

SONNY BROCKWAY

**MOVING ON UP** — Ohio State promoted interim men's basketball head coach Jake Diebler (pictured) to the full-time position on March 17 after a strong close to the season following the firing of Chris Holtmann on Feb. 14. Diebler is the 15th head coach in program history and the first to be hired from within since Randy Ayers in 1989.

## Diebler Sheds Interim Tag, Named 15th Head Coach Of Buckeye Men's Hoops

By **PATRICK ENGELS**  
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

Two days after assuming interim head-coaching duties in the wake of former Ohio State men's basketball coach Chris Holtmann's dismissal on Feb. 14, 37-year-old Jake Diebler sat in front of a group of reporters at Value City Arena and made his intentions clear on how the assistant coach was preparing to take on this daunting challenge.

Now serving as the face of a reeling program in shock over the timing and abrupt nature of the firing for the remainder of the season — which then included just six more regular-season games and a likely short stint at the Big Ten tournament in Minneapolis — Diebler emphasized that this was not an opportunity for him to audition for the head-coaching job.

Rather, he felt he had an obligation to serve the Ohio State program — one he had spent nearly half of his coaching career a part of, with another four years spent watching his younger brother, former guard Jon Diebler, don the scarlet and gray — the only way he knew how.

"I don't know if I really spend any time thinking about that," Diebler said on Feb. 16, roughly a month before he was named the 15th Ohio State men's basketball head coach on March 17. "I'm viewing this as almost like a stewardship of this program for the time being. I want to really focus on doing that as best I can, because I care about this program so much.

"Our guys care about this program, and I need to care about them and spend all my mental space and energy on that. Right now, I'm solely focused on serving our guys well and this program well."

Diebler's initial comments appeared — at least at the beginning of his tenure as the Buckeyes' interim leader — to match the opinions of those both within and outside the program.

With incoming athletic director Ross Bjork leading the head-coaching search and current athletic director Gene Smith monitoring close by, many people familiar with the program believed Ohio State was gearing up to make a big splash and bring in an experienced, high-profile name. Bjork said himself that he was prioritizing experience when sorting through candidates, telling *The Columbus Dispatch* in late February that "experience in the head-coaching chair matters."

This approach appeared more of a reality when names began to circulate. As the days went by, veteran Division I coaches such as Florida Atlantic's Dusty May, Creighton's Greg McDermott, Xavier's Sean Miller and South Carolina's Lamont Paris all emerged as people to watch, with May — who eventually assumed the head-coaching position at Michigan on March 24 — even engaging in preliminary talks with Buckeyes brass.

But back in Columbus, there was another more familiar name whose candidacy for the position was becoming impossible to ignore. Squarely under the guidance of Diebler — the son of recently retired Ohio high school basketball coaching legend Keith Diebler and a Gibsonburg, Ohio, native who had just two games of head-coaching experience (both filling in for an ill Holtmann) under his belt before his elevation to interim leader — for the final three weeks of the regular season, the energy around the Buckeye program began to shift with each passing game.

Implementing a high-paced, high-intensity style of play that was bound together by a culture of togetherness and family, Ohio State first dethroned No. 2 Purdue in Diebler's debut on Feb. 18 — just four days after Holtmann's firing.

Ohio State then secured a dramatic come-from-behind road victory over Tom Izzo and Michigan State on Feb. 25, snapping a program-record 17-game road losing streak. Then came another two home wins over NCAA Tournament-bound Nebraska on Feb. 29 and spiraling Michigan on March 3, winding up with a 73-51 road victory against Rutgers on March 10.

When the dust settled on the regular season — and after the Buckeyes tacked on another win over Iowa in the second round of the Big Ten tournament on March 14 — Diebler had thrust an Ohio State team that owned a 14-11 record and 4-10 mark in the Big Ten on Feb. 14 back onto the NCAA Tournament bubble with six convincing wins in seven tries.

"I'll say this, we're 6-1," Diebler told Big Ten Network's Andy Katz after the win over Iowa. "It's not me. *We're* 6-1. Our guys have come together. They've battled. We've raised our toughness and togetherness, and that's been the biggest difference."

While the Buckeyes' NCAA Tournament hopes dissolved one day later after a 77-74 loss to Illinois in the Big Ten tournament quarterfinals, leading them to accept a bid

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## From The Message Board

"The spotlight's not just on Diebler but (incoming athletic director Ross) Bjork for making the hire. This being Bjork's first big move, a crash and burn would reflect poorly. I like Diebler's energy and chemistry with the team. I'm optimistic. Go Jake!"

– **Peyote Buck**

"I still think they should have gone with an experienced coach who has tournament success and years as the head man at the helm but I can't argue how well the team played after Diebler took over, and with his low contract and low buyout, it doesn't hurt to take a flier on him and see what happens."

– **Tiffin Buckeye**

"Although I think it was a risky move, I'm cautiously optimistic that Diebler will have success but not dominate the Big Ten immediately. Could any coach have dominated the conference suddenly?"

– **Terrier Buck**

"When (Chris) Holtmann was fired, it was like a new team out there. The team played with more excitement and attendance increased. I think Jake had a lot to do with this, and am glad to see him given this chance. I hope they can retain the nucleus of this team and get better results next year."

– **R1TBDBITL**

**Ohio State promoted interim men's basketball coach Jake Diebler to the full-time position on March 17 after an impressive run to end the regular season, leading to an NIT bid for the Buckeyes. With several weeks now removed from Diebler's hiring and the end of Ohio State's season, we asked readers on the BuckeyeSports.com Fan Forum their thoughts on the hiring and what they believe the ceiling is for Diebler at Ohio State. Here are some of the responses:**

"Buckeye fans love Jake Diebler and rightfully so. But it is hard to project his success as a head coach based on less than a dozen games. It was a roll of dice by Bjork to make the hire rather than taking a coach with a more proven track record. We saw what Diebler could do for a little more than a month. Being a head coach is a 12-month job. Let's see how he does the other 11 months."

"I'm not being pessimistic, I'm being cautious. This is a question that will take 2-3 years to answer."

– **Poster That Harley Built**

"I probably would have liked to go

with a guy with a more proven track record. Though how many coaches out there have a career winning percentage of .727? A little coach hiring humor. The fact of the matter is that Diebler has been around basketball his entire life, he just hasn't been a head coach. I wonder if Spartan fans complained when Tom Izzo was promoted to head coach to replace Jud Heathcote at Michigan State without any head coaching experience? Here we are nearly 30 years later. And Izzo's career winning percentage is only .706. This is a question that no one – Diebler, Bjork or the fans – can answer for at least a couple of years."

– **Mcarr**

## From The Pages Of BSB

### 35 Years Ago – 1989

Ohio State head coach John Cooper admitted he sometimes borrowed quotes from other great coaches. This year, he was taking one from Leo Durocher: "Nice guys finish last!"

Spring practice began March 28 for the Buckeyes, who were seeking to improve upon the previous year's 4-6-1 record, the school's first losing mark in 22 years.

While Cooper and OSU players had tried to get acquainted this time a year prior, the Buckeyes' head coach said things would be a little different in spring camp this time around.

"I'm tired of being a nice guy," said Cooper, who entered his second year at the OSU helm. "Last year, we took the attitude that we were going to work with everybody and give everybody an equal chance. Those days are over."

### 30 Years Ago – 1994

The team's leading rusher was gone. So were four of the five starting offensive linemen. The number one defensive player? Gone. The school's all-time sack leader? Gone, too.

The starting fullback? Gone. The starting tight end? Gone. Three-quarters of the secondary? Gone. The school's all-time leader in field goals? Gone.

All over the depth chart, Cooper saw holes he needed to fill if his Buckeyes even hoped to successfully defend their Big Ten co-championship.

Most of the time, teams that lose seven starters on offense and six more on defense would be looking long and hard at a rebuilding season. But those were two words on which Cooper nearly choked.

"Rebuilding season?" he asked almost incredulously. "Are you kidding me? Sure, we have some big holes to fill. But we're not looking to rebuild. We're looking to reload!"

### 25 Years Ago – 1999

After five largely forgettable losing seasons, marked by a bout with NCAA probation and a spate of off-the-court problems, Ohio State returned to prominence in college basketball with an unlikely NCAA Final Four run.

OSU seniors Jason Singleton and Neshawn Coleman had endured three straight losing seasons. But they, along with superstar talent like transfer point guard Scoonie Penn and sophomore shooting guard Michael Redd, helped second-year coach Jim O'Brien do the unthinkable.

"I'm hoping that in some small way we were able to restore some of the respectability to Ohio State's basketball program," O'Brien said after his team's national semifinal loss to eventual NCAA champion Connecticut. "If that's the case, maybe some of the younger players in the state of Ohio will take a closer look at our program. That is going to continue to be the lifeblood of our program."

"I think we've been able to restore some of the dignity this university deserves, and we'll just go from there."

### 20 Years Ago – 2004

Transition is the nature of the beast in college football. Each season, star players move on and younger ones rise up to take their places.

But for the Ohio State football team, this year marked more transition than normal. In fact, it marked the largest overhaul in terms of personnel

since Jim Tressel took over as head coach in 2001.

In addition to losing 13 starters – six on both offense and defense as well as punter B.J. Sander along with suspended tailback Maurice Clarett for good – Tressel had to revamp his coaching staff to make up for losses of defensive coordinator Mark Dantonio, running backs coach Tim Spencer and most of the graduate and volunteer assistants.

Then, on the day spring practice began, longtime recruiting coordinator and tight ends coach Bill Conley handed in his resignation.

To say this had been a winter of discontent for Tressel might be stretching it, but it certainly had been one of upheaval after two years of relative normalcy. Still, the OSU coach remained as upbeat as ever on the direction of his program.

"I felt like there was more transition in 2001 because I didn't know any of the players," Tressel said. "I didn't have a relationship with anyone other than maybe two or three of the coaches that I'd worked with before. The time it takes to develop a good relationship is extensive."

"But transition in college football is supposed to happen. That's what makes it exciting. Young men are supposed to come here, become as good as they can become, get their diplomas and move on to a career outside this university. We definitely have transition going on, but we're excited about it."

### 15 Years Ago – 2009

In the University of Dayton Arena locker room immediately following OSU's season-ending 74-72 loss to Siena in double overtime on March 20 in its first game in the NCAA Tournament, Evan Turner was adamant about his plans for the future.

"My plan is to have a good offseason, gain 10 pounds, come back and win a Big Ten championship, a Big Ten tournament championship and an NCAA championship," he said. "My teammates and I didn't want to come here and just do four years for no reason. We wanted to come here and leave a legacy of winning. That's why you play the game."

Asked if that meant he would be returning for his junior year, Turner smiled and replied, "Of course. I love the Scarlet and Gray." However, Turner's mother, Iris James, wanted to make sure her son had all the necessary information before making a final decision. While Turner was home in Chicago during OSU's spring break, she did so.

The result was Turner's deciding not to waver from his public pledge to return.

"Evan said he is returning," she told BSB. "You can print that!"

### 10 Years Ago – 2014

In a matter of mere moments, Aaron Craft went from hero to witnessing his college career come to an end.

With a reverse layup to give his team a late lead, Craft appeared to be establishing himself as a postseason legend for Ohio State with last-minute heroics for the second consecutive year. A year earlier he had buried a three with less than a second remaining to defeat Iowa State and send OSU to the Sweet 16.

But this time, on the ensuing possession, Vee Sanford answered back with a floater over Craft with 3.8 seconds left on the clock to give 11th-seeded Dayton a 60-59 win over No. 6-seed Ohio State in the opening game for both teams in the NCAA Tournament on March 20.

"Craft is a great player and a great defender, but the door was wide open as far as when the floor was cleared," Sanford said. "I just wanted to go right. I knew that if I could do that, I had a high chance of hitting the floater off the backboard!"

