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"For The Buckeye Fan Who Needs To Know More"

March 2, 2024

Holtmann Fired After Seven Seasons Leading OSU Men's Hoops

By **PATRICK ENGELS**

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

Coming off perhaps one of the more excruciating losses in his seven-year tenure at Ohio State, men's basketball head coach Chris Holtmann quietly walked into the Value City Arena interview room on Feb. 6 to answer questions from a group of reporters.

Just 25 minutes earlier, Holtmann and his team saw an 18-point second-half lead evaporate on their home floor to Indiana, a sputtering blue blood that entered the game having lost five of its previous seven games. It was a backbreaking 76-73 defeat for Ohio State that continued a spiraling downward trend for the program, giving them their second significant late-game collapse of the season – the first being another 18-point blown lead on Dec. 9 at Penn State – along with its eighth loss in the last nine games.

"I think it's frustrating for everybody," Holtmann, who would ultimately be fired on Feb. 14, said after the game. "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."

Ohio State's loss to Indiana was not only another disappointing defeat for Holtmann's team in the 2023-24 campaign – a season that once held high hopes after a 12-2 start – but also a microcosm of all that has gone south for the program across the last few seasons.

The Buckeyes welcomed an uninspired Value City Arena crowd of 11,157 that night, part of a trend for the program that has Ohio State on track to finish the season with record-low attendance for the second year in a row. On the court, Ohio State received inconsistent offensive production from its three transfer portal additions – fifth-years Jamison Battle and Dale Bonner, and sophomore Evan Mahaffey – an area in which Holtmann and his staff have strug-



SONNY BROCKWAY

OUT OF TIME – Ohio State fired men's basketball coach Chris Holtmann on Feb. 14, parting ways with the head coach after seven years with the program. He finished his Ohio State career with a 137-86 record and failed to reach 20 wins in each of his past two campaigns while missing the NCAA Tournament.

gled to find success since it became a more prominent part of the collegiate game.

Holtmann and his staff also relied upon a quartet of relatively inexperienced sophomores – guards Roddy Gayle Jr., Bruce Thornton and Mahaffey along with center

Felix Okpara – to guide them late in the game, reflecting a concerted push across the last two seasons to go young that has led to a bevy of late-game struggles both this season and last.

"We have the youngest team in the Big Ten, so we have a lot of guys who get inside their heads," Gayle said after the game. "We had a lot of manageable things we did to lose this game. I think we had a lot of mistakes we could have corrected. We need everybody to keep their heads up and stay together moving forward."

For Holtmann, the frustrations surrounding all of these shortcomings seemed to hit a boiling point during a tense six-minute press conference following the Indiana loss, where he seemed uninterest-

ed in giving detailed responses regarding the state of the program and offered only short – sometimes curt – answers.

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

"We just need to be more aggressive," he added later on.

"We'll see," he said when asked if these late-game collapses were correctable.

The Indiana loss – and the reaction by Holtmann after the game – was viewed by many as the beginning of the end for the Holtmann era at Ohio State, one which may ultimately be remembered more for games and moments like those than his early tri-

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Continued On Page 16

From The Message Board

"Some talent, but not quite enough. Some experience, but nowhere near enough. No discernible sense of direction. Underwhelming fan interest. I feel like this program needs an Urban Meyer-level hire to right the ship. I would prefer that the university invest in a top-level coach, if one is interested. We need a leader who has been there ... successfully!"

– Michael Bauer

"The current state of the program is at the basement level as the worst Big Ten team the last two seasons in the conference. The basketball team will always play second fiddle to the

football program. However, there's no reason with the positive recruiting the last couple seasons that the program cannot have at least some modicum of tournament success or at least challenge for the regular and postseason conference title. My hope is that the new coach will strive to obtain those goals which I think are very achievable and not asking too much."

– Tiffin Buckeye

"I think Gene Smith articulated the expectations way back when Holtmann was hired, and if I remember what he said, I concur; something like routinely

The Ohio State men's basketball program is set to undergo significant change following the firing of head coach Chris Holtmann on Feb. 14. With a new voice set to lead the team beginning next season, we asked our readers at the BuckeyeSports.com Fan Forum their thoughts on the state of the men's basketball program, including the expectations for the team moving forward. Here are some of the responses:

ranked in AP poll, making the Sweet Sixteen usually, and make the Final Four once in awhile, and of course finish in the top half of the Big Ten almost always. If those are not Gene Smith's expectations, they are mine."

– Terrier Buck

"Whoever that coach might be, I hope he can bring at least two 6-10, 240-pound bangers with him to join Felix Okpara and Austin Parks to play in the paint. It wouldn't hurt if those two could shoot from behind the arc on occasion. I really like Okpara and believe he will be an asset the next two years. I hope he can add 20

pounds of bulk to withstand the rigors of Big Ten play.

"Bruce Thornton, Roddy Gayle, Scotty Middleton, Devin Royal, Evan Mahaffey, Taison Chatman and Bowen Hardman have two to four more years to develop and make the Buckeyes a solid contender. With the right coach, they will make fans proud next season."

– BYRON MCNUTT

"You know when you are out in the woods trying to light a campfire and you can get it to spark but it won't catch? That's the men's team."

– Peyote Buck

From The Pages Of BSB

40 Years Ago — 1984

The lithe figure swooped across the key near the basket, took in a pass from a teammate and ever so smoothly turned and fired in one quick, graceful motion. A smile creased the player's face as the ball curled the net.

That, in a nutshell, is what Brad Sellers' basketball abilities allowed him to do. The 7-1, 212-pound transfer student from the University of Wisconsin hoped that is what he would be doing for real next year as a member of Eldon Miller's Ohio State men's basketball team.

"I fit in just like I've been here all along," the 21-year-old said. Sellers had practiced with the Buckeyes all season, and although he was not getting the game-action necessary for proper improvement and refinement of his skills, he was maintaining a level of consistency.

"I think I'm able to maintain a certain level, but it's not the same as in a game," Sellers said. "I think I'm keeping in time by practicing. I want to report in September in shape because if I don't, it will hurt me greatly. I wouldn't mind being 220 (pounds), but I feel comfortable playing at this weight."

35 Years Ago — 1989

Senior leadership was the key for the Ohio State women's basketball team in 1989, and that was certainly in evidence Feb. 21 when it rolled to a 66-57 victory over Iowa.

The victory not only extended the team's home winning streak to 61 consecutive Big Ten games and propelled the Buckeyes back into first place in the conference, but it served as a reminder that OSU's quartet of talented seniors was capable of carrying the team to the conference championship and beyond.

Against Iowa, Geneva Sanford, Niki Lowry, Lisa Cline and Liana Coultts combined for 58 points, 19 rebounds and 14 assists. Most of Ohio State's opponents had been dazzled by Cline's outside shooting, Lowry's inside moves, Sanford's quickness and Coultts' passing skills. Those game-in, game-out performances were not lost upon head coach Nancy Darsch.

"The senior class is a good class," Darsch said. "They're used to working with one another now. They look to create things that are going to give each other shots. Whether it's penetration by Geneva or Lisa, whether it's Liana finding the open man or whether it's Niki looking high or low, they're really unselfish."

30 Years Ago — 1994

Two well-known former Ohio State football players emerged as the early front-runners to replace Jim Jones as university athletic director.

Rex Kern, quarterback of the 1968 national championship team, and Archie Griffin, the only two-time winner of the Heisman Trophy, were the names most frequently mentioned in the week following Jones' announcement that he would retire effective June 30.

"I already have a great job and I am not looking to change what I'm doing," Kern told BSB via telephone from his home in California. "However, I have very strong ties to Ohio and to Ohio State. If the university wants to talk to me, I surely will listen to what it has to say."

While Kern had been active with his alma mater since graduation, he had been physically removed from the university for nearly 25 years. That was a liability that did not affect Griffin. An assistant athletic director in charge of fundraising for the past nine years, the 39-year-old former OSU tailback was still immensely popular, although it had been nearly 20 years since he won the second of his two Heismans.

"I've been here for nine years and if the time is right, the time is right," Griffin told BSB. "I won't tell anyone to select me. But, yes, I would think I would be one of the ones they would consider for the position."

25 Years Ago — 1999

While Michael Redd and Scoonie Penn continued to play at a high level and earn national recognition, fans were becoming increasingly concerned at the thought they would jump to the NBA.

"It's in the back of my mind, but I'm just staying focused on this season," said Redd, a 6-6 sophomore. "In the offseason, I'm sure we'll talk about it, but I don't see him leaving or me leaving at this point."

Penn had said little on the subject, but those close to the program believed he was intent on returning for his senior season next year, when he and Ohio State could be in line for even greater accomplishments. Since Penn had sat out the previous season as a transfer, he was unlikely to bolt without assurances of being a high pick.

"I haven't even thought about that yet," Penn said March 1. "There's none of that going on in my mind. OK, I won this award here, but I've got to take care of Friday (OSU's tournament opener March 5)."

"I'm sure scouts are looking at us," Redd said. "That's just being realistic. But I just want to worry about us continuing to win these games. In the offseason, we'll see what happens."

20 Years Ago — 2004

Snarling heavyweights bent on taking down three-time All-American Tommy Rowlands were usually no match for the Ohio State wrestler. A Gatorade cup, though – well, that's a different story. Looking for refreshment just prior to a recent practice, Rowlands spilled the contents of a large cup all over the floor of the Buckeyes' wrestling room.

Fortunately for the Buckeyes, that was about the only misstep he had made in the last month, and because of that Rowlands was staring down the barrel of history. No OSU wrestler had ever been a four-time All-American, and only Kevin Randleman has been a two-time national champion.

Rowlands, who had finished second, first and sixth in three NCAA tournaments, could do both if he blitzed through the Big Ten championships and NAAs the way many thought he could. Rowlands wasn't chalking up anything yet.

"There are a lot of guys out there who can beat me if I don't wrestle well," said Rowlands, who entered the Big Ten meet ranked No. 1 in the country. "I have to stay focused and get through these last few weeks to really achieve what I set out to do."

15 Years Ago — 2009

The question posed to Ohio State head coach Jim Foster was natural after his team concluded a fifth consecutive Big Ten women's basketball season in first place with a 74-63 win against Penn State on March 1.

Did this – a record 12th Big Ten title in school history – feel any different?

He gave an answer that seemed fittingly disjointed considering the ups and downs of a young but talented team he had coached to 24 wins during his seventh regular season stalking the sidelines in Columbus.

"Yeah, I think," he said before a pause. "I think we're a better team than we've been for a while, a couple of years. That would certainly be one (difference). A little more enthusiasm with it. And I like the way they took their time and respected their opponent and celebrated afterwards."

10 Years Ago — 2014

According to Ohio State, head coach Urban Meyer underwent a small medical procedure over the Feb. 28 weekend to remove a small fluid collection related to a congenital arachnoid cyst. The procedure, which was performed at OSU's Wexner Medical Center, removed a cyst that was first found in 1998 when he was a coach at Notre Dame.

According to Ohio State, the procedure was done to alleviate inter-

mittent headaches Meyer had been experiencing the previous few weeks. Meyer, 49, was reported to be doing well and was expected to be on the field March 4 when Ohio State opened its spring drills.

Meyer, of course, had battled health concerns before. He left his job at Florida after the 2010 season as a result of consistent health- and stress-related issues and to spend more time with his family.

His biggest health scare came after the Gators' 2009 SEC Championship Game loss to Alabama when he had to be rushed to the hospital with chest pains. He then announced his first retirement from the Gators that December, but he returned to work in the spring and announced his chest issues were caused by esophageal spasms that were easily treatable with medication.

Five Years Ago — 2019

Chris Holtmann may have chosen the wrong profession. In baseball and international soccer, for example, the person guiding the team is called a manager.

Holtmann was a coach, more specifically the second-year head coach of the Ohio State men's basketball team. Yet the title didn't accurately describe what he did. For much of the 2018-19 season he had been a manager, not necessarily of people – although that was a part of his job – but of expectations.

It was his own fault. His inaugural campaign after replacing Thad Matta was better than anyone could have imagined. He took a program that was 17-15 overall and 11th in the Big Ten with a 7-11 mark in 2016-17 to one under his guidance that qualified for the NCAA Tournament with a 25-9 record, including finishing second in the conference at 15-3.

Holtmann, the 2017-18 Big Ten Coach of the Year, was the magic man with the golden touch. But even with that short run of success, the honeymoon for Holtmann and the Buckeyes (18-11, 8-10 Big Ten) was over. He was questioned about why fifth-year senior guard C.J. Jackson was playing so much and freshman forward Justin Ahrens so little. How about some zone defense? Why was Kaleb Wesson always in foul trouble? And those darn turnovers.

Holtmann was a victim of his own success, as he told the media in January.

"Fans on the street said, 'Coach, what were you doing, winning so much your first year?'" he said, noting that high expectations for this season were unrealistic.

One Year Ago — 2023

In the storied history of the Ohio State women's basketball program, nine players had been honored as Big Ten Freshman of the Year. That group includes the likes of forward Jantel Lavender and guard Kelsey Mitchell, who were also named Big Ten Player of the Year during their freshman campaigns, as well as program greats such as Cline, Tracey Hall, Samantha Prahalis and Katie Smith, among others.

All those listed left strong legacies at Ohio State, and it may have been time to add a new name to the list of standout freshmen.

First-year forward Cotie McMahon, the winner of six Big Ten Freshman of the Week honors as of Feb. 20 (tying the program record previously set by Mitchell), provided a significant boost for Ohio State this season, growing in a matter of months from a wide-eyed freshman to a leader for one of the better teams in program history.

"She's got a lot of talent, and the good news is I think she's really just scratching the surface of it, but she's working hard at it," Ohio State head coach Kevin McGuff said earlier in the season. "She's already made a lot of progress, but she's still really got a long way to go to reach the great potential that she has."

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No. 1	Sept. 9	No. 13	Dec. 16
No. 2	Sept. 16	No. 14	Jan. 13
No. 3	Sept. 23	No. 15	Jan. 27
No. 4	Oct. 7	No. 16	Feb. 17
No. 5	Oct. 14	No. 17	March 2
No. 6	Oct. 21	No. 18	March 16
No. 7	Oct. 28	No. 19	April 6
No. 8	Nov. 4	No. 20	April 20
No. 9	Nov. 11	No. 21	May
No. 10	Nov. 18	No. 22	June
No. 11	Nov. 25	No. 23	July
No. 12	Dec. 2	No. 24	August

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OSU Hoops Program Needs Rebuilt – Again

I guess no one should have been surprised at Ohio State deciding to part ways with men's basketball coach Chris Holtmann. Conversely, I don't think anyone thought Holtmann's tenure would implode in such spectacularly excruciating fashion.

Holtmann banked a tremendous amount of emotional capital when he took over a program that had begun to meander during the final years under Thad Matta and immediately produced a 25-win season in 2017-18. But that turned out to be the high-water mark during Holtmann's seven years in Columbus.

There was already a sense the program had plateaued the last couple of years, but beginning late last season, the Buckeyes looked disjointed, disinterested or a combination of both on any given night. As if anyone wants to relive the nightmare, Ohio State began last season with a 10-3 record before losing 14 of its next 15 games on the way to the program's first losing season in nearly 20 years.

This year was almost a carbon copy when the Buckeyes started with a 12-2 record before embarking upon a streak that included eight losses over their next nine games, a slide punctuated by blowing an 18-point lead during a 76-73 home loss to Indiana. OSU stopped the bleeding temporarily with a 79-75 win in double overtime against Maryland, but when the Buckeyes followed that with a listless 62-54 loss at Wisconsin – the team's 16th consecutive road defeat – outgoing athletic director Gene Smith pulled the plug on Holtmann.

The team responded a few days later with a 73-69 upset win against second-ranked Purdue in front of a raucous (for once) crowd at Value City Arena inside the normally lifeless Schottenstein Center. But while the Buckeyes showed more spark than they had in a month, the outcome could also have been attributed to the Boilermakers who didn't play anything like the No. 2 team in the nation.

I have no idea who Holtmann's successor will be. Barring some kind of miraculous late-season run, I doubt it will be Jake Diebler with his lack of experience running a program. Likewise, none of the names first banded about following Holtmann's dismissal excited anyone.

Former OSU player and assistant Chris Jent has reportedly expressed his interest, but his experience running his own program is only slightly better than Diebler. Jay Wright, who won 520 games and two NCAA titles at Villanova before retiring two years ago, has not expressed any desire to get back in the game.

Sean Miller has been successful during two separate stints at Xavier, but his tenure at Arizona was racked by scandal and NCAA investigations before Miller was fired in April 2021. And speaking of excess baggage, Bob Huggins was in attendance at the OSU-Purdue game. The 70-year-old Ohio native has 935 victories over more than 40 years as a college head coach – and almost more black marks and red X's on his résumé than humanly possible.

Whoever gets the job will have the unenviable task of somehow trying to resurrect a program that has traditionally played the role of ugly stepsister to its football big brother. While Ryan Day has to continually defend a program that has won nearly 90 percent of its games with five Big Ten titles and one national championship over the last decade, the men's basketball program has no conference titles since 2012, a 10-year-long (and counting) streak of failing to advance past the first weekend of the NCAA Tournament, and a 64-year gap (and counting) since its one and only NCAA championship.

That kind of record wouldn't seem to rise even to the level of mediocrity.

A History Lesson

During the CBS telecast of Ohio State's victory against Purdue, the network produced a graphic in connection with Black History Month featuring Cleo Vaughn, the first African-American basketball player in OSU program history who played one season – and one season only – during the mid-1950s.

EDITOR'S NOTEBOOK Mark Rea

As something of a history buff where Ohio State football is concerned, I'm ashamed to say I'm severely lacking when it comes to OSU basketball history and had honestly never heard of Vaughn. Therefore, a little digging was in order.

Thanks in part to OSU basketball historian Lee Caryer, I learned that Vaughn, a native of northern Alabama, was a football, baseball and basketball star at Lima (Ohio) Central High School and was highly recruited by several high-level programs before Floyd Stahl offered him a scholarship to come to Ohio State.

After earning a freshman letter with the Buckeyes, Vaughn started the opening game of the 1953-54 season and scored 13 points during a 93-78 win at Butler. Three days later, he totaled 11 points and six rebounds during a 91-86 win at St. Louis.

A lingering ankle injury hampered Vaughn for much of the rest of his sophomore season, and he wound up averaging just 3.6 points over 14 games. The following year, he returned to Ohio State but admitted he really wasn't interested in either academics or athletics.

He left school and joined the U.S. Army after which he played some minor-league baseball in the New York Yankees organization. During the 1957 season, Vaughn played in the outfield at Class-D St. Petersburg and Class-C Modesto, hitting a combined .221 with one home run and 11 runs batted in over 30 games.

By 1960, Vaughn decided to complete his college education at Alabama A&M, where he played basketball and earned black college All-America honors. "I wasn't eligible under the rules after playing professional baseball," he later said, "but nobody checked."

After graduation, Vaughn moved to the Detroit area, where he worked for Ebony magazine and began referring to himself as Chico rather than Cleo. While in the Motor City, he dated such Motown Records stars as Diana Ross and Martha Reeves, and he even sang backup on the 1971 Marvin Gaye hit "What's Going On."

Years later, he moved to the Toledo area, where he became involved in community service, including running an incredibly popular youth basketball camp that attracted such youngsters as Dennis Hopson, Jim Jackson and LeBron James.

Vaughn continued to be an influential member of the Toledo community until his death in 2010 at the age of 77. Last summer, he was elected to the Ohio Basketball Hall of Fame.

Despite his passing, the Cleo Vaughn Sports Group lives on, founded by Vaughn's son, Tommy, to offer free basketball camps, clinics and life skills to youngsters in the Toledo area.

Key To Success

It's been something of a jackpot offseason for the Ohio State football team.

Stalwarts such as TreVeyon Henderson,

Emeka Egbuka, Jack Sawyer, Denzel Burke, Lathan Ransom, J.T. Tuimoloau, Tylic Williams and Cody Simon decided to return for another season, while the Buckeyes raided the transfer portal for the likes of Kansas State quarterback Will Howard, Ole Miss running back Quinshon Judkins, Alabama safety Caleb Downs and Michigan linebacker Joey Velazquez.

There seems to be a glut of talent at nearly every position, and that includes quarterback – somewhat strange for a team that lost its starter through the portal when Kyle McCord ran off to the relative obscurity of central New York and Syracuse University.

Howard seems to have the inside track on replacing McCord as the OSU starter, but Day is on record as saying he wants to get "as many (spring) reps as we can" to holdovers Devin Brown and Lincoln Kienholz as well as incoming freshman Air Noland and Alabama transfer Julian Sayin.

Of course, it goes without saying that all the stockpiled talent in the world isn't going to amount to the proverbial tinker's damn (look it up, kiddos) if the offensive line doesn't perform a whole lot better than it did during the 2023 season, and most specifically against Missouri in the Cotton Bowl.

Left tackle Josh Simmons, left guard Donovan Jackson and right tackle Josh Fryar return from last year's line, and one would hope their year of experience together will help them improve for 2024. Joining them will be Alabama transfer Seth McLaughlin at center and former four-star tackle prospect Luke Montgomery, who will presumably take over right guard duties from Matthew Jones.

So, when Bobby or Betty Buckeye try to bend your ear this spring and summer about how many points their favorite team is going to ring up in the fall, remember that the road to beating Michigan and beyond will either be a smooth one or chock full of potholes because of the offensive line.

Irish Eyes Are Crying

In case you missed it, the College Football Playoff board of managers unanimously approved on Feb. 20 the so-called 5+7 model for the expanded 12-team tournament field beginning this fall.

The agreement guarantees playoff spots to the five highest-ranking conference champions along with the next seven highest-ranking teams. That means automatic inclusion to the Big Ten, SEC, Big 12 and ACC winners with the fifth spot going to the highest-ranked Group of 5 champion from the American, Conference-USA, MAC, Mountain West and Sun Belt. (Remember, the Pac-12 has ceased to exist.)

First-round byes go to the top four teams during a tournament that will be spread out over four weeks.

You can argue about which entities – universities, coaches, players, broadcast partners, advertisers – are the big winners in this expanded playoff format, but there can be no dispute about the biggest loser.

The arrogance Notre Dame has exhibited over the years by refusing to join a football conference while hoarding all of its TV revenue is finally coming back to bite the Fighting Irish in a big way.

Under the new CFP rules, an undefeated and No. 1-ranked Notre Dame team would fare no better than a No. 5 seed in the playoff tournament because the first four seeds are locked into the Power 4 conference champions. As a result, under the present format, the Irish will never garner a first-round bye and must always run the four-game gantlet if they are to win their first national championship since 1988.

OHIO STATE INSIDER

Laurinaitis Promoted To Linebackers Coach

Ohio State and head coach Ryan Day have filled their 10th and final assistant coach opening with a familiar face, promoting graduate assistant James Laurinaitis to linebackers coach on Feb. 15. He received a two-year contract through the 2025 season.

Laurinaitis, 37, joined the staff last season, working with the linebackers while assisting with recruiting. Now as a full-time assistant coach, Laurinaitis – who has drawn rave reviews from prospects – is allowed to go on the road and recruit.

“I try to be an ambassador of Ohio State,” Laurinaitis said on Feb. 20. “I love this school. It’s changed my life. It’s done wonders for me and my family. To play here, recruit your position at the school you went to at the place that you love, it’s so natural.

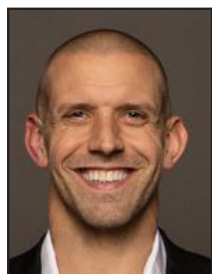
“When you’re explaining it to people, like, I’m sure there are some coaches that have to come off as car salesmen. There’s really none of that because I’ve lived it. That’s a huge benefit, when you’re talking to young people trying to convince them to come to your school, it’s like, ‘This is what it did for me.’”

A spot opened up for Laurinaitis on the coaching staff following the firing of special team’s coordinator Parker Fleming. Day had indicated the Buckeyes were looking at several options regarding the final assistant coach spot, including hiring another special teams coordinator or adding an additional defensive line coach, but they elect-

ed to use that spot to promote Laurinaitis. Without a dedicated special teams coordinator, it is expected that one of Ohio State’s current assistants will take over coaching that unit, with Day also having more input.

Laurinaitis is a former linebacker at Ohio State, where he played from 2005-08 and was a three-time All-American and two-time Big Ten Defensive Player of the Year, among other national awards. Following his time with the Buckeyes, Laurinaitis played eight seasons in the NFL with the St. Louis Rams and New Orleans Saints, finishing with 869 career tackles.

He first broke into coaching in 2022,



James Laurinaitis

joining Notre Dame as a graduate assistant under head coach Marcus Freeman, and since returning to Ohio State, Laurinaitis has made a significant impression on those in and around the program.

“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.

Laurinaitis is now one of three new assistant coaches for Ohio State, joining safeties coach Matt Guerrieri and offensive coordinator/quarterbacks coach Chip Kelly.

Walton Promoted, Four Coaches Extended

The promotion of Laurinaitis was one of several moves Ohio State made to its coaching staff on Feb. 15. The team also announced the promotion of Tim Walton to assistant head coach/secondary and cornerbacks coach and gave him a two-year contract extension through 2026.

Additionally, tight ends coach Keenan Bailey and defensive coordinator Jim Knowles received one- and two-year extensions through 2025 and 2026, respectively, and associate head coach/defensive line

coach Larry Johnson earned a new two-year contract through 2025.

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.)

Walton, who played cornerback at Ohio State from 1990-93, has made a name for himself since joining the Buckeyes’ staff as cornerbacks coach in 2022. Ohio State finished with the nation’s top-ranked pass defense last season while Walton has also been electric on the recruiting trail, signing several high-profile cornerbacks in 2024 and is in line to do the same in 2025.

Johnson, despite consistent rumors of retirement, will serve as an Ohio State assistant for his 11th season, making him the longest-tenured assistant on Ohio State’s staff. The 72-year-old will also have a familiar face joining him on the sidelines this season, as his son Tony will join the staff as an analyst and advisor.

The younger Johnson does not have any collegiate coaching experience, but he did play wide receiver at Penn State from 2000-03, when the elder Johnson was the Nittany Lions’ defensive line coach.

Walton, who played cornerback at Ohio State from 1990-93, has made a name for himself since joining the Buckeyes’ staff as cornerbacks coach in 2022. Ohio State finished with the nation’s top-ranked pass defense last season while Walton has also been electric on the recruiting trail, signing several high-profile cornerbacks in 2024 and is in line to do the same in 2025.

O’Brien Lauds Day In Opening BC Presser

Bill O’Brien’s time at Ohio State may have been a short one, but that did not stop him from having some positive things to say about Day and the program.

Speaking with the media at his introductory press conference at Boston College on Feb. 15, which was the first time he offered comments since he was hired by Ohio State and subsequently hired by the Eagles, O’Brien wasted little time in complimenting Day for the support and consideration he showed the now former Buckeye assistant throughout the situation.

“I really want to thank Ryan Day, the head football coach at Ohio State, for his patience and his understanding regarding why it was so important for me to pursue this job,” O’Brien said. “A lot of people here at Boston College are familiar with Ryan Day. Ryan Day is an outstanding person, an outstanding coach and he was great during this whole process.”

O’Brien, who left Ohio State for Boston College on Feb. 9, told reporters after his press conference that he had been searching for homes in the Columbus area and preparing for life as the Buckeyes’ new offensive coordinator until former Golden Eagles head coach Jeff Hafley left the program on Jan. 31 to become defensive coordinator for the Green Bay Packers.

“The night that (Hafley) decided to go to Green Bay, my phone blew up a little bit,” O’Brien said. “My wife and I were actually in Columbus at the time. She was looking for a house. So then the process started the

next day. It was pretty quick.”

While O’Brien applauded Day and Ohio State for his understanding and patience, he said that the decision to go to Boston College was a “no-brainer” for him and his family, especially given their connections to both the school and the city of Boston.

“Growing up outside of Boston with my family as a lifelong BC fan, a lot of us went to Brown, but we were secret Boston College fans, I promise you,” O’Brien said. “I went into coaching in 1993 when I got out of Brown and went into coaching at Brown, and I always dreamed about being the head coach at Boston College. My career has taken some twists and turns and taken me down roads I never could have imagined, but as I stand here today, I couldn’t be more grateful that the road has finally taken me back home to Boston College.”

O’Brien will begin his head coaching stint at Boston College with a daunting challenge on Sept. 2 when it travels to Tallahassee, Fla., for a matchup against Florida State.

Eight Buckeyes Invited To NFL Combine

The 2024 NFL Scouting Combine will have a strong presence from Ohio State, with eight former Buckeyes having the chance to impress NFL coaches and executives.

Wide receiver Marvin Harrison Jr., running back Miyan Williams, tight end Cade Stover, offensive lineman Matthew Jones, safety Josh Proctor, defensive tackle Mike Hall Jr. and linebackers Tommy Eichenberg and Steele Chambers were the Buckeyes who received invites to the NFL Scouting Combine, which will take place at Lucas Oil Stadium in Indianapolis from Feb. 26 through March 4. Wide receiver Xavier Johnson was the only Buckeye entering the draft who did not receive an invite.

In addition to working out on the field – sans Harrison, who reportedly will not participate in workouts – players will have the opportunity to meet with teams in advance of the 2024 NFL draft, which takes place in Detroit from April 25-27.

Of the 321 prospects invited, Michigan leads all schools with 18 players who will participate in the NFL Scouting Combine. Washington had 13 players, Florida State and Georgia each had 12, Texas had 11 and both Alabama and Penn State had 10 players invited.

Ohio State was joined by LSU, Notre Dame and USC in having eight players invited, though the Buckeyes have a smaller draft-eligible pool than usual considering the number of players who opted to return.



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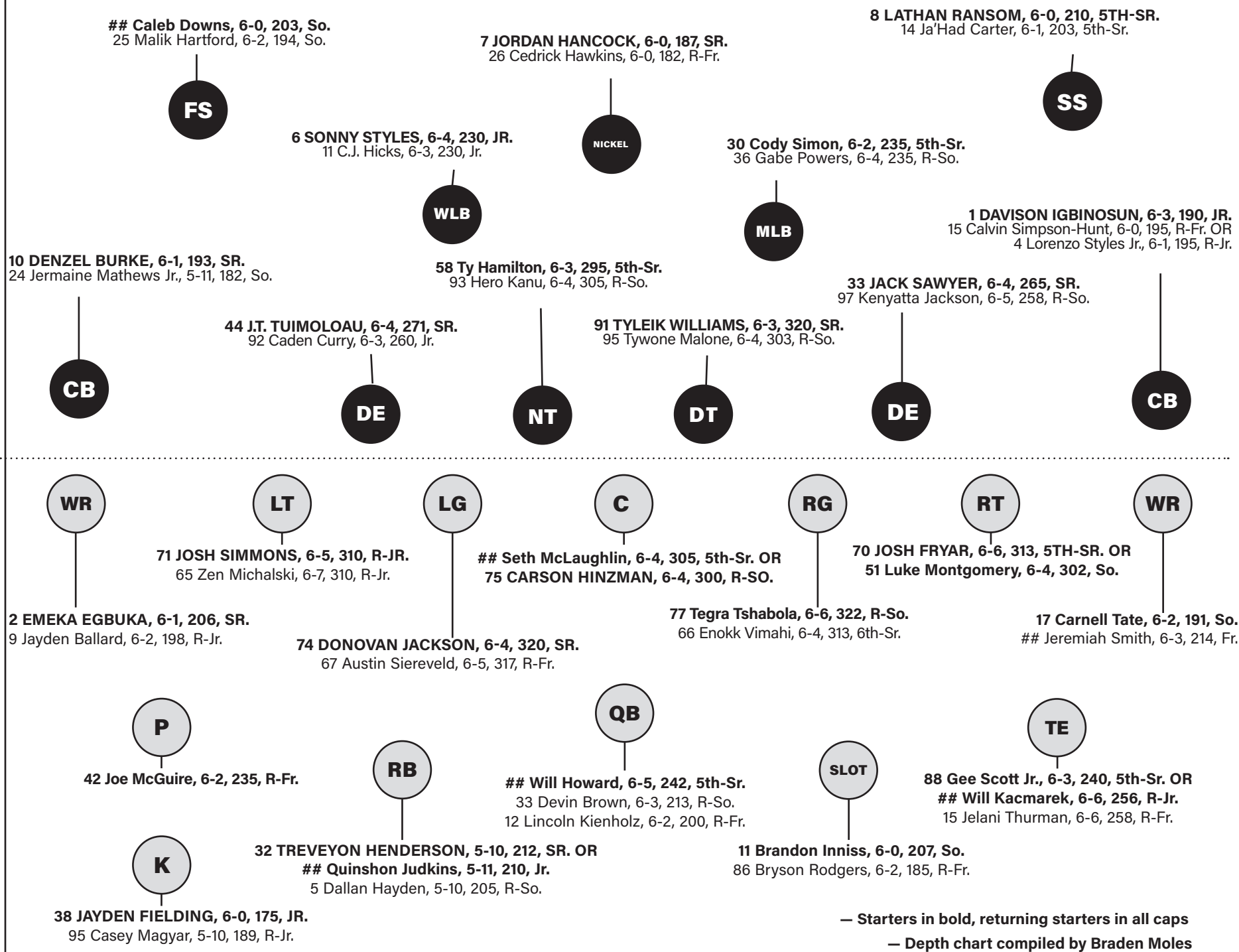
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OHIO STATE PRE-SPRING DEPTH CHART



Former U-M Linebacker Transfers To Ohio State

Former Michigan linebacker Joey Velazquez is turning in his maize and blue for scarlet and gray this fall, transferring from Michigan and joining Ohio State for the 2024 season as a walk-on.

Velazquez, a Columbus native, was a three-star recruit in 2019 out of St. Francis De Sales, the same high school that produced longtime Buckeye and current Wisconsin head coach Luke Fickell. The Ohioan appeared in 17 games in four seasons for Michigan and former head coach Jim Harbaugh, finishing his Wolverine career with seven tackles.

Velazquez, however, made most of his impact with Michigan's baseball team. He was a four-year letter winner for the Wolverines and hit .255 with 17 doubles, two triples, nine home runs and 51 RBI in 100 games, with 68 of those being starts.

According to an Ohio State spokesper-

son, Velazquez will play only football for the Buckeyes. He made his allegiance to the football program clear on Feb. 11 when he appeared in a photo posted by Laurinitis on Twitter that showed a group of Ohio State linebackers watching Super Bowl LVIII together.

Wrigley Field An Option For OSU-NU In 2024

Ohio State could be in line to play in one of America's most iconic sporting venues in 2024. According to a Jan. 21 report from Rivals.com's Wildcat Report, the Buckeyes are slated to face off against the Wildcats on Nov. 16 at Chicago's historic Wrigley Field, a 110-year-old ballpark that is the home stadium of Major League Baseball's Chicago Cubs.

