowles' defense due to his ability to make plays in the open field. Last season for the Crimson Tide, Downs led the team in tackles with 107 total, and 70 of those were solos. He was also a backup punt returner who brought one back for an 84-yard touchdown. On film, Downs displays great closing speed coming up from the secondary on run support, he sheds blocks and demonstrates superior agility in man-to-man pass coverage.

Noticeable for the Buckeyes was the need for a quarterback with experience due to the surprise transfer of McCord and injury issues with Devin Brown. The answer came in the signing of Will Howard from Kansas State. Even though Howard was just a one-year full-time starter for the Wildcats and the Buckeyes will have him for only one season, he impressed the Ohio State coaches with his size, strong arm, and accuracy.

Howard is a pocket passer but also has impressive running skills. The Kansas State coaching staff had a number of designed quarterback runs in their scheme, especially in the red zone, for "Iron Will." Howard will be in a quarterbacks room this spring with four other talented players including Brown, Lincoln Kienholz, freshman Air Noland and a late pickup, Julian Sayin, who flipped his commitment to Ohio State from Alabama after Saban retired.

The Buckeyes have a rich tradition of outstanding running backs and that is exactly what attracted Ole Miss running back Quinshon Judkins to transfer to Ohio State, even though he had never been in the state of Ohio. This physical, fast and elusive back has two years to play for the Buckeyes and should be a very good complement to TreVeyon Henderson and Dallan Hayden.

Last season, Judkins rushed for 1,158 yards and 15 rushing touchdowns. Judkins, like Henderson, has good hands and hauled in 22 receptions and scored two touchdowns via the air. He is also effective in the "wildcat" formation due to his running ability and overall athleticism.

The success rate of players transferring up to a premier program such as Ohio State from the MAC is rare, but the Buckeye coaches saw something special in Ohio University tight end Will Kacmarek. Two transfer tight ends from the Ohio State roster and the loss of multitalented Stover to the NFL left a huge hole in the depth chart at the position with only one player with any significant playing time, Gee Scott Jr., returning for the 2024 season. Kacmarek is a solid blocker but is an excellent route runner and receiving tight end.

Another much needed portal gain for the Buckeyes came in the form of another transfer out of Alabama in center Seth McLaughlin. The 6-4, 305-pounder entered the portal before Saban retired and was looking for another high-profile program like Alabama. The Buford, Ga., native is a physical and powerful run blocker and is extremely consistent in pass protection.

McLaughlin struggled with his shotgun snaps in the bowl game against Michigan, but that was a rarity. He can also play offensive guard but has started 20 games at center, a big need for the Buckeyes.

Freshmen Difference Makers

Oh, how things have changed in the world of college football recruiting. Coaches and fans alike were on edge till the final signed scholarships came via fax to football offices around the country on National Signing Day the first Wednesday in February.

Now, with the early signing period in December and the transfer portal, recruiting classes are all but wrapped up on that Wednesday. The real difference-makers in terms of recruits are more likely to come in the form of transfers today. Coaches can pick up players with at least some college playing experience and others with proven success in another program. Downs and Howard fit into those two categories, respectively, for the Buckeyes.

Still, there is the need each year to bring in high school talent to build for the future and add to the depth chart. In that group, there needs to be some highly talented difference makers who have a chance to make major contributions early.

Day and his staff accomplished their goals of attracting some top talent in both the transfer ranks as well as incoming freshmen. As has come to be customary, Ohio State's 2024 recruiting class ranked in the top five nationally by all major media outlets. The class definitely meets many of those immediate needs as well as position depth.

It would be a surprise if the number one high school recruit in the nation, Miami Gardens (Fla.) Chaminade-Madonna Prep five-star wide receiver Jeremiah Smith (6-3, 214), doesn't see the field early this fall. Smith is a tall and fast receiver who is impressive in gaining yards after the reception due to his ability to pull away from defenders. A solid route runner, Smith should break into the two-deep early at Ohio State.

Coach Larry Johnson loves to rotate a number of defensive linemen into the game as much as any other coach in the nation. One freshman who has the chance to get into that rotation this season is Buford, Ga., five-star defensive end Eddrick Houston (6-3, 269). He is a talented edge rusher with long arms who uses his hands well to disengage from offensive linemen. He is quick off the ball and has the motor Johnson demands in his pass rushers.