Sanford did just that, and Craft's scrambling attempt at an answer – a contested shot as time expired – fell short. As a result, the Buckeyes' streak of four consecutive Sweet 16 appearances came to an end, as did one of the more storied careers in OSU history.

"I have zero thoughts on that right now," Craft, the two-time Big Ten Defensive Player of the Year, said of his career. "I'm upset at the way that we played this game and the way that we didn't take the opportunity and make the most of it. So that's for you guys to decide and discuss, but right now, I can't move past this game yet."

### Five Years Ago – 2019

After the Ohio State women's basketball team walked off the floor March 20 at Value City Arena following its 71-61 loss to Morehead State in the first round of the Women's National Invitation Tournament, head coach Kevin McGuff had a familiar feeling.

For the third straight time, the Buckeyes unraveled after leading late in the second half and fell by 10 points. OSU followed its previous two defeats – 66-56 against Rutgers to end the regular season March 3 and 73-63 against Wisconsin in the Big Ten tournament March 7 – with another dud at the hands of an Ohio Valley Conference opponent.

"It's unfortunate because we made so much progress," McGuff said March 20 when asked by BSB about Ohio State's three-game skid, which followed a season-long four-game winning streak in February. "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 laying the foundation for another run for our program. It's just tough to see that right now with three straight losses at the end."

### One Year Ago – 2023

When the Ohio State women's basketball program last graced the Elite Eight, it happened as Katie Smith was suiting up for the Buckeyes in her freshman season.

It had been a long stretch for Ohio State without making it to that point in the NCAA tournament, but that run finally came to an end on March 25 when the third-seeded Buckeyes completed a 73-61 upset of No. 2 UConn in the Sweet 16 to secure a berth in the Elite Eight for the first time since 1993 and the fourth appearance in that round in program history.

"We certainly have some really talented players, but I think more than anything our culture and the way these kids love to be around each other has been the key for us," McGuff said following the win over the Huskies. "We've had so many come-from-behind wins, and a lot of that has to do with when things go south, people start pointing fingers and so forth, and you have no chance to make a comeback."

"But that never happens with this group. They stay together, they support each other, and that's really just – a lot has to do with, we've got great kids and just great chemistry."

Buckeye Sports Bulletin (USPS 705-690, ISSN 0883-6833.) is published 24 times a year (weekly September through November, biweekly mid-March through May and January through early March and monthly June through August and December) by:

Columbus Sports Publications  
1200 Chambers Road, Suite 206  
P.O. Box 12453  
Columbus, Ohio 43212  
(614) 486-2202  
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Periodical class postage paid at Columbus, Ohio, and additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to: Buckeye Sports Bulletin, P.O. Box 12453, Columbus, Ohio 43212. Subscription rates: \$119.95/year.

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## 2023-24 PUBLICATION SCHEDULE (VOL. 43)

No. 1	Sept. 9	No. 13	Dec. 16
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No. 12	Dec. 2	No. 24	August

The next issue (April 20 cover date) will be mailed on April 16.

Buckeye Sports Bulletin is a privately owned newspaper and is not affiliated directly or indirectly with The Ohio State University.

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# Will Michigan's NCAA Bill Ever Come Due?

Webster's tells us that karma is a spiritual belief that is all about cause and effect. The thinking is that if you put good into the world, that good eventually comes back to you. If you choose to do harm, well ...

I don't know if you believe in that sort of thing, but it sure seems like the piper's bill is coming due at Michigan.

The national championship Jim Harbaugh might (or might not) have circumvented the rules to win obviously resulted in a huge payday for the coach, who accepted a five-year contract worth an estimated \$80 million from the NFL's Los Angeles Chargers. Back in Ann Arbor, however, the NCAA continues its investigation into Harbaugh's questionable recruiting tactics as well as the sign-stealing scandal every maize and blue-wearing fan has convinced him- or herself is fake news concocted in Ryan Day's secret basement laboratory.

While the wheels of NCAA justice grind slowly, the black clouds are still beginning to gather around the Michigan football program.

New head coach Sherrone Moore had to overhaul his staff when Harbaugh took defensive coordinator Jesse Minter, defensive line coach (and recruiting coordinator) Rick Elston, defensive backs coach (and co-defensive coordinator) Steve Clinkscale, and strength coach Ben Herbert with him to Los Angeles, running backs coach Mike Hart was not retained, and special teams coordinator Jay Harbaugh (Jim's son) took a similar position with the NFL's Seattle Seahawks.

No sooner had Moore put the finishing touches on assembling his staff than he lost one member when defensive line coach Greg Scruggs resigned March 21 less than a week after a DUI arrest.

A few days later, during a spring practice non-contact drill, three-year starting safety Rod Moore (no relation to the head coach) tore his ACL. Moore was named to the All-Big Ten third team last season after registering 38 tackles and four interceptions, and Ohio State undoubtedly remembers his game-clinching pick in the final seconds of Michigan's 30-24 win against the Buckeyes last November.

Since torn ACLs typically take nine to 12 months to fully recover, Moore will likely miss the entire 2024 season, and that is a huge blow for a Michigan team that had lost its other starting safety from a year ago when Keon Sabb transferred to Alabama.

The Wolverines were already facing roster upheaval for their 2024 season. They lost a whopping 17 players from the 22 who started against Washington in the national championship game – a total that rises to 18 with the loss of Moore. Michigan also watched a handful of valuable backups follow Sabb's lead and depart the program through the transfer portal.

All of that has happened since Harbaugh raised the national title trophy in Houston on Jan. 8, and still the NCAA has yet to weigh in on whether that title was won fairly.

In mid-February, Michigan athletic director Warde Manuel told reporters it had been several weeks since the school had received any update on the two ongoing investigations – one related to alleged recruiting violations during the 2020 pandemic, and the other about the sign-stealing allegations that led to the resignation of analyst Connor Stallons and the firing of linebackers coach Chris Partridge.

Anyone with any knowledge of the way the NCAA operates understands the investigation arm of the college sports governing body of ten moves at a glacial pace. Additionally, with all of the intrinsic problems brought forth by unlimited NIL money and the transfer portal being used as free agency, the NCAA might

think pursuing the cases against Harbaugh is no longer worth its time or effort, especially since the coach is now in the NFL and virtually untouchable.

But if the NCAA reaches the conclusion that there should be no punishment because the chief perpetrator has left town, then it might as well shutter its offices and fade into the shadow of history.

## EDITOR'S NOTEBOOK Mark Rea

According to the old Chinese proverb, karma has no menu; you get served what you deserve. Whether it will be the Michigan football program or the NCAA itself getting its just deserts remains to be seen.

### Mock Or Mockery?

Now that I have you focused away from March Madness and back to football, it won't be long until the NFL holds its annual three-day draft extravaganza, this time beginning April 25 in downtown Detroit.

Mock drafts are almost as inescapable as death and taxes, but they help to pass the time while coaches, scouts and owners try to outguess one another until it's time to actually make a selection. Most mockups that I have seen agree the Chicago Bears will select USC quarterback Caleb Williams with the No. 1 overall pick with LSU quarterback Jayden Daniels going No. 2 to the Washington Commanders.

After that, it seems to be a total guess-a-thon with projected trades and moves up and down the board. I will say this. It doesn't take much expertise to realize Ohio State receiver Marvin Harrison Jr. should be the first non-quarterback taken. Had I been the Bears, I might have been tempted to keep Justin Fields and draft Harrison, giving an honest-to-goodness weapon to the quarterback Chicago took at No. 1 just three years ago. But what do I know?

With the mock draft he released March 27, NFL draft analyst Matt Miller follows the conventional line of thinking with regard to Williams and Daniels. Then he has Minnesota trading up for New England's pick at No. 3 overall to grab North Carolina QB Drake Maye.

And then, Miller goes completely off the rails. He envisions Denver sending three first-round picks to Arizona to draft Michigan quarterback J.J. McCarthy at No. 4 overall. Miller's rationale is that Broncos head coach Sean Payton will mold McCarthy into the second coming of Drew Brees.

First of all, McCarthy is very much still a work in progress. Yes, he was 27-1 as a starter at Michigan, and yes, he led the Wolverines to their national championship last season. But to compare him to Brees is ludicrous.

By the time Brees united with Payton in New Orleans, Brees had already thrown for 11,792 yards at Purdue (still a Big Ten career record) and another 12,348 yards in five seasons with the Chargers. McCarthy totaled 6,226 yards during his college career.

As we all know by now, the NFL draft is a giant crapshoot especially with regard to quarterbacks. First-rounders just since 2021 include the likes of Kenny Pickett, Trey Lance, Mac Jones and Fields, each of whom has already been traded from the teams that origi-

nally drafted them. Meanwhile, Brock Purdy, the very last player selected in the 2022 draft, led San Francisco to a berth in Super Bowl LVIII in February.

Last year, Carolina made the blunder of the draft when it passed over C.J. Stroud at No. 1 for Bryce Young. Stroud turned around a team that had finished 3-13-1 the year before and earned NFL Offensive Rookie of the Year honors while leading Houston to its first playoff berth in four years. Meanwhile, the Panthers went from a 7-10 record to a 2-15 finish as Young was sacked 62 times for a league-leading 477 yards and threw three pick-sixes among his 10 interceptions.

The good news for Carolina is that because it dealt away this year's No.1 pick in order to draft Young at the top of last year's draft, it can't make the same colossal blunder two years in a row. That distinction will be reserved for whatever team elevates McCarthy into the top half of the first round.

### Basketball Postmortems

Who could have guessed on Valentine's Day that fans would fall in love again with the Ohio State men's basketball team while the women would end their season with a whimper, jilted in their attempt to return to the Elite Eight?

One day after the men's team dropped a 62-54 decision at Wisconsin for its 16th consecutive road loss, head coach Chris Holtmann was fired and replaced by assistant Jake Diebler. After that, the Buckeyes seemed to find another gear and won eight of their last 11 games before finishing with a 79-77 loss to Georgia in the NIT quarterfinals.

While the men were in disarray on Valentine's Day, the women were enjoying an 80-47 romp over Nebraska, extending a winning streak that would eventually reach 15 games on their way to the Big Ten regular-season championship.

Then, suddenly, Kevin McGuff's team hit the skids, losing three of its last four games, including a 75-63 decision to Duke in the second round of the NCAA tournament, a game in which the Buckeyes had led by as many as 16 points with five minutes to go in the first half.

Diebler, who had the interim tag removed March 17 after being rewarded with a five-year contract, was able to transform what had appeared to be a team simply going through the motions at the end of the Holtmann era. There are many theories as to how Diebler accomplished that, but most are simply conjecture.

Comparing the first 25 games under Holtmann against the final 11 with Diebler calling the shots doesn't really show much. The Buckeyes shot slightly better (46.2 percent to 44.5) and scored slightly higher (77.9 points per game to 74.4) after the coaching change. It just seemed that once Diebler took over, the team played with a renewed sense of vigor.

Quite the opposite regarding the women, who seemed to stand around and wait for something good to happen during their stretch swoon. That was especially true during the regular-season finale loss at Iowa, the second-round Big Ten tournament loss to Maryland, and the early NCAA exit against Duke. Ohio State was outbounded in those three games by a lopsided margin of 131-82.

Shooting occasionally goes cold as it did against Maryland. Other teams can devise a defensive strategy to shut down a particular player such as Duke did effectively against OSU sharpshooter Jacy Sheldon. But when you get outbounded by an eye-popping average of more than 16 per game, you shouldn't expect to win.



**FOX To Air OSU Spring Game**

Ohio State's spring game on April 13 will be seen by a national audience. The annual exhibition will be broadcast on FOX at noon from Ohio Stadium.

The Buckeyes' spring game has traditionally aired on Big Ten Network, but FOX has instead elected to air several spring games – including Michigan's on April 20 – on their network in what should pull significant ratings from the Ohio State faithful.