The Wildcats are planning to play their "home" games at different locations due to the demolition of Northwestern's 98-year-old Ryan Field. As the program awaits the new Ryan Field to open in 2026, they also

reportedly are set to play Indiana on Oct. 5 at SeatGeek Stadium, in Bridgeview, Ill., one of multiple games Northwestern could play at the venue next season.

The Wildcats are also slated to have multiple games – including the Ohio State matchup – at Wrigley Field, while the Chicago Bears' Soldier Field and the Green Bay Packers' Lambeau Field have also emerged as potential options. The team, however, has yet to officially confirm any of the locations.

"Northwestern is still exploring options for where the team will play next season," the school said in a statement to Wildcat Report. "At this time, contracts with venues are still being finalized, and we will share information with you as soon as possible."

Men's Hoops To Reduce Ticket Prices In 2024-25

Ohio State's consecutive subpar seasons have led to a decrease in fan interest and participation, with the program on

track to finish this year's campaign with record-low attendance numbers at Value City Arena, a mark that would break the previous record set just last year. To help combat this problem, the university is reducing the price of tickets for the 2024-25 season, a decision that was approved at a Feb. 22 board of trustees meeting.

The board of trustees set reduced prices for six different "zones" for the season, while student tickets will remain at \$9 per game. While the ticket prices of nonconference games will remain the same in each zone, the cost of conference and premier games decreased. Season tickets will start at \$218 in Zone 5, compared to \$255 this season. Season tickets for faculty and staff will start at \$215 in Zone 5, a \$30 decrease from 2023-24.

According to the board of trustees agenda, the decision to reduce tickets was made to compel more fans to purchase sea-

Continued On Page 6

OHIO STATE INSIDER

Continued From Page 5

son tickets and end the overall decline in attendance seen throughout the last four seasons. Ohio State has experienced a decline in average attendance each year since 2019-20 – excluding the COVID-19 year when no fans were allowed at home games – dropping from 14,531 in 2019-20 all the way to 11,290 through 15 home games this season.

Former Seahawks Coach Jordan Joins OSU Staff

Tony Johnson is not the only part-time hiring Ohio State made since Buckeye Sports Bulletin went to press, with the program on Feb. 22 adding former Seattle Seahawks and Michigan State pass rush specialist Brandon Jordan as a defensive program assistant.

Jordan spent last season on recently retired head coach Pete Carroll's staff in Seattle, where he helped guide a Seahawks defense that ranked 11th in the NFL with 47 sacks. Prior to his time in Seattle, Johnson was a pass rush specialist at Michigan State in 2022.

Jordan, who began his coaching career in 2012, has also thrived as a skill trainer. He is the CEO of Brandon Jordan Trench Performance, a football training program that has worked with more than 200 NFL players, including Jadeveon Clowney, Chandler Jones, Von Miller and T.J. Watt, among others. At Ohio State, Jordan will join a defensive line staff that will be led by Larry Johnson and defensive line graduate assistant LaAllan Clark, who is entering his second season with the program.

Philbin Heading Back To NFL As Assistant

Ohio State senior analyst Joe Philbin's stay in Columbus was ultimately a short one. The former NFL head coach is returning to the NFL to become a senior offensive assistant for the Las Vegas Raiders, according to a Feb. 20 report by NFL Network's Ian Rapoport.

Philbin spent this past season with the Buckeyes working with Justin Frye and the offensive line, providing a veteran perspective for the offense.

Prior to his time with Ohio State, Phil-

bin coached for four different NFL franchises from 2003-22, including a head coaching stint with the Miami Dolphins from 2012-14, where he coached current Ohio State wide receivers coach Brian Hartline.

"Having Joe's been great," Hartline said last year. "Everyone in the building can learn something from him. It's really awesome to see and be around Coach Philbin again in a different light, in a different way."

With Philbin's departure, Ohio State now has two senior advisors/analysts in Todd Fitch, who works with quarterbacks, and Tony Johnson.

Dennis Leaves Utah, Joins Ole Miss As Analyst

Former Ohio State quarterbacks coach Corey Dennis is on the move again this off-season. Dennis is leaving his analyst position at Utah just over two weeks after being hired to join head coach Lane Kiffin's staff and serve in the same role with the Rebels.

Dennis, who appeared on the Ole Miss football staff's directory on Feb. 22, initially accepted his analyst role with Utah on Feb. 6 following his demotion from Ohio State's staff in January. Dennis was stripped of his responsibilities as quarterbacks coach and demoted into a "still-to-be-determined role with the program" on Jan. 19 to make room for O'Brien.

Dennis, the son-in-law of former Ohio

State head coach Urban Meyer, now joins a Rebels program that is coming off a strong 11-2 campaign capped by a 38-25 victory over Penn State in the Peach Bowl. Ole Miss will be without its leading rusher from last season in running back Quinshon Judkins, however, who joined Ohio State via the transfer portal.

CFP Approves New Model For 12-Team Playoff

The College Football Playoff board of managers on Feb. 20 unanimously approved the new format for the playoff, which will feature the five highest-ranked conference champions along with seven at-large bids to the postseason.

The board of managers includes all 10 FBS commissioners as well as Notre Dame president John Jenkins. The vote had to be unanimous to employ the model and had previously been delayed by the Pac-12 before the conference's representative – Washington State president Kirk Schulz – voted to approve the new format in the most recent vote.

The change in format accounts for the loss of the Pac-12, which is now down to just two members in Oregon State and Washington State. Neither school would have qualified for the College Football Playoff next season as a conference champion.

"This is a very logical adjustment for the College Football Playoff based on the evolution of our conference structures since the board first adopted this new format in September 2022," said Dr. Mark Keenum, president of Mississippi State and chair of the CFP board of managers. "I know this change will also be well-received by student-athletes, coaches and fans. We all will be pleased to see this new format come to life on the field this postseason."

The new model will assure the conference champion from the ACC, Big Ten, Big 12 and SEC receive an automatic bid, with the fifth automatic bid going to the highest-ranked Group of Five conference champion. The seven at-large bids can then go to any FBS team.

The four highest-ranked conference champions will each receive a first-round bye, with seed Nos. 5-12 all playing in the first round.

Bucks To Get Paid For Video Game Opt-In

EA Sports made headlines on Feb. 15 when it announced that its new college football video game, EA Sports College Football 25, will launch this summer following a decade-long hiatus and will also allow players to get paid for their participation.

Later, on Feb. 22, the publisher finalized its NIL plan and opt-in process for college football players, which will allow over 11,000 student-athletes the chance to opt in to the game and receive \$600 for their participation, as well as a copy of the game. Athletes can also choose to opt in or opt out each year they are playing in college.

EA Sports vice president of business development Sean O'Brien said the players will be guaranteed the \$600 regardless of the games' success. Cory Moss, CEO of the Collegiate Licensing Company, added that this is uncharted waters for the video game company, as they have only dealt with such a process with their professional sports

BSB Subscribers Show Support Through VIP Program

Now is the time for loyal Buckeye Sports Bulletin readers to show their support through our VIP subscription program as we struggle through these times of high inflation, which have affected all small businesses. As most of you know, the newspaper business these days is challenging in even the best of times.

"We want to thank the many BSB readers who have stepped up and shown their support for Buckeye Sports Bulletin through the VIP program," BSB publisher Frank Moskowitz said. "It is a true vote of confidence in what we are doing now, what we have done the previous 42 years and what we plan to do in the future."

A VIP upgrade can easily pay for itself each year with special VIP discounts and perks.

VIP subscribers enjoy a 5 percent discount on any Ohio State football trip booked through Reynolds Travel. And VIP subscribers receive a certificate good for \$10 off at Roosters restaurants, the "Fun, Casual Joint," as well as a card good for \$10 off your next food purchase at any Cameron Mitchell Restaurant.

With the \$50 Brutus VIP upgrade, Buckeye Sports Bulletin subscribers will have their names and cities listed in two different issues annually as supporters of BSB.

Those who add \$100 to their subscriptions will have their names and cities listed in all 24 issues each year as BSB Scarlet patrons. Those who donate \$125 will be designated as Elite patrons in each issue.

And those who donate more than \$125 will have their names listed as Elite-Plus VIPs.

To upgrade your existing subscription to VIP status, with all the benefits that come with that designation, go to BuckeyeSports.com/vip-memberships to pay by credit card, or call us at (614) 486-2202 during regular business hours. If readers have questions about this program, they can call the same number.

The following are our Elite Wachsman, Elite-Plus, Elite, Scarlet and Brutus VIP subscribers.

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Spring Football Practice Beginning March 5

Ohio State spring practice starts on March 5, but the next print issue of Buckeye Sports Bulletin does not mail until March 12. Why wait for news coming out of the Buckeye camp? The BSB staff monitors all the action daily at our electronic BuckeyeSports.com website, free to all BSB subscribers.

There is bound to be plenty of other Ohio State sports news in the next two weeks, including coverage of the search to replace Chris Holtmann, football recruiting and portal news along with reports on the surging women's basketball team and action by the hockey and wrestling teams. All the news is available in real time at BuckeyeSports.com.

BuckeyeSports.com also offers plenty of content not found in your paper with additional features along with the breaking stories and more extensive coverage of the Olympic sports.

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 spring football in

progress.

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.

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games like Madden and NHL.

"There's nothing been done on this scale that EA is doing, where every student-athlete that participates in the game is guaranteed revenue," Moss said.

EA Sports also announced that they are planning to create 100 additional NIL opportunities per year, where they will allow student-athletes to work for them, whether that be promoting the game on social media or campus, making advertisements for the game or becoming the game's cover athlete. This is an opportunity Ohio State players have already begun to take advantage of. Cornerback Denzel Burke and Judkins both promoted the game on Twitter on Feb. 22, saying that they have chosen to opt in and are "in the game."

According to EA Sports vice president of global marketing, communications and partnerships John Reseburg, the game had more than 5,000 players from more than 130 schools – of which all FBS schools will be included – opt in on the first day.

Ohio Stadium To Host NHL, Premier League Games

Ohio Stadium will reportedly play host to a pair of professional sporting events in the next two years, with Manchester City and Chelsea of the English Premier Soccer League first taking the field for an exhibition match this summer and the NHL's Columbus Blue Jackets and Detroit Red Wings later squaring off as part of the league's Stadium Series on March 1, 2025.

The match between English soccer juggernauts Manchester City and Chelsea is part of a two-week preseason soccer tour in the United States for Manchester City. In addition to Columbus, the soccer club will also play in New York; Orlando, Fla.; and Chapel Hill, N.C., all of which are occurring on unknown dates.

Although the university has yet to confirm the match, it would be the first time Ohio Stadium has played host to a professional soccer game since 2016, when it hosted an exhibition between Real Madrid and Paris Saint-Germain. Ohio Stadium also housed the Columbus Crew from 1996-99, their first three seasons as a fran-

chise.

The 2025 matchup between Columbus and the Red Wings will be the first-ever NHL game played at Ohio Stadium, as well as the first-ever outdoor game for the Blue Jackets. The Blue Jackets are one of three NHL teams – along with the Arizona Coyotes and Florida Panthers – to have never played in an outdoor game.

The contest will be played under the NHL's Stadium Series banner rather than the Winter Classic, which is traditionally played on Jan. 1. This is to avoid any conflict between the Blue Jackets and the Ohio State football team, which is likely to be in the midst of the College Football Playoff at that time. For more on the game between the Blue Jackets and Red Wings, see "In the Crease" on page 30 of this issue.

Men's Tennis Wins ITA Indoor Championship

The Ohio State men's tennis team secured their third ITA indoor national championship in dramatic fashion on Feb. 19, coming back from a 2-0 deficit for a 4-3 win over No. 2 TCU in New York City.

It came down to the wire for the top-ranked Buckeyes, down 3-2 late and needing two singles wins from Robert Cash and Alexander Bernard, who both went into the third set. Bernard won to tie it up, and Cash secured the victory with his individual win to complete the comeback.

Cash and Bernard started the match off with a 6-2 win for the Buckeyes over Duncan Chan and Lui Maxted in doubles, but Andrew Lutschaunig and Justin Boulais suffered a 6-3 loss and Cannon Kingsley and J.J. Tracy lost 6-4, giving the doubles point to the Horned Frogs.

In singles play, Kingsley lost to Jake Fearnley in two sets, falling 6-1 in the first and 6-0 in the second to put the team down 2-0 with five other matches still taking place. Ohio State was then able to tie it up

with wins by Jack Anthrop (7-5, 6-2 over Sebastian Gorzny) and Tracy (6-4, 6-4 over Pedro Vives), making it so the Buckeyes needed just two more wins.

Boulais dropped his match to the No. 4-ranked Jack Pinnington to give the Horned Frogs the advantage again, needing just one more win to end it. Bernard and Cash both needed a third set to settle their matches, and both needed to be played out after Bernard took the win 6-3, 3-6, 6-4 to tie it up at three points each, meaning the winner between Cash and Maxted decided the national champion. Cash lost the first set 7-6 but came back to win the second 6-4. He was able to secure the victory with a 6-3 win in the third set to take home the national championship win.

OSU Wins Second Straight WCHA Regular-Season Crown

The tennis team was not the only Ohio State program to secure hardware in re-

cent weeks. With a 4-1 victory over St. Thomas on Feb. 17, the top-ranked women's hockey team clinched its second consecutive Western Collegiate Hockey Association regular-season title.

The Buckeyes, who finished conference play with a 26-2 record, hoisted the Julianne Bye Cup at home in front of a sold-out OSU Ice Rink crowd for the first time in program history, with last season's conference-clinching victory coming on the road at Wisconsin.

"It means a lot (to win a second straight WCHA title)," head coach Nadine Muzerall said after the win. "It's been a long road. This team is just so relentless and resilient. I'm very proud of them, because I think it's arguably the toughest trophy to win in women's hockey, with our league. It just shows your entire body of work."

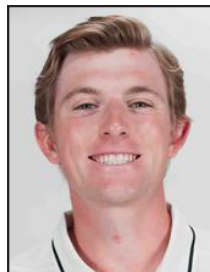
"And to turn around and do that again the next year says a lot about Ohio State women's hockey and how we're creating a tradition of our own."

The second straight conference title adds just another impressive accolade to Muzerall's already loaded coaching résumé at Ohio State. Since taking over for the Buckeyes in 2016-17, Muzerall has led Ohio State to a combined 189-72-19 record and its first-ever national championship victory in 2021-22, while she has also taken home three WHCA Coach of the Year Awards.

In addition to the conference title, Muzerall and Ohio State are poised to continue their winning ways this season, entering the conference tournament with a nearly unblemished 29-3-0-0 overall record.

The Buckeyes will have home ice in their first-round matchup against Bemidji State from March 1-2 and will hope to advance through the WCHA Championship Game on March 9.

"I think (winning the WCHA regular-season championship) is a great steppingstone," senior defense Lauren Bernard said. "It just motivates you and (makes you think), 'Hey, we did this, this is a huge trophy, and we can do it.' You just get that extra motivation to keep pushing forward."



Robert Cash




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Transfers Came To OSU To Win Championships

By **GREG WILSON**

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

The transfer portal can be a stressful process for the players who decide to explore other options, with considerations such as playing time, the ability to contend for championships, potential NIL compensation and much more. This year, there were six players in the portal who ultimately decided to come to Ohio State.

Quarterback Will Howard, perhaps the most notable addition, took his time making a decision. He got calls from Miami (Fla.) and USC, among others, was invited to participate in the Senior Bowl and could have entered his name into the NFL draft.

Howard said at times the process felt rushed and he felt pressure to choose, but he waited for Ohio State to decide it needed to go into the portal for a quarterback because it was where he wanted to be.

"Throughout the whole process I just prayed and trusted God and knew that his plan for me would be greater and I would end up where I was meant to be, and that paid off tenfold," he said.

Ohio State safety Caleb Downs said on Jan. 30 that the day he announced he was leaving Alabama was "recruiting on steroids." He guessed that he got 102 calls in the first few hours from coaches who wanted him to come play for their team.

Those calls were well-deserved for the freshman All-American, and he said he answered about 80 of them because he wanted to be polite. But when it came down to it, he took only two days to make his decision, and after considering returning to his home state and playing for Georgia, he decided on Ohio State as the best place for him.

Each of the six new Buckeyes had different motivations to enter the transfer portal, and each of them had different experiences being recruited once they decided to depart. But all of them ended up in Columbus one



FILE PHOTO

HIGH EXPECTATIONS — The incoming transfers for Ohio State — with former Alabama safety Caleb Downs among them — have national championship aspirations as they are set to begin their first spring practice with the Buckeyes.

way or another, and a common factor that went into the decision for each of them was the expectation at Ohio State.

"To win games, dominate every game, and go win a championship," Downs said.

He came to Ohio State because he said it's the same as Alabama in terms of expecting to win it all. After Nick Saban retired, he was looking for a place that could live up to that, and he landed with the Buckeyes as his top option.

Former Ole Miss running back Quinshon Judkins had the same attitude. He said he doesn't care how it happens, but he wants to be a contributor on a team that goes on to win it all.

"The idea of coming to a team where you're playing for something that's bigger than yourself," Judkins said. "A lot of great players have come here through the portal this year. When you come together for a cause that's bigger than yourself, you have great players around you and you want to win, that's what it's all about."

Judkins was one of the more surprising additions the Buckeyes made, especially after TreVeyon Henderson announced his intention to return to the program for another season. Judkins had been a workhorse back at Ole Miss, rushing 545 times for 2,725 yards and 31 touchdowns in his first two seasons with the Rebels.

He announced his decision on Jan. 8, just minutes after Michigan won the national championship over Washington. He said it wasn't planned that way, but he was feeling committed to Ohio State at that point.

"At that moment I was like, 'OK, let's make it happen.' Especially when The Team Up North won, I was like, 'This is where I want to be.'"

Head coach Ryan Day understands that is the expectation, as it always is for Ohio State, but a new sense of urgency is apparent inside the program, as well as a strong belief that this is the year to go win it all.

Day had shifted his approach to the transfer portal after utilizing it sparingly over the last few seasons, previously looking to fill holes on the depth chart but now pulling several starters away from other programs. He said he looks for players where he feels the team has a need, citing Judkins as an example after Chip Trayanum went into the portal and landed at Kentucky and Kyle McCord transferred to Syracuse, opening up a need for Howard.

There is still a recruiting process in the portal, but Day gave credit to the returning players for contributing to the championship-chasing culture the transfers wanted to be a part of. Henderson, Denzel Burke, J.T. Tuimolou and more had the opportunity to go to the NFL, and in some cases go in the first couple of rounds of the draft, but throughout the beginning of January, each went to social media to say they would be coming back so they could achieve their goals of beating Michigan, winning a Big Ten championship and winning the national championship.

"A big part of it goes back to the guys that came back," Day said. "I think that was the No. 1 thing coming off the season, the guys coming back and seeing that they wanted to be with their teammates and reach their goals. To me, that's where all this started."

"When you think about J.T. and Denzel, Jack (Sawyer), Tyleik (Williams), Lathan (Ransom), TreVeyon, Emeka (Egbuka), Donovan (Jackson) — these are all really high-end players who decided they wanted to come back, and it wasn't for anything other than their teammates, their coaches, the culture, and that set the tone for all of it. Then we filled in a couple of the pieces. It wasn't big numbers, but hopefully the guys we brought in can make an impact."

It's not just a feeling that Day had. The Buckeyes' new offensive lineman, Seth McLaughlin, who transferred in from Alabama, noticed the culture the returning players

have helped create around the program.

"It's impressive," McLaughlin said Jan. 30. "I think it's a testament to the culture here. In my two short weeks, I can tell how much guys love this program, care about this program and care about their legacy. You had so many guys that could have been drafted this year that came back, and I don't want to speak for them but it sounds like it's because they think they have unfinished business and they want to win all the games. They want to leave a legacy here."

The transfers have been taking that goal to heart, and they want to do the same things, a goal also shared by Howard, expected to take over as the Buckeyes' starting quarterback this season.

"The biggest thing was I felt like I could come compete here to win the national championship," Howard said. "That, above anything else, was one of the most important things. I felt like I just had more I wanted to accomplish in college and I wasn't done yet. That was what really drew me here."

While most of the transfers project to at least compete for a starting spot at their respective positions, if not already being viewed as immediate starters, it doesn't seem to have any effect on the players already in Columbus, since everyone coming in is aligned with the same goals.

"That's what everyone here works hard for," Judkins said. "That is the end goal. It's not to get a certain amount of wins. Everyone is here to win the national championship. I take it seriously. Everyone here has bought in, whatever it takes to get that, and that's what everyone's trying to do."

Another common motivation for the transfers was that they wanted to be at a place where they could receive top-tier development to set them up for success, and Ohio State is known as a place that is better than almost any other school in getting players to the next level. McLaughlin said he wants to take in as much information as possible while he can, and he wanted to do that by learning from new coaches.

"I've always thrived off change," he said. "I played for three different offensive coordinators. I played for three offensive line coaches, two strength staffs. At this point in my career, Alabama did a great job of developing me from a 265-pound kid into a 300-pound center. But I thought for my fifth year, I could do something different and go to a new program, learn from new people, a new strength staff and really progress my development further."

"Whatever happens now, it doesn't matter if you don't make it to the NFL, and I wanted to go to a place that could put me there."

Ohio State continues to be a premier destination for players seeking the ability to compete for championships and prepare for the next level. With the transfer portal now as active as it is, that culture and reputation have become even more important to build a team that can compete with the best of the best. That is exactly what Downs expects the defense — and the overall team of which he is now a member — will do this season.

"I expect us to be one of the best," he said. "I expect us to excel and be better than (we) were last year. I expect us to be elite."

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Howard Feels 'Blessed' To Be At Ohio State

By **GREG WILSON**

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

After Kyle McCord entered the transfer portal and left for Syracuse, Devin Brown and Lincoln Kienholz had the chance in the Cotton Bowl on Dec. 29 to show that they were able to take over the starting job going into next year.

Brown finished the game with 20 yards passing and an ankle injury, and Kienholz took over to complete six of his 17 passes for just 86 yards, looking overwhelmed by the extra pressure the Missouri defense sent at the freshman in the 14-3 loss. It was clear that the quarterback position was one that needed to be addressed over the offseason, and the transfer portal was where that relief would be found.

Former Kansas State quarterback Will Howard had announced on Nov. 27 that he would be entering the transfer portal, but he took over a month to find a new home before he ended up landing on Columbus on Jan. 4 as the place he wanted to be. Nearly a month later on Jan. 30 in his first media availability since transferring, he said there were several reasons Ohio State was the right place for him.

"There were a lot of reasons why, but when it got to the end, it was more, 'Why not?' " Howard said. "I just felt like this was an opportunity I couldn't pass up on. I thought I had a really good relationship with Coach (Ryan) Day. I thought he was a really good guy. There were just so many different things that went into this decision. It was a long, weird journey in the portal, but I couldn't be happier or more blessed to be here."

During his time in the portal, Howard had several decisions to make. Miami (Fla.) and USC were among the other schools courting him – aggressively, at that – but he wanted to wait and see what all of his opportunities would be, especially since Day and the Buckeyes were waiting until after the Cotton Bowl to decide where they were headed at the quarterback position.

"At times it felt rushed and it felt like I was pressing," Howard said. "People were like, 'We need a commitment. We need this. We need that.' "

Last season was Howard's best outing in four seasons at Kansas State, finishing the year with 2,643 yards passing, 24 touchdowns and 10 interceptions in 12 games. It's a similar finish to McCord, who had 3,170 yards, 24 touchdowns and six interceptions, but a key difference between the signal callers is Howard's ability to run the football when needed.

Last season, he rushed 81 times for 351 yards and nine touchdowns, with his longest run a 70-yard designed quarterback run against Oklahoma State where he came up just short of a touchdown, taken down in front of the goal line when he was caught by a safety. McCord, meanwhile, finished the season with 65 rushing yards lost, with a long of just 9 yards.

Day said the quarterback's ability to run was one of the biggest reasons he felt Howard would be a good fit for this roster, citing the loss to Michigan this past season

as an example of why the Buckeyes' run game – specifically under center – needed to be better.

"One of the things you have to do to win the last game of the year is run the football," Day said on Feb. 7. "In order to do that you want to have somebody that at least needs to be accounted for in the run game. If the defense says, 'Well, he's not a threat at all to run,' that certainly changes the angles, changes the numbers, leverage, all of the above. That was one thing I wanted to make sure we had.

"When you look at the guys we have on our roster right now, they all have the ability to do that. It started with that, then from there it was, 'How do they throw the football? What's their size? What's their intelligence?' All of those things. It doesn't need to be doing all kinds of running with the ball, but it needs to be able to at least be accounted for by the defense."

The ability of a quarterback to run the football is something that has become a necessity in the NFL, and Howard has goals of playing at the next level. One of his options if he hadn't ended up at Ohio State was to enter his name into the draft, which he said he likely would have done if he hadn't landed in Columbus, but ultimately he wanted to improve his draft stock with one more year in college. He felt like there weren't many better places to do that than Ohio State.

"A lot of things were attractive to me about this offense and about what (Day) thought about my game and how he thought he could elevate me to where I wanted to be," Howard said. "One of the biggest things was how pro-style the offense is. A lot of these other schools that I was looking at – these air-raid type schools – they've got great offenses and I could put up a lot of numbers, but I don't know how much that would develop me for the NFL.

"The resounding thing that I heard from these NFL guys and from people around the league was, 'You need to play more,' and, 'We need to see more high-level play.' I feel like I played a lot of football in my time at K-State but I only had one year where I was really the true starter and where I played the whole year. I felt like I wasn't ready to leave college yet. I still had more I wanted to accomplish."

With additional goals on the table, Ohio State provides everything Howard is looking for. He is one of six incoming transfers, along with talented players such as Ole Miss running back Quinshon Judkins and Alabama safety Caleb Downs, among others.

Furthermore, the Buckeyes return a bevy of juniors from last year, putting Ohio State in a prime position to compete for a national championship. That pursuit of a title – not to mention the development at Ohio State, which has sent three first-round quarterbacks to the NFL dating back to 2019 – was a significant factor in his decision to join the Buckeyes.

Howard felt there was more he wanted to accomplish during his time playing in college, and he felt like coming to Ohio State gave him a good chance at winning a national championship. The development



FILE PHOTO

RIGHT PLACE, RIGHT TIME — Former Kansas State quarterback Will Howard could have entered the NFL draft or explored other transfer destinations, but he decided on Ohio State as the right place for his final year of college football.

he will get from the coaching with the Buckeyes is just a bonus to go along with that for him.

"Obviously, playing in an offense like this is really going to prepare me for that next level and give me the best shot," he said. "That's all just really sugar on the cake for me."

Howard said he's familiar with the pressure that comes with being the starting quarterback at Ohio State, but it's something he feels he is ready for, and he is ready to compete in a five-deep quarterback room to try to be that guy.

"I wouldn't be here if I didn't feel like I was ready for it," Howard said. "My time at K-State kind of hardened me, and obviously it wasn't on the stage that this is, but I'm ready. Nothing that is worth getting ever comes easy. This opportunity here was just too good to pass up."

With five quarterbacks in the room, reps over the spring and summer will need to be divvied up, balancing the competition for the starting job between Howard and Brown with the development of Kienholz and freshmen Air Noland and Julian Sayin. There's a chance that departures through the transfer portal could impact the room come spring, but for now, Day is planning

on all of them remaining Buckeyes.

With that in mind, he doesn't feel pressure to give more reps to Howard, but he wouldn't have gone after a quarterback who has only one year of eligibility remaining if he didn't believe Howard could start in the upcoming season. Howard knows he has to compete for his spot and earn the trust of his teammates and coaches, but his mentality at this point is that he's going to be the starter this year, and Day said that's a good thing.

"Will came here to play football, so I hope that's his mentality," Day said. "I hope all the guys have that mentality. He's going to learn the offense and get going, but he's done a great job so far with the feedback. A big part of the quarterback play here is what goes on in that weight room with Coach Mick (Marotti).

"The leadership and the way that guys work, you have to build credibility among your teammates, and that's a big part of it. We talk to quarterbacks about this all the time, we talked to C.J. (Stroud) when he first went to the NFL; you have to endeavor yourself into that building. You have to earn the respect of the guys in the building, and I think Will is doing that."

Laurinaitis To Be Big Factor In Recruiting

Ohio State's coaching staff was completed on Feb. 15 with the promotion of graduate assistant James Laurinaitis to linebackers coach, but beyond completing head coach Ryan Day's staff for 2024, this also has a significant impact on the team's recruiting efforts.

ary, Laurinaitis was allowed to hit the road as the Buckeyes did not have 10 full-time assistant coaches, and he made the most of it.

"We had an opportunity to see him on the road (recruiting) the last couple of weeks," Day said on Feb. 16. "He did an unbelievable job. There's a lot of momentum, so we felt like it was the right move (to promote him)."

Laurinaitis – even limited to mostly phone calls – has been able to develop a strong relationship with Ohio State's recruits since he returned to campus. Though he was more than a year away from becoming a full-time assistant, Laurinaitis said last February that recruiting would be key for him at Ohio State.

"Recruiting is relationship-building," he said. "You're trying to figure out what's important to not only the kid, but what's important to the family. You just have to be willing to be consistent and build those relationships."

What better person to build those relationships than someone of Laurinaitis'

RECRUITING OUTLOOK Braden Moles

Laurinaitis' usage on the recruiting trail over the past year has mostly been limited to in-house, taking care of usual graduate assistant responsibilities like keeping in touch over the phone and helping with in-person visits. But following the firing of special teams coordinator Parker Fleming in Janu-

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	

stature within the program? His status as a three-time All-America linebacker and two-time Big Ten Defensive Player of the Year – not to mention his eight years of NFL experience – makes him a strong advocate for Ohio State, a significant factor in his promotion.

"He knows Ohio State; he loves Ohio State," Day said. "He has credibility with the players. He has credibility with recruits because he's done it. And not only did he do it, he did it at an unbelievable level. He did it in the NFL.

"I've been impressed with the way he's transitioned from being a player to a coach. I think when you look at James, when you look at Brian (Hartline), those guys were guys who maximized themselves on the field. As they transition from being in the NFL to college, they use a lot of the things they've learned, especially in the latter years of their NFL careers, to help guys on the field. I've seen so many great things from (Laurinaitis)."

Now that he can go out on the road as a full-time assistant, Laurinaitis figures to be even more involved in that area for Ohio State, not to mention his increased responsibilities as a coach now leading the linebackers. But both those aspects of his job – getting to recruit student-athletes to Ohio State and later develop them – are why he got into coaching.

"I love the game of football, and I love working with young people," Laurinaitis said last February. "That's why I got into coaching. You want to impact the kids on the field. But more importantly, you want them to leave, after building relationships with them, as better men and hopefully give them an example of what being a good husband and father can be – the same thing Luke Fickell did for me and Jim Tressel did for me."

A Look Back At New OC Kelly's Recruiting Efforts

New Ohio State offensive coordinator and quarterbacks coach Chip Kelly is un-

likely to be used as an ace recruiter with the Buckeyes with Day and Hartline already on staff, but Kelly – as is the case with all of Ohio State's assistant coaches – will still be utilized on the recruiting trail.

His experience as a recruiter – at least in the FBS ranks – dates back to his original run at Oregon, where he began as an offensive coordinator in 2007 before taking over as head coach in 2009. During his time as an assistant, Kelly helped the Ducks sign the No. 34 class in 2008 and the No. 30 class in 2009, including a trio of future NFL running backs in Kenjon Barner, LeGarrette Blount and LaMichael James.

Once Kelly became head coach at Oregon, he took the Ducks' recruiting efforts to another level, signing the nation's No. 12 classes in 2010 and 2011, the latter including future Heisman Trophy-winning quarterback Marcus Mariota.

Kelly also helped Oregon sign the No. 14 class in 2012, doing most of the legwork even if he had departed for the NFL by the time the class signed. Following his firing by the San Francisco 49ers after a couple of years in the NFL, he kept a low profile before returning as head coach at UCLA heading into 2018.

Despite having been on the job for only a few months, he was able to hold onto a strong recruiting class with the Bruins, signing the nation's No. 19 class in 2018 headlined by quarterback Dorian Thompson-Robinson, a top-40 prospect. But Kelly's first class at UCLA – one in which much of the groundwork was established by his predecessor, Jim Mora – wound up as perhaps his recruiting highlight with the Bruins.

He followed it up with classes ranked 40th, 33rd, 32nd and 61st from 2019-22, though he did finish on a strong note in 2023 by signing the No. 37 overall class and five-star quarterback Dante Moore, the fifth-ranked prospect in the class.

Kelly's final class at UCLA, however – the 2024 haul that was formalized on Feb. 7, just two days before Kelly left his post with

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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	★★★★★	Santa Ana (Calif.) Mater Dei

the Bruins for Ohio State – finished 89th in the country and would have been last in the Big Ten. Kelly signed just a 10-man class that included only two four-star prospects and just three total in the top 500.

Kelly's recruiting efforts in the latter stages of his career never quite matched what he was able to do at Oregon, but luckily for Ohio State, recruiting is not why he was brought in as offensive coordinator. It will surely be a part of his responsibilities – though likely in a similar capacity to defensive coordinator Jim Knowles, who is seen sparingly on the trail – as he focuses on Ohio State's offensive game planning.

TE Target Roberts Deciding In Coming Months

Washington, Okla., four-star tight end Nate Roberts (6-4, 235) is one of Ohio State's top targets and expects to make a decision in either April, May or June, according to 247Sports, with Alabama, Ohio State, Oklahoma, Oregon and Penn State among his top schools.

Roberts is the No. 107 overall prospect and fourth-ranked tight end in the class. The former Notre Dame commit visited Ohio State twice last season and expects to make it back to Columbus for the spring game on April 13.

"I'll make it back in the spring and on an

official visit," he said. "Ohio State, Oregon and Oklahoma are definitely official visits and possibly Penn State. Alabama is in there too. They've done a great job recruiting me with their new staff."

Roberts, who was offered by Ohio State last May, hauled in 38 receptions for 816 yards and eight touchdowns during his junior season, building on a sophomore campaign in which he had 33 catches for 705 yards and 11 scores.

Ohio State is looking to again take two tight ends in this recruiting cycle. Roberts is one of several targets, including West Chester (Ohio) Lakota West four-star Luka Gilbert (6-7, 233); Leo, Ind., four-star Brock Schott (6-3, 215), who is visiting Ohio State on March 28; and St. Louis University three-star Landon Pace (6-3, 215), the son of legendary Ohio State offensive tackle Orlando Pace.

OSU In Top Five For Top-200 LB Sacca

Ohio State landed in the top five on Feb. 8 for Philadelphia St. Joseph's Prep four-star linebacker Anthony Sacca (6-3, 225) along with Alabama, Duke, Notre Dame and Wisconsin.

Sacca is the No. 173 overall prospect and No. 21 linebacker in the class, and he received a visit in January from Knowles.