Springfield, Ohio, five-star cornerback Aaron Scott (6-2, 190) is another incoming freshman who may see early playing time. He committed to the Buckeyes last July and kept that commitment throughout the recruiting process. Scott has the length of a safety but the athleticism to play corner. He can flip his hips in man coverage without losing speed or balance. Scott has a chance to break into the two-deep and contribute on special teams early in his Ohio State career.

No battle in the freshmen class will be watched more than the one between previously mentioned quarterbacks Air Noland and Sayin. With Howard coming in and Brown – along with Kienholz – in the fold, it may be tough for either Noland or Sayin to break into the two- or even three-deep this spring due to limited reps. Hopefully Day and coaching staff can keep the majority of these quarterbacks on the roster this season, though it will be very difficult.

There will be other freshmen who will emerge as major contributors early. They will surprise the coaching staff with their talents, maturity and mentality for young players. There will be others who do not live up to expectations, and that's the nature of college football. It will be both intriguing and entertaining to follow the progress of all the newcomers to the Ohio State program this year in this ever-changing face of college recruiting.

Stellar Offseason Shifts To Exciting Spring

EXNER POINT
Rich Exner

There are no trophies for winning the offseason, and it's certainly hazardous to predict what will happen next December and January based on what is occurring now.

But Ohio State football fans must feel much better about the direction of the program and the prospects for 2024 than they did a few weeks ago in watching the humbling defeat to Missouri in the Cotton Bowl – and with good reason.

There are the draft-eligible players who stayed, the ones that transferred in, and what's happened on the coaching carousel elsewhere, not to mention a key hire to the Ohio State staff – first Bill O'Brien, and now former UCLA head coach Chip Kelly.

One really had to wonder about the direction of the Ohio State football team as the clock ticked near midnight on Dec. 29, the Buckeyes having fallen to Missouri, 14-3 – a score that understated the putrid performance on the field.

The offensive line was overmatched. The limited look at Devin Brown (4 of 6 for 20 yards passing) left no assurance that Ohio State had found its next quarterback. And the defense, however great it played last season, proved that under such circumstances it could not carry the day by itself, faltering in the end.

Soon, however, events began to unfold in Ohio State's favor going forward. In no particular order:

Alabama lost coach Nick Saban to retirement. The Crimson Tide began to lose players, including three key ones to Ohio State. Where is Alabama heading in the short term?

Washington, an entry in the Big Ten next season and coming off a championship game appearance, then lost its coach to Alabama. The Huskies, up and coming, suddenly aren't the concern they would have been if Kalen DeBoer were still leading that program. The Huskies were 4-8 in 2021 then hired DeBoer, who led them to 11-2 and 14-1 seasons.

At around the same time these changes were occurring elsewhere, Ohio State found its apparent starting quarterback in the portal, someone with experience.

Does Will Howard arrive with expectations of bringing a Justin Fields/C.J. Stroud type of talent? No. But unlike anything on the current Ohio State roster, he's won big-time football games and has experience, having thrown 779 passes over four seasons at Kansas State.

Howard apparently will fill the gap of biggest need. But he's not the most talented add for the Buckeyes. Unexpectedly, Ohio State now has what could, or should, be the best one-two running back combination in the country.

Quinshon Judkins, who ran for 2,725 yards in his two seasons at Ole Miss, will join TreVeyon Henderson (2,745 yards). Together, that's 5,470 yards of experience and talent.

There's help arriving on the offensive line with Alabama starter Seth McLaughlin joining the Buckeyes. And on defense, there's another Alabama transfer, Caleb Downs, a second-team All-American safety as a freshman for the Crimson Tide.

Oh, and did we mention added depth and future potential in the quarterback room? Julian Sayin, considered the nation's top quarterback prospect in 2024, left Alabama after just a few days as an early enrollee to join the Buckeyes.

No one could have imagined so many high-profile pickups, after what might have been considered a slow start in not attracting one of the bigger-name quarterbacks in the portal. Yet, that's not all.

What about all the key Buckeyes who decided to return for another year when they may have been thought to be leaning toward the NFL? These include Henderson, wideout Emeka Egbuka and offensive lineman Donovan Jackson on offense to go along with a slew of players on defense, including Denzel Burke, Ty Hamilton, Lathan Ransom, Jack Sawyer, J.T. Tuimoloau and Tyleik Williams.

Along the way, Ryan Day added experience to his staff, picking up a guy with NFL and Big Ten head coaching experience to run the offense – O'Brien. But even if he has departed, he may still have left an impact. His presence was considered a key in the pickup of Sayin.