Tickets remain available for the spring game on Ticketmaster, with general admission tickets available for \$10 and reserved seating available for \$22 and \$37. Parking is free.

**Ohio State Holds Student Appreciation Day Practice**

Ohio State held the team's annual Student Appreciation Day on March 30 at the Woody Hayes Athletic Center, offering a chance for students – as well as media – to take in the eighth of 15 spring practices for

the Buckeyes.

The star during the nearly 90-minute practice was freshman wide receiver Jeremiah Smith, who made several impressive catches deep and on the sideline. One play in particular drew a rave reaction from those in attendance, when quarterback Devin Brown found Smith deep for a completion despite coverage from cornerback Denzel Burke and safety Caleb Downs.

"Jeremiah has really stepped in," head coach Ryan Day said. "He got his black stripe off real quick. He's got a great approach. I'm going to be careful what I say, but he's been certainly a pleasure to watch, and we're all very excited for his future. If he continues on the path he's on, he's going to play a lot of football and will certainly have a chance to start as well."

Brown had arguably the most consistent outing among the quarterbacks, with transfer Will Howard, redshirt freshman Lincoln Kienholz and freshmen Julian Sayin and Air Noland also throwing in a variety of seven-on-seven and 11-on-11 drills. In addition to his pass to Smith, Brown also had deep connections with senior wideout Emeka Egbuka and redshirt freshman Bryson Rodgers, both of whom stood out among the Buckeye pass catchers.

It was not a perfect day for the offense, however, as the defensive line routinely got in the backfield. In a drill where Ohio State's offense was backed up near the goal line, the defense ripped off three consecutive safeties, one each with Brown, Howard and Kienholz – who threw in that order during practice – under center.

"They were in the backfield a bunch,"

**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.)

Day said. "Too loose on offense. We've got to tighten that up, but you can see the quickness with some of those interior guys. We're looking for three guys at each position because all those guys are going to play."

Day also offered a brief injury update after practice. Safety Lathan Ransom is continuing to work back after last year's season-ending foot injury, while sophomore wide receiver Brandon Inniss is dealing with a "temporary issue" but should be back soon for Ohio State.

**Alford Leaves OSU To Lead RBs At U-M**

Ohio State experienced an unexpected change to its coaching staff on March 13 when running backs coach Tony Alford left the program after nine seasons to assume the same position at Michigan.

Alford's contract runs for three years with an annual base salary of \$850,000, a pay raise from the \$772,500 he was making with the Buckeyes.

"The last nine years (at Ohio State) have been nothing short of amazing, and there are so many people to thank and acknowledge," Alford wrote in a statement on March 13. "As I will undoubtedly miss so many things about being a member of the Buckeye Football Family, I am excited about what the future holds as I embark on the next chapter of this journey."

Alford had been at Ohio State since 2015, originally hired by Urban Meyer but retained by Ryan Day, whom he has coached under for the past five seasons while also serving as an assistant head coach for offense.

The position opened up for Michigan after running backs coach Mike Hart was not retained by head coach Sherrone Moore. Alford was the second-longest tenured assistant on Ohio State's staff behind defensive line coach Larry Johnson, who has been with the team since 2014.

During his time with the Buckeyes, Al-

ford helped lead the team to five top-25 rushing attacks, including the nation's fifth-best rushing offense in 2019 at 266.8 yards per game on the ground. But Ohio State fell to 87th this past season at 138.8 yards per game, the worst mark under Alford. He has coached several high-profile running backs, including Ezekiel Elliot, J.K. Dobbins, Trey Sermon and TreVeyon Henderson, and was set for a talented rushing attack this season with Henderson scheduled to split carries with Ole Miss transfer tailback Quinshon Judkins.

Speaking with the media for the first time since Alford's departure on March 19, Day said Ohio State is conducting a deliberate search for a new running backs coach, with Day leading the charge and offensive coordinator Chip Kelly and the team's tailbacks providing input.

"I was made aware last week, and now we're in the process of identifying replacements," Day said. "We're excited about the group that we've already identified, and it's going to be a thorough process. The good news is we're not in a situation where we have to make a quick decision based on recruiting or the portal or anything like that."

Ohio State reportedly had interest in hiring former NFL running back and current Oklahoma running backs coach DeMarco Murray before he signed a new three-year deal to stay at his alma mater, while other names thrown out for the position include Temple head coach and former Ohio State running backs coach Stan Drayton, Alabama running backs coach Robert Gillespie and Notre Dame running backs coach Deland McCullough.

Additionally, as Buckeye Sports Bulletin was going to press, it was reported by several outlets that the team was beginning to focus in on Oregon running backs coach Carlos Locklyn to fill the same position with the Buckeyes.

For the latest on Ohio State's coaching staff, be sure to visit BuckeyeSports.com.



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### Tressel Helping Guide Day's Special Teams Philosophy

Ohio State is without a special teams coordinator entering this season, and with Day seeking solutions for how to handle the game's third phase, he turned to the guru of Ohio State special teams in former head coach Jim Tressel.

"Quite honestly, I made a bunch of calls to a bunch of coaches," Day said. "One in particular that resonated with me was when I talked to Coach Tressel, and he shared with me that he did this when he was here. He assigned one of the special teams to each of the coaches."

Special teams were one of Tressel's calling cards during his time leading the Buckeyes from 2001-10, when he was known for his brand of "Tresselball" that emphasized field position and strong defense. His success in special teams came not from having a dedicated coach, but from assigning various aspects of special teams to different assistant coaches, allowing the entire coaching staff to have involvement.

"It got great buy-in from the players because as a player, you want to really impress your position coach, you want to push your coordinator, you want to impress the head coach," Day said. "Sometimes, the special teams coordinator can be a little bit low down the line. But when your position coach is up there, and he's coaching special teams, and having the head coach being very much a part of it with them, it provided a lot of buy-in from the players."

Day is putting that into practice with his current team. Safeties coach Matt Guerrieri and linebackers coach James Laurinaitis

are focused on the punt and kickoff units, while tight ends coach Keenan Bailey and wide receivers coach Brian Hartline are in charge of punt and kickoff return. The entire special teams unit is overseen by analyst Rob Keys.

"(Keys) can really do a lot of the legwork in terms of off-the-field stuff, breaking down the film, helping get things organized for us as we get into the meetings," Day said. "But if you've sat in on one of our punt meetings, Matt Guerrieri is running that entire meeting. We get into punt return, Keenan will be up there. He'll be up there with help from Brian Hartline."

### Day Pulls Back Curtain On OC Kelly's Hiring

During his March 19 press conference, Day also shed light on the team's decision-making process regarding hiring an offensive coordinator.

When asked why former Ohio State offensive coordinator/quarterbacks coach and current Boston College head coach Bill O'Brien – who left Columbus after just a few weeks with the team – was initially Day's first choice instead of Kelly, he said the decision was merely a matter of poor timing for his former colleague, with things conversely falling into place at the right place at the right time with O'Brien.

"It was more of a timing issue the first time around with Chip," Day said. "Bill became available, and we made that move and felt like the timing was right on that. For Chip as well, there was a lot on his mind. He had to kind of sort through all that. And then by the time Bill had left, I think he was

in a different place based on a lot of things.

"It wasn't like I ranked them in that order. I kind of said, 'Hey, this is the A-list right here. If we can get one of those, we're where we need to be.'"

Day didn't list his preferred candidates, but he did mention that his program placed each candidate in three categories based on their fit and qualifications, with the most qualified going in the program's "A-list" group and the rest either fitting into the "B-list" or "C-list."

Day also revealed that had the Buckeyes been down to their C-list coaches, he would've reassumed play-calling duties. This is something that Day previously indicated he wanted to take a step back from as he embraces more of a CEO-type of role as head coach.

"I felt like if we got to the C-list, I was probably just going to go back to calling plays," Day said. "I wasn't going to force it at that point."

### WR Smith Loses Black Stripe After Fourth Spring Practice

It did not take long for Smith to earn – or lose, in Ohio State's case – his stripes. Smith, the nation's consensus top-ranked prospect in the 2024 recruiting class, shed his black stripe on March 21 after just four spring practices, becoming the fastest player – either freshman or transfer – to receive the honor with the Buckeyes and become an "official member" of the team.

"First I want to thank God, Coach Hartline, Zone 6 and BIA for going up against y'all every day," Smith said upon receiving the news that he had shed his black stripe

in a video that was posted on Twitter.

While a freshman's first spring practice usually allows for time to acclimate to college football, Smith losing his black stripe this early is a strong indication he could factor in as a starter as a true freshman for the Buckeyes at wide receiver. Ohio State is expected to start Egbuka and sophomore Carnell Tate – with Egbuka potentially starting inside – but junior Jayden Ballard and Inniss also figure to factor in for the third starting spot.

Smith was not the only new Buckeye to shed his black stripe. Downs also earned the distinction after just his sixth practice with the Scarlet and Gray on March 26. Downs, like Smith, has also received praise from his team since joining the Buckeyes in January.

Judkins did not trail far behind, with the announcement of his lost black stripe coming just hours after Downs, while Howard and Seth McLaughlin lost theirs on March 30. All told, six Buckeyes – including sophomore wide receiver Brennan Schramm, a preferred walk-on from Medina, Ohio – have shed their black stripes this spring.

### TE Hart Headed To Colorado

Former Ohio State tight end Sam Hart announced on March 15 that he is transferring to Colorado, a move that will allow him to return to his home state and be led by head coach Deion Sanders. Hart, an Aurora, Colo., native who entered the transfer

Continued On Page 6

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# OHIO STATE INSIDER

Continued From Page 5

portal on Jan. 16 after spending three seasons at Ohio State, has two years of eligibility left with the Buffaloes.

Hart joined Ohio State in 2021 as a four-star recruit out of Aurora (Colo.) Cherokee Trail, choosing to play for the Buckeyes over LSU, Notre Dame, Michigan and Texas, among others. After redshirting his freshman season in 2021, he earned limited action during his final two seasons with the program, appearing in three games in 2022 and just one contest last year.

With Hart expected to be behind the likes of senior Gee Scott Jr., redshirt freshman Jelani Thurman, sophomore Bennett Christian and senior Patrick Gurd, among others, in the tight end depth chart and freshmen Max LeBlanc and Damarion Witten also joining the fold this season, Hart chose to leave Columbus and earn more playing time at Colorado.

## Fields Lands In Pittsburgh, Other Buckeyes Find New Homes

The 2024 NFL offseason has been an eventful one across the league, and one of the more talked about moves involved a former Buckeye.

The Chicago Bears on March 16 traded former Ohio State quarterback Justin Fields to the Pittsburgh Steelers in exchange for a sixth-round pick in next year's draft that turns into a fourth-round pick if Fields plays at least 51.0 percent of Pittsburgh's snaps at quarterback this season.

"Can't say thank you enough to the city of Chicago for taking me in and embracing me," Fields wrote on Twitter. "Thank you to the entire Bears organization and ownership for allowing me the opportunity to be a part of such a historic franchise. ... Ready for this next chapter!"

It was a move that many around the league anticipated, as the Bears – who drafted Fields with the 11th pick in the 2021 NFL draft and where he played three seasons with the franchise – hold the No. 1 pick in this year's draft, which they are expected to use to select former USC quarterback Caleb Williams.

Fields showed flashes but ultimately struggled to find consistent play with Chicago in his first three NFL seasons. He started 38 games for the franchise and completed 578 of his 958 passes (60.3 percent) for 6,674 yards, 40 touchdowns and 30 interceptions while rushing for 2,220 yards and 14 more scores. He joins a Steelers quarterback room that added former Seattle Se-

ahawks and Denver Broncos quarterback Russell Wilson, who is expected to be the starter.

Fields was not the only Buckeye on the move this offseason, with several former Buckeyes signing new NFL contracts since Buckeye Sports Bulletin last went to press.