Sacca visited Ohio State last season and is also looking at a return visit this spring.

"Most schools are already talking to me about getting out to them in the spring," he told 247Sports. "Everybody wants to get me on campus in the spring so I have to look at that. I will probably make a few official visits."

Ohio State has several connections at St. Joseph's Prep. Knowles attended the school, and the Buckeyes also had former quarterback Kyle McCord and wide receiver Marvin Harrison Jr. come from the program to Columbus.

Sacca is one of Ohio State's top targets at linebacker in 2025 along with Vero Beach, Fla., four-star Tarvos Alford (6-2, 210), who will announce his commitment on March 30.

St. Clair Wins Nike Throwing Event

Bellefontaine, Ohio, four-star quarterback Tavien St. Clair (6-4, 210) beat out several of his peers at Nike's "The Next Ones" event in Las Vegas on Feb. 10, winning an accuracy competition held between several high-level quarterbacks in the class.

St. Clair finished at the top in the accuracy competition that gave signal callers a limited amount of time to hit several small targets downfield, ranging from 15 yards to 50 yards.

He edged out Belleville, Mich., five-star Bryce Underwood (6-4, 205), who is committed to LSU; Brentwood (Tenn.) Academy five-star George MacIntyre (6-6, 182), who is committed to Tennessee; Lawrence (Mass.) Central Catholic four-star Blake Herbert (6-

3, 205), who is committed to Clemson; and Boulder (Colo.) Fairview three-star Bekkem Kritza (6-5, 182), who is committed to Penn State.

St. Clair, who threw for 3,083 yards and 37 touchdowns to just six interceptions during his junior season, is considered the No. 56 overall prospect and fourth-ranked quarterback in the class, trailing MacIntyre; Carrollton, Ga., five-star Julian Lewis (6-1, 185), who is committed to USC; and Underwood, who is the consensus No. 1 prospect in the class.

Texas WR Lockett Visiting In Spring

Ohio State's recruitment of Sachse, Texas, four-star wide receiver Kaliq Lockett (6-2, 175) is beginning to heat up. The Buckeyes will host Lockett for his first visit to Columbus on March 23, according to 247Sports.

"They're men that have principles and values," Lockett's father, Kobi, said. "My son just loves Hartline. He loves him. I love Hartline, too. And I love Coach Day. I'm looking at who Kaliq is going to spend the most time with, and a lot of time, it's the receivers coach. I'm keeping an eye on those gentlemen."

Lockett is also planning visits to Florida State on March 9, Penn State on March 14 and LSU on April 13 for the Tigers' spring game. He was offered by Ohio State in December and has continued to rise up the rankings, now checking in as the No. 34 overall prospect and sixth-ranked wideout in the class.

Continued On Page 12

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WR Commit Henry Transfers To Mater Dei

Continued From Page 11

Lockett had a standout junior season, collecting 59 receptions for 1,299 yards and 13 touchdowns. Through three seasons of high school football, he has 103 catches for 2,073 yards and 22 touchdowns. He is also a multisport athlete, competing in track and field.

Ohio State already has one pledge at wideout in the class from Cocoa, Fla., four-star Jayvan Boggs (6-0, 188) – who recently rose to No. 196 overall and No. 24 at wide receiver – and is also focusing on Jacksonville (Fla.) Mandarin five-star Jamie Ffrench (6-1, 185) and Mission Viejo, Calif., four-star Phillip Bell (6-2, 195), among others.

Ohio State Among Top Schools For Top Prospects

Several of Ohio State's targets in 2025 and beyond have narrowed down their list of scholarship offers, with the Buckeyes remaining in contention for a handful of prospects.

Evans, Ga., four-star offensive lineman Mason Short (6-6, 305) included the Buckeyes in his top four along with Clemson, Georgia and Kentucky, while Philadelphia St. Joseph's Prep four-star defensive lineman Maxwell Roy (6-3, 270) had Ohio State in his top six along with Duke, Michigan, Or-

egon, Rutgers and Wisconsin.

McKinney, Texas, four-star linebacker Riley Pettijohn (6-2, 205) also had a top six with the Buckeyes, in addition to Florida State, Georgia, Texas, Texas A&M and USC. Hillside, N.J., four-star defensive end Darren Ikinagbon (6-5, 251), meanwhile, had a top eight with Duke, Georgia, Notre Dame, Ohio State, Oklahoma, Penn State, Rutgers, and Tennessee.

All of those prospects are in 2025, but perhaps the most notable list of top schools came from the next cycle. New Orleans St. Augustine five-star defensive lineman Jahkeem Stewart (6-6, 270), the No. 1 overall prospect in 2026, included Ohio State in his top 15 on Feb. 15 along with Alabama, Auburn, Colorado, Florida State, Georgia, LSU, Miami (Fla.), Michigan, Oregon, Penn State, Tennessee, Texas, Texas A&M and USC.

"I'm looking for a program who can help me become the best version of myself on and off the field," he told 247Sports. "All of these schools have made it known I'm a priority."

Stewart has yet to visit Ohio State but is planning a trip for the spring, and the Buckeyes are in high standing with the prospect who had 85 tackles, 33 tackles for loss and 20 sacks as a sophomore.

"Ohio State has a tradition of producing top defensive linemen and playing in

big games," Stewart said. "Coach (Larry) Johnson is the GOAT (greatest of all time) of (coaching) defensive linemen. They also have Coach (LaAllan) Clark coaching defensive line. He's from Baton Rouge. I'm going up there for the spring. Ever since I've been watching college football, Ohio State has always been in the mix playing in big games, and that's important to me."

2026 Wideout Henry Transfers To Mater Dei

Five-star wide receiver Chris Henry Jr. (6-5, 185), the lone pledge in Ohio State's 2026 recruiting class, announced on Feb. 8 that he will be finishing his high school career at Mater Dei High School in Santa Ana, Calif.

Henry, formerly of Withrow High School in Cincinnati, did not give a specific reason for his departure, though he does have family on the West Coast.

"I appreciate having the opportunity to compete in the same city my father (former NFL wide receiver Chris Henry Sr.) played and receiving all the love from the community for the past 2½ years," he said on Twitter. "Cincinnati will always be a special place for my siblings and I."

His sister, Seini Hicks, is an incoming signee for the Ohio State women's basketball team and also played her high school competition in Cincinnati, though she did

so at West Clermont rather than Withrow. Henry, meanwhile, has impressed through his first two seasons of high school football, becoming the nation's No. 1 wide receiver and No. 3 overall prospect.

But the move to Mater Dei – considered a powerhouse in high school football – gives him an even greater opportunity to develop before his eventual arrival at Ohio State, which is not expected to be in jeopardy despite his move to California from Ohio. He originally committed to Ohio State in July, early in the recruiting process for the soon-to-be junior.

"The atmosphere. It's the coaches, really," Henry said of Ohio State. "That's really what it was, the coaches. I love it here. I love the energy and the atmosphere. I love everything about it. They make me feel like a priority every time I talk to them, so that just makes me feel special."

Ohio State Offers 2026 QB Smigiel

Ohio State is getting involved early with one of the top signal callers in 2026, sending out an offer on Feb. 17 to Newbury Park, Calif., five-star quarterback Brady Smigiel (6-5, 205).

Smigiel is the No. 21 overall prospect and second-ranked quarterback in the class, and he holds additional offers from Georgia,

A Look Back At Recruiting From The Pages Of BSB

35 Years Ago – 1989

The chance to play in the most prestigious bowl game in college football had helped lure many high school stars to Ohio State. It was the same with defensive lineman Mark Williams of Bishop McNamara High School in Forestville, Md.

"I think one of the main reasons I selected Ohio State over some of the other schools was the Rose Bowl," Williams said. "I have always liked the Big Ten conference, the way the teams in the conference play football."

"It's a very competitive conference, one in which a team hardly ever goes undefeated. I like that type of competition. Then, if you work hard and are fortunate enough to win the championship, you get to go to the Rose Bowl. I want that chance, the chance to play in the Rose Bowl!"

30 Years Ago – 1994

Although he lived 140 miles north of Columbus, Calvin Brown felt close to home at Ohio State. Brown, a 6-4, 275-pound defensive end out of Shaw High School in East Cleveland, chose to play his college football at Ohio State instead of Kansas, Southern California or Colorado because he wanted to be and feel close to home.

"The other students and student-athletes were really friendly at Ohio State, and they made you feel welcome," Brown said. "At Ohio State, it seemed like I wouldn't be leaving home. The players are like people here in Cleveland and I liked that."

"And it made my mom real happy (that) I chose Ohio State because I'll be close to home. My coach always wanted me to go to Ohio State, too. He's pushed me real hard the past couple of years to do my best."

25 Years Ago – 1999

What had looked like a good fit a few weeks previous did not materialize. Huron, Ohio, tight end Jimmy Fisher, judged among the state's top junior prospects, committed to Michigan Feb. 24.

According to published reports, Fisher had been favoring Ohio State previously. Fisher was one of a handful of players who visited OSU Feb. 20 for a junior recruiting day.

But when he wasn't offered a scholarship, he decided to go with the offer he already had on the table from Michigan.

"I went to Michigan with the mind-set that I would just go there and visit," said the 6-6, 225-pound Fisher, who also played defensive end. "I've been hearing from Ohio State a lot longer and I always leaned to Ohio State, but I felt more comfortable at Michigan."

"I really liked it at Ohio State, but they didn't offer me a scholarship."

20 Years Ago – 2004

Rumors and allegations of recruiting improprieties on campuses throughout the country prompted the NCAA to form a nine-member panel to look into practices used to lure prospective student-athletes to college.

NCAA president Myles Brand announced Feb. 23 that he wanted the panel (which would possibly increase to 16, including two student-athletes) to report before the April 19 meeting of the NCAA Management Council. In the bureaucratic world of the NCAA, two months was an extremely limited amount of time.

"There are going to be changes enacted pretty quickly," Jeremy Foley of Florida, one of five Division I athletic directors on the committee, told ESPN.

The group looked at the rules governing a variety of recruiting practices, including paid official visits and what occurs during the 48-hour on-campus tours by prep prospects.

15 Years Ago – 2009

It did not take long for David Durham to become a Buckeye. After completing his junior football season at Austin (Texas) Westlake, Durham made a trip north to Ohio with his prep wrestling team to compete in a January tournament.

While there, his wrestling coach – a lifelong Michigan fan – called the Ohio State football office to tell them about the 6-2, 226-pound Durham.

That phone call sparked a whirlwind recruitment process that ultimately resulted in Durham immediately accepting a scholarship offer from the Buckeyes on Feb. 23.

"That was the offer I really wanted," he told BSB. "That was one that if I got it, I would consider committing. I told everybody I wanted to commit early, but even I didn't expect it to be this early. But once I got the offer and met with (head coach Jim) Tressel and everybody, I pretty much had my mind made up."

10 Years Ago – 2014

Ohio State was looking to strengthen its connection with Cleveland St. Ignatius, a northeastern Ohio power that was represented in the Buckeyes' 2014 class by four-star linebacker Kyle Berger. OSU's interest in its in-state school was evident Feb. 25 when the Buckeyes extended an offer to 2015 St. Ignatius defensive end Dre'Mont Jones, who was thrilled to hear from the Ohio State staff.

"The feeling to hear they were offering me a scholarship was very exciting, and I really didn't know what to say," Jones said. "I really don't know what to think about this offer as far as taking it or

not because it still hasn't totally set in yet."

At 6-5 and 250 pounds, Jones measured in as a four-star prospect and the No. 29 defensive end in the country. An offer from OSU, however, gave him even more validation and helped prove to him that he was one of the top players at his position.

"It made me feel like I'm one of the top players in the state," he said of landing the Buckeye offer. "I know the offer is special, and it makes me feel very wanted in a lot of ways."

Five Years Ago – 2019

Tuscon (Ariz.) Salpointe Catholic four-star safety Lathan Ransom spent the weekend of Feb. 22-24 in the Midwest visiting Notre Dame and OSU. The 6-2, 200-pounder spent Feb. 23 in South Bend, Ind., for an unofficial visit with the Fighting Irish.

"I'm only taking so many unofficial visits because it's not cheap," Ransom said. "The time I had here, Notre Dame is staying high on my list."

He then took his trip the next day to Ohio's capital with the Buckeyes, who had offered him Jan. 24.

"Coach (Ryan) Day showed me he really wants me to be part of their program," Ransom said. "He was one of the head coaches that came and saw me at my school. (Co-defensive coordinator/secondary coach Jeff) Hafley, he knew every play of my film. It was my first time to talk to him in person. He hasn't been at Ohio State very long so I can't wait to build a stronger relationship with him. Both Coach Day and Coach Hafley left an immense impression on me. I was super impressed with them."

One Year Ago – 2023

If Ohio State wanted to hold onto the commitment of Opa Locca (Fla.) Chaminade-Madonna Prep five-star wide receiver Jeremiah Smith (6-3, 185), it would have to fight until the bitter end.

Smith – the No. 2 overall prospect and top wideout in 2024 – had been committed to the Buckeyes since December, but there had been recent discussions about visits with Florida, Florida State and Miami (Fla.), with a visit to the Seminoles on deck for March 4, according to 247Sports. He had also been in touch with the Gators and could make a trip to Gainesville in the next few weeks.

"I talk with the (Florida) receivers coach (Keary Colbert), Coach (Benedick) Hyppolite, Coach (David) Doeker and (head coach Billy) Napier," Smith said. "I have a great relationship with the guys on the offensive side of the ball. They want me to come up and check them out. They tell me they have a quarterback in their class that is a great player. They tell me I can be a big game-changer for them."

ASK AN ANALYST

With Bill Greene of BuckeyeScoop

What impact will James Laurinaitis' promotion to full-time assistant as linebackers coach have on Ohio State's recruiting efforts?

"I truly believe he's going to be the Brian Hartline of the defense now. If you look at linebacker recruiting the past couple of years, it's been OK. I'd say average if you compare it to some of the other position groups Ohio State has recruited. I don't think it matches up with the wideouts, the defensive backs. But I think it's going to change, and it's going to change quickly. The recruiting is going to be totally different now with these linebackers, and they're in on a lot of good ones for 2025. They're probably going to take three since they have Akron Hoban three-star Eli Lee (6-3, 215) committed right now. I can see three or four guys that they legitimately have a shot at that are mid four- to five-star kids."

Cornerbacks coach Tim Walton has also come on as a key recruiter over the last year or so. What makes him so productive on the recruiting trail?

"That's a good question because he had been in the NFL for so long, he really didn't have a recruiting pedigree. It had been a while since he was recruiting at this level in college. You knew he would be a good position coach because you'd heard so many good things from these NFL defensive backs just raving about him, but you wondered about his recruiting. Well, the recruiting has been off the charts. If you look right now, we're mid-February and he's got three corners committed in Baltimore St. Frances Academy four-star Blake Woodby (5-11, 175), Houston North Shore five-star Devin Sanchez (6-2, 170) and Birmingham (Ala.)

Parker five-star Naeem Offord (6-1, 185).

"Then he played a huge part in (getting) Caleb Downs. Tim Walton had a friendship with Caleb Downs' dad for a long time. Tim Walton is as good a recruiter as there is in college football right now when you look at what he's done. It's crazy to think that his job's probably over right now for 2025 and it's almost a year out. He's got three corners committed, I guess he'll help out now with the safety recruiting. They're probably going to take three there, too. You can't speak highly enough of Tim Walton. They took a lot of defensive backs in last year's class, and I think they're going to take a ton more again in this class."

Spring visits are on the horizon with spring practice beginning on March 5. What potential visitors are you keeping an eye on over the next few weeks, and who does Ohio State need to get on campus?

"Well, you're always concerned about the offensive line. It just hasn't matched up. They've got Toledo Central Catholic four-star Carter Lowe (6-5, 290) committed. I like him. Then you see about the big-time kids. There's no sense looking at these Ohio projects right now. There's a kid in Massillon (Ohio) Washington, three-star Nolan Davenport (6-6, 260). I like him, but I don't like him in February. You've got guys like Charlotte (N.C.) Providence Day five-star David Sanders (6-6, 270); Lewisville, Texas, five-star Michael Fasusi (6-4, 285); Mesquite (Texas) Horn four-star Lamont Rogers (6-6, 305); Mobile (Ala.) CF Vigor four-star Micah DeBose (6-5, 315); Bradenton (Fla.) IMG Academy four-star Kaden Strayhorn (6-3, 285). Put all your effort into

those guys. Let's see who visits from those guys. Fasusi, I think there's a great shot at him. He is going to be visiting. Micah DeBose is an Alabama kid – which normally you're beating your head against the wall when you go to Alabama to try to recruit their top kids – but I think that state might be open for business right now with Nick Saban out of there.

"There are big names that are interested in Ohio State right now, but we see this every February and March. They just don't sign. I think this is a big year for Justin Frye, I really do. Things weren't all that good on the field last year. I don't think the recruiting was up to par last year, and the one thing about Ryan Day is he's not scared to make changes. That's the position group you really need to watch closely right now."

Five-star wide receiver Chris Henry Jr., a 2026 pledge for Ohio State, will play out the remainder of his high school career at Mater Dei in Santa Ana, Calif., after playing in Cincinnati. Is there any concern about the move impacting his commitment?

"I don't think so. I think the relationship is really strong there with Hartline. No, I don't see any reason for concern. If you ask Ohio State their preference, they'd obviously rather have him in Cincinnati than in Los Angeles, but I don't think so. We'll see what happens. He's got a long way to go before he signs a letter of intent. It's early for the 2025 kids, let alone 2026. So we have to just see what happens there. But I have no reason to be concerned at this point. I've heard nothing that Ohio State is even concerned."

Michigan, Oregon and Penn State, among others. In his sophomore season, he threw for 4,222 yards, 52 touchdowns and 14 interceptions.

"Coach (Chip) Kelly offered," Smigel told 247Sports. "It's very exciting. The school, the program and the tradition is awesome. I can't wait to get out there. Ohio State has a great football program and alumni network for life after football."

Smigel is one of three quarterbacks offered by Ohio State in the class, joining Nashville (Tenn.) Christian School five-star Jared Curtis (6-4, 225) and Tampa (Fla.) Jesuit four-star Will Griffin (6-3, 225).

Other Notes And Tidbits

- Ohio State made a late addition to the 2024 recruiting class on Feb. 20, picking up a preferred walk-on commitment from West Chester (Ohio) Lakota West three-star cornerback Bukari Miles (6-2, 190). Miles does not have a composite ranking but chose to walk on with the Buckeyes over Division I offers from Air Force and Army at the FBS level and Bucknell, Eastern Kentucky and Pennsylvania at the FCS level.

- Ohio State already has the fourth-ranked overall class in 2025, according to the 247Sports composite rankings, with 189.84 points. The Buckeyes trail No. 3 LSU (199.41), No. 2 Clemson (208.09), and No. 1 Notre Dame (241.15). Michigan State and Minnesota are the only Big Ten teams that have no pledges thus far.

- Greenwich (Conn.) Brunswick School three-star offensive tackle Matty Augustine (6-7, 290), who held an offer from Ohio State, committed to Notre Dame on Feb. 20.

- Columbus will host an Elite 11 Regional on April 21, one of eight stops for one

of the nation's top high school quarterback competitions. Standout performers at the regional events are then invited to the Elite 11 Finals in June in Los Angeles.

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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Stroud Stands Out Among 2023 Buckeye Rookies

By **CRAIG MERZ**

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

Quarterback C.J. Stroud was the most notable and impactful Ohio State rookie in the NFL in 2023, but several others had enough success to suggest they could have long and productive careers as well.

Stroud had a sterling first campaign and joined an impressive list of recent ex-Buckeyes to win Associated Press rookie honors when the second pick in the NFL draft led the surprising Houston Texans (10-7) to the AFC South title.

He was named AP Offensive Rookie of the Year on Feb. 8, following in the footsteps of 2022 honoree and former Buckeye receiver Garrett Wilson of the New York Jets.

"It's amazing. It was a goal of mine coming into the year, and I've been blessed enough to get the recognition for it," Stroud told Fox News Digital. "I know there's a lot of great players nominated, and they are just as deserving as me. I'm just really honored to be a part of that."

Prior to Stroud and Wilson, the Buckeyes had a dominant run for AP Defensive Rookie of the Year with linebacker Joey Bosa (San Diego, now Los Angeles Chargers) in 2016, New Orleans Saints cornerback Marshon Lattimore in 2017, defensive end Nick Bosa of the San Francisco 49ers in 2019 and defensive end Chase Young with Washington in 2020.

Stroud received more accolades when he was named both the rookie and offensive rookie of the year by Pro Football Writers of America.

He was joined on that all-rookie offense by a former Ohio State teammate and Cleveland Browns right tackle Dawand Jones. The fourth-round (No. 111) pick earned the distinction despite being placed on injured reserve on Dec. 12 with a season-ending knee injury.

The pair represented a third of the 2023 Ohio State draftees: Offensive tackle Paris Johnson went sixth to Arizona, receiver Jaxon Smith-Njigba was taken 20th overall by Seattle, the Atlanta Falcons made defensive end Zach Harrison their third-round pick (No. 75), and center Luke Wypler was the 190th pick, going to the Browns in the sixth round.

There were five Buckeyes who signed as undrafted free agents, with safety Ronnie Hickman of the Browns by far the most productive. He played 10 games (four starts) and had 25 tackles with one interception for a 30-yard return.

Safety Tanner McCalister was also signed by the Browns, cornerback Cam Brown went to the Chargers, defensive tackle Jerron Cage got a look by New Orleans, and defensive tackle Taron Vincent signed with the Los Angeles Rams.

The Best

Stroud, of course, was the headliner among the drafted rookies. His 4,557 passing yards, including the postseason, was the second most in NFL history by a rookie behind Andrew Luck (4,662) in 2012. During the regular season, Stroud led the league in passing yards per game (273.9) and threw

23 touchdowns to five interceptions while completing 63.9 percent of his passes.

He also became the youngest quarterback (22 years old) to win a playoff game when he threw three first-half touchdowns in a 45-14 rout of the Browns in the wildcard round on Jan. 13. Stroud credited his coaches at Ohio State for making him NFL-ready. He began his career with an NFL-record 192 consecutive pass attempts without an interception.

"The transition was relatively smooth," he said. "Ohio State prepared me in a lot of different ways. It's been really cool to see all the work in college pay off in the league."

Stroud had six games with more than 300 passing yards. He joined Tom Brady (2007) and Joe Montana (1989) as the only quarterbacks in the past 50 seasons to lead the NFL in both passing yards per game and TD-INT ratio.

Room To Grow

Jones' reward came for his play in the trenches because of his quick learning curve. He became a starter in Week 2 after starting tackle Jack Conklin suffered a season-ending knee injury in the opener.

Despite being hampered by his own knee and shoulder injuries, Jones played 11 games, nine of them starts. According to Pro Football Focus, he played 712 snaps, allowed three sacks and was penalized twice.

"I've seen Dawand make great strides on and off the field," Browns coach Kevin Stefanski said in December. "That offensive line room, obviously, with the coaches, with the players, that's a room that is great for a young player to be in to see how you operate, how you prepare, how you work, and I thought he got better as the season went on."

Jacob Roach of Browns Wire in grading Jones an "A" for the season wrote:

"Right tackle Dawand Jones didn't often look like a rookie this year and seemed to be the steal of the draft. He stepped in right away and though he needs work as a run blocker it is hard to argue he isn't already a borderline elite pass protector."

"Jones had some injury issues that ended his season early but he matched up more than once against T.J. Watt and showed he could handle the league's best pass rushers. It will be interesting to see what the Browns do with Jack Conklin and Jones next year but it was a great start to the former Buckeye's NFL career."

While at Ohio State, Jones started all 13 games in 2021 at right guard and all 13 games at right tackle in 2022.

Evolving

Smith-Njigba is on the cusp of joining 2022 draftees Wilson and Chris Olave of the Saints as a go-to receiver.

He starred in the 2022 Rose Bowl when Stroud connected with him for an FBS bowl-record 347 yards, a school-record 15

receptions and three touchdowns. But a hamstring injury limited him to three games in his final college season before he decided to enter the draft.

His bad luck continued in the Seahawks' preseason when he sustained a fractured wrist. When he returned, Smith-Njigba sat behind established receivers DK Metcalf and Tyler Lockett.

Smith-Njigba had his breakout game Oct. 15 with four catches on five targets for 48 yards in a 17-13 loss to the Cincinnati Bengals. He finished the season holding the following ranks among rookie wideouts: seventh in catches (63), eighth in yards (628) and seventh in touchdowns (four). He was targeted 93 times while playing 17 games (three starts).

"What I'm seeing is Jaxon really emerging," then-coach Pete Carroll said in November. "He's really coming to life, and he's really coming through. He's running routes really well, makes catches (securely), turns the transition into running really quickly. He's really fitting in. It's just one element in particular that adds and makes everybody else come to life, too. Now you have to cover everybody."

Doing The Right Thing

Johnson, who was an All-America left tackle for the Buckeyes in 2022, was moved to right tackle by the Cardinals and needed time to make the adjustment, even if changing positions had become a yearly habit. He was a right guard in 2021 for the Buckeyes.

He started all 17 games for Cardinals, playing 1,130 snaps while allowing eight sacks and being penalized 12 times.

"He's playing well. He started every game and played a premier position," Cardinals coach Jonathan Gannon said in November. "He'll only continue to get better."

"I think he continues to get better week to week, and that's not just on game day too. That's looking at the whole scope of practice (with) fundamentals, his process and how he's going about it and how he's studying."

Quarterback Kyler Murray is glad the Cardinals drafted Johnson.

"Anytime a quarterback gets a guy that is as talented as him, you're going to be happy because if you can stand up in the pocket, stand up straight and keep you upright," he said, "I feel like it'd be pretty good."

Ready To Soar?

Harrison, a first-team all-Big Ten selection as a senior, steadily improved in his first season with the Falcons.

"I just feel like I can be a playmaker in this league," he said, "just consistently being a person that my teammates can count on."

In 16 games, he had 33 tackles (18 solos), four tackles for loss, three sacks, five quarterback hits and nine pressures, and two missed tackles.

"He was a useful special teams piece and run defender immediately, which led to a fairly consistent role throughout the sea-

son," Dave Choate of TheFalcoholic.com wrote. "Aside from the final game of the season, which he missed owing to injury, Harrison logged under 24 percent of the defensive snaps just once all season."

"Harrison figures to be capable of putting up four to eight sacks next year and providing quality run defense as a young piece of a Falcons front that needs that kind of production. Atlanta has sunk a lot of mid-round picks into the defensive front in my many years as a Falcons fan, and Harrison looks like he'll be a rarity: The guy who ends up being a multi-year, quality contributor."

Making Strides

Wypler, a two-year starter for Ohio State at center, saw limited playing time, but in the Browns' season finale, with a playoff berth secured, he made his first career start – not at center, but at right guard. In five games, he wasn't penalized.

"Another player who didn't see much playing time (57 snaps) in 2023 but wasn't a liability when he was on the field," Roach wrote. "Many people, myself included, thought that Wypler was just a center and couldn't play guard but he showed potential at the position as a rookie. It will be interesting to see if the team keeps (center) Nick Harris, but if they don't, the team should feel comfortable with Wypler backing up (center) Ethan Pocic."

Not Like The Others

Hickman stood out among the five undrafted Buckeyes. Taking over for injured safety Juan Thornhill in the Browns' 13th game, he showed he was ready for the challenge. In the penultimate game of the regular season against the Jets, he received a 92.6 grade by Pro Football Focus, which was the best grade for all safeties in Week 17.

"Ronnie Hickman might have had the best rookie year of any Browns player not named Dawand Jones after going undrafted out of Ohio State," Roach wrote. "Hickman was tremendous in coverage playing deep free safety despite struggling in that role at Ohio State."

"He has no problem playing downhill and physical in run defense on top of that and gave (defensive coordinator) Jim Schwartz another weapon in his arsenal. Hickman will force the team to play him next year and seems like a home run of a signing."

The Others

Brown signed with the Chargers shortly after not being drafted but was put on waivers on Aug. 29. He is on the roster of the Arlington (Tex.) Renegades of the new United Football League spring league.

Cage did not make the Saints out of the preseason camp and played last season for the Montreal Alouettes of the Canadian Football League.

McCalister got his chance late in the season when he played in three of the final seven games for the Browns. His only career tackles were a solo and an assist vs. Houston Dec. 24. He signed with the Denver Broncos on Jan. 22.

Vincent was waived by the Rams on Aug. 28, and he too will try to continue his career in the UFL with the San Antonio Brahmas.



Jaxon Smith-Njigba



Dawand Jones

Iowa's Clark Breaks Women's Scoring Record

Iowa guard Caitlin Clark became the all-time leading scorer in women's college basketball in a 106-89 win over Michigan on Feb. 15, scoring 49 points in the contest to reach 3,569 points in her four-year career with the Hawkeyes. She passed former record-holder Kelsey Plum who scored 3,527 points in her four years at Washington from 2013-17.

BIG TEN NOTES Greg Wilson

Clark needed just eight points coming into the game to break the record and did so just 2:12 into the contest. She broke the record with a transition three from deep beyond the arc on the left side of the court.

"You all knew I was going to shoot a logo three for the record, come on," Clark joked after the game."

Not only did she break the all-time scoring record, but her 49 points in the game set a new program record for Iowa behind a career-high nine three-pointers in the win.

Given that Clark broke the record on her home court, a video was shown on the arena's video board after the game, which began with her parents and two brothers congratulating her on the record along with former teammates and coaches who have helped her along the way.

"There have been so many famous and cool people, and people I idolized growing up, that say a lot of really nice things about me," Clark said. "But when it's people who have had your back through the ups and downs and been there every step of the journey – whether it was good or bad – and have seen the hard days, seen the good days, that's when it means the most."

As of the Hawkeyes' 101-85 win over Illinois on Feb. 25, she sits at 3,593 career points and is just 74 points away from breaking the all-time NCAA scoring record held by Pete Maravich, who scored 3,667 points from 1967-70 when he played at LSU. With two regular-season games left (at Minnesota on Feb. 28 and vs. Ohio State on March 3) plus the Big Ten and NCAA tournaments, she is likely to blow past that mark.

En route to the women's scoring record, Clark also broke the Big Ten women's scoring record, passing former Ohio State player Kelsey Mitchell, who played for the Buckeyes from 2014-18 and scored 3,402 points in her career. The Big Ten scoring record for the men belongs to Indiana's Calbert Cheaney, who played from 1993-97 and scored 2,613 points.

Former NU Coach Fitzgerald Seeking December Trial Date

Former Northwestern head coach Pat Fitzgerald is seeking a December trial for his wrongful termination lawsuit against the university. He and attorney Dan Webb believe sitting out a third season of college football would impact his ability to get another job.

"I'm told by experts that if he misses that third season, then it's going to have a severe impact on his ability to ever get a chance to



SONNY BROCKWAY

ONE FOR THE BOOKS — Iowa guard Caitlin Clark became the NCAA's all-time leading women's scorer on Feb. 15, and with 3,593 points as of Feb. 25, she is just 74 points from passing LSU's Pete Maravich for the most points in NCAA history.

get any kind of comparable coaching job," Webb said. "It's just the way football coaching works. Football coaching decisions are made by teams in December, so in December of 2024 and January 2025, there will be decisions made on who's going to coach in the 2025 season."

Fitzgerald was fired for cause by Northwestern in July due to hazing allegations within the program, so he didn't coach this past season and is likely not to coach this upcoming season, as he has yet to be hired, with most teams beginning spring practice.

Cook County Circuit Judge Daniel J. Kubasiak set an April 2025 trial date to try the case, which Northwestern attorney Reid Schar called "aggressive" but more realistic than December since there are so many discovery documents. He said about 700,000 documents have been reviewed, and he believes June 30, 2025, would be a more reasonable date.

"Ultimately, the plaintiff chose to bring this case," Schar said. "The plaintiff ... ultimately could not resolve it ahead of bringing this. He has chosen to pursue this litigation."

"We have to pick a schedule that's actually achievable, not one that's defined by what he might want to do with the rest of his life but one that's actually achievable and fair to both parties, not just what he wants."

The wrongful termination suit was filed by Fitzgerald in October for breach of contract and defamation for which he sought more than \$130 million in lost earnings. At the virtual hearing on Feb. 13, Kubasiak encour-

aged both sides to reach a settlement before the trial.

"I don't think any party wins if this matter goes to trial," he said. "This is clearly the type of matter that should be resolved between the parties."

Originally, Fitzgerald was told he would serve a two-week unpaid suspension by Northwestern, but he was fired three days later because of the hazing in the program, stemming from a complaint received in November 2022.

In response to that complaint, an investigation, led by attorney Maggie Hickey, was launched by the university in January 2023 and found that there wasn't sufficient evidence that Fitzgerald and other members of the coaching staff had any knowledge of the hazing taking place. The investigation did find proof of hazing, however, and other accounts of hazing have been presented by former players who did not speak to Hickey as part of her investigation.

"If somehow the belief is that this is a simple case because it's bound by what Maggie Hickey's report found, that is not an accurate assessment of the complications of this case and the additional evidence that's going to be relevant in this case," Schar said.

U-M's Nkamhoua To Miss Rest Of Season

Michigan forward Olivier Nkamhoua will be out the remainder of the season after undergoing wrist surgery, according to head coach Juwan Howard. Nkamhoua has been

dealing with the injury for part of this season and knew surgery would be necessary, but he decided his best course of action was to start his recovery now, which will take three to four months.

"Decisions like this are never easy," Nkamhoua said in a statement. "Playing with this injury became taxing, and we knew something had to be done. I feel like I wasn't able to finish what I came here to do; however, the support and love from the coaches, my teammates and everyone involved with this program has been so amazing."

"Coming to Ann Arbor and having the opportunity to play for a coach like Coach Howard has been something I will cherish. I cannot thank Chris (Williams) and his training staff enough for all they have done for me throughout this season and going forward in my recovery. I am proud to be able to say I was part of this great university. I am proud to be a Michigan Wolverine."

Nkamhoua averaged 14.8 points and 7.1 rebounds per game this season in his first year with the Wolverines after transferring from Tennessee, where he played for his first four seasons of college basketball. He shot 51.2 percent from the floor and 33.3 percent from three.

"This is not how things were meant to be for Olivier," Howard said. "From the moment he stepped on campus, he brought maturity, class, insight and leadership. I truly feel blessed that I was able to learn a tremendous amount from him both on and off the court. He was a true warrior playing with this injury. However, it was just time to do something. We know this will pass and he will return to have a successful playing career."

Nkamhoua had considered entering the NBA draft last offseason before electing to transfer to Michigan. With no eligibility left, Nkamhoua finishes his college career with 1,117 points and 612 rebounds.