Of course, as noted at the top, all this doesn't guarantee success on the field in the drive toward a run at the title next season. But this sure does put Ohio State in a better position than it was after the Missouri game. And it's hard to imagine a better collection of occurrences in such a short period of time.

Stay tuned. The opener is less than seven months away.

Wilson, Stroud And Harrison?

C.J. Stroud made it two in a row for Ohio State in winning the AP NFL Offensive Rookie of the Year Award.

There really was no drama. His performance in leading the Houston Texans to the playoffs made him a no-doubt winner, following his Buckeye teammate and New York Jets receiver Garrett Wilson, who won last season.

The question now is, will Ohio State win three in a row? You have to believe that if Marvin Harrison Jr. lands in a good situation, he'll be a top candidate next year unless another rookie quarterback has an incredible season.

Before Wilson and Stroud, the last Buckeye to win the award was Eddie George, playing for the old Houston Oilers in 1996. Before then, you have to go back to John Brockington with the Green Bay Packers in 1971.

On the defensive side, the Buckeyes produced back-to-back winners of the award in 2019 (Nick Bosa of the San Francisco 49ers) and 2020 (Chase Young of the Washington Commanders), while cornerback Marshon Lattimore won with the New Orleans Saints in 2017. Nick's brother, Joey, won the same award as a rookie with the Chargers in 2016, becoming the first Ohio State winner of the award established in 1967.

There are various other rookie of the year awards combining both defense and offense, including Pepsi NFL Rookie of the Year and Pro Football Writers of America Rookie of the Year, both of which were won by Stroud. Before him, Nick Bosa won both in 2019, while running back Ezekiel Elliot earned the honor from the PFWA in 2016.

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Miller Time May Be Coming Soon For Holtmann

THE VIEW FROM 15TH & HIGH
Frank Moskowitz, Publisher

Even the most casual Buckeye fan knows that Ohio State basketball coach Chris Holtmann is on thin ice as far as job security is concerned. Some avid Buckeyes fans have even been calling for Holtmann's immediate dismissal.

Let me go on record as saying that I do not believe in firing coaches in the middle of the season, something that is becoming more common in college sports. But as I was trying to come up with a subject for our weekly BuckeyeSports.com Reprint Thursday on Feb. 8, it occurred to me that Ohio State has fired a basketball coach in the middle of the season – well *maybe* they fired Eldon Miller. That's what makes Miller's plight so interesting, and we used his story for Reprint Thursday.

In fact, I found it so interesting that I am going to expand on the story, even though you can read about Miller's departure at BuckeyeSports.com, a departure that played out over several 1986 issues of BSB.

Miller, in his 10th season with the Buckeyes, had been under fire for years, as much for his bland personality and bland style of play as for his team's win-loss record. Things came to a head on Jan. 30, 1986, when the Buckeyes lost at Minnesota, dropping to 10-8, 4-4 in the Big Ten on the season. But there was more to the defeat. In the week leading up to the game, the Gophers had lost five players to either arrest or suspension, leaving Minnesota with just six players, and coach Jim Dutcher's resignation soon followed. Still, the Buckeyes lost 70-65. The Buckeyes lost at Iowa two days later before returning home.

On Feb. 3, 1986, Miller and OSU athletic director Rick Bay announced that they had mutually agreed that Miller would not return for the 1986-87 season.

"Early this morning, coach Eldon Miller and I met and we agreed mutually that it was time to look for a new basketball coach for Ohio State University at the end of the current season," Bay said. "Coach Miller will continue as our head coach for the rest of this year."

Bay claimed to be surprised that things had come to a head so quickly.

"Yesterday at this time, there was no question in my mind that we were not going to resolve this issue or even talk about the future any further than we already had until the season was over," Bay said.

"But Coach Miller came to my office this morning and said that we should resolve it immediately. It was at that time we mutually agreed to begin looking for a new head coach at the conclusion of the season.

"He said he was not going to resign, because he didn't like the word 'resign.' It was a connotation relative to quitting. I told him that I wasn't going to fire him, because I didn't like the word 'fire.' So, the compromise was we would mutually come to a decision that was in the best interest of Ohio State.

"I think that Eldon felt that given the lack of support and some restrictions that we're operating under currently in the athletic department, he just could not take the program any further. I think I agree with that. He's been operating on a year-to-year contract, which has worked against us in recruiting."