Former Ohio State defensive end Chase Young also found a new home, signing a one-year, \$13 million contract on March 19 with the New Orleans Saints. Young, a former No. 2 overall pick by Washington in 2020, was traded last season to the San Francisco 49ers, a move that reunited him with former Ohio State teammate Nick Bosa and allowed him to play in the Super Bowl against the Kansas City Chiefs.

Other notable Buckeyes who reached new deals were safety Vonn Bell, who signed a one-year, \$1.21 million deal with the Cincinnati Bengals; offensive lineman Jonah Jackson, who signed a three-year, \$51 million deal with the Los Angeles Rams; cornerback Jeff Okudah, who signed a one-year, \$4.75 million deal with the Texans; and wide receiver Curtis Samuel, who signed a three-year, \$24 million deal with the Buffalo Bills.

## Former Buckeyes Take United Football League Stage

Several former Ohio State players are also taking to the gridiron this spring, where they are competing in the brand-new United Football League, which was created following the merger of the XFL and USFL in December.

The UFL, whose season kicked off on March 30 and consists of eight teams split between the USFL Conference and XFL Conference, features six former Buckeyes on five different rosters, all of whom joined the league in January after the UFL's initial player dispersal draft.

Headlining the group of participating Buckeyes are former Ohio State cornerback Cameron Brown, wide receiver Binjimen Victor and defensive tackle Taron Vincent, who are on the Arlington Renegades, Birmingham Stallions and San Antonio Brahmas, respectively.

While Brown, who played for Ohio State for five seasons from 2018-22, begins the season on the Renegade's injured reserve list, Victor and Vincent are both on their respective team's active 50-man rosters. Three other former Buckeyes are also on UFL rosters this season: former Ohio State tight end Marcus Baugh (Birmingham Stallions), cornerback Gareon Conley (D.C. Defenders) and defensive tackle Antwan Jackson (St. Louis Battlehawks).

The UFL's regular season will run until June 2, with the conference championships occurring on June 8 and 9 followed by the first-ever UFL Championship on June 16. The UFL's games will be televised all season on ESPN, FOX and ABC.

## Vrabel Joins Browns' Staff As Consultant

Former Ohio State linebacker and assistant coach Mike Vrabel, who was fired as head coach of the Tennessee Titans in January, will return to his home state to join the Cleveland Browns as a coaching and personnel consultant.

Vrabel, who was named NFL Coach of the Year in 2021, was fired after going 54-45 with three playoff appearances in six seasons, though the Titans combined for just a 13-21 record over the past two seasons. Vrabel interviewed with several teams this offseason following his firing by Tennessee, including the Los Angeles Chargers, Atlanta Falcons and Carolina Panthers, but he was not able to land any of the available head-coaching positions that have since been filled.

Before taking on the head-coaching position in Tennessee, Vrabel was an assistant coach with the Houston Texans from 2014-17 and at Ohio State from 2011-13, kept on as an assistant by new head coach Urban Meyer. As a player at Ohio State, Vrabel was a consensus All-American in 1996 and two-time Big Ten Defensive Lineman of the Year from 1995-96.

He got into coaching after a career in the NFL that spanned 14 seasons and three teams, including a run from 2001-2008 with the New England Patriots in which he won three Super Bowls and was a first-team All-Pro selection in 2007. He was later inducted into the Patriots' Hall of Fame.

## FBS Conferences Sign New CFP Contract

The nine FBS conferences and Notre Dame agreed on March 15 to a new College Football Playoff contract that will both raise the revenue share for the Big Ten and SEC and increase the likelihood of a 14-team playoff starting in 2026.

The terms of the contract include a guarantee that the CFP will continue to have a

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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.

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## Back To Biweekly For The Print BSB

Buckeye Sports Bulletin's winter/spring schedule is back to its traditional biweekly print timetable after a quirk that left a three-week gap since our March 12 mailing. The next print edition of BSB will be mailed on April 16 and contain coverage of the annual spring game. Remember, the BSB mailing schedule is always listed in the credit box on page 3 of each issue, and readers will receive 24 print issues, as listed.

There is bound to be plenty of Ohio State football news leading up to the spring game, as well as portal news, recruiting news, and coverage of the spring sports, such as baseball. There is no reason to wait for your next Buckeye Sports Bulletin to get the latest stories. All the news is available in real time at the electronic BuckeyeSports.com, free to all subscribers.

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

Along with daily posts, we offer reprints from the Buckeye Sports Bulletin archives as part of our popular Reprint Thursdays. Also, staff members man the Fan Forum, where the discussion between staff and readers is bound to be lively leading up to and immediately after the spring game.

We want to remind readers that the complete edition of each BSB is posted at BuckeyeSports.com immediately upon completion of the paper, making the site a must for the readers having continuing mail problems. While there were a full three weeks between this issue and the last BSB, there were a stunning number of readers who did not receive their papers in a timely fashion. This electronic 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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12-team playoff format for the next three seasons, but the expectation is that a 14-team playoff will be implemented in 2026. ESPN's Heather Dinich and Pete Thamel reported that the format of the expanded 14-team playoff is still unknown, but there is a strong preference for a field that features the five highest-ranked conference champions and nine at-large teams.

The contract also guarantees that the Big Ten, SEC, ACC and Big 12 champions along with the highest-ranked non-Power Five champion will all receive playoff berths.

Under the current 12-team format, the CFP will take the five highest-ranked conference champions and the seven highest-ranked at-large teams, with the top four seeds receiving a bye and first-round games being held on the campuses of the better-seeded teams.

In addition to the likely expanded playoff format, teams in the SEC and Big Ten – who have expanded to 16 and 18 schools, respectively, for 2024 – will also each receive more than \$21 million annually under the new CFP agreement, while the ACC will receive around \$13 million per school and schools in the Big 12 and Notre Dame will each get around \$12 million. Group of Five schools will earn roughly \$1.8 million each.

As for the Pac 12 – which will consist of just Oregon State and Washington State in 2024 – new commissioner Teresa Gould did not sign the new CFP contract. CFP executive director Bill Hancock told ESPN that both programs are eligible to participate in the playoff the next two seasons and there is a “path for them to participate in the CFP” in the future.

Both Oregon State and Washington are set to receive \$360,000 under the new contract, just a fifth of what the Group of Five schools will make each year and down significantly from the between \$6-7 million the schools received in previous years.

### Former McGuff Assistant Mitchell Passes Away

Former Ohio State women's basketball assistant coach Mark Mitchell, the father of

the Buckeyes' all-time scoring leader Kelsey Mitchell, died March 26 at the age of 56.

Mitchell was an assistant coach for head coach Kevin McGuff's first five seasons from 2013-18 and helped lead his daughter to one of the all-time great Ohio State careers in his final four years on staff. With Mitchell on staff, Ohio State secured two Big Ten regular-season championships, a Big Ten tournament title and four NCAA tournament berths.

“As a program, we are devastated to hear of the passing of former assistant coach Mark Mitchell,” McGuff said. “Mark was extremely dedicated to his family, friends and players. His passion for young people allowed him to positively shape the lives of so many who had the privilege of playing for him. We mourn with Cheryl, Kelsey, Chelsea, Kevin, Cam and the extended family. Mark will always remain in our thoughts and prayers.”

Mitchell also made his mark in the Ohio high school head coaching ranks, where he served as the head boys basketball coach at Taft High School in Cincinnati from 2003-13, leading the Senators to a Division III state title in 2011.

Following his five-year stint at Ohio State, Mitchell returned to the Queen City to become boys basketball head coach at Western Hills High School for one season in 2018 before taking on the head coaching job at Wilberforce University in 2020.

Among those who expressed support for the Mitchell family over social media were former Ohio State assistant coach Jeff Boals and players Jared Sullinger, Sam Thompson, Linnae Harper, Ohio State women's basketball assistant coach Wesley Brooks and South Carolina women's basketball head coach Dawn Staley, among many others.

### Coleman OK After Saving Parents From House Fire

Former Ohio State wrestler and UFC Hall of Famer Mark Coleman may be known for his brute strength and success in the octagon, but on March 12, he served the

role of hero.

That day, the 59-year-old Coleman, who won an NCAA championship while wrestling for Ohio State in 1988 before embarking on a long professional career in mixed martial arts, successfully rescued his parents from a fire in their Fremont, Ohio, home. He was then airlifted to ProMedica Toledo Hospital in critical condition to be treated for smoke inhalation, where he spent three days in the hospital before since returning home.

“My lungs are sore, my eyes are burned, but I'm very much alive and well,” Coleman said in a video released on his Instagram account on March 17. “I feel so blessed it's in my higher power's hands. He wants me to move forward today and I am. ... We lost everything, but by the grace of God, my higher power, I was able to somehow save my parents and myself.”

Coleman paid a visit to his childhood home on March 12 before a significant fire erupted around 4 a.m. With Coleman, his parents and his dog, Hammer, in the house at the time, he entered and exited the home on four separate occasions. While Coleman was able to successfully carry his parents out of the fire, his dog did not survive the fire.

In the wake of the tragedy, Coleman's daughter, Kenzie, organized a GoFundMe to help pay for medical expenses while also providing financial relief to his two daughters who took off work to be with their father. The page raised nearly \$66,000 in one day and had surpassed \$121,000 when BSB went to press.

“It truly is a miracle, and it is in (God's) plans to move forward,” Coleman said on social media. “Thanks to all the medical staff involved in saving my life. They are all heroes as well.”

### Pistol Team Wins Fourth Consecutive Championship

The women's hockey team and wrestling's Jesse Mendez were not the only Ohio State programs or individuals to secure national championships since BSB last went to press.

The Buckeyes' pistol team took home the Intercollegiate Pistol Championship Trophy on March 25, placing first overall at the national championships held in Columbus with an aggregate score of 6,736, 296 points ahead of runner-up Navy. The victory gave head coaches Ryan Tanoue and Emil Milev their fourth consecutive national championship.

Ohio State won in dominating fashion, sweeping the top three spots in two out of the three team and individual events. Ohio State secured three individual championships, with Ada Korkhin ranking first in air pistol (575) and Katelyn Abeln assuming the top spots in both sport pistol (581) and standard pistol (563).

With the resounding victory, Ohio State has now won five of the last six national championships in pistol and secured nine total pistol titles since 2000.



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# Diebler's Leadership Outweighed Experience

Continued From Page 1

to the NIT, the end-of-season stretch under Diebler marked a dramatic turnaround for the program that was largely unforeseen in the middle of February.

For Bjork, what was once an inspiring story became an impressive showing of leadership and coaching ability that he could not dismiss, causing him to believe that the right person for the job was not a big name outside of the program, but rather a Buckeye lifer who was right on campus.

"We laid out a very specific profile about what we envisioned for Ohio State basketball," Bjork said during Diebler's introductory press conference on March 18. "Passion; energy; create a program; identity; a track record of player development; a recruiting machine, especially here in the Midwest and in the state of Ohio; strong leadership skills that can galvanize Buckeye Nation; someone who understands and also can capitalize in modern-day college athletics; born-to-coach. Jake Diebler fits each one of those characteristics, and then some.

"As we looked at all the characteristic, we just thought, 'Look, if we know where we're going, let's pull the trigger.' He's the real deal. He knows how to live at the highest level of college basketball. He's seen it in action. So to me, that made up for the lack of long-term head-coaching experience, because he just fits where we are in this program right now."

## Checked Every Box

While Bjork and Ohio State may have begun the search with the intention of hiring a big-name head coach, the incoming athletic director said it became clearer with each passing game that Diebler possessed the qualifications needed to thrive as the Buckeye leader, starting with his sound in-game performances.

Bjork, who admitted that he was on a sabbatical in February when he first received a call from Smith to begin a head-coaching search, said Diebler initially flashed with his ability to make the proper in-game adjustments and transform his team into a more high-paced and high-intensity operation, two qualities that he thought allowed him to out-scheme some of the more experienced coaches in the Big Ten.