Penn State Wrestling Wins B1G Regular-Season Title

The top-ranked Nittany Lions won their fourth straight Big Ten regular-season title, clinching an undefeated conference record with their 22-13 dual win over Nebraska on Feb. 18.

In the best conference in the country, Penn State won its conference duals by an average of 27.3 points, including shutouts of Indiana (46-0) and Michigan State (35-0). The Cornhuskers were the first team this season to win four individual bouts in a dual against the Nittany Lions, and the 13 points were the most allowed by Penn State in a dual this season.

The Penn State wrestling run that has spanned over a decade now with Cael Sanderson at the helm has been one of the most dominant stretches in college athletics. The Nittany Lions have won 10 of the last 12 national championships, a run interrupted by only Ohio State in 2015, COVID-19 in 2020 and Iowa in 2021.

They have won 56 consecutive duals after the 55-0 win over Edinboro on Feb. 25, dating back to the 2019-20 season, and now will attempt to defend their Big Ten tournament title March 9-10 in College Park, Md., and national title at the NCAA championships March 21-23 in Kansas City.

Holtmann Flamed Out After Exciting Start

Continued From Page 1

umphs. That reality came true one week later – a day after Ohio State suffered a 62-54 loss at Wisconsin on Feb. 13, the team's program record-tying 16th consecutive road defeat – when the school officially announced that it was terminating Holtmann's contract effective immediately, ending his seven-year run as head coach.

"I thought that looking at the last couple of games, few games actually, that this team needed different leadership," Ohio State athletic director Gene Smith said at that same Value City Arena press conference room after making the official announcement. "So I made the change."

It was a rare midseason coaching change for Smith and Ohio State, one that will cost the school \$12.8 million in buyout money to pay Holtmann the remainder of his contract, which just 21 months ago was extended through the 2027-28 season. But for Smith, it was a decision he felt was necessary in order to return the program to national prominence in the future and salvage whatever may have been left of this season.

"It's hard," a teary-eyed Smith said before taking a 12-second pause. "It's really hard. When you have good people and you care about people, it's hard. If you don't have a good person, and you really don't care about the person, it's easier. When you care about someone like I did, it makes it hard.

"My responsibility is to the program.

It's to these young men who compete every single day. I don't care what sport it is. My responsibility is to those young people and to the program. I felt at this particular time, with six regular-season games left and the Big Ten tournament and whatever the postseason brings, a spark of energy was needed. It's about the program in the end. I have to set aside my personal feelings and go with what's best for the program."

Holtmann's run at Ohio State may have endured an abrupt ending, but the overall decline of the program under his guidance was a gradual process. Taking over for former head coach Thad 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 – Holtmann experienced instant success in Columbus.

Coming off a successful three-year tenure at Butler that included three straight NCAA Tournament berths and a combined 70-31 record, Holtmann continued his winning ways as the Buckeye coach in 2017-18. In a season when Ohio State was projected to finish 11th in the Big Ten, Holtmann led his new team to a 25-9 overall record (15-3 in the Big Ten) and second-round appearance in the NCAA Tournament.

It was an impressive debut that earned him Big Ten Coach of the Year, the second straight conference coaching honor for Holtmann and Ohio State's first since Matta

won in 2010.

"It's been a remarkable (season)," said Holtmann on Feb. 26, 2018, when asked to describe his first season at Ohio State. "It's really been a remarkable experience, for all of us, to go through this Big Ten regular season."

Holtmann's immediate success carried over to the next three seasons. In his first four years, he secured an impressive 87-44 record – the third-most wins by an Ohio State head coach in that span behind Matta (105) and Fred Taylor (89) – and took his team to the NCAA Tournament in all three seasons it was played (2018, 2019, 2021).

But even amid this success, Holtmann and the Buckeyes still showed some cracks in their armor, mostly with their performance in postseason play. Ohio State secured four straight seasons with 20 or more wins but failed to reach the second weekend of the NCAA Tournament in each of the three years it was held during that span.

Those shortcomings were headlined by Holtmann's signature loss at Ohio State, a shocking 75-72 overtime defeat to No. 15 Oral Roberts in the first round of the 2021 NCAA Tournament, a game where the No. 2-seeded Buckeyes held a 74-70 lead with 1:07 left in the second half. It was a crushing loss that sent Holtmann and his team home early once again despite having hopes of making a deep run, a reality he was eager to change in the future.

"We all have to be responsible for not quite getting it done," he said after the loss. "It begins, first and foremost, with me. Obviously, you're a No. 2 seed for a reason. That means you put in great work throughout the season. You had a season, a body of work that was really good. There were some tremendous moments this season, by and large. It was a special year with a conclusion that we have to lean into. It's incredibly disappointing."

While Holtmann saw this loss as a potential learning experience for the team that could motivate them to achieve greater postseason success down the line, it instead served as the turning point of his tenure. The Buckeyes had another strong regular season in 2021-22 behind the dynamic duo of future NBA draft selections E.J. Liddell and Malaki Branham, entering the Big Ten tournament with a 19-10 record and No. 5 seed in the conference.

But, like previous years, Holtmann's team fizzled out in March, dropping their first-round Big Ten tournament game to 12th-seeded Penn State and failing to reach the second weekend of the NCAA Tournament for the fourth time in as many tries, this time with a 71-61 loss to No. 2 seed Villanova in the round of 32.

Then, with the supreme talents of Branham and Liddell leaving for the NBA, the wheels began to fall off for Holtmann's program last season. Led by upstart fresh-

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men Thornton and Brice Sensabaugh, the Buckeyes started nonconference play with a 9-3 record but dropped 14 of their first 16 games in Big Ten play and missed the NCAA Tournament for the first time under Holtmann with a 16-19 record, their first losing season since 2003-04 under Jim O'Brien.

This losing stretch only carried over for Ohio State this season, when – despite hopes of the program turning it around behind the improved play of Gayle and Thornton – the team sputtered again in conference play, dropping nine of its last 11 Big Ten games before Holtmann's firing, with four of those coming by double digits. When the dust settled, Holtmann finished with a 30-30 overall record and a 9-25 record in the Big Ten in his final two seasons, a noticeable stain on a tenure that had shown promise early on.

"These two years, personally, have been a challenge," Holtmann said on Feb. 10. "They've been probably the hardest thing I've gone through."

Roster Mismanagement Blights Holtmann's Run

Holtmann and his program's struggles were thoroughly analyzed by many in the days leading up to and after his firing, but the root of the Buckeyes' downslide may ultimately have come down to a years-long trend of mismanagement with Ohio State's roster.

The program has endured a number of surprising departures the last five seasons that left Holtmann and the program scrambling for replacements. Emerging freshmen such as Branham and Sensabaugh – not viewed as traditional one-and-done candidates, at least as they arrived on campus – left for the NBA draft after excelling in their lone seasons with the program. The unexpected roster overhaul also carried over to the transfer portal, where younger players such as DJ. Carton (Marquette), Alonzo Gaffney (Arizona State), Meechie Johnson (South Carolina), Jaedon LeDee (TCU) and Luther Muhammad (Arizona State) all left the program to find more favorable fits at other schools.

"Generally, players in those situations, they want a situation where maybe they are playing a different position or maybe they want more shot attempts or they want more of something," Holtmann said in April 2020 about the transfer portal. "I think that is where a lot of this is. I don't think in any cases, or very few cases, there is anything else beyond that."

Most of these exits were not anticipated, and Holtmann and his staff struggled to find suitable players to replace them. The Buckeyes did find success with a few transfer portal additions in recent years – those being Justice Sueing and C.J. Walker, who emerged as key contributors on Ohio State's NCAA Tournament teams from 2020-22 – and Battle, who ranks second on the team in scoring this season at 14.2 points per game.

But outside of those three, Ohio State's transfer-portal signings have made minimal contributions. None of the additions of Jimmy Sotos and Seth Towns in 2020-21; Joey Brunk and Jamari Wheeler in 2021-22; Tanner Holden, Isaac Likekele and Sean McNeil in 2022-23; and Bonner and Mahafey in 2023-24 have averaged more than 9.7



SONNY BROCKWAY

REVOLVING DOOR — Former head coach Chris Holtmann's roster faced significant turnover during his tenure, with a pair of one-and-dones in Brice Sensabaugh and Malaki Branham as well as players coming and going in the transfer portal.

points per game with the Buckeyes.

Smith declined to comment on whether Holtmann failed to adjust to college basketball's increasing reliance on the transfer portal as an effort to combat roster turnover, saying, "That's a good question for Chris." But he did acknowledge the unique challenges Holtmann and his now-former colleagues are faced with today when it comes to juggling the ever-changing landscape of collegiate athletics, with the transfer portal included.

"I think it's harder on all coaches in every sport now," Smith said. "When you think of the aggregate of all the issues that each coach is faced with now – the transfer portal, the lawsuits, the NIL, the uncertainty about what's coming, relative to our structure and model – it's harder today. The industry is harder. It's harder for basketball coaches and all coaches. But the basketball coaches, they have different windows around the transfer portal. It makes it a little bit more difficult."

Regardless of the changing landscape, Holtmann's transfer portal misses may very well have played a significant role in Ohio State's inability to achieve sustained success during the last two seasons, especially in the competitive Big Ten. With many of the incoming upperclassmen underperforming in recent years, Holtmann and his staff were forced to rely more heavily on younger, inexperienced underclassmen to lead the team, a concerted effort that Smith initially proposed to Holtmann in the middle of last season.

Smith told Buckeye Sports Bulletin last June that he was pleased with Holtmann's ability to get the best out of his younger players – a group that consisted of Gayle, Okpara, Sensabaugh and Thornton – in what was an otherwise disappointing season, something that gave him optimism for the future of Ohio State basketball under Holtmann's watch.

"I knew going into the year it would be challenging, but I really emphasized more and more with Chris about playing those

young puppies and getting them a chance to get minutes on the floor and get them experience," Smith said. "The shift to make sure we got them more playing time was critical. We saw that at the end of the schedule. Once they played more they came together, and I feel so good about the results of the efforts."

Diebler Taking Reins For Remainder Of Season

The youth movement continued into this season, but as the ill-fated campaign progressed, Smith expressed a different tone and sensed the need for a shift within the program. While still believing in the team's youth, Smith felt Ohio State's younger players needed a new voice in the locker room to best accentuate their talents moving forward.

"I think the young men have played hard," Smith said. "They've given a lot. But the reality is, (with) the body of work over this last year, I felt that they needed something different from a leadership point of view to give them that chance. While they're young, there's a lot of minutes on that floor – a lot. They still have six games and the tournament, so I wanted to give them a shot, and that's what they have."

For Smith, that new voice came from Jake Diebler, who had served on Holtmann's staff for the past five seasons – including the last two as associate head coach – and is the brother of former Ohio State guard Jon Die-

bler (2008-11).

Smith called the 37-year-old Jake Diebler a "warrior" for taking on this elevated role and said he felt the longtime assistant would put the team in the best position to finish the final six games of the regular season on the right note, a final stretch that began with a battle with No. 2 Purdue just four days after the firing.

"I am so appreciative that Jake Diebler has stepped up and accepted the challenge, Smith said. "That's not easy. I hope you guys appreciate that. What he's doing is not easy. My heart is with him to a great degree, but we have a little runway. We have days between (Feb. 14) and (the Feb. 18 game vs. Purdue) where you have time to accept the emotions of this moment and adjust and begin to coach our kids."

"I think he's a very good coach. I think he's going to demonstrate, for the kids, that at the end of the day, we need to keep fighting all the way through. He's going to do that."

Despite the quick turnaround and limited time to instill his head-coaching philosophies upon the team, Diebler accomplished just that in his first game leading the Buckeyes. Implementing a more fast-paced style of play, Diebler orchestrated one of the more stunning upsets of the college basketball season in front of a national audience, securing a 73-69 win over Purdue behind a stifling defense that forced 14 turnovers – five of them by way of Zed Key stealing it from Purdue center Zach Edey – that led to 22 Ohio State points.

It was a significant win that led to a sea of scarlet and gray flooding the Value City Arena floor at the buzzer, capping off a monumental week that was filled with a wide-ranging mix of emotions for those within the program.

"This was one of my hardest, weirdest, most dramatic times being a college basketball player this last week," Thornton said after the game. "It's not normal when your head coach gets fired in the middle of the season and then you play probably the No. 1 seed in March Madness. But I told our guys, 'We are all we have right now.' Things happen. College basketball is a business. We took every day one day at a time. We saw our teammates with a confidence and swagger about them that it doesn't matter who we play, we're going to show how to play Ohio State basketball. We showed it tonight."

"What a resilient group," Diebler added. "We have some great young men in there who came together at a high level these last few days in a way that I don't know any of us fully anticipated, of that level we could get to in a short amount of time. They deserve so much credit. I am so very happy for them, and I'm proud of them."

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Several Coaches Emerging To Replace Holtmann

By **PATRICK ENGELS**

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

Interim head coach Jake Diebler made a strong first impression on the Buckeye faithful by knocking off then-No. 2 Purdue on Feb. 18, but Ohio State is expected to look outside of Columbus and conduct a nationwide search to replace Chris Holtmann.

Athletic director Gene Smith emphasized on Feb. 14 that while he will have significant input in the decision-making process, the coaching search will be led by incoming athletic director Ross Bjork, who will join the program as an advisor to Smith on March 1 before taking the reins from the longtime athletic director on July 1.

"When Ross gets here, as he shares with me his plan for the search, I'll be there to assist him and be very much a part of it with conversations and background information, things of that nature," he said. "I'm going to be all in. I'm going to be all in with Ross. I'm going to be honest, forthright, authentic and genuine. I'm going to tell him that we need to find someone that has the X's and O's and those talents and skills, but they have to fit our values, they have to fit our culture. So I'll be involved. It will be heavy."

Factoring in Ohio State's hefty athletics department budget and strong alumni and booster presence, there is sure to be a rich pool of candidates for Bjork and Smith to choose from in the upcoming months – a decision that will likely be heavily influenced by each candidate's approach toward NIL, the transfer portal and other changing aspects of collegiate sports.

Aside from those things, Smith acknowledged that the program's 16th head coach must ultimately understand and live up to the lofty expectations the school has set for the men's basketball team on the court, a high standard that Holtmann was ultimately unable to reach.

"There's nothing changed for any of our sports (regarding expectations)," Smith said. "I think we have 13 or 14 (teams at Ohio State) ranked in the top 25 right now. I mean, nothing's changed. All of our programs have the same standard."

"The blessing that we have at The Ohio State University is to recruit to this platform, to recruit to Columbus, the resources that Buckeye Nation provides us. The standard for men's basketball is the same. Be in the hunt, periodically win the championship, and then go deep into the postseason. That hasn't changed, and that hasn't been accomplished. We need to do better."

Smith indicated that Ohio State's coaching search will not begin until the end of the season – as the focus is currently on putting Diebler in the best situation to succeed – but that has not stopped several notable names from emerging as potential candidates to become the Buckeyes' next men's basketball coach.

While Smith, Bjork or the university have yet to publicly identify people who have piqued their interest since Holtmann's firing, BSB has compiled a list of seven coaches – most of whom are currently

employed at other universities – who have reportedly surfaced as names to watch as Ohio State begins just its third coaching search in two decades.

Jeff Boals – head coach, Ohio University: Boals may be the biggest wild card on this list, as he has never led a Power Five school in his eight-year head coaching career. But his assistant coaching history at Ohio State as well as his success leading Ohio University over his first five seasons may warrant some interest from Bjork, or at least an interview.

Boals served as an assistant on Matta's staff at Ohio State from 2009-16, helping the Buckeyes gain a berth to the NCAA Tournament in six of those seven seasons along with a Final Four appearance in 2012. But the longtime Ohioan was perhaps most valuable to the program with his recruiting, where he reportedly played a large role in the signings of some of the premier players of that era of Ohio State basketball such as Aaron Craft, D'Angelo Russell and Jared Sullinger.

Boals' coaching career extends beyond Ohio State, too. He earned a 55-42 record while serving as head coach for Stony Brook from 2016-19 before taking over at Ohio University in 2019-20 and boasting a 93-59 so far in his first five seasons. That stretch included an NCAA Tournament appearance in 2020-21, the Bobcats' first since 2012.

Chris Jent – assistant coach, Los Angeles Lakers: While many of the names listed have few or no ties to Ohio State, Jent's basketball resume oozes scarlet and gray. The longtime NBA assistant and Sparta, N.J, product played for the Buckeyes from 1988-92, averaging 8.2 points, 3.9 rebounds and 1.4 assists per game.

Jent's time at Ohio State also extended past his playing career. He had two separate stints with the program. He first joined Matta's staff as an assistant coach from 2011-13. After spending two years in the NBA as an assistant for the Sacramento Kings (2013-14) and head coach of the Phoenix Suns' developmental league team Bakersfield Jam (2015-16), Jent then returned to Ohio State in 2016-17.

In addition to his playing and coaching career at Ohio State, Jent also has an extensive history coaching in the NBA, having spent 15 seasons as an assistant for six different franchises, including two separate stints with Akron native and current Los Angeles Lakers forward LeBron James with the Cleveland Cavaliers (2006-10) and Lakers (2022-present). While with the Cavaliers, he was James' personal shooting coach. Jent also served as the interim head coach for the Orlando Magic for the final 18 games of the season in 2004-2005.

Jent has reportedly already expressed interest in becoming the Buckeyes' next head coach, making him an intriguing candidate for Bjork if he chooses to go the unconventional route and add a veteran leader who has ties to both the NBA and



Jeff Boals

Ohio State.

Dusty May – head coach, Florida Atlantic: May is one of the hottest names in college basketball today. Despite being head coach at FAU for only six seasons, the 47-year-old has already cemented himself as the winningest head coach in program history, boasting a 122-67 record as BSB went to press.

May's impact on the Owls' program has been substantial. After failing to secure a 20-win season in his first four years as head coach, May placed Florida Atlantic in the national spotlight during the 2022-23 season, taking the program to their second NCAA Tournament appearance in history and making a run all the way to the Final Four as a No. 9 seed with a 35-4 overall record.

May's historic season had many experts believing that he was in line to accept a more lucrative head coaching position at a Power Five school last offseason, similar to the path former Florida Gulf Coast and current USC head coach Andy Enfield took after leading his "Dunk City" Eagles to the Sweet 16 as a No. 15 seed in 2012.

Instead, May signed a 10-year extension to stay with the program one week after their Final Four loss to San Diego State, a lengthy deal Bjork would have to match with his wallet.

Greg McDermott – head coach, Creighton: McDermott is arguably the most decorated and experienced candidate on this list, having been a head coach since the 1994-95 season, including the last 14 years as the head man at Creighton.

McDermott has helped turn the Blue Jays into one of the more highly respected and competitive non-Power Five teams in the country during his tenure, leading the program to an impressive 320-158 record and eight NCAA Tournament appearances, with another one expected this season. His best coaching performance may have come a year ago, when he led the Blue Jays to their first Elite Eight appearance in program history and finished 24-13.

McDermott, a Cascade, Iowa, native, has no ties to Ohio State or the Big Ten. His other coaching stints include head coaching tenures at Wayne State (1994-2000), North Dakota State (2000-01), Northern Iowa (2001-06) and Iowa State (2006-10). He also agreed to a multiyear contract extension with Creighton in March 2022, providing another hurdle for Bjork and Ohio State to clear if they are interested.

Sean Miller – head coach, Xavier: Miller returned to Xavier – where he earned his first head coaching job in 2004 – in 2022 and instantly elevated the program, taking his team to the NCAA Tournament for the first time since 2017-18 and finishing with a 27-10 record.

This fast start helped Miller earn a two-year contract extension in October that runs through the 2028-29 season, but his Musketeers haven't been able to replicate that same success this season, holding a

13-14 record as BSB went to press.

This season's struggles do not discredit his ability to build a program into a juggernaut, though. Prior to his time at Xavier, Miller led Arizona to a combined 302-109 record, five Pac-12 regular-season championships and seven NCAA Tournament appearances, though he was fired following the 2020-21 season after the Wildcats were caught up in a wide-ranging corruption scandal that included bribery and money laundering.

Aside from his success at Arizona, Miller also has ties to former OSU head coach Thad Matta, having served as associate head coach under him at Xavier from 2001-04.

Lamont Paris – head coach, South Carolina: Paris, a Findlay, Ohio, native, may not possess the reputation that Miller holds in the collegiate head coaching ranks, having spent just two seasons leading a Power Five program,



Lamont Paris

but he has quickly emerged as a rising star in the industry due to his performance at South Carolina this season.

Paris' first year with the Gamecocks was a disappointment, going 11-21 and finishing 12th in the SEC. That has been erased this year, as he has lifted the team – featuring former Ohio State and Holtmann recruit Meechie Johnson – to a 22-5 record and 10-4 in conference play.

The open vacancy at Ohio State may also entice Paris to return to not only his home state, where he previously served as an assistant coach at Akron from 2005-10, but also the Big Ten. Paris worked under Bo Ryan and later Greg Gard at Wisconsin from 2010-17 being elevated to associate head coach under Gard in 2016-17.

Before taking the South Carolina job, Paris posted an 87-72 record as head coach at Chattanooga.

Buzz Williams – head coach, Texas A&M: Aside from his successful 17-year career in head coaching, the obvious draw of Williams for Ohio State is his connection to Bjork. The two men spent the last five seasons together at Texas A&M, with Williams being named head coach in April 2019 and Bjork taking over as athletic director that next month.

Williams amassed a combined 91-59 record dating back to 2019-20 and took his team to the NCAA Tournament in 2022-23, a year in which he also won SEC Coach of the Year. The team currently holds a 15-12 record, with one of those wins coming against Holtmann and Ohio State, a 73-66 victory in Columbus on Nov. 10.

Williams, who had previous stints at Marquette (2008-14) and Virginia Tech (2014-19), also has no real connections to Ohio State. But he did speak glowingly of the Buckeyes after their matchup earlier this season, specifically praising the talents of Bruce Thornton and calling him the catalyst of the Ohio State's offense as well as a "hard guard."

Players Preaching Unity After Holtmann Firing

By **PATRICK ENGELS**

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

Fresh off a 62-54 loss to Wisconsin at the Kohl Center on Feb. 13, Ohio State sophomore guard Bruce Thornton woke up the next morning with a feeling that something had gone wrong. He then checked his phone and saw some alarming news that validated those suspicions.

"I woke up (on Feb. 14), I just had a bad feeling," Thornton said on Feb. 16. "I don't know what it was. Then you see the news, you see things on Twitter, you look on social media like anybody else, asking, 'Is this really real?'"

What Thornton saw on Twitter were multiple rumors and reports that suggested Ohio State was planning on firing head men's basketball coach Chris Holtmann that day with just six games remaining in the regular season, one which began with high hopes after a 12-2 start but ultimately sputtered when the Buckeyes lost nine of their last 11 games.

A few hours later, Thornton received a text that legitimized the information they were seeing on social media. The text read that Ohio State athletic director Gene Smith had called for a team meeting later that day, where he would soon deliver the news of his decision to fire Holtmann after seven years leading the program and elevate associate head coach Jake Diebler to fill his position for the rest of the season.

It was a decision that Thornton said came as a surprise to both him and his teammates, most of whom Holtmann had personally recruited and coached throughout their entire college careers, but one which he also knew was ultimately out of his control.

"We get a text that we have to go meet with Gene Smith, so we're just all trying to figure out what's going on until you get the real news and read what it is. We had a meeting with the whole coaching staff. Gene Smith just (said) 'This is the move that I'm going to make.'

"It's a business decision that is higher than us players and us coaches, because that's the athletic director."

While those within the program attempted to digest the news that sent shockwaves through the college basketball world, Thornton said he and his team were forced to quickly move forward and adjust to life without their head coach who had led them on the sidelines all season.

With just four days between the news and Ohio State's next game against then-No. 2 Purdue, Thornton said his team was able to accomplish exactly that by ensuring that each player was in the right mental state to close out the remainder of the season on a positive note.

"It was hard to really process it, especially because we have a good game (vs. Purdue on Feb. 18)," Thornton said. "My main focus was making sure I was straight myself, making sure I'm mentally there to talk to my teammates and evaluate what we need to do. I've never experienced this, nobody on my team has experienced this, no coaches have been in this experience.

"I'm trying to let my teammates know that things happen, life happens. It's really how you move on from it and continue to get bet-

ter each and every day. I feel like I (had) to instill that confidence back in my teammates that we still have things to finish. We still have hardware to go get, even though we don't have the best record right now. But I feel like these next couple of games in our regular season, we can go get those. And then in the Big Ten tournament, anything can happen, especially with what happened last year."

The Buckeyes won three games at the conference tourney before being eliminated by Purdue.

Senior center Zed Key, who joined Holtmann's program in the 2020 recruiting class, said the news was unexpected, but like Thornton, Key is looking to move forward.

"From a leadership standpoint, I can't let guys see me down," he said. "I need to continue to work hard every day in practice, don't feed into any of the news and stuff that you see online, and just continue to get your work done."

Thornton said that he and his teammates felt they had an obligation to make these efforts because of the bond they had built both throughout the offseason and regular season. To him, the hard work they put in together all year served as a reminder that they could emerge from these adverse times as a better – and more cohesive – unit.

"We know we are playing for the guy next to us at the end of the day," he said. "We went through the offseason workouts in the summer, in the preseason, we just kept fighting together. We built that camaraderie and that bond with your teammates that's unbreakable. These are relationships that you're going to have outside of basketball. So when we saw (Holtmann get fired), we just knew we had to get closer, even closer than before, because it's a crazy time.

"Having guys on the team that stayed in the same dorm as me, or with Jamison (Battle) and Dale (Bonner), the new guys – we need each other more than ever now. We just have the same motto, still trying to prove people wrong, trying to get better every day, and I feel like everything will take care of itself."

The Buckeyes' commitment to staying focused translated to the practice floor in the days following Holtmann's firing. According to both Thornton and Battle, the team – now led by the 37-year-old Diebler – put together a strong few days of preparation leading up to the Purdue game, ones consisting of a renewed urgency and intensity both on the floor and in the film room.

"I think the biggest thing was just us, collectively, coming together as a team and, within that adversity, growing closer and staying present in the moment," Battle said. "I think that's something I've talked about this whole year, not letting the past affect us and not letting what's in the future affect us, just staying present in the moment, focusing on each day. We had three really good days of prep this week."

This new mentality paid off in a significant way for the Buckeyes in their first game in the post-Holtmann era on Feb. 18. Ohio State excelled in front of the national audience, pulling off a huge 73-69 upset victory over the Boilermakers behind an ignited defense that forced Purdue into 14 turnovers.

Key, who played a significant role in the win with a career-high five steals, all on Pur-



SONNY BROCKWAY

COME TOGETHER — Ohio State's players have shown unity since the firing of head coach Chris Holtmann, with those such as Felix Okpara (34) and Evan Mahaffey (12) helping lead the team through a difficult time.

due star center Zach Edey, said that his team's performance that day – which was capped by a postgame celebration with fans who rushed the floor after the final buzzer sounded – was one to remember for those in the locker room who endured a difficult week.

"With everything that's been going on, it was a tough week for us," he said. "I just put my head down and let all the frustrations out there on the court. I just wanted to get the 'W.' We had momentum, the crowd was on our side, and we were making the right plays, so we got the 'W.' As an individual, I just told myself, 'Go out there, play free, and don't let any distractions get to you.'

"There were definitely a lot of emotions in that locker room, just from the week that we had. We pulled out the 'W' and played so hard. We came together as a team and knew, from that day on, that we are still a contender in this and that we're a really good team. We're going to try and keep that momentum going."

Thornton echoed Key's sentiment, with the win serving as a cathartic few hours for his team when they could lay out all the frustrations on the court from the difficult week that was – one which, for Thornton, began with a mindless scroll through Twitter.

"It feels great, man," Thornton said. "Especially seeing your teammates, coaching staff, Buckeye Nation, all coming together. Seeing the smile on everybody's faces, that's what college basketball is about.

"I'm just really excited for my teammates. I'm so proud of them. What I ask of them, they always come forward and bring their best every day, and they bring me confidence. I'm really proud of those guys. I'm glad that we got the result that we wanted, that we've been working on for a long time. Another one is coming up next.

"As a man, you have to keep moving forward when things are not going your way. We

kept putting in work. We had trust in (each other). We're having fun playing the game that we also absolutely love since we've been at a young age. I feel like with this game, all that frustration, all that attitude, all that swagger that we had about ourselves, we showed it, and we got the win."

Ohio State is looking forward to what may lie ahead the rest of the season, a stretch that is guaranteed to include three more regular-season games (Nebraska, Feb. 29; Michigan, March 3; and at Rutgers, March 10) and at least one game in the Big Ten tournament in Minneapolis. Those within the locker room also haven't forgotten to reflect on the times they had with their now-former head coach.

Thornton acknowledged that he would not be in his current position of team captain and leading scorer at Ohio State without the efforts of Holtmann, who he said met with him – along with every other player – to fill them in on the details of his firing. Thornton said the coach helped mold him into a better player and person with his teachings on and off the floor, something he will appreciate for the remainder of his basketball career.

"Holtmann is a great guy," Thornton said. "He gave me an opportunity, a scholarship, to play at a Power Five school, and I'm forever thankful for that. (I appreciate) what he's done for me and the other guys he's ever recruited at Ohio State. His family is great. His wife (Lori), his kids – he always treated us like we were his sons. He was a big family guy. I was always over at his house. Everybody just had fun, laughed, kicked it with each other.

"At the end of the day, he's grown us into more than basketball players, so I always respect what he has done. But as a man, he just had to tell me, 'This is what happened, and I have to move on. I got fired.' Just being straight up with me. He said, 'I still want you all to finish this season out strong. I love you all and I have care for you all.'"

Holtmann Blindsided By In-Season Dismissal

Former Ohio State head coach Chris Holtmann, who was fired by athletic director Gene Smith on Feb. 14, reportedly was caught off guard by the news of his dismissal.

COURT REPORT Patrick Engels

A source told The Athletic's Dana O'Neil and Tobias Bass that the seventh-year head coach was "blindsided" by the school's decision to fire him before the season ended and that he did not get a chance to meet with his team prior to the announcement.

Holtmann reportedly met with Smith the week before his firing, where Smith made it clear to the now-former coach that while making the NCAA Tournament was "critical" – something the program has not done since the 2021-22 season – the plan was to wait until the season ended to make a decision on Holtmann's job status.

Instead, Holtmann was relieved of his duties on Valentine's Day with six games remaining in the regular season – a move that will cost Ohio State \$12.8 million in buyout money to pay the coach his remaining salary – and Jake Diebler was elevated from associate to interim head coach for the remainder of the campaign.

The week of play leading up to the firing was an up-and-down one for the coach and



SONNY BROCKWAY

BIG MEN — Ohio State forward Zed Key (23) was a pivotal part of the Buckeyes' upset of Purdue on Feb. 18, notching five steals of Purdue center Zach Edey.

2023-24 Ohio State Men's Basketball Statistics

16-12 Overall (6-11 Big Ten) Statistics through games of Feb. 25

Player	G-GS	Min.-Avg.	FG-FGA	Pct.	3P-3PA	Pct.	FT-FTA	Pct.	Rebounds		PF-FO	A	TO	BS	ST	Pts.-Avg.
									O-D	T-Avg.						
THORNTON, Bruce	28-28	943-33.7	152-358	.425	46-148	.311	104-123	.846	11-84	95-3.4	48-1	117	32	1	33	454-16.2
BATTLE, Jamison	27-27	835-30.9	132-286	.462	73-166	.440	46-49	.939	31-107	138-5.1	52-1	30	43	5	10	383-14.2
GAYLE JR., Roddy	28-28	890-31.8	131-295	.444	23-83	.277	98-113	.867	28-94	122-4.4	59-0	89	72	3	23	383-13.7
KEY, Zed	28-1	450-16.1	68-128	.531	3-9	.333	60-84	.714	53-63	116-4.1	56-0	16	18	17	10	199-7.1
OKPARA, Felix	27-27	633-23.4	69-115	.600	0-2	.000	26-41	.634	62-106	168-6.2	77-3	13	27	63	11	164-6.1
MAHAFFEY, Evan	28-28	657-23.5	58-125	.464	2-16	.125	22-36	.611	39-84	123-4.4	71-2	47	28	20	33	140-5.0
BONNER, Dale	28-0	521-18.6	43-137	.314	20-69	.290	19-31	.613	5-55	60-2.1	29-0	32	14	3	18	125-4.5
MIDDLETON, Scotty	25-1	378-15.1	34-96	.354	18-49	.367	8-18	.444	10-24	34-1.4	25-0	18	12	7	5	94-3.8
ROYAL, Devin	25-0	231-9.3	36-68	.529	2-12	.167	19-31	.613	21-27	48-1.9	40-1	9	15	7	8	93-3.7
HARDMAN, Bowen	14-0	68-4.9	10-23	.435	8-19	.421	1-2	.500	0-8	8-0.6	1-0	0	0	0	0	29-2.1
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	8-0	17-2.2	1-1	1.000	0-0	.000	1-2	.500	0-4	4-0.5	3-0	1	1	0	1	3-0.4
CHATMAN, Taison	11-0	43-3.9	1-11	.091	0-9	.000	0-0	.000	1-4	5-0.5	7-0	5	5	0	0	2-0.2
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									48-39	87		14				
Total	28	5680	735-1647	.446	195-585	.333	408-534	.764	310-702	1012-36.1	472-8	379	282	126	153	2073-74.0
Opponents	28	5675	709-1634	.434	191-534	.358	348-485	.718	291-662	953-34.0	502-10	317	296	77	137	1957-69.9

his program. The Buckeyes, riding a four-game losing streak, had arguably their worst defeat of the season on Feb. 6, squandering an 18-point second-half lead at home in a 76-73 loss to Indiana.

Four days later – with Smith in attendance – Ohio State had one of its best victories of the year, a dramatic 79-75 double-overtime home win against Maryland where sophomore guard Bruce Thornton provided the game-tying scores in regulation and overtime before hitting the game-winning layup in the second extra period. But the Buckeyes could not replicate that late-game success on the road at Wisconsin on Feb. 13 in a 62-54 loss in what wound up as Holtmann's final game at Ohio State.

It was a defeat that gave Holtmann and his team their 16th straight road loss – a streak that dated back to Jan. 1, 2023 – and their ninth loss in the last 11 games, an extended losing stretch that likely played a role in Smith's decision to fire him before the season ended.

While The Athletic reported that Holtmann was unable to speak with the team before news of his firing broke, Thornton told the media on Feb. 16 that the former coach spoke to each player individually on an undisclosed date to offer clarity on the situation.

"He met with everybody individually," Thornton said. "He just wanted to be straight up about it. He wanted to tell us before the news got out. Just being a man, telling everybody one-on-one what happened, what he was experiencing. ... He just said, 'This is what happened, I have to move on. I got fired.'"