The next day Miller said that he was definitely fired.

"Rick Bay told me it was in the best interest of Ohio State not to renew my contract," Miller said, adding that he took that to mean he was fired. "He fired me and I accepted the fact that he fired me."

As for the "lack of support," Miller also pointed to his contract situation.

"You don't need 10 years," he explained. "A player coming in needs to know the coach is going to be there four years, or at least it has to appear as best as possible the coach is going to be there four years. No coach can ever guarantee that, but you have to eliminate things that can be used in any way negatively against you in recruiting."

The story could have ended there, with Miller coaching out the rest of the season and moving on to wherever he was going to move on to and Bay finding a new coach. But the story played out in a way that I just don't see happening in today's coaching world.

A little over three weeks later, while still on the job at Ohio State, Miller was introduced as the new head basketball coach at Northern Iowa. Meanwhile, the Buckeyes were going 4-5 in Big Ten play after Miller was fired. He won his final game at St. John Arena, 68-55, over those very same Golden Gophers.

"Coaching at Ohio State has been a lifelong dream for me," he said after the game. "It will be something that will be a part of my life forever. There's no way I could begin to tell you what it means to me to have coached here 10 years. Those 10 years are almost over."

But those 10 years were far from over. The Buckeyes dropped the final two games of the regular season to finish 14-14, good enough to earn an invitation to the NIT. The Buckeyes tallied a win over Ohio University on March 14 to start the tourney.

On March 15, Boston College coach Gary Williams was announced as the new head coach at Ohio State, with Miller and the Buckeyes still competing. Ohio State would go on to win the NIT, defeating Wyoming in Madison Square Garden, 73-63, for the crown.

"I'm glad we won it, number one," Miller said after the victory. "And number two, I'm glad I've got a place to go to work come Monday."

Miller, who seldom showed a sense of humor with the media, was asked if it would be difficult to part with his players.

"It's not difficult for me," he replied. "I'm not moving to outer space. I'm going to Northern Iowa. It's not the end of the world."

It may not have been outer space, but it may have been close.

"Northern Iowa is at Cedar Falls, Iowa," he explained. "You fly from Dallas to Chicago. You take a plane from Chicago to Cedar Rapids and you pick up a plane in Cedar Rapids and go to Cedar Falls. It's right across the river from Waterloo."

The coast was finally clear for Williams to take over at Ohio State.

On a quaint note, given today's sky-high coaching salaries, Williams agreed to a five-year deal at $75,000 annually, with a chance to make over $200,000 when outside income was factored in. Miller also agreed to a five-year deal at Northern Iowa, good for $50,000 a year.

About Reprint Thursday

For those of you who are not familiar with Reprint Thursday, it is a staple on our BuckeyeSports.com website, free to all subscribers. Each Thursday we try to find a story that is somehow relevant to current events at Ohio State or maybe something that is having an anniversary. We reprint stories from the Buckeye Sports Bulletin from back in the day. Sometimes, when we can't find something relevant, we play Reprint Roulette, where we randomly pick a past BSB and reprint stories from that issue. The reprints are almost always interesting, or at least I find them so.

Since January, we have run reprints on the time Michael Penix Jr., who was preparing with Washington for the CFP national championship game, almost led Indiana to victory over the Buckeyes in 2020 (Jan. 4). We continued our 25th anniversary celebration of the 1998 Buckeye football team with coverage of their Sugar Bowl win over Texas A&M (Jan. 11), offered coverage of Mike Doss electing to return to the 2002 football team in honor of the many Buckeyes who elected to return this year (Jan. 18), bid farewell to Michigan's Jim Harbaugh with stories about OSU's 62-39 shellacking of Harbaugh and the Wolverines in 2018 (Jan. 25), wrapped up coverage of the 1998 football season with stories from the 1999 National Signing Day (Feb. 1), and then reprinted the stories on Miller's "firing" on Feb. 8.

All reprints are archived on BuckeyeSports.com, so you haven't missed a thing. Just go to the BSB Online drop-down tab or call us at (614) 486-2202 if you need help getting started.

Coop An Early Advocate

In that BSB from February 1999 covering Ohio State recruiting, it was noted that Ohio State coach John Cooper was stumping for a recruiting early signing period, something that was finally implemented in 2017, 18 years later.

"I would like to see us have an early signing day for football," Cooper said. "We had 12 or 15 early commitments, and I would have liked to have signed those players and not worry about it.