During Ohio State's 6-1 run, Diebler and the Buckeyes bested veteran coaches such as Izzo, Purdue's Matt Painter, Nebraska's Fred Hoiberg and Iowa's Fran McCaffrey, among others.

"I wasn't breaking down film, necessari-

ly," Bjork said. "But you see the momentum swings. Do you call the right timeout? Do you sub? Do you make a defensive adjustment? He made the defensive adjustments. Playing guys who maybe hadn't played a lot through the year, getting more rotation and getting the style of play, that's coaching. You're going to recruit to that and use that as a selling point."

"To me, you have the wherewithal or you don't. If you break down the moves that were made during games, he outcoached coaches that have been doing this a long time. Clearly, he has his dad in his ear and sort of that born-to-coach mentality."

Diebler's in-game coaching caught the attention of Bjork, but the veteran administrator was also impressed by the way he carried himself on and off the hardwood.

Bjork said that despite not being in Columbus until March 1, when he began serving as an advisor to Smith, he saw Diebler emerge as a selfless and fearless leader who can handle the responsibilities that come with being the singular face of a program, a trait that he thought became even more apparent once he arrived on campus and met with Diebler himself.

"I saw it in that Purdue game, and I thought he was actually going to play," Bjork said. "I think he was on the court a couple times. To me, you saw the energy, you saw the connectivity, you saw that he was maybe going to open up the style of play a little bit more. So you saw all of those things. And then, when I came to the game on March 3, I saw the environment and what it's capable of. I saw the way we played. We hammered (Michigan) in the second half. That was awesome to see. So all of those elements just came together.

"People are born to do this," he added. "There's innate leadership abilities that you see manifest in conversations, in interactions, the way he carried himself in the media. He never made it about self-preservation, that he's doing everything to manipulate it to get the job. He was doing everything to do what's best with the program at this time."

While Diebler possessed the core traits Bjork was looking for in a head coach, Bjork still wanted to ensure that no stone was left unturned during his first coaching search at Ohio State. Utilizing the search firm Collegiate Sports Associates – the same company Ohio State used to hire Bjork from Texas A&M in January – Bjork said he spoke either virtually or in person with nearly 50 candidates, many of whom were qualified coaches whom the university could have

hired.

"We could've waited on a lot of people," Bjork said. "There are a lot of people who wanted this job. All the people that we talked to – the 49 coaches, the people that we met with in person, the people that we met with on Zoom – this was an attractive job."

Bjork declined to go into specifics on the names that received the most consideration for the position – the only reported conversation being with May. But he did say that many of these candidates lacked another core characteristic for the position that Diebler championed during his interview, that being familiarity with the program.

Bjork noted that Diebler further separated himself from other candidates with his rich knowledge of the expectations and culture surrounding Ohio State basketball, one that could allow him to better and more quickly relate to his players, fan base and university. Relatability was a trait Bjork said several former Ohio State players also valued in a head coach, a key piece of intel that helped him identify Diebler as the right person for the job.

"It's the connectivity that he already has within the program," Bjork said. "The fact that his brother played here, so he knows how to relate to that former player group and he knows how to relate to the fans. He can galvanize that, because he's got the wherewithal. He's not afraid to go out and carry himself in public.

"You could go after a big name, but if it takes them six months to figure the place out – this is a massive place. You have to have the wherewithal to understand, 'OK, football is football here.' We want basketball to be at a big stage. Diebler has seen that here. You bring somebody else in, do they have that wherewithal? Do they understand the dynamics? Do they understand that you have to relate to people here?"

"It's not just, 'I'm going to go coach on Saturday or Tuesday night and then go back home.' No, you have to do all the things that it takes to connect here. Jake has that vs. somebody that may not have seen it or relate to that."

With Diebler meeting each of the criteria Bjork laid out for a potential head coach, Ohio State soon turned its attention to finalizing a deal. As the season neared its end and the Buckeyes awaited their postseason fate following the loss to Illinois on March 15, Bjork said he and the university worked quickly to officially name Diebler the program's head coach, an effort that he thought needed to be a swift process to give the players and program full transparency as they entered a hectic period of postseason play and potential offseason changes.

"(March 16-17) is a key weekend," Bjork said. "You have Selection Sunday. You have the transfer portal. We wanted to make a postseason run, but I knew that you had to have some kind of clarity going into this weekend and going into this week.

"There are a lot of jobs open, so if we homed in on the right person, let's just pull the trigger and let's make it happen. Let's provide clarity for our roster. Let's provide clarity in recruiting, let's provide clarity in the transfer world, that this is our guy, and let's go."

"We could have waited into April, and then we might be standing here with who? With what? Did our team play in the NIT? All of those uncertainties were part of the factor that said if he checks the boxes as far as the profile, this is our guy."

Bjork and Ohio State put those words into action on March 16 when he and Dan Cloran, executive associate athletic director for development and sport administration, paid a visit to Diebler's house to finalize the terms of the deal to make him Ohio State's next head coach.

While Diebler admitted that the meeting was an anxious few hours, Bjork said that the time he spent that night with his soon-to-be new coach, his wife, Jordyn, and their three children, Jackson, Jaymes and Jessa, only further validated his decision to hand Diebler the keys.

It allowed him to see Diebler as not just a men's basketball coach, but an authentic and faith-driven family man, all of which were qualities that – along with his other basketball-related traits – made him the right person at the right time for Ohio State.

"When Dan and I went to the Diebler house – I'll try not to get emotional about this – to make the official offer, I asked Jordyn and Jake, 'Are you ready to be the first family of Ohio State basketball?' Of course, they said yes," Bjork said. "This was what was really neat. The passion, the spiritual faith, the family, the vision, the energy, all of that was present in that moment. That's what it's all about. This is a family, and that's what it means to be a Buckeye.

"In that moment, it really struck me that this is a calling for Jake Diebler – Ohio native, son of a coach. He had to work for everything that he's achieved. Hard work defines Jake Diebler. He played the game at a high level. His brother played here. So really, in the living room, in the kitchen, it just made all of this feel right. I'm so confident in the future of Buckeye basketball. It's time to bring out those ladders. It's time to bring out those scissors."

## Time For Work

Diebler's blazing start as the Buckeyes' interim head coach earned him a five-year, \$12.5 million deal, a long-term commitment for Ohio State that Bjork indicated was made due to his new leader's strong vision for the future of Buckeyes' basketball.

"It may be easy to say that we just walked right down the hallway – it's an easy pick and we could just name him our head coach," Bjork said. "But we pressed Jake on what it takes to build championships, what it takes to make changes as the leader of the program. We asked him about modern-day athletics.

"We have a program that is ready to excel. We have a program that's ready to take flight. And with the right kind of adjustments, we know that we could cut down nets and raise those ladders that we expect. Every time we checked the profile, the values of Ohio State, the beacon was Jake. It just kept pointing to the fact that he's the right guy."

But what exactly is Diebler's vision for the future of Ohio State basketball?

For Diebler – who acknowledged af-

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ter his introductory press conference that things feel different now that he has shed the interim tag – a successful tenure may start with him being able to retain the core of his roster next season. This is an area where Holtmann – who was named on March 14 as the new men's basketball coach at DePaul – often struggled during his seven-year tenure with the Buckeyes, with players such as D.J. Carton (Marquette), Meechie Johnson (South Carolina) and Jaedon Ledee (San Diego State) all transferring from Ohio State and having success at other schools.

With the transfer portal becoming an increasing factor in college basketball due to the advent of NIL and high booster influence, Diebler will have to work to secure at least another year's worth of commitment from his most productive players from this past season. It's a group that includes starting sophomores Roddy Gayle Jr., Felix Okpara and Bruce Thornton along with upstart freshman Devin Royal, all of whom will likely garner transfer interest from other programs this offseason. The Buckeyes have already lost one impact player to the portal in freshman guard Scotty Middleton, who announced on April 1 that he is transferring.

Diebler acknowledged the importance of keeping these Buckeyes on the roster next season, saying that while other responsibilities of being a full-time head coach such as recruiting and player development are integral to a program's success, roster retention might be at the top of his priority list this offseason.

"We're going to continue to view through the lens of what best sets us up to achieve our goals," Diebler said on March 18. "High school recruiting is really, really important in that. So is the transfer portal. And then roster retention is probably of greatest importance."

"(Gayle, Thornton and Okpara) have poured their heart and soul into this program," he added on March 26. "I think they've really embraced the way we've wanted to play, the changes we've made. They've played well in their own way, and they're growing. I'm proud of them for that. Those three are a big part of the leadership, too, of us finishing the way that we have."

Aside from player retention, Diebler's next step as head coach will be finalizing a staff for next season and beyond. When asked about what he values in a coaching staff, Diebler said that he would like to assemble a group of experienced assistants who can add to the tight-knit culture he is creating and be well-versed in the areas he may struggle as a first-time head coach.

Diebler said this type of synergy between head coach and staff can allow him to continue utilizing the strengths he had as an assistant coach in the head coaching chair, with building relationships through recruiting at the top of that list.

"There's a character profile that is kind of a non-negotiable," he said. "We want to bring in guys who are relatable, who care about helping guys grow on and off the court. Great work ethics. And there are some great (assistants) who are already here.

"But a lot of it is being honest with myself about what I do well. I love to recruit. I love to get in the gym with players. I realized I can't do that at the same capacity that I may have before, but I want to build a staff that



SONNY BROCKWAY

**NEW PRIORITIES – Moving from assistant coach to head coach will bring about many new responsibilities for newly-appointed coach Jake Diebler, including roster retention and the handling of the program's NIL.**

still allows me to do some of those things. I want to be able to get in the gym and work out with guys. Maybe not every single day like I did before, but certainly regularly.

"I want to be significantly involved in recruiting because the relationship that is formed in the recruiting process – we've gotten to see how impactful that can be. It's a big part of why I think I was able to coach these guys. Certainly, they're great guys and care a ton about Ohio State, but that relationship was a big factor."

Diebler found a significant piece to that puzzle on March 25 when he hired former Ohio State assistant and USC Upstate head coach Dave Dickerson as an assistant, a move that came just two days after former assistant Jack Owens left the program to join Holtmann's staff at DePaul. The 56-year-old Dickerson was previously an assistant on Thad Matta's staff from 2010-17 and an associate head coach for his final six seasons at Ohio State.

Diebler also finished the season out with two other full-time assistants in Brandon Bailey and Mike Netti, while director of professional development Terence Dials and special assistant to the head coach Nick Kellogg also served in coaching roles, though it was not clear as Buckeye Sports Bulletin went to press whether the plan is to have them on staff next season.

Regardless of how his coaching staff or roster fills out in the coming months, Diebler vowed to attack his new role with the same energy and passion he displayed during his previous role as interim head coach. For him, serving the program the best he can is the only way he knows to coach, a showing of authenticity that he is confident will never waver throughout his tenure leading the Buckeyes.

"What drives me is to serve this program as best as I possibly can," he said. "That's not going to change. It's not going to change once we are able to win a championship. That's not going to change when we go through adversity. It's not going to be different five years from now, or however much longer I'm able to serve. Time will change things, certainly, but the motivation behind how we're going to take this program to where it belongs will not."

### A Taste Of Madness

Before even thinking about filling out a staff and retaining his roster for next season, Diebler's first order of business as head coach was to determine how the rest of this past campaign would unfold.

Just hours after Diebler's hiring was announced, the new head coach was tasked with gauging his team's interest in continuing the season into the NIT, where they were to receive a bid to the 32-team field on March 17.

With the finality of the season up in the air, Diebler said he and his staff let the players decide what direction they wanted to take, giving each person on the roster a chance to share their perspective on the situation with the team inside the locker room. After each player spoke, the answer became abundantly clear. The Buckeyes wanted to continue their season into postseason play under Diebler and compete for a championship in the NIT, a nearly program-wide decision that he said was a testament to the character and commitment of the team.