Diebler's Buckeyes Ramp Up Intensity Against Purdue

In the days following Holtmann's firing and leading up to Ohio State's matchup against No. 2 Purdue on Feb. 18, Diebler and his staff committed to instilling a higher level of energy and pace in practice to inject focus into an emotionally charged locker room.

"I operate with passion and urgency and a pace to things, so we tried to tailor our practice around that," Diebler said. "I was very open with what I wanted it to look like,

and they embraced that."

That mentality translated onto the floor in front of a packed Value City Arena with 18,353 fans on hand, where the Buckeyes turned up the heat and upset the heavily favored Boilermakers, 73-69, behind a number of fastbreak baskets and 14 forced turnovers. Speaking with the media after the win, Diebler said his and his team's emphasis on operating with increased urgency played a significant role in what was their biggest victory of the season, giving them the added confidence and belief they needed to close out the game on a winning note.

"We prepared to win this game," Diebler said. "I told our guys last night, 'We're going in this to win. We're not going in this to be close.' They had earned the right to play well, and so I think that aggressive mentality – I told them in a couple of timeouts, 'Stay aggressive. Keep swinging.' Our staff, we kept echoing that. As the game went on, they believed. It's going to be important moving forward that we keep that same mentality. There's going to be adversity moving forward and in games and beyond. But we want to keep that mentality."

Ohio State's heightened intensity was most evident on defense, where the Buckeyes came up with nine steals – tied for their second most all season – and scored 22 points off turnovers. Five of those steals came from the active hands of senior center Zed Key, who stripped the ball away from Purdue center Zach Edey on numerous occasions inside the paint.

It was a career defensive performance from the veteran that not only frustrated his 7-4 opponent but allowed the offense to find success offensively in transition.

"Key did a good job of stripping (Edey)," Purdue head coach Matt Painter said after the game. "I don't know whether he was just exposing it or Zed just picked up on something, like a pitcher (in baseball) tipping something. It was a big part of the game, Zed's ability to defend."

"We can't let them get in transition," Edey added. "We have to play a halfcourt game. They were able to get those steals and play in transition. It's tough to win the game when a team scores 22 points off turnovers."

Diebler also pointed to the overall aggres-

siveness of his team on defense as something that tilted the game in the Buckeyes' favor, a mentality that he hopes to see his players continue to embrace on both ends of the floor moving forward this season.

"That aggressiveness that I talked about is for both sides of the ball," Diebler said. "And the pace element that we've been talking about is just – there's an urgency we want to operate with. I felt like we were able to do that on both sides. We tried to mix in some pressure, full-court (pressure) today. We had some guys just individually step up and guard really hard, and I thought that was important. But we want to be aggressive on both sides, certainly."

Transferring Not In Thornton's DNA

Speaking to the media just two days after Holtmann's firing, Thornton acknowledged on several occasions that college basketball is a "business" and that the school's decision to fire the man who offered him a scholarship was out of both his and his teammates' control.

He acknowledged that he has no say over who will be next in charge for the Buckeyes – the decision-making process that will be led by incoming athletic director Ross Bjork after the season – but one thing he can control in this business-oriented sport is whether he will enter the transfer portal this off-season, an avenue that players have utilized more frequently in an era of increasing roster overhaul in college basketball.

While some players may be compelled to leave the program for another opportunity amid this change of leadership at Ohio State – an avenue they can even take during the season under the current NCAA transfer portal rules, which allow players to enter the portal for 30 days after a coaching change – Thornton instead voiced his commitment to the team for the foreseeable future, something he felt he had the obligation to do given his status as team captain.

"It's about my morals and my values as a player," Thornton said. "I never felt it was OK to go separate ways, especially being a captain. You have a responsibility. Especially as a man, you don't quit. You at least finish it out and see what's happening after (the



SONNY BROCKWAY

IN FOR THE LONG HAUL — Despite changes in the program following the firing of head coach Chris Holtmann, sophomore guard Bruce Thornton said he intends to stay at Ohio State.

season).

“But during the process, you don’t quit. That’s the thing my mom always taught me, just to finish things out. Even if you don’t like it, even if it kills me. But at least finish it out, then after that, if you really don’t like it, you don’t have to go through it anymore. But now, how I explain it to my teammates, is that I’m not going to go anywhere. I’m going to finish the season out strong. ... I’m not going to quit on my teammates, not on the coaches, and especially not on Buckeye Nation. And all of my teammates are of the same accord. We’re going to finish it out the right way and see what happens.”

Regardless of his commitment to the team, Thornton – who is in the midst of his second season at Ohio State with two more seasons of eligibility remaining – is likely to receive interest from other schools in need of a point guard. After bursting onto the scene and starting every game as a freshman, he has quickly emerged as Ohio State’s most productive player, leading the team in points (16.2) and assists (4.2) as of Feb. 25.

According to former Ohio State guard Aaron Craft – who visited the team during their practice on Feb. 15 – teams have already begun to inquire about Thornton’s possible availability next season, with many programs reportedly contacting Thornton’s mother, Tiaunna Briggins, rather than the sophomore guard himself to avoid any NCAA infractions.

“Talking to Bruce yesterday after practice, I completely underestimated this kind of fallout with the way college basketball is now,” Craft said on the “Carmen’s Crew” podcast. “Other coaches, other programs can’t talk to him specifically, but he said from the moment rumors went out that Holtmann was going to get fired until practice (on Feb. 14) – so like a 40-hour window – his mom was on the phone nonstop talking to ‘X’ program or ‘X’ coach and trying to figure out what Bruce was trying to think about doing.”

Despite the extra attention Thornton is receiving from opposing schools, the guard said he has remained focused on leading

his team through the final two weeks of the regular season and finishing his sophomore campaign at Ohio State on a strong note.

“I’m just making sure as the captain that everybody is still going to stay the course and still try to finish the season out well,” he said. “I feel like we still have things to accomplish. I feel like we still have some goals in plan. We just need to keep putting in work, keep trusting the next guy in front of us, keep making the right play and having offensive efficiency, and it will take care of itself.”

Mobley, White Voice Commitment To Program

Holtmann’s firing will likely impact Ohio State in the world of recruiting, where the coach has secured top-40 classes in five of his seven years leading the Buckeyes. But for the lone two players signed by Ohio State in 2024, the change in leadership has had no impact – at least, for now – on their commitment to the program.

In the wake of the head coach’s dismissal, incoming freshman guards Juni Mobley and Colin White – whom Holtmann officially signed to the program on Nov. 8 – both announced that they have no intention of reopening their recruitments anytime soon but will closely monitor how the program operates during the offseason.

Mobley (6-0, 150), a four-star prospect out of Mount Pleasant (Utah) Wasatch Academy and the No. 48 overall player in the class, was the first of the two to pledge, committing to the program in October 2022. He also paid an official visit to Columbus on Sept. 9, attending the Buckeye football team’s home opener against Youngstown State.

“As a family, we have no intentions of opening his recruitment anytime soon,” Ronnie Steward, a family friend and athlete management representative for Mobley, told The Columbus Dispatch on Feb. 16. “Juni’s still really excited about being a Buckeye.”

“We’re aware a coaching decision is going to be made. Right now the focus is on finishing this high school season strong, and at the end of the year we’ll evaluate once

a decision is made and with the new staff, what their plans are and how they view Juni.”

White (6-6, 180), a three-star prospect out of Ottawa (Ohio) Ottawa-Glandorf and the No. 180 overall player, committed to Ohio State over Butler, Cincinnati, Northwestern and TCU in August. A Division-III Northwest Ohio Player of The Year award winner in 2022-23, White has been seen attending many home basketball games this season and even joined the Buckeyes and their fans to celebrate on the court after the team’s win over Purdue.

“The Block O means a lot to me, but who knows what the future holds?” White told “Views From The Schott” podcast host Tim Miller. “I am definitely going to stay committed, but I will wait for the next hire to make the best decision for me.”

While Mobley did not directly comment on what the program has said to him in the wake of Holtmann’s firing, White said he has stayed in constant communication with Diebler, who has assured him that greener pastures are to come for the program in the future.

“Me and Diebler talk every day,” White said. “Diebler is a great coach and a great guy, and he always tells me to trust him and we’ll figure it out. I do trust him.”

Although it is unclear what route Ohio State will take in recruiting moving forward with a nationwide coaching search set to be under way this offseason, Diebler said on Feb. 16 that while recruiting is not a top priority as interim head coach, he still needs to show support toward both Mobley and White and assure the incoming duo that the program still values them.

“From a recruiting standpoint, the focus is on the guys that are signed,” Diebler said. “In my opinion, spending a lot of time on (recruiting) is not in the best interest of this program or for the players right now. But in the next couple of days, maybe we’ll have a chance to sit down and process what that needs to look like. Ohio State, players from Ohio, that stuff matters to me, personally. I think it’s really important, and it will always be important.”

Former Coaches, Players Weigh In On Holtmann Firing

Ohio State’s decision to fire Holtmann garnered national attention in the college basketball world, and it even caused some of the more recognizable names in the sport to offer their take on the matter.

Appearing together on Sirius XM’s “Basketball & Beyond” radio show on Feb. 15, legendary former college basketball head coaches Mike Krzyzewski and Jay Wright both expressed disapproval toward Smith’s decision to dismiss Holtmann after seven seasons leading the program, saying the school acted too quickly and did not allow the coach an opportunity to rebound from the last two disappointing seasons.

“After three years at Duke, I’d be fired,” said Krzyzewski, men’s college basketball’s all-time wins leader at 1,202 who amassed five national championships at Duke from 1980 to 2022. “Part of building a culture is going through adversity. (Wright and I) were fortunate to be allowed to do that. Our schools were fortunate because we were allowed to build a culture. Our culture is still there at Duke. That’s what you want to keep going.”

“It’s almost like everybody is a junior col-

lege coach now,” added Wright, who earned two NCAA championships along with a 520-197 record at Villanova (2001-22). “We have to put a team together and we have to win right away because we might not get a chance late in the year.”

“They might not be patient with us. That’s why I brought up Holtmann. Seventy percent of Ohio State’s points come from freshmen and sophomores. If those guys stay, whoever gets that job next year is going to have a hell of a team. No one is waiting on those young teams anymore. It’s so different.”

The former coaches were not the only college basketball legends to offer their comments on Holtmann’s dismissal. Longtime Michigan State coach Tom Izzo – who told the media after the Spartans’ win over Ohio State in Columbus last year that Buckeye fans should be patient with Holtmann – said that the in-season firing depicted a disturbing trend in college basketball where head coaches are dismissed before they can adjust to the changing landscape of the sport.

“I don’t get into other people’s business, but I feel for Chris Holtmann and what’s gone on there,” Izzo said. “Again, I don’t know all the circumstances. I just know it was five years he was in the NCAA Tournament.”

“Right now, we’re all going through a tough time as far as figuring out whether you want to take freshmen or whether you want to take transfers, and it’s really hard to navigate for all of us. That’s another thing that saddens me, because with all this stuff, coaches are going to lose their jobs. I’ve always stuck up for coaches. I obviously am good friends with (Smith), but I just don’t like what’s going on for coaches in general and that’s all I have to say about that.”

While several retired and current coaches – Dayton’s Anthony Grant and Purdue’s Painter being other examples – have come to Holtmann’s defense, those who have donned the Scarlet and Gray have offered different opinions on the decision.

Speaking on the “Carmen’s Crew” podcast alongside The Columbus Dispatch’s Adam Jardy, former Buckeyes David Lighty (2007-11), Jared Sullinger (2010-12) and Craft (2011-14) – who each played only under Thad Matta during their respective Ohio State careers – had mixed opinions on the matter, with Craft and Lighty both saying that they were shocked by the timing of the firing, and Sullinger saying that he felt the program needed a change in leadership to give them a spark to finish the season.

“It was a shock for me,” Lighty said. “I thought if any changes would happen from the Ohio State Buckeyes in a coach position, I thought it would be at the end of the season. But Gene hit us with one and said we’re going to get that started now for some reason.”

“I think it was needed, though,” Sullinger added. “That’s no shot to Chris Holtmann, but just sometimes, you need a fresh face. To be honest with you, whoever took that job after Thad Matta, that was a hell of a job, because Coach Matta had set a standard for Ohio State basketball. If you couldn’t produce to that standard, then it was on to the next one. It was very unfair for Coach Holtmann to come into that situation (the way he did) in June (of 2017). He didn’t really get to create his team, his culture, right away the way he wanted to.”

Diebler's Buckeyes Upset Purdue, Stun Spartans

By **PATRICK ENGELS**

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

The Ohio State basketball team went through a litany of change since Buckeye Sports Bulletin last went to press, with the school firing head coach Chris Holtmann on Feb. 14 just one day after the team's 62-54 loss at Wisconsin and subsequently promoting Jake Diebler from associate to interim head coach.

This change in leadership began an action-packed stretch of play for the Buckeyes that included two thrilling wins and an historic defeat.

Under Diebler's guidance, the Buckeyes secured a significant 73-69 upset victory over No. 2 Purdue at home on Feb. 18, dropped a program-record 17th straight road game at Minnesota on Feb. 22, then snapped the streak just three days later with a 60-57 win at Michigan State that ended on a buzzer-beating three from fifth-year guard Dale Bonner.

The win over Michigan State gave Ohio State its first road win since Jan. 1, 2023, along with its first win at the Breslin Center since 2011-12.

Holtmann Era Ends With Loss To Wisconsin

The Holtmann era at Ohio State ended in familiar fashion Feb. 13 in Madison, Wis., with the Buckeyes (14-11, 4-10 Big Ten) succumbing to poor shooting and sluggish play down the stretch in a 62-54 loss to No. 20 Wisconsin (17-8, 9-5), tying a program record with their 16th consecutive road defeat before

14,931 at the Kohl Center.

Ohio State trailed 34-21 at the half but managed to cut the deficit down to just five points with 9:49 left. But Holtmann's team – like many times on the road this season – struggled offensively when it mattered most, making just four of its final 15 shots and allowing the Badgers to hold onto the win.

“(Wisconsin) made it difficult for us to score and finish around the rim and hit some timely baskets,” Holtmann said. “I thought if we could make two or three of those and cut it to a four-point game, we would be right there. We just weren't able to do it.”

Wisconsin raced out to an early lead, making four of its first five shots to go up 10-4 before the first media timeout. The Buckeyes answered out of the break with a 7-1 run that included a three-pointer from sophomore guard Roddy Gayle Jr. to tie the game at 11.

The Badgers broke a 6:36 field-goal drought with makes from forward Steven Crawl and guard A.J. Storr to go back up 18-13, but the Buckeyes responded with five straight points from Gayle to tie the contest with 7:08 on the first-half clock.

Later, after Wisconsin went up by six, Bruce Thornton connected on his first basket with 3:23 left to make it 25-21 in favor of the Badgers. Wisconsin closed on a 9-0 run to lead 34-21 at the break.

Ohio State came out firing in the second half with eight makes in its first 11 tries – four of those baskets from Thornton – but it didn't do much to scrape into Wisconsin's lead, as the Badgers started the half shooting 7 of 11 from the floor to still lead 50-40 with 11:21 left.

Thornton's fourth basket in the OSU shooting spree started an 8-0 run to trail 50-45 with 9:49 left. But that was the closest the Buckeyes got to the Badgers the rest of the game. Wisconsin gradually increased its lead back up to 57-47 with 3:56 left on a basket from Tyler Wahl.

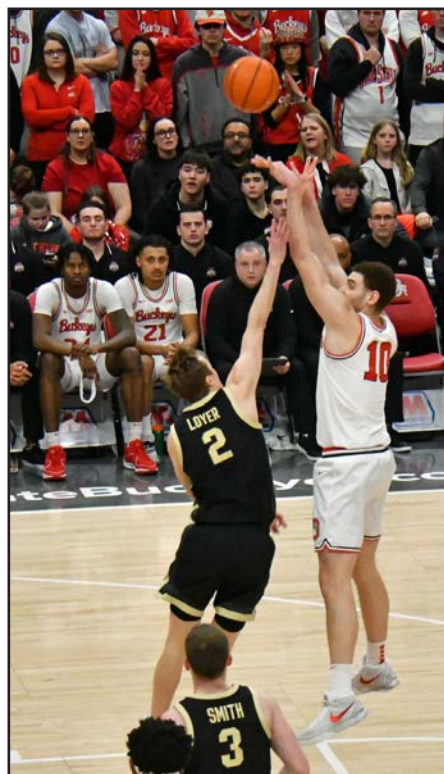
Despite Wisconsin not making a shot in the next 3:05, Ohio State never got closer than eight with three misses before a driving layup by Thornton with 1:36 left made it 57-49. Wisconsin extended its lead back up to 60-49 off a second-chance triple from guard Chucky Hepburn with only 51 seconds to play to dash any Buckeye hopes.

“The disappointing thing was not being able to get the necessary scores,” Holtmann said. “We got enough stops. We just weren't able to get the scores we needed to during that stretch.”

Ohio State was led by Thornton, who scored 16 of his 18 points in the second half while adding a team-high five assists. Gayle and Evan Mahaffey both finished with 10 points while Wisconsin was powered by Crawl (16 points, 10 rebounds) and Storr (14 points, 12 rebounds), with the Badgers holding a 39-26 edge on the glass.

Buckeyes Hang On To Upset No. 2 Purdue

Ohio State (15-11, 5-10) used strong performances from Jamison Battle and Thornton and tenacious team defense to secure a huge 73-69 upset victory over No. 2 Purdue (23-3, 12-3) on Feb. 18, defeating the heavily-favored Boilermakers in front of 18,353 fans at Value City Arena in its first game with Diebler at the



SONNY BROCKWAY

BATTLING ON — Ohio State forward Jamison Battle finished with 19 points on three made three-pointers in the win over Purdue on Feb. 18.

helm.

The Buckeyes, who defeated a top-five opponent for the first time since dethroning No. 1 Duke on Nov 30, 2021, received more than half of their scoring on a combined 41 points from Thornton and Battle, who made 14 of the team's 28 baskets. Ohio State also forced Purdue into 14 turnovers – five of those being Zed Key steals – that led to 22 points.

“We have some great young men in there who came together at a high level these last few days in a way that I don't know any of us fully anticipated, of that level we could get to in a short amount of time,” Diebler said. “They deserve so much credit. I am so very happy for them, and (I'm) proud of them.”

“(Diebler) did a great job, especially preparing us,” Thornton added. “He was excited. His hands were shaking. I saw them after the first media (timeout). But he was just excited. His dream was one day to be a head coach, and he had (an opportunity) coaching players that he recruited and that he absolutely loves.”

Purdue was dominant to start, scoring the game's first eight points behind three makes in four tries, capped by an old-fashioned three-point play from Trey Kaufman-Renn. But the Buckeyes – led by eight early points from Thornton – battled back as the half progressed, tying the game at 16 after an emphatic dunk from Gayle with 10:24 left.

Purdue then quieted the crowd with a dunk from center Zach Edey, starting a 12-5 run for the Boilermakers to go back up 28-21 with 5:51 remaining before intermission. The Buckeyes answered with an 8-0 run to take the lead off a basket from freshman center Austin Parks – his first career field goal – as part of an extended 14-2 run to lead 35-30 at the break. Thornton had 14 points in the first 20 minutes.

Ohio State's lead grew in the early portion of the second half thanks to Battle, who was

Ohio State 73, Purdue 69

Feb. 18, 2024
Value City Arena • Columbus

	1	2	F
Purdue (23-3, 12-3)	30	39	69
Ohio State (15-11, 5-10)	35	38	73

Purdue	Total	FG	FT	Reb.	A	PF	Pts.
Edey	33	7-11	8-8	6-7	3	2	22
Jones	30	3-11	4-4	1-3	0	2	13
Smith	39	5-11	2-2	1-4	7	0	12
Kaufman-Renn	21	5-6	2-2	2-1	2	1	12
Loyer	25	1-7	4-4	0-1	0	4	6
Gillis	16	1-3	0-0	0-2	0	2	2
Heide	4	1-1	0-0	0-0	0	0	2
Morton	19	0-0	0-0	0-3	1	1	0
Furst	9	0-3	0-0	4-1	0	2	0
Calvin	4	0-0	0-0	0-0	0	0	0
Totals	200	23-53	20-20	14-22	13	14	69

Percentages: FG: 43.4%. FT: 100.0%. **Three-point field goals:** 3-9 (Jones 3-5, Smith 0-2, Loyer 0-1, Gillis 0-1). **Team rebounds:** 0. **Blocked shots:** 5 (Edey 3, Smith, Morton). **Turnovers:** 14 (Edey 6, Smith 3, Jones, Kaufman-Renn, Loyer, Gillis, Morton). **Steals:** 3 (Loyer 2, Furst).

Ohio State	Total	FG	FT	Reb.	A	PF	Pts.
Thornton	35	8-17	5-5	2-2	3	1	22
Battle	25	6-8	4-4	0-4	0	4	19
Gayle Jr.	28	2-6	0-0	1-2	4	1	4
Mahaffey	23	1-4	0-0	1-2	1	2	2
Okpara	16	0-2	0-0	0-0	0	5	0
Key	21	4-7	0-0	1-0	1	4	9
Bonner	18	3-4	0-0	0-2	1	1	7
Royal	14	2-4	1-2	1-2	2	1	5
Middleton	15	1-5	0-0	0-2	1	0	3
Parks	2	1-1	0-0	0-0	0	1	2
Chatman	3	0-0	0-0	0-0	0	0	0
Totals	200	28-58	10-11	7-16	13	20	73

Percentages: FG: 48.3%. FT: 90.9%. **Three-point field goals:** 7-21 (Battle 3-5, Thornton 1-4, Middleton 1-3, Key 1-2, Bonner 1-2, Gayle 0-2, Royal 0-2, Mahaffey 0-1). **Team rebounds:** 1. **Blocked shots:** 3 (Mahaffey 2, Okpara). **Turnovers:** 6 (Thornton 2, Battle, Gayle, Mahaffey, Bonner). **Steals:** 9 (Key 5, Bonner 2, Gayle, Mahaffey). **Officials:** Carstensen, Szec, Walton. **Attendance:** 18,353.

Wisconsin 62, Ohio State 54

Feb. 13, 2024
Kohl Center • Madison, Wis.

	1	2	F
Ohio State (14-11, 4-10)	21	33	54
Wisconsin (17-8, 9-5)	34	28	62

Ohio State	Total	FG	FT	Reb.	A	PF	Pts.
Thornton	35	8-19	0-0	1-3	5	3	18
Gayle Jr.	31	4-11	0-0	0-1	4	0	10
Mahaffey	18	5-6	0-0	1-5	0	3	10
Battle	27	1-6	0-0	1-4	0	1	3
Okpara	27	1-1	0-0	2-2	0	2	2
Hardman	21	2-3	1-2	0-3	0	1	7
Royal	16	2-4	0-0	1-0	0	5	4
Key	13	0-2	0-0	0-0	0	0	0
Bonner	11	0-4	0-0	0-0	0	0	0
Middleton	1	0-0	0-0	0-0	0	1	0
Totals	200	23-56	1-2	7-19	9	16	54

Percentages: FG: 41.1%. FT: 50.0%. **Three-point field goals:** 7-18 (Thornton 2-6, Gayle 2-3, Hardman 2-3, Battle 1-3, Bonner 0-2, Royal 0-1). **Team rebounds:** 2. **Blocked shots:** 3 (Okpara 3). **Turnovers:** 8 (Thornton 3, Battle 2, Gayle, Okpara, Royal). **Steals:** 7 (Gayle 4, Royal 2, Thornton).

Wisconsin	Total	FG	FT	Reb.	A	PF	Pts.
Crawl	31	7-14	0-1	2-8	2	2	16
Storr	36	4-9	6-8	6-6	0	0	14
Wahl	34	5-9	0-0	0-7	3	1	10
Hepburn	39	3-5	1-2	1-4	7	3	9
Klesmit	32	2-10	2-3	0-1	1	3	8
Winter	9	1-1	2-2	0-1	0	0	5
Essegian	11	0-1	0-0	0-0	0	0	0
Gilmore	6	0-0	0-0	1-0	0	2	0
Lindsey	2	0-1	0-0	0-0	0	1	0
Totals	200	22-50	11-16	12-27	13	12	62

Percentages: FG: 44.0%. FT: 68.8%. **Three-point field goals:** 7-21 (Klesmit 2-7, Crawl 2-6, Hepburn 2-4, Winter 1-1, Storr 0-1, Wahl 0-1, Lindsey 0-1). **Team rebounds:** 2. **Blocked shots:** 0. **Turnovers:** 12 (Crawl 4, Wahl 2, Winter 2, Gilmore, Klesmit, Storr, Team). **Steals:** 4 (Hepburn 2, Storr, Winter). **Officials:** Brill, Curry, Pfeifer. **Attendance:** 14,931.

OHIO STATE MEN'S BASKETBALL

and Battle added two more from the charity stripe to put his team up four with 34 seconds left. Ohio State made each of its final four free throws to close out the game, leading the Buckeye faithful to rush the floor and celebrate the upset victory.

"This was one of my hardest, weirdest, most dramatic times being a college basketball player this last week," Thornton said. "It's not normal when your head coach gets fired in the middle of the season and then you play probably the No. 1 seed in March Madness. But I just told our guys, 'We are all we have right now.' Things happen. College basketball is a business. We just took every day one day at a time.

"We kept doing that, and leading into the game you saw your teammates with a confidence and swagger about them that it doesn't matter who we play, we're going to show how to play Ohio State basketball. We showed it tonight."

Ohio State was led in the win by Thornton and Battle, who scored 22 points and 19 points, respectively, on a combined 14-of-25 shooting with Battle hitting 6 of 8 including 3 of 5 from distance. Key, who scored nine points, also had his career-high five steals, all coming at the expense of Edey, who was charged with six turnovers. Purdue was powered by Edey, who earned a double-double with 22 points and 13 rebounds. Edey helped the Boilermakers to a 36-23 margin on the boards.

Buckeyes Make History With Loss At Minnesota

Ohio State (15-12, 5-11) suffered its program-record 17th straight road loss on Feb. 22 at Williams Arena, suffering an 88-79 loss to Minnesota (17-9, 8-7) due to a dominant

frontcourt performance from the Gophers.

Ohio State – which broke the previous record of consecutive road losses set from 1996-98 – shot a respectable 50.9 percent from the floor but was bullied in the paint, with the Gophers holding a 32-26 rebounding advantage and a 19-9 edge in second-chance points.

"We needed to rebound better," Diebler said. "That was a big key going into this game. We just didn't execute that well enough."

Ohio State struggled to start, missing three of its first five shots as Minnesota – which made each of its first five attempts – jumped out to an early 14-4 lead. The Buckeyes cut the deficit to seven with a triple from Battle – who received boos from the Gophers faithful in his first game back since transferring from the program – but Minnesota took off again, going back up 22-9 with 13:47 left after an 8-2 run.

The Buckeyes answered with an 8-0 run that included back-to-back threes by Scotty Middleton to trail 22-17 with 12:29 left. This kept Ohio State in reach of Minnesota in the ensuing minutes, and the away team trailed just 26-23 with 8:07 left after another three from Battle.

Minnesota made two straight baskets to increase its lead to 30-23, but Ohio State followed with a 7-0 run – a stretch that included freshman guard and Minneapolis native Taison Chatman's first career basket and Battle's third three of the half – to tie it at 30 with 5:24 remaining. After the two teams traded baskets, Minnesota assumed control of the game, closing the half on a 10-2 run – aided by a 3:37 scoring drought by Ohio State – to lead 42-34 at the break.

Despite Battle hitting his fourth three in as many attempts just 1:21 into the second period, Minnesota increased its lead coming out of the break, holding a 53-41 advantage with 16:06 left after consecutive threes from guard Elijah Hawkins. But thanks to a sluggish offensive sequence from the Gophers that included two makes in eight attempts, Ohio State went on a 9-4 run – eight of those points coming from Thornton – to trail 57-50 with 9:48 left.

But that was the closest Ohio State would get the rest of the contest, though the Buckeyes did close to seven again with 18 seconds remaining on a Battle three. The Gophers broke through with back-to-back threes from Hawkins and guard Cam Christie, starting a 10-1 run that put Minnesota up 67-51 with 7:44 left.

The Gophers led by as many as 17 before Ohio State cut the deficit to 72-59 with 4:41 remaining following baskets from Gayle and Mahaffey, later using an 11-4 run to trim the deficit to 79-70 with 1:31 left following a layup by Thornton. But the Buckeyes ultimately ran out of time. Minnesota made seven of its final eight free throws to go along with a layup by Dawson Garcia to close out the win.

"I was proud of the way our guys fought back," Diebler said. "The game very easily could have ended differently. But our guys kept fighting. That's what we have in this locker room. We just have to continue to do that and do it longer."

Ohio State was led in the loss by Thornton, who scored 25 points on 10-of-14 shooting while adding a team-high six assists. Battle scored 21 points and shot 5 of 10 from three in his return to Williams Arena. Minnesota was led by Hawkins' 24 points on 6-of-10 shooting, including 4 of 5 from beyond the arc. Garcia added 22 points and a game-high nine

off the boards.

Bonner's Three Breaks Road Losing Streak

Ohio State (16-12, 6-11) snapped its 17-game road losing streak in dramatic fashion on Feb. 25 at Michigan State, with the Buckeyes coming back from 12 points down to secure a 60-57 win over the Spartans (17-11, 9-8) behind a game-winning three-pointer from Bonner.

"(The win) is great for our program," Diebler said. "Not to run from the numbers (regarding the road losing streak), we certainly knew what those were. But our players, they have had good moments on the road. Sometimes it doesn't always go your way, and things happen. But for them to push through the way they did today says a lot about them."

Ohio State, which played shorthanded with Battle sidelined with an ankle injury, shot just 24.1 percent (7 of 29) from the field in the first half and trailed the Spartans 50-38 with 11:05 left in the game, but OSU stormed back in the game's final minutes. The Buckeyes outscored Michigan State 22-7 the rest of the way capped by Bonner's buzzer-beating three in a game played before 14,797 in the Breslin Events Center.

"I was just trying to get the shot up, honestly," Bonner said. "We practice these types of situations, and I just so happened to be in that situation. I was open, and I just shot it and it went in. I knew (the shot) was good."

The undermanned Buckeyes struggled in the early going, making just three of their first 14 shots as Michigan State jumped out to a 13-8 lead. After two free throws from Royal, Gayle intercepted a pass and sprinted the other way for a dunk to trail 13-12, but it was the closest Ohio State got the rest of the half. Michigan State then scored eight of the game's next 11 points to take a 21-15 lead with 5:59 remaining, with Malik Hall scoring four of the eight points.

The Buckeyes managed to keep the score within two possessions in the ensuing minutes, trailing 23-18 heading into the final media timeout. But the Spartans closed the half on a 9-4 run – capped by a Tyson Walker second-chance layup at the buzzer – to take a 32-22 lead into half.

The Buckeyes missed their first four shots out of the break, helping the Spartans to go up 36-24 on a Xavier Booker dunk. Ohio State cut it to eight on a Gayle layup at 15:37 to make it 38-30, but the Spartans answered with a 10-6 run over the next 3:41 to lead 48-36 with 11:56 left.

After the two teams traded scores, the Buckeyes responded again, this time going on a 13-2 run to trail 52-51 with 6:02 left after a hook-shot jumper from Okpara. Okpara had two other buckets in the run, and Royal added consecutive baskets. Michigan State responded with a basket from Hall, and the score stayed at 54-51 for the next 3:32 until Gayle hit two free throws to put the Buckeyes behind just 54-53 with 2:08 left.

Walker and Royal traded baskets on back-to-back possessions before Bonner stripped Spartan forward Mady Sissoko, allowing Ohio State to take its first lead of the day, 57-56, on two Gayle free throws with 11 seconds left.

Walker was fouled by Thornton on the next possession and hit one of two free throws on the other end to tie the game at 57, but the Buckeyes had six seconds left to win the game. Facing a full-court press, Thornton

Ohio State 60, Michigan State 57

Feb. 25, 2024
Breslin Center • East Lansing, Mich.

	1	2	F			
Ohio State (16-12, 6-11)	22	38	60			
MSU (17-11, 9-8)	32	25	57			

Ohio State	Total	FG	FT	Reb.	A	PF	Pts.
	Min	M-A	M-A	O-D			
Gayle Jr.	27	3-10	6-6	3-5	2	1	12
Thornton	37	4-13	2-2	0-4	3	3	11
Okpara	32	5-8	0-0	4-2	1	1	10
Middleton	21	1-3	1-3	0-1	1	1	3
Mahaffey	22	0-4	0-2	0-1	1	3	0
Royal	18	6-8	2-2	0-2	0	3	14
Bonner	20	2-8	0-0	0-1	0	0	6
Key	11	1-2	2-3	4-3	0	2	4
Chatman	6	0-0	0-0	0-2	0	0	0
Hardman	6	0-2	0-0	0-2	0	0	0
Totals	200	22-58	13-18	13-26	8	14	60

Percentages: FG: 37.9%. FT: 72.2%. Three-point field goals: 3-17 (Thornton 1-6, Bonner 2-5, Gayle 0-2, Hardman 0-2, Middleton 0-1, Mahaffey 0-1). Team rebounds: 5. Blocked shots: 5 (Okpara 2, Gayle, Mahaffey, Key). Turnovers: 9 (Gayle 3, Thornton 3, Okpara 2, Bonner). Steals: 7 (Gayle 2, Royal 2, Okpara, Middleton, Bonner).

MSU	Total	FG	FT	Reb.	A	PF	Pts.
	Min	M-A	M-A	O-D			
Hall	28	5-9	4-4	2-5	1	3	15
Walker	33	5-15	1-2	1-2	0	2	12
Hoggard	30	4-8	0-0	2-0	4	1	9
Booker	17	3-6	0-1	0-3	0	1	7
Akins	34	1-9	2-2	0-3	2	2	4
Sissoko	15	1-1	2-2	1-5	0	3	4
Holloman	16	1-3	0-0	0-1	2	0	2
Kohler	12	1-2	0-0	0-3	0	0	2
Carr	7	1-2	0-0	1-0	0	0	2
Cooper	8	0-0	0-0	0-0	0	2	0
Totals	200	22-55	9-11	8-25	9	14	57

Percentages: FG: 40.0%. FT: 81.8%. Three-point field goals: 4-16 (Walker 1-6, Hall 1-3, Booker 1-3, Akins 0-3, Hoggard 1-1). Team rebounds: 4. Blocked shots: 6 (Booker 3, Hoggard, Akins, Holloman). Turnovers: 10 (Hall 2, Holloman 2, Carr, Cooper, Hoggard, Sissoko, Team, Walker). Steals: 7 (Akins 3, Walker, Hoggard, Holloman, Carr). Officials: Anderson, Ogelsby, Pfeifer. Attendance: 14,797.

raced down the sidelines and found Bonner near the Ohio State bench. Bonner dribbled, gathered himself and hit a contested fade-away three as time expired.