"If you can get a player committed early, why not go ahead and sign him?"

Cooper said he and his coaches had to stay on top of their commitments to make sure they signed when February finally rolled around.

"In certain cases, a player makes a verbal commitment, but we keep calling them once a week and we have them make their official visit," he said.

"I know there was a Big Ten school that called most of our recruits one night this week asking, 'Are you still going to Ohio State? Have you changed your mind? Do you know they've signed two other running backs?' "

In classic Coop style, he considered it a minor nuisance, as well as a compliment.

"When that happens, you know you've had a good year recruiting."

Déjà Vu All Over Again

You may have noticed in our "From the Pages of BSB" feature on page 8 of this issue, 30 years ago the legendary Clark Kellogg had to come to the defense of Randy Ayers and his struggling Buckeyes, who were in a similar situation as Holtmann and his current Buckeyes. The 1993-94 club was mired in what would become a 13-16, 6-12 campaign.

"I think it's crazy and ridiculous," Kellogg said of the criticism of Ayers and his team. "But it's something that comes with the territory when you're a coach of a high-profile university. Fans are always going to have a second opinion, especially when you're struggling.

"There's not much to be said when you're winning back-to-back Big Ten championships. I understand that it's the nature of the beast, but that doesn't mean I have to like it."

Ayers had led the Buckeyes to back-to-back conference championships in 1990-91 and 1991-92.

It's Not Just BSB

There still remains a group of Buckeye Sports Bulletin readers out there who insist that we are the only entity in the entire United States that is having postal delivery problems. I think most people have figured out by now, especially after the holiday rush, that the delivery problem goes way beyond BSB.

I recently came across an interesting article from USA Today. While the article by Minnah Arshad centered on the Houston area, it pointed out that there were problems everywhere.

"While problems are reported in many places, the outcry from Houston has been particularly loud," Arshad wrote. BSB has many, many readers in the Houston area, so they should take note.

One Houston small business owner tracked a package mailed to a customer in Houston. It went to Dallas, Houston, Atlanta and then dropped off the radar. It was mailed on Jan. 9 and still had not arrived two weeks later. Sound familiar, Toledo-area BSB readers, whose paper goes to Detroit and then who knows where before it comes back down to northwest Ohio?

U.S. Rep. Al Green, from Texas, said he had received nearly 100 calls from people "dismayed about postal service delays."

Green said he hoped to get problems resolved before the primary elections in March to prevent problems with mail-in ballots.

"It would be a shame for the election to be thrown into some sort of questionable circumstances because the Postal Service did not deliver mail timely and appropriately," Green said.

Meanwhile, in the Pacific Northwest, Washington Representatives Suzan DelBene and Rick Larson sent a letter to Postmaster General Louis DeJoy about "persistent mail delays" during the holidays. That letter followed one in July complaining about "chronic delays."

In Virginia, Rep. Abigail Spanberger said in December she received more than 1,300 complaints about mail delays. Virginia officials asked the Postal Service to hold a town hall meeting to address concerns about chronic delays and mail theft, WTVR-TV reported. The request was denied.

I think most everyone is aware of the financial struggles of the Postal Service. According to the article, in 2021 the Postal Service announced a 10-year plan to get its debt-ridden finances turned around.

"It plans to build back its financial viability through *slower delivery, price hikes* and process optimization (my italics)"

Sounds like a plan, doesn't it?

Buckeye Sports Bulletin's Plan

Meanwhile, BSB's plan is to continue to work with our loyal readers to keep the paper "vibrant and viable," in spite of mail problems and issues with the economy. You have read about this project in this space for months now and you have responded in little ways – paying full price even though you have been offered a promotional rate – and big ways by participating in our VIP program.

In the next few issues we are going to be offering a radical gift rate directed at groups that we feel will either help us or are likely to renew after their initial gift subscription runs out.

You can send a gift subscription to anyone under the age of 35 – our most difficult demographic – for just $19.95. This rate is a so-called "loss-leader," as it costs far more than that just to print and mail the paper. But who knows? Maybe some of those in the cellphone set will find that reading a newspaper is fun.

Send your gift names and addresses with check or credit card information to PO Box 12453, Columbus, Ohio, 43212. Don't forget your three-digit security code (four for American Express). Or you can give us a call at (614) 486-2202 for credit card orders or questions. Mention the "Under 35" special.

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