"Most of the guys said the same thing," Diebler said on 97.1 The Fan on March 18. "They wanted to play as long as everybody wanted to play. It wasn't hard to get to the conclusion that this was ultimately what

they wanted to do. It says a lot about the guys we have that they want to play and they want to compete. You're seeing across the country that a lot of teams aren't doing that. Our guys love to play, and they're a really competitive bunch."

Diebler viewed this opportunity to keep playing as a win-win for his program, as it not only would give Ohio State's younger players such as Gayle, Thornton, Okpara and Royal a first taste of tournament play and a chance to continue developing their respective games but also would afford veteran Buckeyes such as Jamison Battle, Dale Bonner and senior forward Zed Key the chance to cut down the nets in their final season with the Scarlet and Gray.

"We have some guys who want to continue to grow as players and gain more experience," Diebler said before the tournament. "All offseason, we'll work and we'll grow. But you can't simulate game reps. We want to get as many game reps that we can get. That's for the young guys. There are also some guys where this is their last college ball. We want to honor what they've done, how they've served this program and finished out the way that they have."

Diebler's words were validated in the ensuing week of postseason play. Earning the No. 2 overall seed in the NIT, the Buckeyes built upon their success from the regular season with an extended run in the bracket, securing first- and second-round victories over Cornell and No. 3 Virginia Tech in front of an inspired Value City Arena crowd before ultimately ending their season in the quarterfinal round to fourth-seeded Georgia at home on March 26.

While the end result may not have been what Diebler and his program envisioned heading into the tournament, Ohio State still managed to pick up a pair of hard-fought postseason wins and extend its season into the final week of March, a reality most would have scoffed at in the middle of February.

For Diebler, the Buckeyes' three-game run in the NIT only added to the foundation and culture he quickly installed at the end of the season, providing the program with great momentum and optimism heading into the new era of Ohio State basketball.

"The way we played, the urgency and the aggressiveness we played with, the toughness we played with, the togetherness we played with, those are things we want to be about moving forward," he said. "We were able to see those things serve us well in the Big Ten and in the postseason. I think that's really valuable.

"We have to be able to bottle that up. And as we transition – after we get a break – as our guys transition to offseason work, we need to remember what that felt like and be able to keep taking it to another level."

The NIT also provided another opportunity for those closely following the team to see what the future of Ohio State basketball can look like under Diebler's leadership, a tenure that could mark the start of a more successful and exciting time for the program.

"I think you can look at these 'X' amount of games and see what he's done to change this program in such a short amount of time," Battle said after the loss to Georgia. "There's no secret sauce, but I've said it a couple of games ago. 'Whatever a coach has to have, he has it.'"

# Styles Adjusting Well In Shift To Linebacker

By **PATRICK ENGELS**

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

For many Division I athletes, a switch to another position during the middle of their collegiate careers may serve as a tall task, one that would require a significant amount of time spent on learning the intricacies of the new role.

That does not appear to be the case for Ohio State junior Sonny Styles.

Styles – who has repeatedly been lauded for his athletic versatility since joining the program as a five-star freshman in 2022 – has had little trouble making the move from safety to linebacker for the Buckeyes this spring, an adjustment that has many of his teammates wondering what took him so long to make the change.

“I mean, he is a linebacker,” fellow junior linebacker C.J. Hicks said on March 21. “Look at him. He was just a linebacker playing safety. He’s 6-4, 235.”

“We always joked about that, because he’s heavier than half the linebackers in the room,” fifth-year linebacker Cody Simon said on March 7. “But for him, he can play any position he wants. He’s that dynamic of a player. Really, it’s my job, physically, to keep up with him, because he’s the most athletic player on the field.”

While it may have been obvious to his teammates that a move to linebacker was in the cards for Styles, that did not always seem to be the case early on in his Ohio State career.

Entering the program as a 17-year-old reclassified freshman out of Pickerington (Ohio) Central, Styles was placed near the back of defensive coordinator Jim Knowles’ safety depth chart behind starters Ronnie Hickman, Tanner McCalister and Lathan Ransom, appearing mostly on special teams his freshman season and recording nine tackles in 10 games.

Styles then saw his role significantly increase his sophomore season, when Knowles tabbed him as the team’s starting nickel safety to open the year alongside free safety Josh Proctor and Ransom at boundary safety.

Playing the first eight games primarily at the nickel before moving to the bandit for the final five contests in the wake of Ransom’s season-ending foot injury against Wisconsin on Oct. 28, Styles emerged as one of the more important and versatile pieces on Knowles’ highly-ranked defense. He finished the season with 53 tackles – a mark that tied for fifth on the team – along with 4½ tackles for loss, two sacks, a pass

breakup and one forced fumble.

It was a breakout season for Styles that caught the eye of his coordinator, who lauded him for the maturity and versatility he showed while tasked with playing multiple positions.

“He’s very mature,” Knowles said last season. “He plays like a veteran. He handles himself like a veteran. I don’t even think about his age or where he is at (on the field) because he acts like a veteran.”

Knowles said Styles’ experiences playing different positions during his first two seasons at Ohio State ultimately set the junior up to make the change to linebacker, as it allowed him to understand the complexities of his 4-2-5 defense from a safety’s perspective before moving closer to the line of scrimmage.

This was a progression that the coordinator added has helped some of his players before they made the move inside. Former Oklahoma State safety-turned-linebacker and current Detroit Lion Malcolm Rodriguez served as the prime example.

“When I first met (Styles), when I first got here, everybody said, ‘He’s going to be a linebacker,’” Knowles said. “But I really wanted to see him at safety first. That’s what he wanted to do. That’s what I wanted to see. I felt long term, in my vision for him, that playing safety early in his career was going to give him a better perspective of the defense.”

“I had Malcolm Rodriguez, who is with the Lions, at Oklahoma State – he’s about half of Sonny’s size – but he started at safety. When he became a linebacker, he understood things a lot better. My vision for Sonny was to start him at safety and then eventually move him down.”

That exact opportunity presented itself in January when Ohio State was able to bring in former Alabama safety Caleb Downs through the transfer portal. The reigning SEC Freshman of the Year led the Tide with 107 tackles last year – 40 more than the next closest tackler – becoming the only freshman to hold the distinction in program history.

With Downs immediately plugging into a starting role at free safety and Ransom and nickel Jordan Hancock both returning to the program for their senior seasons, Knowles made the decision to move Styles to linebacker, where Ohio State was entering this season without starters Tommy Eichenberg and Steele Chambers, both of whom declared for the NFL draft.

For Styles, it was a change that he anticipated he would have to make at some point

during his Buckeye career, and one that he is thoroughly embracing this season.

“There was already a little talk about playing some linebacker before (last) season even ended,” Styles said on March 21. “I was already kind of like – I wasn’t really learning it, no one was teaching me – but I was getting to know linebacker a little bit

just because I knew that I would probably play linebacker at some point.



Sonny Styles

“Obviously, when Downs came here, it’s like, ‘All right, so where can I help the defense the most? If we’re trying to get our best 11 on the field, where can I help

the defense the most?’ I just want to do whatever I can wherever the defense needs me.”

While Styles indicated that he was ready to switch roles this season, he admitted he still encountered some difficulties while making the full-time change. He said it took some time to adjust to the different types of techniques and responsibilities that a linebacker has to embrace, particularly with the increased speed and urgency they need to play with on a snap-to-snap basis.

“It’s less time and space,” Styles said. “It’s less wasted movement. When you’re playing at safety, you can kind of have a little more wasted movement with your feet, you can take longer strides. At linebacker, everything’s short, choppy, (you need to) stay in power, keep your base. That’s just something that every linebacker has to work on, honestly. That’s kind of been a big thing for me. But there’s a lot of things to work on.”

Styles also said he is attempting to gain a better understanding of how Knowles’ entire defense – rather than just the back end of the unit – operates. This includes investing more time into learning about how the interior of Knowles’ defense works, which he admitted was not a primary focus for him when he lined up at safety.

“I didn’t know every little aspect of it,” he said. “I think I’m trying to learn that now. At linebacker, you have to know that more. I think when it’s all said and done, I’ll have a really, really good understanding of the defense and know exactly what everyone’s doing.”

It may take some time for Styles to adapt to these changing responsibilities as he gears up for his first season at linebacker. But to speed up that process, he is looking toward the two men in his life who may know the position best.

Styles indicated that he is leaning on the tutelage of both his father, former Ohio State first-team All-Big Ten linebacker and six-year NFL player Lorenzo Styles Sr., as well as his newly promoted linebackers coach James Laurinaitis, a three-time All-America linebacker at Ohio State and an eight-year NFL veteran, as he adjusts to the new position.

“My father and I watch tape all the time, watch practice,” Styles said. “He was a high-level linebacker, and I’m just getting started with this. He gets a little upset with my footwork and stuff like that. But it’s good.

I get good teaching from him. Obviously, with Coach Laurinaitis – great player, great teaching from him. Coach Knowles, he’s a super smart football mind. I’m getting great teaching all around.”

Regardless of who is helping him learn how to play the position, Styles’ development this offseason has already turned the heads of those around him in practice. Knowles said he feels that Styles has made the necessary adjustments to attack his new role at a high level this spring, which serves as a testament to the unique knowledge of the game he possesses.

“It’s a change for Sonny because he’s playing in the box from a low position instead of dropping in,” Knowles said. “So things happen a lot faster. But he’s reacted superbly. I mean, he’s a guy who has football intelligence. He understands the scheme. He’s played a lot of positions. I think he’s going to be great. Because one of the biggest parts of being a linebacker is you have to know all the pieces around you so you can play fast, and Sonny has shown a lot of that.”

Styles’ teammates have also taken note of his quick-learning mentality in spring, with some of his fellow defenders gushing over the way he has been able to attack his new position.

“It’s not easy,” Simon said “Even (former running back) Steele can tell you. Changing a position in college is not an easy thing. He’s super athletic, and he knows the game really well, so I think he’s coming into the role really well.”

“Moving Sonny down, I think that’s a great move for him,” said senior defensive lineman Tyleik Williams. “He’s a big, athletic dude. He can play in the box. He can play safety. I think that just shows how versatile he is.”

Despite the praise, Styles’ starting role at linebacker this season is still not guaranteed. Both Knowles and head coach Ryan Day indicated that while they are planning to use Styles in many different defensive packages this season, including a three-linebacker scheme that could put Styles at Sam linebacker alongside Simon and Hicks, he will still need to put together a strong performance this spring and summer to beat out Hicks – who was seen taking first-team reps ahead of Styles during the first two spring practices – for the starting Will linebacker role.

“Part of the time they are (competing),” Knowles said. “Part of the time, we’ll have all three of them on the field. There’s a balance there in that they’re competing and they also can be in the same package.”

Regardless of who wins the starting role, those within Knowles’ unit are excited for Styles to move closer to the line of scrimmage and play linebacker this season, a change that they said can help turn Ohio State into an even more formidable unit.

“I feel like that was a great move,” said senior cornerback Denzel Burke. “For him to be in the box, him running sideline to sideline, fit in gaps, I feel like it’s going to be scary for offenses. Especially for his size, he’s like 230, probably runs a 4.3 or 4.4 (40-yard dash). So it’s going to be fun.”

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# 'Freak Athlete' Smith Emerging In First Spring

By GREG WILSON

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

Ohio State freshman wide receiver Jeremiah Smith came out of high school as the top-ranked recruit in the country, a rare feat to accomplish as a pass catcher.

His recruitment came with some drama. Playing at Chaminade-Madonna Prep near Miami Gardens, Fla., in-state schools such as Miami and Florida State were two programs that went hard after him even after he committed to Ohio State, and it seemed like a flip was possible when the early signing period came around on Dec. 21.

When he went to sign during a ceremony at his high school, he had a bag with him that had an Ohio State hat and a Miami hat, but he ended up going with the Buckeyes. It was a decision he said was made at the last second, ultimately deciding to stick with Ohio State because it has a better track record of wide receivers being drafted to the NFL in the first round.