"That was me drawing up a play, Coach (Tom) Izzo taking that play away, and players making plays," Diebler said. "Dale's shot, obviously, was incredible. But when you think of the poise Devin Royal showed, taking the ball out of bounds with no timeouts when our first option was taken away. Bruce, double-cutting, finding a way to get open, having the awareness to get the ball down the floor. Then Dale having the awareness to get a shot up. That was players making plays. That was special."

Bonner's three was just his second make of the game on eight attempts. He finished with six points, while Royal led the victors with a career-high 14 points on 6-of-8 shooting, and Gayle (12), Thornton (11) and Okpara (10) each scored in double figures. Michigan State was led by Hall and Walker, who scored 15 and 12 points, respectively, on a combined 10-of-24 shooting.

After the slow start shooting in the first half, Ohio State hit on 51.7 percent of its shots (15 of 29) in the final frame, while holding MSU to 39.3 (11 for 28) in the second half. The Spartans, who shot just 40.0 percent for the game (22 of 55), were 0-7 from distance in the final 20 minutes.

Ohio State will finish off its regular-season schedule before Buckeye Sports Bulletin goes to press again, hosting Nebraska on Feb. 29 (6:30 p.m., FS1) and Michigan on March 3 (4 p.m., CBS) before traveling to Rutgers on March 10 (2 p.m., BTN).

Minnesota 88, Ohio State 79

Feb. 22, 2024
Williams Arena • Minneapolis

	1	2	F			
Ohio State (15-12, 5-11)	34	45	79			
Minnesota (17-9, 8-7)	42	46	88			

Ohio State	Total	FG	FT	Reb.	A	PF	Pts.
	Min	M-A	M-A	O-D			
Thornton	35	10-14	5-5	1-3	6	0	25
Battle	33	6-12	4-5	2-1	2	4	21
Gayle Jr.	24	5-7	3-4	1-2	2	2	13
Mahaffey	16	1-4	0-0	2-5	1	3	2
Okpara	20	0-2	0-0	0-2	0	4	0
Key	17	3-5	1-2	0-1	0	1	7
Middleton	16	2-6	0-0	0-1	0	2	6
Royal	12	1-3	1-2	1-0	0	3	3
Chatman	9	1-3	0-0	0-1	1	2	2
Bonner	17	0-1	0-0	0-0	0	2	0
Hardman	1	0-0	0-0	0-0	0	0	0
Totals	200	29-57	14-18	9-17	12	23	79

Percentages: FG: 50.9%. FT: 77.8%. Three-point field goals: 7-23 (Battle 5-10, Middleton 2-3, Thornton 0-3, Gayle 0-2, Chatman 0-2, Mahaffey 0-1, Royal 0-1, Bonner 0-1). Team rebounds: 3. Blocked shots: 4 (Mahaffey 2, Okpara, Key). Turnovers: 11 (Gayle 3, Mahaffey 2, Team 2, Battle, Okpara, Middleton, Royal). Steals: 5 (Mahaffey 2, Thornton, Gayle, Okpara).

Minnesota	Total	FG	FT	Reb.	A	PF	Pts.
	Min	M-A	M-A	O-D			
Hawkins	39	6-10	8-11	0-2	7	3	24
Garcia	33	8-15	5-6	4-5	0	2	22
Payne	27	5-7	5-7	3-1	1	2	15
Mitchell Jr.	31	3-8	0-0	1-1	5	3	8
Christie	23	1-6	2-2	0-4	2	2	5
Fox	18	3-4	3-4	1-3	1	2	9
Carrington	29	2-6	1-1	1-2	1	3	5
Totals	200	28-56	24-31	13-19	17	17	88

Percentages: FG: 50.0%. FT: 77.4%. Three-point field goals: 8-19 (Mitchell 2-6, Hawkins 4-5, Garcia 1-3, Christie 1-3, Carrington 0-2). Team rebounds: 4. Blocked shots: 3 (Garcia 2, Payne). Turnovers: 9 (Christie 2, Hawkins 2, Mitchell Jr. 2, Garcia, Payne, Team). Steals: 6 (Hawkins 2, Mitchell, Christie, Fox, Carrington). Officials: Breeding, Daily, Riley. Attendance: 8,558.

Local, National Media React To Holtmann Firing

By **BRADEN MOLES**

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Editor

Ohio State fired men's basketball head coach Chris Holtmann on Feb. 14, ending his seven-year run as the lead man for the Buckeyes.

Holtmann and Ohio State held just a 14-11 overall record and a 4-10 mark in conference play at the time of Holtmann's firing, and the Buckeyes had also lost 16 consecutive true road games, with the last win coming on Jan. 1, 2023.

Although Holtmann had a hot start to his Ohio State tenure, taking the Buckeyes to the NCAA Tournament in four of his first five seasons – the lone miss due to the tournament being canceled in 2020 – Ohio State missed the dance last season, finishing with the school's first losing record (16-19, 5-15) since 2003-04, and was on track to miss the tournament again this year. In the first game since Holtmann's firing on Feb. 18, the Buckeyes – led by interim coach Jake Diebler – knocked off then-No. 2 Purdue, 73-69, in Value City Arena.

Here are reactions from local and national media on Holtmann's firing and the Buckeyes' upset of Purdue as well as where Ohio State goes from here:

"There is no reason OSU shouldn't finish in the top half of the conference eight of every 10 seasons, with the rare 'oops' year happening only due to multiple players leaving for the NBA. Holtmann won 20 games each of his first five seasons, which is no gimme, but also does not jump off the page of a coaching résumé. In hindsight, the loss to Oral Roberts, which was only the 11th time a No. 2 seed lost to a No. 15, was the beginning of the end. After that, fans began looking for cracks in the foundation. And they were easy to spot. The offense too often bogged down in a back-and-forth of wasted energy that was too heavy on dribbling. The defense was more miss than hit, and the inside game nev-

er put a scare into opponents.

"Especially perplexing was Holtmann's inability to attract players from the transfer portal who were anything more than average Joes. And too often less than average.

"It's a shame, really. Holtmann is a nice guy who runs a clean operation. It may be that he was too nice. You can never be too clean, unless your program begins with 'Kan' and ends with 'zona.' But you can be clean and still have a roster peppered with players who like to get their hands dirty, meaning guys who play with an edge and get after it like every game is the last one they will ever play.

"Even then, however, Ohio State has a limited ceiling of success. Since 1960, when the Buckeyes won the NCAA title, only two other 'football-first' schools have won national titles: Michigan in 1989 and Florida in 2006 and 2007. Three years out of 61. Additionally, only six schools that favor football – Ohio State, Michigan, Florida State, Oklahoma, Florida and Wisconsin – advanced to championship games during that span.

"Clearly, it is difficult for football schools to make the necessary crossover to dominate in basketball."

— **Rob Oller,**
The Columbus Dispatch

"The interest in the basketball program is quite possibly at an all-time low because everyone has come to terms with what they're watching. Nobody's falling for the early season success anymore, and the January woes are par for the course. Only now there's never a swing back the other way to tease you one last time.

"Under Holtmann, the Buckeyes were a team that was at best good, not great. That was supposed to change last season, but it instead produced the worst season the program's had in over 25 years, and now they're on pace to repeat it. ... And there aren't two more highly rated recruiting classes to put your hopes into this time around.

"This is what a failed tenure looks like. A few flashes in the pan, the ability to hope for something that was probably never going to happen until finally the dam breaks completely and all you're left with is disaster. The one positive is that the football team has spent the past month giving you something else to look at other than the six-year car crash."

— **Stephen Means,**
Cleveland.com

"There's a case to be made Holtmann – who made three NCAA Tournaments in as many years at Butler before coming to Columbus – was too reliant on a traditional program-building method at the wrong time.

"Ohio State boasted deep, well-regarded freshman classes the past two seasons, and historically that's the route to take. Yet between the obliteration of strict transfer rules and the proliferation of 22- and 23-year-olds in the sport thanks to the NCAA's COVID-era eligibility waiver, there's never been a worse time for a high-major coach to count on freshmen flourishing as part of a cohesive unit and administrative patience in case they don't.

"Holtmann will be fine, both financially (he has a \$12.8 million buyout coming his

way) and professionally (a guy who is 207-116 with eight NCAA Tournament-worthy teams in 10 seasons in the Big East and Big Ten will not lack for future opportunities).

"And Ohio State will be back, probably sooner than most expect. Jim O'Brien took over a 10-17 team in 1997 and had the Buckeyes in the Final Four within two years (granted, that appearance was vacated as part of an NCAA case). Thad Matta required three years to make the national title game after O'Brien was fired in 2004. And Holtmann transformed a 17-15 team into a No. 5 seed in his first season at Ohio State.

"The Buckeyes made a change, but are they at a true pivot point as a program? It doesn't seem likely."

— **Patrick Stevens,**
The Washington Post

"It seems likely Jan. 2, 2021, was the pivotal day in Malaki Branham's basketball career – and also for Chris Holtmann. Branham wound up in the NBA. Holtmann wound up unemployed. And they were on the same side.

"Entering the third month of his freshman season then, after nearly a full month off because of games canceled due to the lingering COVID-19 pandemic, Branham scored 35 points against Nebraska. ... This breakout against the Huskers at Pinnacle Bank Arena was a moment that seemed to offer considerable promise for the Buckeyes, their coach, and their new star shooting guard.

"Even in the transfer portal era, it's a challenge to build a successful program when top recruits are leaving for the pros without having achieved much of significance, especially when there's no cause to expect they'll enter the draft after one year.

"That almost always results in a calamity. Between 2010 and 2019, there were 39 one-and-done players selected in the first round of the NBA draft without having won an NCAA Tournament game during their college seasons. The coaches of 27 of those players were fired, forced out or left under pressure within five years, including Final Four veterans Rick Barnes at Texas, Ben Howland at UCLA, and Tom Crean at Indiana.

"Six of those one-and-dones played for Hall of Famers who could endure beyond such disappointment: Mike Krzyzewski, John Calipari, Jim Calhoun, and Jim Boeheim. This means for those coaches who weren't enshrined in Springfield (or clearly on their way), there was an (81.8) percent chance signing such a player and seeing him enter the draft without going all Greg Oden on the world was like lining up to collect unemployment – or a multi-million-dollar buyout, anyway."

— **Mike DeCourcy,**
The Sporting News

"In hindsight, Holtmann's inability to know what an elite Big Ten player looks like was evident when he took the job in the summer of 2017.

"He waxed at length then about his emotional tug-of-war over leaving Butler, fawning over a clearly-inferior job where he would never have a chance to win the national championship that was well within his reach, given the resources at OSU.

"The longer Holtmann went down that

road, the more his comments began to expose an annoying, think-small mentality that suggested he would never embrace the expectations he well knew came with the job he had just accepted. Therein was the evidence that Holtmann would struggle to maximize the potential inherent in being the coach at Ohio State.

"Turns out, while Holtmann's body came to Columbus, his mind remained mired in the mid-major mind-set from which he came."

— **Bruce Hooley,**
Press Pros Magazine

"The win (over Purdue) is a big one for Ohio State's season, which comes after athletic director Gene Smith said Feb. 14 that he fired Holtmann during the season because the team needed a change of leadership.

"It got that and a spark of energy with Diebler, who is now hoping to build on this momentum heading into the end of the season.

"Ohio State hasn't won on the road this year and three of its final five games are away from Columbus, but this is a strong start for Diebler and should build confidence in the team.

"Ohio State still has a chance to turn this season around with a strong finish and a Big Ten tournament run. And for Diebler, he has a chance to show he's ready to be a head coach sooner rather than later."

— **Cameron Teague Robinson,**
The Athletic

"Here are some not-so-fun facts about a gig anyone in the industry would consider overloaded with promise: Ohio State has one men's hoops national championship, ever, and that came in 1960. It has reached the Final Four just three times since the NCAA Tournament expanded to 64 teams (and beyond). The Buckeyes haven't won a regular-season or conference tournament championship in a decade. There's something bizarre about a front-porch program at a school flush with resources struggling with consistency at an elite level.

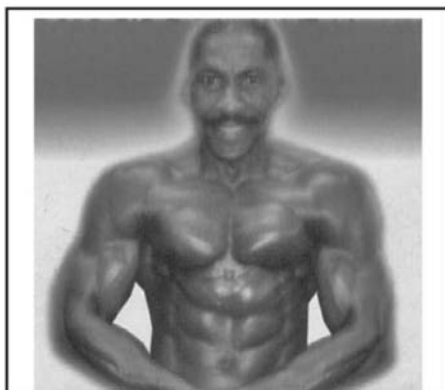
"Maybe the number is arbitrary, maybe not, but the pattern is emblematic: This is the 10th time in 11 seasons Ohio State will finish with double-digit losses. It lost nine the other year.

"It is not easy to win national titles. They only give one out every season. So none of this will stop candidates from seeing what could be. But they also should arrive with a clear-eyed appraisal of what has been.

"In the end, the college athletics scales have tilted so far in favor of the Big Ten and the SEC that a job in one of those leagues promises a level of stability and funding not found elsewhere. And if Ohio State higher-ups decide they really, really want to be absolutely elite in men's basketball, you'd expect this is one of the schools where decision-makers can put plenty of money behind their intentions.

"It's a very good job. The results, historically, nevertheless haven't matched the potential. Warning sign? Opportunity of a lifetime? That's in the eye of the beholder."

— **Brian Hamilton,**
The Athletic



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Culture Fits Leading The Way For Ohio State

By **BRADEN MOLES**

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Editor

Ask Ohio State women's basketball head coach Kevin McGuff about his team, and his response will likely include something along the lines of, "We have great kids."

It's a canned yet accurate answer, one that references leaders such as Jacy Sheldon, Madison Greene and Rikki Harris who have been at the forefront of the Buckeyes' impressive run over the last two seasons and change.

"They're high-character kids who want to be here and want to do something special," McGuff said on Feb. 13. "Anything you do that's going to be great is going to be based on people like that, so we're fortunate to have great kids like that in the program."

But like Rome, the culture was not built in a day. This is McGuff's 11th season on the job at Ohio State, and his Buckeyes are just now at a point where they are consistently competing for conference and national championships, something that most on the team attribute to the Buckeyes' collective bond and competitiveness.

"It's a comfort thing, and being here and on this team, we're all really close," Sheldon said on Feb. 7. "We hold each other accountable at a level I think is rare at a lot of places. It's not always being nice to each other and telling people they did a good job, but it's the hard part of telling people when they're messing up and when they need to be better, and that's what makes us really good. We don't like taking days off, plays off, and when you have a team full of that, it's special. You have that edge where you can get into each other and sometimes you do get frustrated and yell at each other, but that's part of being competitive and wanting to win so badly."

"We have so many people – like I said, we've had it a couple years ago and probably more than ever on this team – where you just want to win so badly and would do anything to win and would put yourself in whatever position it is to win whether it's best for you or, more importantly, best for the team. We've got girls full of that, so it's fun to be a part of."

The culture is evident from the outside, too. Ohio State brought in three transfers this past offseason – Celeste Taylor from Duke, Taiyier Parks from Michigan State and Kennedy Cambridge from Kentucky – who were obviously intrigued with the Buckeyes coming off an Elite Eight appearance, but the culture in particular stood out as they made their decisions.

"It was all about if they had the space and if they needed that extra player," Taylor said in October, "but the winning culture, the style of play, the girls – just the success of the program overall the last two years is definitely what drew me in."

Those bonds have Ohio State in contention for the Big Ten regular-season title and high seeding in both the Big Ten and NCAA tournaments, but don't let the success fool you – it hasn't always been this way for McGuff and Ohio State.

Arriving in Columbus for the 2013-14



SONNY BROCKWAY

BUILDING A PROGRAM — Ohio State women's basketball coach Kevin McGuff has set the Buckeyes up for sustained success with a strong culture.

season after stints at Xavier (2002-11) and Washington (2011-13), McGuff suffered a losing campaign in his first season as head coach before ripping off four NCAA tournament appearances – including two trips to the Sweet 16 – over the next four seasons.

That run was due in large part to talented rosters that included the likes of Kelsey Mitchell, Ameryst Alston, Asia Doss, Linnae Harper and Stephanie Mavunga, among others. But those teams from 2014-18 never advanced past the Sweet 16 and lost to lower-seeded teams in two of those tournaments, including a 95-78 loss as the No. 3 seed to No. 11 Central Michigan in 2018 in Mitchell's final game as a Buckeye.

"It's hard," McGuff said after that loss. "I'm really proud of our kids, what we accomplished winning the Big Ten regular season and the tournament. More importantly, we have really great kids. These kids handled themselves really well, on and off the court, and they're going to go on to do great things in life."

It should have been a jumping-off point for McGuff and the program, but it instead represented the peak of McGuff's time at Ohio State, at least for the next few years. Without those like Mitchell and Mavunga on the roster, the Buckeyes backslid the following season, suffering a 14-15 campaign that included three consecutive losses to end the year.

"It's unfortunate because we made so much progress," McGuff said after the season concluded. "I'm proud of where we were and where we got to – it's just unfortunate. It's going to hurt because it just wasn't reflective of the growth we made, but it is what it is. Hey, I can't change that. But right now, or at some point, we'll look back and be proud of the growth. We're kind of lay-

ing the foundation for another run for our program. It's just tough to see that right now with three straight losses at the end."

That growth was still a few years away. The program was hit with several obstacles over the next few seasons, including the COVID-19 pandemic halting what appeared to be a team well-equipped for a tournament run in 2020 after the Buckeyes advanced to the finals of the Big Ten tournament. Additionally, following that season, former five-star guard Kierstan Bell – a potential face of the program – transferred to Florida Gulf Coast.

The next season saw the program hit with a self-imposed postseason ban after former assistant Patrick Klein violated the university's sexual harassment policy. The ban was handed down midseason and left those on the team wondering if the season was even worth finishing.

"We had a conversation as a team, too," former Ohio State forward Dorka Juhasz said at the time. "Should we opt out as a team for the season? But I feel like we have a lot of great kids that love to play basketball and even if we can't really achieve a big thing this year, just having games and playing together and just building that chemistry on the court and just playing because we love basketball. I think that was the main reason why we decided, 'I think we should do this,' and, 'I think we should try to be our best team.'"

"My feeling was as long as we had an appropriate number of players we were going to play," McGuff added. "I'm thankful that we had kids who really wanted to embrace the opportunity to play this year, and it really speaks to their competitive character and who they are, and I was really happy. I wanted to play, and I wanted to help the kids who wanted to play and put them in position to be successful. I never had any thoughts of opting out. That's just not what I would want to do personally, and I'm glad we had players that felt the same way."

In retrospect, that push to play – even if the Buckeyes did end up losing five of their last six after injuries hampered the team – appears to have been that foundation McGuff was seeking ever since he arrived at Ohio State. In the face of immense adversity and with no postseason on the horizon, the Buckeyes persisted.

"We had some incredible moments," McGuff said after that season. "We had stretches where we played extremely well, and we showed how good we can be. The way that we were playing there for a while, there wasn't a team in the country I don't think that we couldn't have competed with and had a chance to win. We also had some ups and downs and some of the players coming and going, and it hurt our continuity and our rhythm. But overall, I thought our kids handled a lot of adversity this year as well as they possibly could."

Several players transferred out after that season, including Juhasz and forward Aaliyah Patty, with the latter expressing that she wished she had not played out the rest of the season.

"At the end of the year, the main goal is to win an NCAA championship," Patty told Buckeye Sports Bulletin at the time. "Not being able to reach that goal, it was hard try-

ing to find what we're playing for as a team. I definitely don't wish this feeling upon anybody. I'm not happy I went through it, but I had to, so it just is what it is."

But of more importance to Ohio State were those who stayed. Sheldon, Greene, Harris and forward Rebeka Mikulášiková – all members of Ohio State's 2019 recruiting class along with Bell – opted to stick around the program despite a general sense of dysfunction, setting the stage for what the program has turned into today under McGuff.

"When everybody stayed when they could have left, I felt confident, especially with the core group of Jacy and Madison and those kids," he said on Feb. 7. "I felt confident that as we moved forward with putting people around them that we could have a successful program."

That goal of building around Sheldon, Greene and others who helped lead the program through challenging times has been reflected in how the Buckeyes have approached talent acquisition, both from the high school ranks and through the transfer portal.

"For me personally and our staff, when I first got here, I thought we were really good at recruiting talented players, but I'm not sure we put together great teams," McGuff said on Feb. 7. "I think now we've done better in making sure we put together great teams. For example, Sheldon was the 60th-ranked player in the country. I wouldn't trade her for anybody."

"It's just kind of evolved over time," he added on Feb. 13. "I felt like early on, we had great kids and really talented teams, and good teams that were successful, but maybe we just had one or two that didn't fit, kind of threw things off. In general, it's just been an evolution."

That evolution has paid dividends for Ohio State. While today's team may not be as highly rated or even as individually talented as some of the players on McGuff's earlier teams, this collection of players is exactly that – a team.

"I think we're in a really good place right now," McGuff said on Feb. 13. "I was hopeful we would get to this point a little quicker. In some ways, we did. We had success early on, but then we had a lull there where we didn't sustain it."

Ohio State is set up for success this season, with Sheldon, Greene, Harris and Mikulášiková – in addition to veterans in Parks, Taylor and forward Eboni Walker – all hoping to lead the Buckeyes to their first Final Four appearance since 1993 and potentially work toward the first national championship in program history.

But regardless of what happens in the remainder of this season, Ohio State is confident that the team's unprecedented run of success can be sustained moving forward for the Buckeyes of today and tomorrow.

"We've recruited the right kids and put together a team instead of a collection of players," McGuff said on Feb. 13. "That kind of fell apart on us for a year or two, and I think we're just doing a better job of identifying people that fit our program, our culture, our university, and it seems to be working for us right now."

Big Ten Title Win Highlights OSU's Senior Day

Ohio State's 79-66 win over Maryland on Feb. 25 was a significant victory for the program, as it secured a share of the team's 17th Big Ten regular-season title and moved the Buckeyes one step closer to winning the conference outright.

DOUBLE DRIBBLE Braden Moles

But just as important was the acknowledgment of an outstanding senior class for Ohio State. On Senior Day, with 10,790 in attendance at Value City Arena, the Buckeyes celebrated seven outgoing seniors – including guards Rikki Harris, Jacy Sheldon and Celeste Taylor, and forwards Rebeka Mikulášiková, Taiyier Parks, Eboni Walker and Karla Vreš – who have shed blood, sweat and tears for the program over the last few years.

Harris, Mikulášiková and Sheldon have spent the longest time with the program, coming in as part of the 2019 recruiting class and returning for their fifth seasons this year. Sheldon has been easily the most impactful player for the Buckeyes over the last few seasons. The Dublin, Ohio, native has led the team in scoring in two of the last three seasons and is on pace to do so again this year, averaging 17.9 points in addition to 3.6 assists per game through Feb. 25, helping facilitate the offense as well.

But beyond her playing ability that has her in position as a potential lottery pick in the WNBA draft in April, Sheldon is a three-time captain for Ohio State – one of just five in program history, along with Jantel Lavender, Tanya McClure, Braxtin Miller and Amber Stokes – and has become a face of the program.

"It still hasn't hit me," Sheldon said after the game. "I'm not a very emotional person, but it won't hit me probably until our last game."

"It's been awesome," she said later. "It doesn't feel like five years, but it's finally

2023-24 Ohio State Women's Basketball Statistics

24-3 Overall (15-1 Big Ten) Statistics through games of Feb. 25

Player	G-GS	Min.-Avg.	FG-FGA	Pct.	3P-3PA	Pct.	FT-FTA	Pct.	Rebounds		PF-FO	A	TO	BS	ST	Pts.-Avg.
									O-D	T-Avg.						
SHELDON, Jacy	27-27	881-32.6	176-345	.510	49-132	.371	82-95	.863	28-63	91-3.4	51-0	97	65	4	55	483-17.9
MCMAHON, Cotie	27-27	762-28.2	138-295	.468	14-56	.250	92-144	.639	39-136	175-6.5	71-2	59	71	14	34	382-14.1
THIERRY, Taylor	27-27	717-26.6	110-178	.618	12-25	.480	79-102	.775	63-86	149-5.5	63-1	41	28	16	46	311-11.5
TAYLOR, Celeste	27-27	763-28.3	102-248	.411	34-104	.327	38-60	.633	25-91	116-4.3	76-2	88	61	25	60	276-10.2
MIKULÁŠIKOVÁ, R	26-26	631-24.3	94-195	.482	30-77	.390	25-28	.893	8-66	74-2.8	42-1	67	41	11	13	243-9.3
HARRIS, Rikki	26-0	465-17.9	35-84	.417	22-63	.349	27-39	.692	6-45	51-2.0	41-0	33	18	6	23	119-4.6
SHUMATE, Emma	24-0	241-10.0	36-79	.456	27-60	.450	5-8	.625	11-15	26-1.1	21-0	9	9	8	4	104-4.3
PARKS, Taiyier	25-0	237-9.5	33-71	.465	0-3	.000	14-26	.538	21-35	56-2.2	33-1	8	13	5	12	80-3.2
COLLINS, Diana	17-0	175-10.3	20-66	.303	6-27	.222	8-11	.727	8-13	21-1.2	22-1	4	10	1	8	54-3.2
GREENE, Madison	19-0	248-13.0	17-52	.327	8-25	.320	11-14	.786	6-13	19-1.0	19-0	32	13	1	20	53-2.8
WALKER, Eboni	22-1	239-10.8	23-52	.442	0-2	.000	10-13	.769	25-31	56-2.5	19-0	27	17	1	8	56-2.5
VREŠ, Karla	6-0	17-2.9	3-31	.000	0-0	.000	0-0	.000	1-2	3-0.5	3-0	1	1	0	0	6-1.0
HENDERSON, Kaia	14-0	66-4.7	6-17	.353	0-2	.000	0-0	.000	1-9	10-0.7	5-0	6	5	0	0	12-0.9
CARSON, Faith	6-0	10-1.7	1-3	.333	0-0	.000	2-2	1.000	1-4	5-0.8	2-0	3	2	0	0	4-0.7
Team									35-49	84				7		
Total	27	5453	794-1688	.470	202-576	.351	393-542	.725	278-658	936-34.7	468-8	475	361	92	283	2183-80.9
Opponents	27	5460	609-1507	.404	142-485	.293	329-448	.734	277-682	959-35.5	490-9	318	576	65	156	1689-62.6

getting to the end. I've got to build a lot of relationships, a lot of new best friends. It's been, really, a dream, so it's been fun. It's awesome to (share that with her family). I'm not even sure if Emmy (her younger sister) knew what was going on. She wanted to be in all the pictures."

Mikulášiková has seen perhaps the most growth of any player at Ohio State in recent seasons, utilized little in her first two seasons before becoming a significant contributor for the Buckeyes with her ability to play inside and stretch defenses with her three-point shooting. While it was not an easy transition to Ohio State coming from Nitra, Slovakia, Mikulášiková has grown into a confident player who is boosting the Buckeyes.

"(The focus this offseason was) just changing my mentality, knowing that my teammates trust me and see the progress and work I put in," she said. "That means so much. I just try to take it to the games."

Harris has not started as many games as Sheldon and Mikulášiková have, but her minutes off the bench are some of the most impactful that Ohio State receives. She is averaging 4.6 points and 2.0 rebounds this season – with many coming late in contests to seal wins – and has stepped in as a starter over the past few seasons when her number

is called.

"The fans, all the experiences I've had on this campus and in these gyms, have been some of the best memories of my life," she said.

This is the second season at Ohio State for Walker and Vreš. Both have been used sparingly, with Walker averaging 10.8 minutes and Vreš on the floor for just 2.9 minutes per game, but both have made plenty of memories during their time in Columbus. Walker's highlight came last season when she was a pivotal part of Ohio State's 71-69 win over North Carolina to advance to the Sweet 16, finishing with a career-high 15 points in the win.

"I'm really proud of Eboni," McGuff said after that game. "We've all in the program watched her in practice have flashes of what she did today, and this was her best game and biggest moment when we needed it the most. I've been telling her all year, for a long time, 'You're capable of really impacting us at a high level,' and she was awesome tonight."

Vreš was able to score her first points as a Buckeye this season, knocking down two field-goal attempts in a 108-58 win over IU-PUI on Nov. 12, drawing a strong reaction from those in attendance at Value City Arena and earning the "Dub Chain" after the game.

"It felt great, amazing. It's something that I've been working on for a long time," she said after the game. "Having the team there to support me to that extent was amazing, knowing everybody wanted it as much as I did."

While Parks and Taylor have spent just one season at Ohio State, they both have found themselves at home. A native of Cleveland, Parks has been able to spend her final collegiate season close to home.

Taylor, meanwhile, has been a standout. The reigning ACC Defensive Player of the Year who transferred from Duke is averaging 10.2 points, 4.3 rebounds, 3.3 assists and 2.2 steals, and she has helped Ohio State limit the opposition to just 62.6 points per game.

"The legacy is really big," Taylor said of the senior class. "We have people from all walks of life. It's really cool – we have (Rebeka), Karla, Jacy's been here for five years, we have a couple transfers in, Rikki's been here, so it's cool to have that diversity of experience."

"Then, before I got here, these girls have given their hearts to this program. The only thing I hope to do is come in and make an impact as well with them, so it's pretty cool to share this group. They're really special to me, and they're going to be my sisters forever."

The outgoing senior class has plenty of work left, however. With the win over Maryland, the Buckeyes clinched a share of the Big Ten regular-season title and now need just one win in their last two games – either at home against Michigan on Feb. 28 or at Iowa on March 3 – to win the regular-season crown outright.

With the win over Maryland, Ohio State also secured the top seed at the Big Ten Women's Basketball Tournament in Minneapolis from March 6-10. The Buckeyes will have a double-bye and will face either the No. 8 or 9 seed in the quarterfinals before facing one of seeds Nos. 4, 5, 12 or 13 in the semifinals.

The full bracket will be revealed following the conclusion of the regular season on March 3. And once the conference tournament concludes, Ohio State is also in prime position to earn a No. 1 seed in the NCAA tournament and to host games in the first two rounds, with Selection Sunday set for



SONNY BROCKWAY

TAKE A BOW – Ohio State recognized seven outgoing seniors on Feb. 25. From left to right they are: Eboni Walker, Rebeka Mikulášiková, Jacy Sheldon, Rikki Harris, Karla Vreš, Celeste Taylor and Taiyier Parks.

OHIO STATE WOMEN'S BASKETBALL



SONNY BROCKWAY

SIXTH TIME'S THE CHARM — Ohio State head coach Kevin McGuff said on Feb. 25 that he is expecting guard Madison Greene (pictured) to return for a sixth season with the Buckeyes after dealing with injuries throughout her career.

March 17. For full coverage, visit BuckeyeSports.com.

Greene "Probably" Returning For Sixth Season At OSU

One notable Buckeye who did not take part in Senior Day was fifth-year guard Madison Greene, who McGuff said on Feb. 25 is expected to return for a sixth season at Ohio State.

"Yeah, probably," McGuff said when asked if Greene is coming back. "With all the kids, with COVID and injuries, some days I'm like, 'How many years do you have left?' It's hard to keep track of. But for all of them, we'll get it all sorted out when the season's over."

Greene's career has been significantly impacted by injuries. She suffered season-ending knee injuries in both 2021-22 and 2022-23. The former happened just days before the season began, and she was lost last season after playing in 12 games. She also missed five (out of 20) games in 2020-21.

But when healthy, Greene has been an impact player for the Buckeyes. She started 21 games as a freshman, averaging 7.7 points, and started all 15 games she appeared in the next season while averaging 13.4 points and 4.3 assists per game.

After returning from her extended knee injury, Greene was ready to begin the 2022-23 season and played well — including seven starts, as Sheldon was also in and out of the lineup — averaging 10.9 points and 5.0 assists and shooting 56.0 percent from beyond the arc.

Greene has come off the bench in all 19 of her appearances this season and is averaging 2.8 points and 1.7 assists in just 13.0 minutes per game as she continues to recover from significant back-to-back knee injuries. Her minutes have continued to ramp up, however, playing at least 13 minutes in six of the last eight games for Ohio State.

"I feel great," she said earlier this season. "I'm glad to be back. I'm excited to be back with the team. I'm excited to be back and ready to keep playing with this team."

With Sheldon and Taylor departing the program after this season — and things still up in the air for Harris, who could return for an additional season despite participating in Senior Day — a starting role for next year's team is in the cards for Greene if she does indeed return. The Buckeyes are also returning Kennedy Cambridge, Diana Collins, Kaia Henderson and Emma Shumate at guard, with Greene and Henderson likely to factor in at point guard.

Taylor Reaches 1,500 Career Points

Taylor hit a significant milestone near the end of her final season of college basketball, when she surpassed 1,500 career points in her stops at Texas, Duke and Ohio State.

She moved past 1,500 points during the Buckeyes' 82-69 win at Penn State on Feb. 22, finishing with 16 points, seven assists and seven steals in the victory, and as Buckeye Sports Bulletin went to press, Taylor was up to 1,528 career points. She collected 628 points at Duke, and she had 624 points during her first two seasons at Texas.

Taylor is not the only Buckeye approaching a significant milestone, however. Sheldon is up to 1,936 career points through Feb. 25 and would need only four games at her current 17.9 points per game average to surpass 2,000 points.

If she can break that mark, she would become just the eighth player in program history to surpass 2,000 points, joining Kelsey Mitchell (3,402 points, 2015-18), Lavender (2,818, 2008-11), Katie Smith (2,578, 1993-96), Jessica Davenport (2,303, 2004-07), Ameryst Alston (2,165, 2013-16), Tayler Hill (2,015, 2010-13) and Samantha Prahalis (2,010, 2009-12).

Another Buckeye on the verge of history is sophomore forward Cotie McMahon, who has 925 points as of Feb. 25. If she can keep up with her current per-game average of 14.1 points, it will take just six games to reach 1,000 points and become the 38th player in program history to hit that milestone.