But Ohio State wide receivers coach Brian Hartline, who has quickly become one of the chief wide receiver recruiters in the country, didn't see it that way.

"He never wavered," Hartline said. "His family never wavered. He can say what he wants two minutes before the hat came out, but he always told me the same thing. His parents always told me the same thing. He's been loyal. His family is loyal. They always did what they said, and I can't thank them enough. I'm really excited for him."

Whether he was a real possibility to flip or not, it was known from the beginning of his recruitment that he would be a special talent wherever he landed. His scouting report on 247Sports compared him to NFL wide receiver Julio Jones, one of the best in the league for many years, and he backed that hype up throughout his high school career.

In his senior season at Chaminade-Madonna Prep, the team went 14-0 to win their third straight state championship which he had a big impact on, reeling in 88 catches for 1,376 yards and 19 touchdowns along the way. He also had a rushing touchdown and returned a punt for a score during the season. He had 58 catches for 1,073 yards and 20 touchdowns the year before, already showing he deserved to be the top wide receiver prospect in the country.

Before the Cotton Bowl, Ohio State cornerback Denzel Burke was asked about Smith after he had officially signed with Ohio State, and Burke was impressed. But he wanted to see him do it at the next level before he really gave him any credit for his impressive numbers.

"I have to see him in person," Burke said. "All of that high school stuff is cool, but when you've got an elite corner lining up across your face, let me see what you can do. I heard he's a five-star, he can move. Let's line up and we'll find out."

Now that Smith is actually in practice with the Buckeyes, Burke has turned into a believer and agrees that he is going to be great after he was finally able to see him in person and defend against him. And it took only two practices for him to see that.

"This might be a big statement, but the

way he handles himself and the way he moves and the potential he has, I feel like he might be the next best wide receiver to come through here," Burke said. "I'm really excited to see what he can do. The sky's the limit for him."

When teammates and coaches talk about Smith, the common word that seems to come to mind for almost all of them is "freak."

"Freak. Athlete," sophomore cornerback Jermaine Mathews Jr. said about the freshman. "He's big, strong, fast. A lot of the same things you see in Marvin (Harrison Jr.), but not the same – he's younger right now."

"He's a freak," sophomore quarterback Devin Brown said March 4. "He's going to be next level. That guy handles things the right way, does everything right in the weight room. I was throwing with him yesterday, and every time I throw with him it's like, 'Jeez, this guy's a stud.' He's going to be a freak. He's just so smooth. He's super smooth, super athletic. He's a big kid. He could snag it literally anywhere. He was making a couple of one-handers yesterday. This kid's just freaky."

Plenty of talented wide receivers have come through Ohio State in recent years, with the likes of Harrison, Chris Olave, Jaxon Smith-Njigba, Carnell Tate and Garrett Wilson all gracing the field for the Buckeyes. But none of them were able to significantly contribute as freshmen.

The closer it gets to the season, and the more teammates and coaches talk about Smith, the more it seems like a realistic expectation that he will see the field in his first year at Ohio State given his development since he arrived on campus as an early enrollee.

Senior wide receiver Emeka Egbuka has been through the system, so he knows what it takes to get on the field. He thinks it's possible Smith could do that as a true freshman.

"Logically speaking, you have to understand the offense," Egbuka said. "You have to know the ins and outs, not just your play, but your role in the play and the concept of it all, which takes a little bit to learn, but it's not impossible. You've got to be able to block, go out there and make big plays. But ultimately if you're talented enough, you're going to get on the field."

"I'm not going to say that he's starting as a freshman because that's not for the far future, but if he continues his hard work and his diligence in his craft and he's able to learn the offense, the sky's the limit for him."

Listening to his coaches and teammates, the talent aspect won't be an issue for him. Already as an 18-year-old receiver, he's able to do things that great veterans can do. Hartline said he doesn't need to teach Smith how to do those things, but he does need to explain why the things he does work since he still has so much to learn. Smith has been trying to take it all in.

"I love the way he lifts. I love the way he approaches things," Hartline said. "I love the questions he asks. I love the way he makes mistakes and corrects mistakes. It's very veteran-like. There's so much ball he has to learn. He does things that are good, and I'm like, 'Do you know why that

worked?' and he goes, 'I have no freaking idea.' So trying to teach him all of that, why it works, so then the consistency at which it works goes through the roof."

"I'm very excited and proud of the conversations we're currently having, and I'm excited for them to keep going."

The talent Smith has and the way people talk about him could be an excuse for him to coast and play through his career because people talk about him like he is a guaranteed starter for Ohio State. But that's not the attitude he's had since he joined the program. He is keeping the same mentality that got him to this point, impressing those such as Egbuka.

"There's nothing he really can't do," Egbuka said. "He runs fast, he jumps high. He's strong. He's a natural pass-catcher. He's very coachable. I do my best to uplift the young guys and give them pointers here and there, and he's always willing to listen. He always puts his best foot forward every single day."

Head coach Ryan Day is another person who has noticed not only the talent Smith possesses, but the hard work he puts in to try to continue getting better and how impressive it is for someone so young to have that approach.

"He's jumped right in," Day said. "The talent's there. The thing that's been most impressive to me so far is his discipline that he's already built in his life. Then the skill of playing the position at such a young age as well, and Hartline and everybody will continue to build on that and grow on that."

That work has already paid off, at least as much as it can at this early point in his college career. He became the first player to lose his black stripe in the spring, and in doing so in just four practices, he became the fastest player in program history to achieve that feat.

It's just the first step in what is looking to be a very impressive Buckeye career for Smith, and sophomore wide receiver Brandon Inniss is pushing for that to start sooner rather than later.

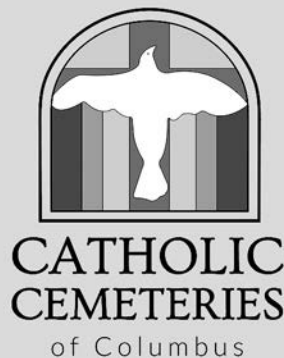


SONNY BROCKWAY

**NOT NORMAL — Ohio State freshman wide receiver Jeremiah Smith has wowed coaches and teammates in his first spring with the Buckeyes, putting him in position to compete for a starting job in his first year.**

"I feel like Jeremiah is a different caliber," Inniss said. "When you watch him, how smooth he is and the physical capabilities he brings to the game, he has to play. Some way, he has to play."

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# Brown, Howard Offer Helping Hand At Pro Day

By **BRADEN MOLES**

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Editor

Former Ohio State quarterback C.J. Stroud threw at each of the Buckeyes' last two pro days, delivering passes for his former teammates in 2022 and going through his own pro day last year in advance of the NFL draft.

But with Stroud no longer throwing passes in Columbus, that responsibility fell to someone else – or in this case, two others, when Ohio State quarterbacks Devin Brown and Will Howard, locked in a battle with each hoping to become the Buckeyes' starting quarterback this season, both threw at Ohio State's pro day on March 20.

"We were joking, we were like, 'Oh, I'm sure they'll figure out who the starting quarterback is today, right?'" Howard said. "We were just out there having fun. We don't think about it like that at all. We were just out there competing and trying to help our brothers out who are going to the next level, so that's all it was."

Both signal callers threw routes over air to three former Buckeyes, with tight end Cade Stover, wide receiver Xavier Johnson and Ohio University wide receiver and former Buckeye Sam Wiglusz all taking part in workouts and drills at the Woody Hayes Athletic Center in front of NFL scouts.

It was a unique opportunity for Howard, who appreciated the opportunity to work with some former Ohio State players even though he is in just his first spring with the Buckeyes.

"I know C.J. did it when he was here going into his last year," he said. "When they asked me to do it, I said, 'Absolutely.' Obviously, the guys I threw to are really talented. I never got to throw with Cade or 'X' or 'Wigs.' It was cool to work out with those guys."

Howard threw in drills followed by Brown. While Howard has seen struggles this offseason with accuracy in practice sessions, he appeared to have a better touch on his passes in a limited sample size.

While neither Brown nor Howard's performance at pro day is likely to have any significant bearing on who is under center on Aug. 31 against Akron, those reps will be filed away along with those from the other 15 spring practices when it comes to a final decision. For now, though, Howard had fun throwing the ball around and help-

ing out the receivers.

"It was fun," he said. "It was those guys' day. I was out there to be the home-run derby pitcher. That was the analogy I was using. It was fun for me to get time with them."

Stroud, who has been through this experience twice, said both Brown and Howard looked great during the approximate 17-minute throwing session.

"They looked great," Stroud said. "I had the opportunity to throw to Chris (Olave) and Garrett (Wilson). It's good to feel the 'pressure' of pro day early so whenever they get theirs, they'll do a great job knowing they have experience doing it. I thought they did an amazing job."

## Stroud Returns To Ohio State

Howard and Brown threw during the Buckeyes' pro day, and another former signal caller graced the sidelines when Stroud returned to support his teammates.

Stroud, who is coming off a standout rookie season in the NFL where he led the Houston Texans to a playoff berth and was named NFL Rookie of the Year, said it was "tremendously special" to return to Ohio State.

"I've built a lot of great relationships here that I'll cherish for the rest of my life," he said. "I remember coming here, someone told me, 'It's not a four-year decision. It's a 40-year decision.' For the next however long God allows me to be on Earth, I know that this is a second home to me and I'm proud to be able to come back and still get love. I really do appreciate everyone for watching me now that I'm in the NFL."

Stroud played alongside nearly every pro day participant at one point or another during his three years at Ohio State, and chief among them was wide receiver Marvin Harrison Jr. While Harrison did not do on-field drills – nor did he at the NFL Scouting Combine – it appears most already view Harrison as ready to go at the next level, where he is expected to be the first wide receiver off the board in April.

"Marvin – I was telling someone earlier – he's NFL-ready," Stroud said. "If you were building a prototype guy, a lot of prototype guys don't have the work ethic that he does, so it will take him as far as he wants to go."

"I'm just excited to see him blossom as a man. He's always been a sheltered person, but his personality has kind of picked up. He's a great talent, but he's an even

better person, so I'm excited for him and his family. He has a lot of great football to be played. I'm really just proud of him, and all the work I've seen him put in has been inspiring."

The pro day experience is one Stroud went through himself last season, impressing NFL general managers and head coaches in attendance before eventually being taken second overall by the Texans. While neither Howard nor Brown was participating in his formal pro day – that will come next season for Howard – the opportunity to throw in front of NFL evaluators was an opportunity for both to build momentum for a quarterback battle going into this season.

Stroud himself went through one in 2021 alongside Quinn Ewers, Kyle McCord and Jack Miller, and when it comes to advice for Howard and Brown as they approach the rest of the spring and next season, he said the key will be doing it to improve the team and each other.

"Do it for everybody in the room," Stroud said. "Me, Jack, Quinn and Kyle, we all had really good relationships off the field. We all really wanted to see each other do well. Of course, everybody wanted to play and everybody wanted to start, but it wasn't out of ill will. It wasn't like we were trying to cut each other in line or just be weird. Really, everything was natural, and I think that that's the reason why we've all had some successes."

"I think for those guys, just doing it for the right reasons and just listening to coaching. It's not going to be easy. At one point in your career at Ohio State, people are going to hate you and they're going to talk crazy. But it's all to prepare you for what's to come next."

## Johnson Takes Advantage After Combine Snub

Ohio State had eight players invited to the NFL Scouting Combine in late February, but Johnson was not among them. Facing that type of adversity is nothing new for Johnson, though, who began his career with the Buckeyes as a walk-on before working himself into NFL draft consideration during his six years in Columbus.

"For me, it's been the situation my entire life where it's been an uphill battle," he said. "The Lord puts things in front of you and allows you to show how much you actually trust him. So for me, it wasn't a situation where I shied away or tucked my tail, got down in the dumps. I just had to work harder."