Several Buckeyes On Naismith Watch Lists

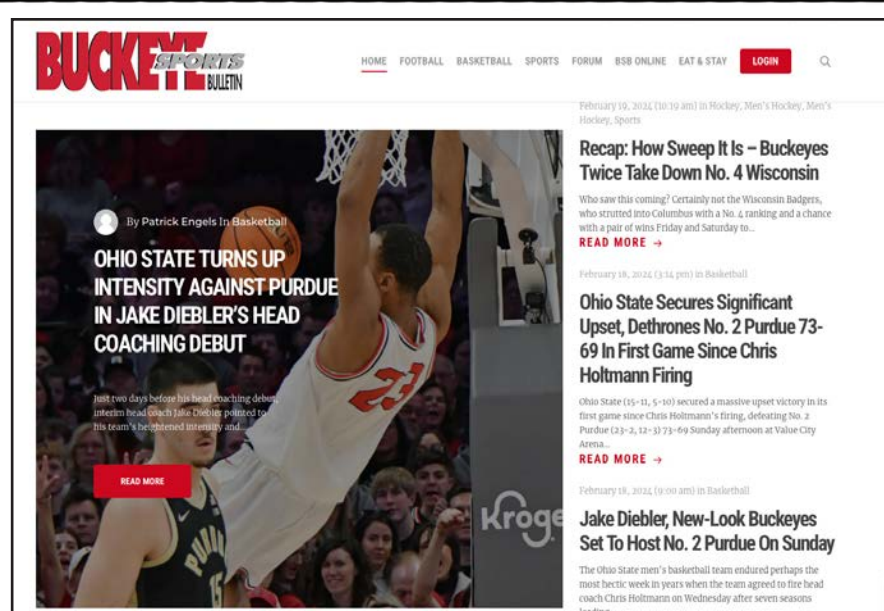
A handful of Buckeyes are receiving recognition for their performances, with McMahon and Sheldon being named to the Naismith Women's College Player of the Year watchlist, and McGuff was named to the Naismith Women's College Coach of the Year watchlist.

McMahon and Sheldon were two of 30 players named to their watchlist, along with the likes of Iowa guard Caitlin Clark, Indiana forward Mackenzie Holmes, UCLA center Lauren Betts and USC guard Juju Watkins, among others.

Ohio State was one of just seven schools — along with LSU, South Carolina, Stanford, UCLA, UConn and Virginia Tech — to have multiple players on the list, and the Bruins led the way with three honorees.

McGuff, meanwhile, was one of 15 coaches on his watchlist, joined by Colorado's JR Payne, Gonzaga's Lisa Fortier, Iowa's Lisa Bluder, Kansas State's Jeff Mittie, LSU's Kim Mulkey, NC State's Wes Moore, Oregon State's Scott Rueck, South Carolina's Dawn Staley, Stanford's Tara VanDerweir, Syracuse's Felisha Legette-Jack, Texas' Vic Schaefer, UCLA's Cori Close, USC's Lindsay Gottlieb and Virginia Tech's Kenny Brooks.

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Ohio State Wins Share Of Regular-Season Title

By **BRADEN MOLES**

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Editor

Ohio State continued to dominate the Big Ten since Buckeye Sports Bulletin last went to press, winning its last three games and extending its winning streak to 14 games as it clinched a share of the Big Ten regular-season championship.

With a 79-66 win over Maryland on Feb. 25, Ohio State secured the 17th Big Ten regular-season championship in program history, and with a win in either of the team's last two games, it would secure the outright regular-season title for the 10th time. Additionally, the Senior Day win secured the No. 1 seed in the Big Ten Women's Basketball Tournament.

No Letdown For OSU Against Cornhuskers

Ohio State (22-3, 13-1 Big Ten) did not let the pressure of rising to the top of the national rankings get to its head on Feb. 14, taking care of business in an 80-47 win over Nebraska (16-9, 8-6) in Value City Arena to extend the team's winning streak to 12 games.

Ohio State shot 48.5 percent (32 of 66) from the field in the win and 42.9 percent (9 of 21) from deep while holding the Cornhuskers to just 36.0 percent (18 of 50) from

the field and 34.8 percent (8 of 23) from beyond the arc. The Buckeyes also forced 30 turnovers, a season high for Nebraska, that turned into 29 points for Ohio State in a game played before 7,115.

"I think for us the backbone of our game is our press and our defense and when it's flowing, it leads the offense," guard Jacy Sheldon said. "It was a lot of fun to see a lot of people thrive in that press."

Ohio State missed opportunities in the opening minutes, failing to connect on several open three-pointers and unable to convert a three-on-two fast break. But Nebraska had similar early struggles, missing on its first six shots of the game, and Buckeye forward Cottie McMahon scored the game's first points on a layup with 7:29 left in the frame. The Cornhuskers were held without a score until there was 5:59 left in the quarter, but the three-pointer by Jessica Petrie gave Nebraska the lead before Sheldon responded with a triple of her own to lead 5-3. After a basket by Nebraska tied things back up, the Buckeyes responded with a 9-2 run to take a 14-7 lead into the second quarter.

Nebraska freshman forward Natalie Potts knocked down a pair of free throws to begin the frame, but Ohio State responded with an 8-0 run – with all the points coming from either McMahon or Sheldon – to go up 22-9 with 7:17 left in the half.



SONNY BROCKWAY

CHAMPIONS – Fifth-year guard Jacy Sheldon and the Buckeyes secured a share of the Big Ten regular-season championship with a 79-66 win over Maryland on Feb. 25, the 17th title – shared or outright – in program history.

Nebraska got back-to-back scores by junior center Alexis Markowski and Potts, but a three-pointer from fifth-year guard Celeste Taylor sent Ohio State into a media timeout with a 25-13 lead. A three-point contest broke out through the remainder of the half, with two triples by each team and a late layup from Taiyier Parks to give Ohio State a 33-19 lead heading into the locker room.

Ohio State started the third quarter off strong with a triple from Sheldon and later baskets from Taylor Thierry and McMahon to go up 40-19 just 1:45 into the frame, forcing a timeout by the Cornhuskers. Things did not go much better out of the break for Nebraska. The Buckeyes turned three turnovers by Nebraska – including a 10-second violation – into three baskets, extending their run to 13-0 coming out of the half for a 46-19 lead on a basket by Sheldon.

"It's awesome," Sheldon said. "It's just fun, and for how hard we work, it's also a relief when that happens (forcing a 10-second violation). It's exciting. It gets us going and our energy builds off that, so it's definitely something we look forward to and like to celebrate together."

Markowski stopped the Husker bleeding with a basket at the 6:16 mark. Another three-pointer from Sheldon later put the Buckeyes up 52-23 before back-to-back three-pointers by the Cornhuskers made it 52-29 with 3:41 left in the quarter. Rikki Harris answered with a triple of her own, starting a 10-5 run over the final 2:55 of the frame to lead 62-34 going into the fourth quarter.

Sheldon connected from deep early in the frame before checking out of the contest with 8:29 to play, and McMahon added two baskets of her own before stepping out of the contest with 5:33 remaining. The Buckeyes

went on to outscore the Cornhuskers 18-13 in the final quarter with Madison Greene scoring all seven of her points in the final quarter to lead the way.

Sheldon led Ohio State with 23 points on 9-of-15 shooting and had six rebounds and a game-high six assists, while McMahon added 20 points and 10 rebounds for a double-double. Markowski led Nebraska with nine points and a game-high 16 rebounds. Ohio State committed just 12 turnovers in the game, leading to only two Nebraska points.

Lions Lack Roar Against Buckeyes

Penn State returned to historic Rec Hall for the first time since 1996 when it hosted Ohio State on Feb. 22, but it was the Buckeyes (23-3, 14-1) who felt right at home, extending their winning streak to 13 games with an 82-69 win over the Nittany Lions (16-11, 7-9) with 2,501 looking on.

The Ohio State defense limited Penn State, holding the Nittany Lions to 44.0 percent shooting in the first half (11 of 25). The Buckeyes also forced 27 turnovers by the Nittany Lions for the game – a season high for the home team – that turned into 30 points. In addition, Penn State struggled from distance, going just 4 of 17 (23.5 percent).

The Buckeyes blitzed the Lions early, connecting on their first five shots – including triples from Taylor, Sheldon and McMahon – to take a 13-0 lead with 6:34 left in the first. Penn State finally got on the board with a layup from guard Leilani Kapinus, but Ohio State responded with an 8-2 run to lead 21-4, having connected on nine of its first 11 shots.

"I thought we had a great start," said OSU coach Kevin McGuff. "I thought that was the

Ohio State 80, Nebraska 47

Feb. 14, 2024
Value City Arena • Columbus

	1	2	3	4	F
Nebraska (16-9, 8-6)	7	12	15	13	47
Ohio State (22-3, 13-1)	14	19	29	18	80

Nebraska	Total				A	PF	Pts.
	Min	M-A	M-A	O-D			
Potts	16	2-8	2-2	1-1	0	3	6
Markowski	32	4-8	0-0	1-15	1	1	9
White	13	0-1	0-0	0-2	1	4	0
Shelley	31	2-9	0-0	0-5	2	2	6
Moriarty	18	2-6	1-1	0-1	2	0	5
Hake	23	3-5	0-0	2-0	2	0	7
Petrie	16	1-2	0-0	0-2	0	0	3
Nissley	22	2-5	0-0	0-2	1	1	6
Stewart	8	1-3	0-0	0-1	1	1	2
Krull	13	1-2	0-0	0-1	0	0	3
Coley	9	0-1	0-0	0-1	1	1	0
Totals	200	18-50	3-3	6-31	11	13	47

Percentages: FG: 36.0%. FT: 100.0%. **Three-point field goals:** 8-23 (Nissley 2-5, Shelley 2-6, Hake 1-3, Krull 1-2, Markowski 1-1, Petrie 1-1, Coley 0-1, Moriarty 0-1, Potts 0-1, Stewart 0-2). **Team rebounds:** 2. **Blocked shots:** 4 (Markowski 2, Coley, Potts). **Turnovers:** 30 (Shelley 7, Petrie 5, Potts 4, Markowski 3, Stewart 3, Team 3, Hake 2, White 2, Nissley). **Steals:** 4 (Shelley 2, Markowski, Nissley).

Ohio State	Total				A	PF	Pts.
	Min	M-A	M-A	O-D			
Mikulášiková	23	2-8	0-0	0-2	2	0	4
McMahon	30	9-17	2-5	1-9	3	1	20
Thierry	20	1-3	0-0	0-1	1	2	2
Sheldon	29	9-15	0-0	2-4	6	2	23
Taylor	21	2-4	0-0	0-3	4	1	5
Harris	17	3-4	2-2	0-3	1	0	11
Greene	20	2-5	3-4	1-0	1	1	7
Walker	8	0-0	0-0	0-0	1	1	0
Parks	14	3-6	0-2	2-1	0	1	6
Shumate	10	0-1	0-0	0-1	0	1	0
Collins	5	0-0	0-0	0-0	0	0	0
Henderson	2	0-1	0-0	0-0	0	0	0
Carson	2	1-2	0-0	0-0	0	0	2
Totals	200	32-66	7-13	8-26	19	10	80

Percentages: FG: 48.5%. FT: 53.8%. **Three-point field goals:** 9-21 (Sheldon 5-8, Harris 3-4, Taylor 1-3, Greene 0-2, McMahon 0-1, Mikulášiková 0-1, Shumate 0-1, Thierry 0-1). **Team rebounds:** 4. **Blocked shots:** 2 (Thierry 2). **Turnovers:** 12 (Sheldon 3, McMahon 2, Parks 2, Thierry 2, Mikulášiková, Taylor, Walker). **Steals:** 15 (McMahon 4, Thierry 2, Greene 2, Parks 2, Taylor 2, Harris, Walker). **Officials:** Kanter, Hall, Knight. **Attendance:** 7,115.

Ohio State 82, Penn State 69

Feb. 22, 2024
Rec Hall • State College, Pa.

	1	2	3	4	F
Ohio State (23-3, 14-1)	26	11	27	18	82
Penn State (16-11, 7-9)	10	14	18	27	69

Ohio State	Total				A	PF	Pts.
	Min	M-A	M-A	O-D			
Mikulášiková	28	3-7	0-0	1-5	3	1	8
McMahon	32	7-14	0-0	0-5	2	4	16
Thierry	28	6-10	2-3	3-2	1	0	14
Sheldon	36	9-15	0-0	0-2	6	1	20
Taylor	29	6-12	0-0	0-2	7	4	16
Greene	13	1-4	0-0	0-2	0	1	3
Harris	14	0-1	1-2	0-0	2	3	1
Walker	10	0-1	0-0	2-0	0	0	0
Shumate	4	1-3	2-2	2-0	0	0	4
Collins	3	0-2	0-0	0-0	0	0	0
Parks	2	0-1	0-0	1-0	0	0	0
Totals	200	33-70	5-7	10-19	21	14	82

Percentages: FG: 47.1%. FT: 71.4%. **Three-point field goals:** 11-27 (Taylor 4-7, McMahon 2-4, Mikulášiková 2-4, Sheldon 2-6, Greene 1-2, Collins 0-1, Parks 0-1, Shumate 0-1, Thierry 0-1). **Team rebounds:** 2. **Blocked shots:** 4 (McMahon, Mikulášiková, Taylor, Thierry). **Turnovers:** 16 (McMahon 4, Harris 2, Mikulášiková 2, Sheldon 2, Taylor 2, Collins, Parks, Shumate, Walker). **Steals:** 14 (Taylor 7, McMahon 2, Greene, Harris, Parks, Sheldon, Walker).

Penn State	Total				A	PF	Pts.
	Min	M-A	M-A	O-D			
Brigham	18	5-6	0-0	1-0	2	1	10
Owusu	24	8-12	5-6	2-3	2	1	22
Ciecki	13	1-5	0-0	0-0	0	1	3
Kapinus	27	4-10	1-1	2-8	1	2	10
Marisa	12	0-3	5-6	1-0	1	0	5
Pinto	18	1-2	0-0	0-2	0	1	2
Campbell	18	2-3	0-0	1-3	1	0	4
Murray	24	1-5	0-0	1-2	3	0	3
Oden	21	2-6	0-2	0-3	1	1	4
Hall	15	1-1	0-0	0-2	0	2	2
Lavelle	11	2-2	0-0	0-0	1	0	4
Totals	200	27-55	11-15	10-25	12	9	69

Percentages: FG: 49.1%. FT: 73.3%. **Three-point field goals:** 4-17 (Ciecki 1-4, Kapinus 1-1, Murray 1-4, Owusu 1-3, Campbell 0-1, Marisa 0-2, Oden 0-2). **Team rebounds:** 4. **Blocked shots:** 6 (Hall 3, Kapinus 2, Lavelle). **Turnovers:** 27 (Kapinus 6, Ciecki 4, Marisa 4, Team 4, Owusu 3, Lavelle 2, Murray 2, Oden, Pinto). **Steals:** 10 (Kapinus 3, Brigham, Hall, Lavelle, Murray, Oden, Owusu, Pinto). **Officials:** Gross, Pethel, Morris. **Attendance:** 2,501.

key. They've had a great season. They're very talented, but they haven't played quite as well lately. I felt like if we gave them confidence early, it could be a long night for us."

Penn State center Ali Brigham answered with consecutive baskets, but Rebeka Mikulášiková hit back with a three-pointer. The Buckeyes then took a 26-10 lead into the second after the teams traded baskets in the final minute of the frame.

The Nittany Lions did not go away easily, however. After a jumper from Sheldon put Ohio State up 32-15 with 6:58 left in the half, Penn State responded with a 7-0 run to make it 32-22 and held the Buckeyes without a field goal for 4:21. McMahon broke the PSU scoring run with a fastbreak layup with 2:37 left, and after a score by the Nittany Lions' Chanaya Pinto, Sheldon sent Ohio State into the break with a 37-24 lead after a late three-pointer.

The Buckeyes did not let up out of the break, utilizing an 11-2 run – with three-pointers from McMahon and Taylor – to go up 48-26. The Nittany Lions' attempts to stay close were rebuked by Taylor and Mikulášiková, who combined for the team's next 10 points to go up 58-34 with 4:38 left in the third.

Thierry and Sheldon scored the next two baskets for Ohio State on strong drives to the rim, and another score by Sheldon sent the Buckeyes into the fourth with a 64-42 advantage.

Ohio State did not get on the board in the fourth until a free throw from Thierry with 8:07 left in the contest, followed on the next possession by a layup from McMahon. After a responding layup from Brigham, Ohio State answered with an 11-0 run to go up 78-48 on another Sheldon layup with 4:30 remaining, the largest lead of the game for the Buckeyes.

"It's easy when we're moving the ball like that, finding the open person and hitting shots," Sheldon said. "So it's fun. I think our chemistry's only getting stronger, and we're starting to find each other more."

Penn State guard Ashley Owusu broke the scoring drought with a second-chance layup, helping the Nittany Lions close on a 21-4 run in the loss. Ohio State was left awaiting word on Harris, who went down with what McGuff called an ankle sprain late in the win.

Sheldon led the Buckeyes with 20 points on 9-of-15 shooting, while Taylor (16 points), McMahon (16 points) and Thierry (14 points) all finished in double digits. Owusu led Penn State with 22 points, while Kapinus had a double-double with 10 points and 10 rebounds, helping the Lions to an edge on the glass, 35-29.

Bucks Clinch Share Of Big Ten Title Against Maryland

Ohio State (24-3, 15-1) celebrated its seniors in style on Feb. 25, securing a 79-66 win over Maryland (16-11, 8-8) at Value City Arena that also gave the Buckeyes a share of the Big Ten regular-season championship, as well as their 14th consecutive win, while 10,790 looked on.

"The younger ones wanted to play for the seniors to make sure we send them out on a high note," McGuff said. "We had a great ceremony before (the game), but I think they did a great job regaining their focus to be ready for the game."

After a brief confetti delay as the teams took the floor, the squads battled to a 12-11 Buckeye lead with 4:51 left in the quarter. Sheldon and Taylor – two of Ohio State's seven senior honorees, along with Harris, Mikulášiková, Parks, Eboni Walker and Karla Vreš – then connected on a pair of three-pointers before Harris hit a triple to take a 21-13 lead after the first.

Maryland guard Brinae Alexander and Harris hit dueling threes to begin the second quarter, and Alexander added another just two possessions later to cut the deficit to 26-19 with 8:54 left in the frame. Ohio State then took off on a 7-0 run, during which it held Maryland scoreless for 3:31. Alexander broke the run with a free throw, beginning an 8-2 run for Maryland that made it 35-27 with 2:54 left in the half on a three by Bri McDaniel, but Ohio State closed the frame out on a 9-4 run – with the final four points coming from McMahon – to lead 44-31 at the break.

Ohio State came out of the half with baskets by Taylor and McMahon, but Maryland responded with a 9-0 run to cut the deficit to 48-42. Mikulášiková then responded with a triple, and the Buckeyes forced a turnover on the next possession that turned into a fast-break basket by Thierry.

McMahon was then hit with a shooting foul and assessed a technical after running in disbelief to the other end of the floor, and she was sent to the bench with four fouls, leading to three free throws by Shayanne Sellers to make it 53-45 with 5:27 left in the third. Sheldon later put the Buckeyes up 57-47 after a pair of free throws at the 2:23 mark, but the Terrapins closed the frame on an 8-3 run to trail just 60-55 entering the fourth, having outscored Ohio State 24-16 in the third period.

"They came back, they fought," Taylor said. "They're a tough team. They're not like any other team in the conference. They're

definitely hard-nosed and they get after it. With us, it's just staying levelheaded, sticking to the game plan and just going out there and executing."

Ohio State scored the first two baskets of the fourth, and Taylor made it to the line for a pair to take a 66-55 lead with 7:55 left, but Maryland answered with back-to-back scores by Faith Masonius and Alexander in just 25 seconds to make it 66-60. McMahon checked back in during a Maryland timeout with 6:13 remaining and the Buckeyes holding a 70-60 lead. Ohio State then got a trio of baskets from McMahon, Sheldon and Mikulášiková to lead 77-64 with 3:27 left.

Maryland got a pair of free throws by Masonius, but an ensuing score by McMahon helped to ice the contest before the outgoing seniors got their chance to check out of the game.

Taylor led the Buckeyes with 20 points, while Sheldon (17), McMahon (15), Mikulášiková (11) and Thierry (10) all reached double digits. Sheldon dished out six assists. McDaniel led the Terrapins with 21 points, while Alexander added 16.

"(Taylor's) done a great job integrating herself into our program, into our system," McGuff said. "How we play is different and unique and something she hadn't been a part of. Each week she seems to get better and better, and it's the work and effort she's put in."

Ohio State will close the regular season by hosting Michigan on Feb. 28 (7 p.m., Peacock) and then traveling to Iowa on March 3 (1 p.m., FOX). The Big Ten Women's Basketball Tournament will then take place in Minneapolis from March 6-10, with games set to be broadcast on Peacock, Big Ten Network and CBS.



SONNY BROCKWAY

ROUNDING INTO FORM — Ohio State fifth-year guard Celeste Taylor has played well in recent weeks for the Buckeyes, including a 20-point outing in the win over Maryland.

For the latest on Ohio State's seeding and tournament run – as well as the Buckeyes' NCAA tournament seeding and destination – visit BuckeyeSports.com.

Ohio State 79, Maryland 66										
Feb. 25, 2024										
Value City Arena • Columbus										
	1	2	3	4	F					
Maryland (16-11, 8-8)	13	18	24	11	66					
Ohio State (24-3, 15-1)	21	23	16	19	79					
Maryland	Total	FT	Reb.							
	Min	M-A	M-A	O-D	A	PF	Pts.			
Alexander	27	5-9	1-2	1-4	0	3	16			
Masonius	32	3-5	2-2	2-2	1	1	8			
Sellers	28	2-10	3-4	0-4	5	3	7			
Brown-Turner	38	4-11	2-2	3-3	4	4	10			
McDaniel	40	8-17	4-5	0-4	2	3	21			
Kubek	14	0-2	0-0	1-0	1	2	0			
Fisher	21	2-4	0-1	0-4	1	2	4			
Totals	200	24-58	12-16	10-24	14	18	66			
Percentages: FG: 41.4%. FT: 75.0%. Three-point field goals: 6-13 (Alexander 5-9, McDaniel 1-3, Sellers 0-1). Team rebounds: 6. Blocked shots: 0. Turnovers: 15 (McDaniel 5, Alexander 3, Brown-Turner 2, Kubek 2, Sellers 2, Fisher). Steals: 4 (McDaniel 3, Alexander).										
Ohio State	Total	FT	Reb.							
	Min	M-A	M-A	O-D	A	PF	Pts.			
Mikulášiková	28	4-6	2-2	0-3	2	1	11			
McMahon	29	5-12	4-4	0-5	3	4	15			
Thierry	31	4-5	2-2	1-5	1	3	10			
Sheldon	34	6-12	3-4	2-3	6	3	17			
Taylor	38	7-14	3-4	0-5	2	1	20			
Harris	21	2-5	0-0	0-2	1	2	6			
Parks	6	0-1	0-0	0-0	0	0	0			
Greene	12	0-1	0-0	0-1	1	0	0			
Walker	2	0-0	0-0	0-0	0	0	0			
Totals	200	28-56	14-16	5-27	16	14	79			
Percentages: FG: 50.0%. FT: 87.5%. Three-point field goals: 9-26 (Taylor 3-7, Harris 2-5, Sheldon 2-6, McMahon 1-4, Mikulášiková 1-3, Greene 0-1). Team rebounds: 5. Blocked shots: 3 (McMahon, Mikulášiková, Sheldon). Turnovers: 9 (Taylor 3, McMahon 2, Greene, Mikulášiková, Sheldon, Walker). Steals: 10 (Greene 3, Taylor 3, Harris, McMahon, Sheldon, Thierry). Officials: Grinter, Dickerson, Resch. Attendance: 10,790.										

Buckeye Sports BulletinBoard

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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.

FOR SALE: OSU football programs including bowl games, national playoff and championship games. OSU basketball programs, NFL programs, golf, Olympics, NBA, other print sports memorabilia. Call John at (330) 507-7339.

TIM POND, member of both the Bishop Watterson High School and the Otterbein University Basketball Halls of Fame, recently

offered his publication entitled "Coaching Youth Basketball: Coaching the Coaches" for sale on Amazon.com. Access to this instructional manual was previously limited to attendees of his basketball clinics and camps only.

FOR SALE — OSU-MICHIGAN Game, 1975 - original RADIO broadcast on CD! Woody's last great team & Archie's last UM game as Bucks go 11-0! Three-disk set runs 3½ hours! Listen in your car! \$25 + \$3 S & H. Call 1-630-527-8890!

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NHL Outdoor Game Puts Spotlight On 'Shoe

With the announcement of the NHL Stadium Series coming to Ohio Stadium on March 1, 2025, the venerable Horseshoe will take on a decidedly different hue that day for the game between the Columbus Blue Jackets and the Detroit Red Wings.

IN THE CREASE Craig Merz

Instead of scarlet and gray permeating throughout the venue, the majority of fans will be wearing blue for the hometown team while the hordes of Red Wings followers will be in red.

What will also be noticeable is the lack of participation by the Ohio State men's and women's hockey teams. When the long-ruled event was confirmed by the NHL and the Blue Jackets on Feb. 17, there was no mention of games involving the programs, as many hoped.

Imagine the excitement for another Ohio State-Michigan installment like last season's outdoor game in Cleveland on the men's side, or the women taking on another powerhouse such as Minnesota or Wisconsin.

There was no slight intended, and the reason for their omissions is simple: scheduling. But the good news is Ohio State officials are working toward outdoor games, sans the NHL, in Ohio Stadium for the men and women in 2026. Soon after the Stadium Series release went public, Ohio State executive associate athletic director Shaun Richard posted on Twitter:

"Congrats to the #CBJ on the NHL outdoor game in the Shoe in 2025! While the March date doesn't work for (men's hockey) & (women's hockey) due to (Big Ten hock-

ey) schedule and (WCHA women's hockey) playoffs, we are starting to work on a weekend for both programs to play in the Shoe in 2026."

Men's coach Steve Rohlik confirmed that to Buckeye Sports Bulletin on Feb. 21.

"Certainly, there's been talk with the administration that they want to make sure we get this done the following year (2026) with us here at the 'Shoe," Rohlik said. "This is the NHL, and we understand the NHL is the one that pushed the game (in 2025). It's a great opportunity for the city to be around and see something like this, which will be spectacular.

"As hard as it is for the men's and women's program not to be involved, especially the first time at the 'Shoe, if they can work it out including both our programs, I think that would be a big deal for us, the school and the city as well."

This year's version of the Stadium Series was held Feb. 17 and 18 at MetLife Stadium in East Rutherford, N.J., with the Philadelphia Flyers playing the New Jersey Devils the first day and the New York Rangers facing the New York Islanders the next, with more than 150,000 fans combined for the two games.

Those mid-February dates are unavailable to the NHL in 2025 because the league will hold its first 4 Nations Face-Off tournament from Feb. 12-20, with several practice days before the start of the competition between Canada, Finland, Sweden and the United States.

Thus, March 1 was selected. Based on this season's schedules, the women next year at that time will have the WCHA quarterfinals and the men will be in the last weekend of the regular season before the Big Ten tournament.

"An outdoor game like that is a lot to take in, especially if you might be playing a play-off game the following Thursday," Rohlik said. "There's not too many teams that

would want to do that."

With the university looking to run its own outdoor games in 2026, they will be on a more conducive date. As a template, last year's game for the men at FirstEnergy Stadium, the home of the Cleveland Browns, was held on Feb. 18. The Buckeyes downed the Wolverines 4-2 before a crowd of 45,523.

"It was a neutral site, obviously, but it was an incredible show, the fans were awesome," Ohio State forward Dalton Messina said. "I hope they sell out the 'Shoe, 100,000 or whatever it is, next year. The place will be rocking, get that football atmosphere. It's just an unbelievable experience."

Icing The Puck

The Blue Jackets will play their first outdoor game. While many pined for the more prestigious Winter Classic on New Year's Day, the NHL wanted to avoid potential conflicts with Ohio State football in the days leading to the outdoor event.

That becomes even more of an issue because of the new College Football Playoff system with schools hosting games in mid-December.

Steve Mayer, NHL senior executive vice president and chief content officer, told the Blue Jackets-oriented The Inside Edge podcast on Feb. 20 that setup for the rink begins at least two weeks prior to the game.

Another factor in the NHL's hesitancy over the years to have a game in Columbus was Ohio Stadium's infrastructure, specifically pipes that were not winterized, with officials concerned about them bursting if used during the winter. The water is turned off after the final home football game, but the university recently made upgrades to the satisfaction of the NHL.

Also, students would be on their break on Jan. 1 for the Winter Classic, and Mayer said the Stadium Series is relying on them.

"Let's face it, 100,000 tickets. That's a lot

BIG Men's Hockey

	GP	Pts.	W	L	T	OW	OL	SW
Michigan State	22	49	15	5	2	0	1	1
Wisconsin	22	47	15	6	1	2	2	1
Minnesota	22	37	12	6	4	3	0	0
Michigan	22	34	10	10	2	0	1	1
Notre Dame	24	31	9	13	2	0	1	1
Penn State	22	21	5	14	3	0	1	2
Ohio State	22	15	4	16	2	1	0	2

Overall records — Wisconsin 24-8-2, Michigan State 21-8-3, Minnesota 19-8-5, Michigan 17-12-3, Notre Dame 15-17-2, Penn State 13-16-3, **Ohio State 12-16-4.**

- standings courtesy of College Hockey Inc.

of tickets to sell," he said. "I think we would have probably been screamed and yelled at by the student body of Ohio State if suddenly we scheduled this game when they weren't there.

"We want them to be there as much as anybody that lives in Columbus. We definitely needed to make sure that school was in session, and we're going to do some things with the students. We'll lean into Ohio State big time on this one so they'll have a huge presence not only there in the stands, but I would think on the field as well with some of the entertainment aspects of what we'll do."

The NHL has held games at iconic sites such as Dodger Stadium, Fenway Park, Notre Dame Stadium, Soldier Field and Wrigley Field. The record crowd is 105,491 at Michigan Stadium in Ann Arbor for the Red Wings-Toronto Maple Leafs game in 2014.

While the highest attendance for an Ohio State football game is 110,045 vs. Michigan in 2016, renovations have cut seating and the capacity is listed at 102,780. The largest crowd the past two seasons was 106,787 when Michigan came to town in 2022.

Field seating could be added for the hockey game but any seats on risers may reduce or block visibility from some of the permanent stands so an increase could be limited.

All those details will be finalized over the next 12 months, but what can't be controlled is the weather. Games have been delayed or postponed because of snow, rain or high temperatures, and even glare off the ice from the sun.

The latter may not be a factor with a late afternoon or early evening start, which may be preferable based on climate averages for March 1.

Meteorologists at Columbus TV station WCMH studied patterns for that date since 2000 when the Blue Jackets entered the NHL and found an all-time record high of 75 degrees was set in 2023, and 46 percent of high temperatures exceeded 50 degrees. The lowest high was 31 degrees in 2005. The wettest March 1 was 1.10 inches of rain in 2007 and the most snow was 3.6 inches in 2015, with 42 percent of the days having either rain or snow.

Go Fourth And Prosper

The Buckeyes (12-16-4, 4-16-2 Big Ten) went 3-1-0 since the most recent issue of BSB, including an epic sweep of No. 4 Wis-

VARSITY CLUB ICER OF THE MONTH For February



Davis Burnside
sophomore forward
Scottsdale, Ariz.

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OHIO STATE MEN'S ICE HOCKEY

consin on Feb. 16-17 at Value City Arena. It was the first sweep of a Big Ten opponent since downing Michigan State at VCA on Jan. 6-7, 2023, and the first sweep of a top-10 team since Minnesota on Dec. 8-9, 2017.

The momentum carried into the weekend of Feb. 23-24 when the Buckeyes upset the new No. 4 with a 6-2 rout of host Michigan State in the opener to run their winning streak to three games. The Spartans rebounded to take the finale, 5-2.

Ohio State entered the Wisconsin series with seven straight losses and one win in 18 conference games so, of course, the Buckeyes were going to rally twice for a 3-2 overtime win in the opener followed by a 3-1 victory.

"It's huge," forward Cam Thiesing said after the series. "We've been itching for something like this all year long and we came together as a team. Like, I can't even describe the stuff that we went through this week, and it shows on the ice."

Ohio State trailed 2-1 the first night and had goalie Logan Terness pulled for an extra attacker when Stephen Halliday tied it 2-2 with 1:39 left in regulation before Davis Burnside scored the winner with 22 seconds left in the extra period.

In the rematch, Kristoffer Eberly made 27 saves, Burnside scored again, and Joe Dunlap had a goal and an assist as the Buckeyes never trailed, jumping out to a 2-0 lead in the first period.

"It's different when you're playing with the lead, and to get the lead tonight for us was huge," Rohlik said. "We kind of did enough to control them and to get the two wins. I'm just happy for these guys. I feel really good for our group."

Confidence is contagious, and the Buckeyes used it to stun MSU. After falling behind in the opening 1:50, the Buckeyes ripped off four straight goals with freshman Sam Deckhut scoring the first two of his career. Terness made 34 saves.

A major penalty to the Buckeyes' Patrick Guzzo for hitting from behind midway through the second period turned the rematch in favor of the Spartans. They scored twice during the power play to extend their lead to 4-1. OSU defenseman Scooter Brickey scored his team-best 11th goal in the third period to make it 4-2.

"This was a disappointing loss," Rohlik said. "It was a tight game, but the five-minute major really hurt us. Again, special teams was the difference. We battled hard, but you can't put yourself in that position."

Next

OSU closes the regular season hosting Penn State on March 1 (6 p.m.) and 2 (5 p.m.). The senior class will be recognized before game two vs. the Nittany Lions.

The last-place Buckeyes trail Penn State by five points and need a sweep in regulation to surpass the Nittany Lions to move into sixth.

Ohio State will be on the road for the best-of-three quarterfinals March 8-10 against a team to be determined. If they finish last it will be either Michigan State or Wisconsin. If they are sixth, it will be Michigan or Minnesota.

Burning It Up

Burnside is the Varsity Club Icer of the Month after scoring three goals and adding one assist in six February games. He scored twice vs. Wisconsin, including the overtime winner in the first game and the winning goal in the second game as well. He also scored against Michigan State on Feb. 23 and had an assist in the next game.

For full recaps of the Wisconsin and Michigan State series go to the BuckeyeSports.com website, free to all Buckeye Sports Bulletin subscribers.

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 (16-12, 6-11)

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, L 62-54; **18** PURDUE, W 73-6-9; **22** at Minnesota, L 88-79; **25** at Michigan State, W 60-57; **29** NEBRASKA

March 3 MICHIGAN; **10** at Rutgers.

WOMEN'S BASKETBALL (24-3, 15-1)

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, W 80-47; **22** at Penn State, W 82-69; **25** MARYLAND, W 79-66; **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** Central Collegiate Fencing Conference Championships, M: 4-0/1st; W: 5-1, 2nd. **25** Central Collegiate Fencing Conference Championships, NTS.

MEN'S ICE HOCKEY (12-16-4, 4-16-2)

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, W 3-2 (OT), W 3-1; **23-24** Michigan State, W 6-2, L 5-2.

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 (29-3-0, 26-2-0)

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, W 12-1, W 4-1; **24-25** Wisconsin W 3-1, L 4-2.

March 1-2 WCHA QUARTERFINALS VS. BEMIDJI STATE.

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, NTS; **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., 1st.

Feb. 2 PITTSBURGH, W 202-97; **16-18** OHIO STATE WINTER INVITATIONAL, NTS; **21-24** Big Ten Championships at West Lafayette, Ind., 2nd/1,358.5.

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 (14-0)

Sept. 18-24 COLUMBUS CHALLENGER, NTS. **30** ITA All-American Championship at Tulsa, Okla., NTS.

Oct. 1-8 ITA All-American Championship at Tulsa, Okla., NTS.; **19-23** ITA Midwest Regional Championship at Ann Arbor, Mich., NTS; **23-29** Las Vegas Challenger at Las Vegas, NTS.

Nov. 1-5 ITA Fall National Championship at San Diego, Calif., NTS; **1-5** Big Ten Singles & Doubles Championship at Madison, Wisc., NTS.

Jan. 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** National Team Indoor Championship at New York, N.Y., vs. Alabama, W 4-2; **17** National Team Indoor Championship at New York, N.Y., vs. Harvard, W 4-1; **18** National Team Indoor Championship at New York, N.Y., vs. Virginia, W 4-0; **19** National Team Indoor Championship at New York, N.Y., vs. TCU, W 4-3; **24** Notre Dame, W 7-0; **28** Baylor.

March 10 Texas; **13** Texas A&M; **17** Michigan; **22** NORTHWESTERN; **24** ILLINOIS; **29** Purdue; **31** Indiana.

April 5 Penn State; **13** MICHIGAN STATE; **14** MICHIGAN; **19** Nebraska; **21** Wisconsin; **26-28** Big Ten Tournament at Evanston, Ill.

May 3-5 NCAA Regional; **10-11** NCAA Super Regional; **16-19** NCAA Championship; **20-26** NCAA Singles & Doubles Championships.

Ohio State Prepares For Big Ten Tournament

Now that the Buckeyes' dual schedule is over, the calendar is turning to March, which means postseason wrestling is here. The Big Ten tournament is first, which will take place at the Xfinity Center in University Park, Md., from March 9-10.

ON THE MAT Greg Wilson

After a second-place finish in the regular-season standings for the conference for Ohio State (15-2, 7-1 Big Ten), head coach Tom Ryan is looking forward to the tournament, where he feels they have a shot at making a statement with a young team.

"I feel great. This is a great team," Ryan told BSB. "We're very young. You're talking about seven of your starters are freshmen. But they love to wrestle and they prepare hard and we're excited about them going to Big Tens."

With such a young team, most of them don't have the experience of wrestling in the postseason, but Ryan said they bring an energy that is going to be important for the team when it comes to how grueling the run will be.

"There's a lot of energy," he said. "We have

two true freshmen, Rocco (Welsh) and Ryder (Rogotzke). With youth, you get excitement. Sometimes you're here for five or six years and the age takes a toll on you. These guys are young and excited. They've really brought a lot of excitement to the lineup."

Throughout the past year, Ohio State has lost three different grapplers who began the season in the starting lineup to injury with Paddy Gallagher (157 pounds), Carson Kharchla (174 pounds) and Gavin Hoffman (184 pounds) each having their seasons ended prematurely.

To take their places, senior Isaac Wilcox moved down from 165 pounds to 157 pounds, Welsh took over at 174 pounds and Rogotzke got the call at 184 pounds, the latter two expected to earn a redshirt when the season began. All of this is in addition to losing Sammy Sasso at 157 pounds as he continues to recover after being shot during the offseason.

"(We lost) four of our black shirts," Ryan said, "all of the leaders on our team. We're very fortunate that we have a lot of depth. These guys were ready to go, and they jumped right in."

"The thing that's helped us is that none of these guys had to be coerced to go into the lineup when they thought they would be redshirted. Rocco said, 'I'm ready to go. Put me in.' That's the mindset that you have to have."

Ryan said the 10 expected starters for the Buckeyes are all entering the Big Ten tournament fully healthy, which will be a neces-

sity given that the conference tournament is one of the toughest in the nation. Penn State (11-0, 8-0), undefeated in the regular season for the fourth straight year, is defending its Big Ten and national titles and is the favorite to win the tournament again. Five other Big Ten teams – including No. 3 Nebraska, No. 4 Iowa, No. 10 Michigan, No. 12 Minnesota and No. 14 Rutgers – join top-ranked Penn State and No. 6 Ohio State in the top 25 of the NWCA coaches poll.

But with four wrestlers ranked in the top 10 of their respective weight classes, the Buckeyes do have an outside shot if things go their way.

No. 3 Jesse Mendez at 141 pounds likely has the best chance to win his weight for the Buckeyes, though the top two wrestlers are also in the Big Ten. He will have to get through No. 1 Beau Bartlett of Penn State – whom he already matched up against and lost in a sudden victory period – and No. 2 Real Woods from Iowa, who has lost just two bouts this season.

At heavyweight, No. 7 Nick Feldman could make a run as well. Only two grapplers ahead of him in the national standings – No. 6 Lucas Davison of Michigan and No. 1 Greg Kerkvliet of Penn State – are in the conference, and he has already beat Davison in an exciting match to give the Buckeyes the win when Michigan came to Columbus earlier this season.

However, beating Kerkvliet is going to prove to be a tall task. When they matched up in University Park, Pa., on Feb. 2, Feldman wasn't able to score in a 12-0 major-decision loss. He got better as the season progressed, though, so if he's able to get to the championship round, where he would likely meet Kerkvliet, he has the ability to make things interesting.

Another redshirt freshman with an outside shot is No. 10 Nic Bouzakis at 133 pounds, though he will have to deal with at least No. 5 Dylan Ragusin of Michigan and No. 8 Dylan Shawver of Rutgers. He lost to both this season, but he did beat No. 11 Aaron Nagao of Penn State and had other significant upsets, proving he can beat some of the best.

Welsh faces perhaps the toughest test of the entire event at 174 pounds, as he could end up matching up with No. 1 Carter Starocci of Penn State, a two-time conference and three-time NCAA champion who is a heavy favorite entering the event. When Welsh and Starocci faced off on Feb. 2, it was a 4-2 decision loss for Welsh, though it was tied mid-way through the third.

Ohio State's other expected starters include No. 22 Brendan McCrone at 125 pounds, No. 10 Dylan D'Emilio at 149 pounds, No. 16 Bryce Hepner at 165 pounds and either No. 21 Luke Geog or Seth Shumate at 197 pounds. After months of duals, it will be a significant shift moving to tournament action, but Ryan said the preparation is going to remain mostly the same.

"We lower the mountain of work," Ryan said. "We kind of lower the volume of work and the intensity stays the same. It's more about getting these guys feeling good. Just keep them fit. Keep them ready for the fight that's coming and be grateful that they're healthy this time of year."

Rogotzke, Welsh Earn Black Shirts

Both true freshman, Rogotzke and Welsh have proved they belong in the lineup for the Buckeyes, even though it took injuries to move them up the depth chart. But they will be getting a boost going into the Big Ten tournament, earning black shirts from the coaching staff on Feb. 23.

"The way they compete is a critical component," Ryan said. "You could do everything right, but when competition day comes and you don't present a style that's just pure gratitude that I think anybody watching can see."

Black shirts are given to members of the Ohio State wrestling team who are considered elite both on and off the mat. Everyone starts with a gray shirt when they come into the program, but those who earn it wear black in the team facility, a tradition started by Ryan and the coaching staff in 2019. In order to be awarded a black shirt, a wrestler has to earn unanimous approval from the entire coaching staff and all current black shirts, which can be tough to come by with the standard of the Ohio State wrestling program.

Welsh is 17-4 in his first year with the team, posting an 8-3 record in dual meets with three major decisions, six technical falls and a pin to his name.

Rogotzke boasts a 15-6 record, going 4-3 in duals. He has accumulated 13 pins in his short time on the mat, which – if he keeps up – would be on pace to break Don Moxley's record of 50 pins as a Buckeye, set from 1983-85 and later tied by current assistant coach Logan Stieber. And Rogotzke's success has come in a season when he was supposed to be redshirting, so he was held out of the lineup for much of it.

"Anyone in competition can see when someone's wrestling with love and excitement rather than fear," Ryan said. "And those guys do that. They're just great competitors. They're Bucks."

Buckeyes Win Last Dual Over Spartans

The Buckeyes finished the regular season with another Big Ten win to finish second in the conference standings behind Penn State, picking up a 38-7 win at Michigan State and losing just two of eight individual bouts.

Three different Buckeyes won by fall, with Bouzakis being the first of them. He needed just 1:58 to take down Andy Hampton, taking advantage of an early lead and securing the victory with his ninth pin of the season.

Rogotzke then upset No. 15 Layne Malczewski, pinning him early in the second period while holding on to a 7-4 lead. His win officially ended the Spartans' chances at taking the dual.

Even though the outcome of the dual was decided, it wasn't in Feldman's nature to let up, and he won by fall over Josh Terrill in 5:29. The match was likely going to end early by technical fall anyway if Feldman hadn't stuck Terrill since he had a 17-4 lead after two periods.

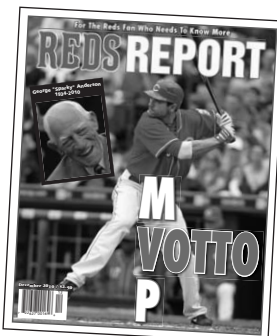
Mendez and D'Emilio both scored bonus points for the Buckeyes with technical falls, while McCrone, Shumate and Welsh picked up wins by decision or major decision, in the case of Welsh.

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Moore Laying Foundation Of Long-Lasting Success

By **GREG WILSON**

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

Amanda Moore started her career at Ohio State as an assistant coach in 2009 for the women's lacrosse team, staying for two years before she moved on. That stint helped her decide that coaching was her goal going forward, and after 13 years, she has found herself right back in Columbus where she first started – but now, she's the one leading the program.

The six years preceding her return to Ohio State were spent as the head coach of the East Carolina women's lacrosse team, and in her time there, she took the team to three winning seasons in her final three years. She said it was tough to move on from that, but it's not often Ohio State comes calling, so felt she had to seize the opportunity.

"We felt like we were building something," Moore said of her time with East Carolina. "We were right on the doorstep knocking on the door of something even greater. There is that little bit of the feeling of maybe we had some unfinished business there, but you don't always get to pick the timing of things in life."

She got that call from the Buckeyes because she had proved she's able to build a program, coaching the Pirates during their first six seasons of existence after beginning their inaugural season in 2018. Now having that experience, Moore said there aren't many better places to try to build than at Ohio State.

"Not to quote the great late Woody Hayes, but the people, the tradition, the excellence," she said. "This is such a phenomenal global brand. It's so well-respected, does things the right way, provides such an incredible opportunity to all of its student-athletes with both facilities, opportunities to compete in the Big Ten and nationally. What more could you want if you want to pursue excellence and championships?"

While Ohio State's program is not starting from scratch like East Carolina, it was in a poor spot when Moore took over, as the Buckeyes won just five games in 17 tries last season under former coach Amy Bokker. Moore wants to take what she learned at East Carolina and implement that at Ohio State so she can turn it around.

Those changes have paid dividends thus far. The Buckeyes were 4-1 through Feb. 23 with 76 goals scored to just 36 allowed. It's been a hot start, but Moore knows they will need to sustain that for it to mean anything.

"What I've taken from that experience is building and having really honest and open communication with our players and our staff during that building and transition process," she said. "It's just so, so important. You want to be as transparent as possible with your players."

"East Carolina having been my first head-coaching job, I really learned about managing people. One of the big things and lessons that I learned is to not assume you know what a player is walking through. To not come in hot and guns blazing, but to ask the right questions. Be curious with your players. Bring them in, ask them, get to know them, figure out what they're walking



FILE PHOTO

FOUNDATION OF SUCCESS – In her first season as Ohio State's women's lacrosse coach, Amanda Moore is looking to build the foundation of a successful program.

through so that you can help lead them as best as you can."

The players have noticed a difference so far in terms of what it looks like off the field, which is an important part of the equation for Moore. Senior attack-draw Jamie Lasda said getting a new head coach in her fourth year at Ohio State was a challenge, but the personal relationships Moore has built have made it much easier on her and the rest of the team.

"That is a tough transition for anybody, but Mandy made it very easy on us by taking the time in the first couple of months to really get to know us as people and making sure that we're bonding as a team as well," Lasda said. "Establishing those connections early made the process pretty smooth."

It's different from what Lasda is used to as a player, but it's something she said she appreciates because it has brought the team much closer together.

"The priority and emphasis she puts on those bonds is definitely different than in the past," she said. "Everyone takes those relationships much more seriously and understands the importance of them. The effort going into making those bonds has increased dramatically."

It's a similar sentiment to how Moore will approach success this season. Coming off a tough season for Ohio State, it will be a challenge to make such an immediate turnaround in terms of on-field success, but Moore said that success this season is going to be measured by much more than just wins and losses.

"First and foremost, if we could hold a mirror to ourselves, what is the culture of our program?" Moore said, "Do we trust one another? Are we living by our standards, our

Buckeye sisterhood? Are we asking ourselves to hold each other accountable over the wins and losses?"

"Yes, we would love to be playing in May. That would be silly if we weren't saying that was our goal, but I think for us right now the focus is very much – especially as we transition as a new staff – on the process because we want to lay a really strong foundation for all the years to come for Buckeye lacrosse."

Laying that foundation of a long-standing, successful program is a tough thing to do for a coach, especially because the players each need to buy into exactly what Moore is trying to do. Lasda said even as a senior, she wants to help build that culture that can help to get Ohio State women's lacrosse to that point of sustained success, which for her goes back to the personal relationships with her teammates and being able to have them with everyone on the team.

"One thing that we do is big and little Bucks on our team," Lasda said. "We pair up an upperclassman with an underclassman, and that just helps establish those bonds across different grades. We hang out

and do things outside of lacrosse. This year we made a change where we like to do team meals and activities the night before a game. We're with each other a lot, but during practice, you don't have those conversations."

The Buckeyes suffered their first loss of the season to No. 10 Denver on Feb. 23, but even then, Lasda said it felt different in the locker room following the 15-5 defeat than it used to.

"The sense of belief has been really high this year," Lasda said. "We just played a tough opponent and didn't come out on top, but the belief didn't waver even when we were down. There's a sense that the confidence that she has instilled in us has been different."

The immediate impact of Moore's coaching hasn't been an accident. She knew the expectations that come with being a head coach at Ohio State. She considered the pressure when she was taking the job. She knows that she can handle that pressure, as she already expects that type of excellence from herself as a coach every day.

"No one is ever going to put more pressure on me than myself," Moore said. "I learned that about myself at a really young age. It's waking up and doing the best job I can each day. That's how I can put my head down to the pillow and sleep well at night."

It's still just the beginning of what Moore is trying to build long term, but the early returns are already being felt inside the locker room and are being seen on the field. Moore has a vision of what she wants this program to be, and she knows it's going to take a lot of hard work on her part to get it there. But it's something she is willing to put the time into.

"I hope we're always playing in May, deep into May," Moore said. "That's the goal, but that we're also achieving comprehensive excellence as a program. There's a holistic bigger picture too at play that's important to me as a head coach and for our young women, that they're prepared to just crush it when they enter the real world."

"We want to have comprehensive excellence as a program, and for me, that's playing in May, that's achieving our goals academically, so we're prepared for the next chapter of life, whether that be pursuing another degree or entering the professional realm, that we value our relationships. This place is filled with pride, and we want our players to have pride in the jersey and in the product they're putting on the field and represent it well for the players that did, do and will wear the jersey."

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Buckeyes Hardly Miss A Beat During OC Turmoil

That was fast.

Before the Ohio State fandom got any kind of chance to know Bill O'Brien, he left Columbus to take over head coaching duties at Boston College.

Can't really blame him, as he is a Boston native, and his wife and son are in the area. He was thought to be angling for another NFL job after getting swept out in the housecleaning done by the New England Patriots, and the belief was that he would run the Buckeyes' offense for a couple of seasons and then jump back into the professional waters.

THE FACTS MAN Mike Wachsman

Little did he know that the BC opportunity would open up – coincidentally due to the move of another former Buckeye coach, Jeff Hafley, who left to become defensive coordinator with the Green Bay Packers. There was talk that BC might go with someone else, but it turned out O'Brien was always the guy, and the negotiations didn't take very long.

Just like that, he was gone, without a chance to become the second Boston-area O'Brien – the first being former men's basketball coach Jim O'Brien – to make an impact at Ohio State.

To his credit, Ryan Day did not panic, because he had a backup plan in place. To be honest, it may actually have been the initial plan, but some concerns on the other end kept it from happening right away. No matter that it was delayed, in the end the Buckeyes upgraded when Day brought on Chip Kelly as offensive coordinator. Yes, *that* Chip Kelly, the one who was a sitting head coach for a soon-to-be Big Ten program (that still seems weird to write) at UCLA.

It is the belief from here that the offense would have been good with O'Brien, despite misgivings from folks in the South who claimed it would have been a disaster despite numbers showing otherwise. But that was more a belief than anything.

It's more than a belief that the Ohio State offense will hum like a precision sports car under the guidance of Kelly. He engineered some of the most dynamic offenses in recent memory at Oregon from 2007-12, and even though his UCLA teams underachieved, the

offenses were pretty potent.

The 2022 Bruins squad finished fifth nationally in yards per play (7.01), a year in which they had running back Zach Charbonnet go for 1,359 yards and 14 scores and quarterback Dorian Thompson-Robinson add 645 yards on the ground and a dozen touchdowns. He also threw for over 3,169 yards and 27 touchdowns, and that's the type of output Ohio State fans are looking for from Kansas State transfer Will Howard this season.

Kelly has always been a mastermind at crafting great run fits, and even though he will be running Day's offense, you can bet there will be at least a couple of additions and tweaks to existing plays. That Day looked to his mentor to run the offense shows an immense amount of trust, because until now Day has been unable (maybe unwilling?) to give up play-calling chores. But he knows how important the 2024 season is for his future, so he has made a commitment to delegate more and handle more of the in-game stuff while Kelly runs the offense.

It wouldn't be any kind of surprise to see Ohio State be a bit more physical with its approach this season, leaning on the one-two punch of TreVeyon Henderson and Quinshon Judkins, with some designed run stuff for Howard mixed in.

Of note is the fact that current Ohio State offensive line coach Justin Frye worked with Kelly at UCLA, and the Bruins' ground attack was lethal with Frye in charge of the trench guys. Frye arrived as offensive line coach in 2018 and helped boost a ground game that averaged just 3.7 yards per carry in 2017 to 5.1 by 2020.

Frye has had mixed results so far at Ohio State, but maybe being reunited with Kelly will get some symbiosis going and the Buckeye line will be back up to its expected high standard.

Mr. Oblivious

You have to wonder whether Chris Holtmann even looked at box scores after his team's games. How else to explain him feeling "blindsided" by the fact he was fired?

Gene Smith finally pulled the trigger, a season too late, and Holtmann mused that he felt the team was working hard and close to turning the corner. Never mind that he had presided over a school-record 16-game (at the time of his ouster) road losing streak and looked to be outside looking in at the NCAA Tournament for the second straight season.

"Our responsibility is to the program, so I just felt at this particular time, with six regular-season games left and the Big Ten tournament and whatever the postseason brings, a spark was needed," said Smith, who was nearly overcome with emotion while answering questions during a press conference. Remember, Smith was the man who extended Holtmann's contract in 2022 and was a big part of the reason that Ohio State owed him \$12.8 million to go away.

The Buckeyes were very good in Holtmann's first year, winning 25 games, and then settled into a pattern of scraping to 20 wins, making the tournament and having an open calendar by the end of the first weekend. In seven seasons at Ohio State, Holtmann amassed a record of 137-86 overall and was 67-64 in Big Ten play.

It was a tad surprising to see Smith do any heavy lifting with his retirement looming. It was assumed he would wait until the end of the season and throw it into the lap of new athletic director Ross Bjork, but Smith dropped the hammer. Bjork will hire the next coach, but that's down the road a bit.

In the immediate aftermath, former coaches weighed in, and being that they never hold each other accountable, they decided that Ohio State erred in getting rid of Holtmann.

"After three years at Duke, I'd be fired," former Duke coach Mike Krzyzewski said. "Part of building a culture is going through adversity. We were fortunate to be allowed to do that. Our schools were fortunate because we were allowed to build a culture. Our culture is still there at Duke. That's what you want to keep going."

What you don't want to keep going is a malaise, and that's what had settled over the program and the fan base. Attendance was down for a second straight year, to a new average low of just a touch over 11,000 fans. The Buckeyes have been playing to a capacity of less than 60 percent this season, and the main reason fans were staying away was because the product wasn't good.

Ohio State's offense has been stagnant for much of the year, and it has blown not one but two 18-point leads in defeats during the season.

Jay Wright, not long removed from retirement himself, echoed Krzyzewski, saying Ohio State was pushing a "win now" mentality with Holtmann at the helm.

"It's almost like everybody is a junior college coach now," Wright said. "We've got to put a team together, and we've got to win right away because we might not get a chance late in the year. They might not be patient with us. That's why I brought up Holtmann. Seventy percent of Ohio State's points come from freshmen and sophomores. If those guys stay, whoever gets that job next year is going to have a hell of a team. No one is waiting on those young teams anymore. It's so different."

What Wright failed to mention was that those freshmen and sophomores were from highly touted recruiting classes, classes that were going to turn the fortunes of the program.

It also didn't help that players who were stuck on the bench flourished after leaving Columbus – notably Meechie Johnson, a

Cleveland-area recruit who came to Ohio State with a boatload of accolades yet who never averaged more than five points per game. He transferred to South Carolina following the 2021-22 season, and he's averaged 12.7 and 13.5 points per game the past two seasons, starting all but one contest for the Gamecocks.

Look, Holtmann appeared at the time to be a good hire, and most of Buckeye Nation was behind him, including yours truly. He was exceedingly nice, which is great. But nice doesn't bring victories. Sometimes a coach needs to be a little prickly to be great, and I'm not sure Holtmann had enough of that in him.

Regardless of your feelings on Holtmann or Ohio State and how the matter was handled, it's a closed case, and it's time to move on.

Whoever the next coach is (anyone but Sean Miller, please) will energize the fan base, partly because he won't be Holtmann and partly because he will bring back hope. That's something that was largely gone during the Holtmann regime, as you pretty much knew what you were getting from the Buckeyes before the season even started.

The hope is that Holtmann lands on his feet someplace, that Ohio State brings in a fiery coach who understands how to play entertaining basketball and who can once again make The Schott rock – at least as much as an antiseptic, basketball-unfriendly building can rock.

All Eyes On The Gridiron

Spring football practice is always cause for celebration around these parts, but this year the celebration might be tempered just a bit as fans learn the new faces and names that have come aboard since the end of the season.

It's well-known that Ohio State won the offseason, getting high-profile transfers Caleb Downs from Alabama, Judkins from Ole Miss and Howard from Kansas State. They need to assimilate quickly so that the Buckeyes win the *actual* season, too, which is why this will be a very interesting spring.

It will be fun to watch Jim Knowles' defense evolve even further, and it's not crazy to think that Ohio State could have the nation's best stop unit in 2024. There will be some new faces learning their roles, and more of the playbook implemented during spring. This should be a truly fearsome unit.

The offense may take a bit longer to get going, not only because Howard is going through his first spring in Columbus, but also because there will be some playing around with the offensive line. It's no secret that the trench guys were the weakest link last season, and with only one transfer addition it could be a concern once again. Don't be shocked if Josh Fryar kicks inside to compete for a guard spot, which could open the door for sophomore Luke Montgomery to nail down the right tackle position.

Will Day actually be more of a CEO and cede play-calling duties to Kelly, allowing him to work more with the quarterbacks and the day-to-day and in-game stuff? That might be the biggest question mark, and it may not be answered until the season opens in late August.



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Predicting Holtmann Replacement Not A Slam Dunk

As one of the posters on our BuckeyeSports.com Forum pointed out, this is the time in the hiring process that Buckeye fans think that every coach in the country is just dying to come to Ohio State – in this case to be the men's basketball coach.

Coach K and Jay Wright are available. Bill Self should jump at the chance to escape the hinterlands of Kansas and come to our thriving metropolis of Columbus. After Jake Diebler and his Buckeyes scored a buzzer-beating upset over Tom Izzo and his Michigan State team on Feb. 25, maybe Izzo figures, "If you can't beat them, join them."

With the exception of the Urban Meyer hire in football, Buckeye fans are generally a little disappointed in the ultimate choice by the administration, though John Cooper was a fairly popular choice because he took his Arizona State team to the Rose Bowl and beat Michigan. That was music to Buckeye fans' ears!

I'll never forget how disappointed Buckeye fans were when the search for a coach to replace Cooper came down to Glen Mason and Jim Tressel – hardly sexy choices. We saw how the choice of Tressel worked out, so you never know.

Most of the names you hear in the early part of the search are just speculation. I thought it might be fun to look back at the early "candidates" for open basketball coaching jobs during the Buckeye Sports Bulletin era. Let's take a trip down memory lane and see if you remember some of these coaches, as found in the pages of BSB, starting with replacing Eldon Miller.

According to the Feb. 28, 1986, issue of BSB, OSU athletic director Rick Bay claimed that as of Feb. 11, he hadn't talked to anyone about replacing Miller (who was fired on Feb. 3), especially Indiana coach Bob Knight who, according to a Cleveland television station, had applied for the job.

A spokesperson for IU said the report of Knight's application was "completely unfounded" and Knight later issued a statement saying he was staying put.

Other names bandied about for the job included Iowa State and former Michigan coach Johnny Orr, Tennessee coach and former Buckeye Don DeVoe, Boston College coach Gary Williams and Ohio University coach Danny Nee.

By the next issue of BSB, two weeks later, little progress had been made. DeVoe was granted permission to talk to OSU officials and one Columbus TV station said DeVoe had already been in town.

OU athletic director Harold McElhaney said of Nee, who had led the Bobcats to two MAC championships in the previous four years, "I don't want to lose him, but if they don't take him, they are out of their minds."

A local radio station did a straw poll on who the next coach should be, and the first 17 callers gave 17 different names.

One person whose name was mentioned frequently quickly let it be known that he was not interested.

"I have no desire to coach," former OSU star John Havlicek said. "If I were going to be a coach, I would have done it a long time ago."

Havlicek, however, stumped for his former teammate, Larry Siegfried.

"Larry would give his right arm to be the new coach," Havlicek said. "It would be a labor of love for him."

Knight, a former teammate of Havlicek and Siegfried, reiterated that he was not interested.

"I think I've made my position on jobs clear for a long, long time" he said. "I haven't had an interest in another job since I've been here, and I certainly don't now."

It should be noted that Indiana won the NCAA championship the following season.

A fellow coach in the Hoosier state was a little more pragmatic.

"I'm very happy at Purdue and I'm not thinking about changing my job," Boilermakers coach

THE VIEW FROM 15TH & HIGH Frank Moskowitz, Publisher

Gene Keady said. "But I'm like any coach. In this crazy business if an incredible offer is made and they go through the right channels, I'd listen."

The job ultimately went to Boston College's Williams.

When after three seasons, Williams left to go to his alma mater, Maryland, the first names to pop up as his potential replacement were Terry Holland of Virginia, Billy Tubbs of Oklahoma, Bob Huggins of Cincinnati, Knight, Bobby Cremins of Georgia Tech, Joey Meyer of DePaul, and Keady, according to BSB managing editor Mark Rea, writing in the July 1989 issue of BSB.

"When the dust finally settled," Rea wrote, "the Buckeyes were actually working from a list that included the following: Nolan Richardson, Arkansas, Pete Gillen of Xavier, Lon Kruger of Kansas State, Roy Williams of Kansas, Jim Crews of Evansville, Cy Alexander of South Carolina State, Mike Newell of Arkansas-Little Rock, Mike Deane of Siena, Don DeVoe, former head coach at Tennessee, and Randy Ayers, assistant under Williams at Ohio State."

According to Rea, "Richardson, 47, was thought to be the Buckeyes' top choice for the position. He got support from several school officials and head football coach John Cooper, who coached at the University of Tulsa when Richardson was basketball coach there."

Rea indicated that Gillen and Crews were also getting a lot of support.

But in the end, the job went to the 33-year-old Ayers.

One candidate who wasn't pleased with the choice of Ayers was DeVoe, who played for the Buckeyes in the early '60s and was endorsed by both Knight and legendary OSU coach Fred Taylor. DeVoe had tried for the job three times and said he was getting the message.

"My feeling is obviously they don't want Don DeVoe as their basketball coach," he said. "I felt this time the timing was right for me at Ohio State, and instead I was turned down for someone who's never coached a college basketball game."

Ayers was gone after the 1996-97 season, fired along with women's coach Nancy Darsch on the same day.

BSB's initial "Hot 15," as compiled by editor Steve Helwagen and basketball beat writer Jeff Rapp, consisted of Steve Alford, Southwest Missouri State; Tommy Amaker, Duke (assistant); Rick Barnes, Clemson; Jim Clemons, Dallas Mavericks; Tim Floyd, Iowa State; Eddie Fogler, South Carolina; Gillen, now at Providence; Huggins; Mike Jarvis, George Washington; Knight; Rick Majerus, Utah; Mike Montgomery, Stanford; Skip Prosser, Xavier; Tubby Smith, Georgia; and Maryland's Williams ("Knows better than any of the candidates what's possible at OSU and could be tired of living in shadow of tough ACC programs").

By the time the next issue of BSB came out, the list of candidates was becoming more defined.

"Several of the top men's choices have probably gone by the wayside as South Carolina's Eddie Fogler, Georgia's Tubby Smith and Clemson's Rick Barnes, a former OSU assistant many thought was Geiger's top choice, all reportedly agreed to lucrative long-term extensions at their present schools," Helwagen and Rapp wrote.

"BSB believes the head coaches still with a realistic chance of heading to Columbus as of press time include Pete Gillen of Providence, Rick Majerus of Utah, Mike Montgomery of Stanford, Tim Floyd of Iowa State, Skip Prosser of Xavier and Steve Alford of Southwest Missouri State.

"Cincinnati boss Bob Huggins, a one-time

graduate assistant (at OSU) remains a dark horse."

Some sources were insistent that Huggins was the top choice, but UC officials said he had not been contacted and OSU president E. Gordon Gee was adamant that was not the case.

"That comes as a total surprise to me," Gee said of the reports. "I can assure you I don't know Coach Huggins whatsoever, so for anyone to say he is my top choice, that is absolutely false. I have no favorite."

Years later, of course, Gee would become Huggins' boss at West Virginia.

Additional names that had surfaced since BSB put out its initial "Hot 15" were P.J. Carlesimo of the NBA's Portland Trailblazers, Dave Odom of Wake Forest, Jim O'Brien of Boston College, Mike Deane of Marquette, Ralph Willard of Pitt and Jim Harrick, formerly of UCLA.

Ironically, it was O'Brien, thrown in with the final group of candidates, who ultimately got the job.

By 2004, O'Brien, who took the Buckeyes to the Final Four in his second season in Columbus, was fired after allegations of NCAA violations were revealed, and Geiger was looking for a new coach again.

While previous searches had produced lengthy lists of possible candidates, by the time BSB went to press after the firing on June 8, 2004, the list had been reduced to a truncated group that remains legendary in Buckeye basketball lore for its lack of depth.

Rea had narrowed the list to down Vanderbilt coach Kevin Stallings (who reportedly was the other finalist when O'Brien got the job), Rice head coach Willis Wilson, Penn head coach Fran Dunphy and former Los Angeles Lakers assistant and former Buckeye player and assistant Jim Clemons.

Earlier in the process, Knight, now at Texas Tech, and former NBA coach George Karl were reported to have actively pursued the job, and "fast-rising stars" such as Marquette's Tom Crean and Thad Matta of Xavier were said to be in contention.

Crean released a statement saying, "I have not made myself a candidate for another opportunity and am happy at Marquette."

Matta told the Cincinnati Enquirer, "I am not a candidate. It's that plain and it's that simple."

It took 31 days from O'Brien's firing for Geiger, who drew criticism from local and national media for the delay, to find his man, and it was, indeed, Matta.

While some had speculated Matta was the center of the search all along, both Geiger and the coach denied that.

"My first contact with Andy was June 24," Matta said at his introductory press conference on July 9. "I know that I was in a lot of people's minds about this position early on. I was identified as one of the people who should be interested in this job. But I didn't know if I wanted to be interested. I had a job and I had a great job."

Matta was scheduled to meet with Geiger early on July 7 but struggled with that decision the night before.

"I still wasn't sure I even wanted to come up here," he said. "But once I decided, it all just kind of fell into place from there."

Matta ended up at Ohio State for 13 seasons before he, too, was essentially fired.

BSB went to press shortly after the June 5 announcement about Matta.

"Because Matta's departure was unexpected, there had been limited speculation as of press

time on who Ohio State's next head coach could be," BSB reporter Ryan McGlade wrote in the June 2017 BSB. "Some potential options included Xavier coach Chris Mack, Arizona head coach Sean Miller, Butler coach Chris Holtmann or even Oklahoma City Thunder coach Billy Donovan."

It took only four days for Smith to name Holtmann on June 9.

"The Ohio State University men's basketball program is one of the most respected in the country, and our coach must respect that great tradition," Smith said at Holtmann's introductory press conference on June 12. "We sought a high-intensity individual with an emphasis on academics, someone who is relentless in recruiting with great ties to the great state of Ohio and the contiguous states. We found a proven winner who is a community-engager and bottom line fits our culture."

And now the search begins again.

Writing Was On The Wall

Once Ohio State squandered an 18-point second-half lead on its home floor to lose to a mediocre Indiana team on Feb. 6, I think everyone knew that Holtmann's days at Ohio State were numbered. The only question seemed to be if Smith would wait until the end of the season or pull the trigger sooner. It turned out to be the latter, and Holtmann was given his walking papers on Feb. 14, a day after another road loss, this time to Wisconsin.

I liked Holtmann. It seemed like everybody liked him. It was almost as if his middle name was "good guy." Smith apparently was so attached to him that he was very publicly overcome when announcing his firing. But Smith knew, as we all did, that the program – and attendance – was on a clear downward spiral.

For me, the parts never added up to the potential for Holtmann and his Buckeyes.

Most will point to the stunning 75-72 overtime defeat to No. 15 Oral Roberts in the first round of the 2021 NCAA Tournament, a game where the No. 2-seeded Buckeyes held a 74-70 lead with 1:07 left in the second half (the start of a disturbing trend of blowing second half leads?) as the turning point in Holtmann's tenure.

I might suggest another event that occurred at the end of the following season as the potential beginning of the end. That is when Ryan Pedon, who had been with Holtmann since his days at Butler, left his position as an assistant at Ohio State to become head coach at Illinois State. In the seven seasons Holtmann and Pedon were together, their teams went 154-76 (.670) with appearances in the NCAA Tournament every year but the COVID year when there was no tournament. In 2016-17 they went to the Sweet 16 with the Bulldogs.

After Pedon's departure, Holtmann's Buckeyes went just 30-30.

Is there a connection?

BSB To The Young

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