Johnson arrived at Ohio State in 2018 as a utility piece on offense, lining up at running back and wide receiver. He appeared in 17 games over his first two seasons, mostly utilized on special teams with a handful of touches on offense.

But he became a strong locker room presence for the Buckeyes, and he was placed on scholarship midway through the 2021 season. He then caught his first career touchdown pass against Notre Dame in 2022, helping the Buckeyes overcome a halftime deficit.

This past season he was named one of three captains for Ohio State along with

Tommy Eichenberg and Cade Stover. It's been a long road for Johnson, and the opportunity to work out in front of NFL evaluators was a surreal moment.

"You tell the 18-year-old Xavier walking through these doors that's struggling day in and day out to just make it through and keep working, that he would get to this moment right here, it's surreal," he said. "I'm extremely grateful. I'm grateful for the program, grateful for everything that was instilled with me with the Buckeyes."

The work has paid off for Johnson so far. He has a visit scheduled with one NFL team – a meeting the team asked to keep under wraps, perhaps a sign that Johnson is viewed as a valuable, under-the-radar prospect – and has gotten the opportunity through this process to connect with different teams at the next level.

Although Johnson may not end up going in the fourth round or sooner, as wide receivers coach Brian Hartline speculated before last season, it seems likely that someone with Johnson's work ethic will be able to land somewhere this spring.

"I've talked to a lot of teams, a good amount of teams," he said. "It's a feel out process, and I understand that, so it's just being patient and letting the Lord's will play out."

## Other Notes From Pro Day

- With Harrison skipping workouts and the majority of Ohio State's high-profile draft eligibles returning, there were no NFL general managers or head coaches in attendance. This is a stark change from last year's pro day, which had large contingents from several teams – including the Carolina Panthers and New York Giants, though ironically not Stroud's eventual team in Houston – flock to Columbus to watch him throw.

- A handful of former Ohio State players – including defensive backs Marcus Hooker (Youngstown State), Amir Riep (Lincoln), Darryl Sinclair (Ohio Dominican) and Jahsen Wint (Marshall); linebacker Ryan Batsch (Murray State); and Wiglusz (Ohio) – returned to the Woody Hayes Athletic Center to put their skills on display for scouts in attendance.

- Brown and Howard got their chance to throw in front of NFL scouts, while defensive ends Jack Sawyer and JT Tuimololu also gave scouts an advance preview, working out and conducting drills alongside Mike Hall Jr.

- Former Ohio State running back Miyan Williams was unable to participate as he continues to recover from knee surgery. Other Buckeyes who did participate – in addition to all those mentioned above – include linebacker Steele Chambers, offensive lineman Matthew Jones and safety Josh Proctor.

- In addition to Stroud, another former Buckeye in attendance was Dawand Jones, who was taken in the fourth round of last year's NFL draft by the Cleveland Browns and started nearly his entire rookie season at right tackle.



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# Cruise for Cancer Raises High-Water Mark

By **CRAIG MERZ**

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

The 2024 edition of the Buckeye Cruise For Cancer topped the previous 16 with a record \$4.4 million raised as the event continues to evolve.

For the second straight year, there was an inclusive yacht cruise on the Silversea Silver Dawn, with a capacity of 596 passengers. This was less capacity compared to utilizing a luxury liner, as was the case at its inception. But the COVID-19 pandemic hit less than a month after the 2020 cruise and the industry took a severe hit for several years.

In 2022, nearly 2,000 Buckeye fans set sail. Even at that, COVID-19 restrictions limited the capacity to about half of pre-pandemic trips. That prompted Cruise founder Lisa Cisco of Travel Partners in Dublin and her staff to reimagine the Buckeye Cruise For Cancer. After raising a record-setting \$4.3 million in 2023, this year's total was \$4,417,580.

"We raised even more money than in the last year on the big ship, so it makes sense," Cisco said. "After COVID, we didn't know if we could ever fill up a big ship again. You just didn't know what was going to happen, but now we love this."

Over the years, Buckeye Cruise for Cancer has raised \$39.5 million for The Ohio State University Comprehensive Cancer Center – Arthur G. James Cancer Hospital and Richard J. Solove Research Institute. Cisco said there's a reason for the success of the cruise.

"I honestly think it's the family atmosphere," she said. "It doesn't matter who you are. That week, you're on there for one reason: to cure cancer. It doesn't matter if you're Eme-ka Egbuka or Coach (Ryan) Day or little old us, everybody is family for a week.

"I think that everybody comes together. One, you love the Buckeyes. Another, you have a purpose because so many people say that they never really had a purpose. They didn't have any organization they gave to or they just didn't know how to do philanthropy or charitable things. And not only did they get to have fun, but they're raising a ton of money while doing it. I think that's it. It's the camaraderie."

The cruise departed Fort Lauderdale, Fla., on Feb. 17 with stops in Key West, Fla., Turks and Caicos Islands and Bimini, Bahamas, as well as two days at sea before returning to Fort Lauderdale six days later.

As always, the Cruise is football-centric with Day and former head coach Jim Tressel as headliners. There were ex-players such as Zach and Jacoby Boren, Parris Campbell, Bobby Carpenter, Ezekiel Elliott, Archie Griffin, A.J. Hawk, DeVier Posey, Ryan Shazier and Matt Wilhelm, plus former women's basketball player Katie Smith and ex-men's basketball player J.J. Sullinger, among others.

Current Buckeyes besides Egbuka included Denzel Burke, TreVeyon Henderson, Donovan Jackson, Lathan Ransom, Jack Sawyer, Cody Simon and J.T. Tuimolou.

"We had eight current players, and they'll all probably be in the NFL next year so it was pretty exciting," Cisco said. "Coach Day does it right. He has the finest young men. They're such gentlemen, well behaved, well spoken. They're smart kids.

"They're in the NIL world and you'd think they're going to be different, but they're amaz-

ing. They were very humble, did anything we asked. We have in our video, they're with cancer survivors out there in the pool waving to the cameras just like everybody else.

"And we played 'Are You Smarter Than a Fifth Grader?' and they're up there just as competitive as the older guys who've been here before. They went to the cancer survivor breakfast. They did 'How Well Do You Know Your Teammate?' which was incredible. They just got along really well with the older guys. The brotherhood of Ohio State is amazing."

## There For A Reason

One of the highlights of the trip was the testimonial from former offensive lineman Avery Henry. He was diagnosed with osteosarcoma, a type of bone cancer, in December 2022 and announced last May that he was cancer free but had to medically retire because his cancer procedures made it "virtually impossible to play football again," Day said in July.

Henry was one of many cancer survivors on board and delivered an emotional speech.

"He brought the house down," Cisco said. "It was a total game-changer when you have a 20-year-old up there saying, 'I almost lost my life.' His whole story is pretty incredible."

In a video provided by cruise organizers, Henry said, "I want to thank The James for saving my life. Everyone in this room is a fighter. We have what doesn't come naturally to people. The unfortunate scenarios that we have been through are actually blessings in disguise. They taught us things we could have never learned before. Go Bucks."

The auction, which raised \$1.2 million, was



SONNY BROCKWAY

**FOR A GOOD CAUSE — Current Ohio State players (L-R) TreVeyon Henderson, Cody Simon, Emeka Egbuka and Donovan Jackson were among the draws on the Buckeye Cruise for Cancer that raised \$4.4 million for cancer research in February.**

memorable too. Items for bid included a trip to the upcoming Summer Olympics in Paris, an African safari and travel on the team plane to the football game at Oregon in Oct. 12. But the topper for Cisco was a chance for a backyard barbecue with Tressel and his wife, Ellen.

"It went for \$110,000, 22 couples at five grand a piece," Cisco said. "They did it last year and they only wanted eight couples, and this year he said, 'I'm going to raise it to 10.' Then he got up on stage and said 'Watch this. I'm going to do 20,' and then he ended up with 22, so that was pretty incredible."

Thanks to the generosity of the passengers and sponsors, money was raised for the Fund

A Need program to purchase a liquid chromatography-mass spectrometry system for The James. It's a system that will help researchers better understand how food and water can be causes of cancer and how to develop preventive strategies.

The goal of raising \$300,000 was reached, and with a percentage of matching funds from the hospital, the extra \$200,000 was earmarked for next year's funding project. Speaking of 2025, the cruise will be Feb. 27 to March 5 on the SilverSea Moon.

"We're working on doing a theme like reach for the moon, land among the stars or something like that," Cisco said.

## BUCKEYE SCOREBOARD

### 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 (22-14, 9-11)

**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, W 78-69.

**March 3** MICHIGAN W, 84-61; **10** at Rutgers, W 73-51; **14** Big Ten tournament at Minneapolis vs. Iowa, W 90-78; **15** Big Ten tournament at Minneapolis vs. Illinois, L 77-74; **19** NIT vs.. CORNELL, W 88-83; **23** NIT vs. VIRGINIA TECH, W 81-73; **26** NIT vs. GEORGIA, L 79-77.

### WOMEN'S BASKETBALL (26-6, 16-2)

**Nov. 6** Naimsmith 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, W 67-51.

**March 3** at Iowa, L 93-83; **8** at Big Ten tournament vs. Maryland, L 82-61; **22** NCAA TOURNAMENT vs. MAINE, W 80-57; **24** NCAA TOURNAMENT vs. Duke, L 75-63.

### MEN'S ICE HOCKEY (14-20-4, 4-18-2)

**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, L 5-2, L 2-1; **8-10** Big Ten Tournament quarterfinals at Madison, Wis., vs. Wisconsin, W 3-1, L 4-2, W 3-1; **16** Big Ten Tournament semifinals at Michigan State, L 2-1.

### WOMEN'S ICE HOCKEY (35-4-0, 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, W 10-1, W 8-0; **8** WCHA Final Faceoff at Minneapolis vs. Minnesota Duluth, W 5-0; **9** WCHA Final Faceoff at Minneapolis vs. Wisconsin, L 6-3. **16** NCAA COLUMBUS REGIONAL vs. MINNESOTA DULUTH, W 9-0; **22** NCAA Semifinal at Durham, N.H. vs. Clarkson, W 4-1; **22** NCAA Final at Durham, N.H. vs. Wisconsin, W 1-0.

# Alford Not First To Jump Sides In Rivalry

By **MARK REA**

BSB Managing Editor Emeritus

Tony Alford sent shockwaves through the hard-drawn battlelines between Ohio State and Michigan in mid-March when he departed Columbus after nine seasons as running backs coach of the Buckeyes for the same position on the staff new Wolverines head coach Sherrone Moore is putting together in Ann Arbor.

It didn't really matter to Buckeye Nation that the 55-year-old Alford, already on his ninth stop (10, if you count two separate stints at Iowa State) during a coaching career that began in 1993, left for a job that provided him with a longer contract and more money. Leaving for that so-called "team up north" was the unforgivable act of a traitor.

Not that Alford was the first, second or even third to switch his allegiance from one side to the other in what has been deemed the greatest rivalry in American sports. He is at least the 10th man to either play or coach for the Buckeyes or Wolverines and then jump ship to join the archrival program.

The first was George Little, who spent two seasons in the early 1910s as an assistant coach at Ohio State before a three-year stint at Michigan that included the 1924 season as head coach of the Wolverines.

Little was a Washington, D.C., native who played collegiately at Ohio Wesleyan. During his career as a two-way lineman for the Red and Black (they wouldn't be known as the Battling Bishops until the mid-1920s), Little earned distinction on a team coached by future Ohio State athletic director Lynn St. John.

Ohio Wesleyan posted a 17-10 record during Little's three-year career, a mark that included losses each year to Ohio State at old Ohio Field in Columbus – 21-6 in 1909, 6-0 in 1910 and 3-0 in 1911.

Little, who was also a three-year letterman in track as well as student body presi-

dent during his days at Wesleyan, moved to Ohio State following graduation and began studying agriculture. During his first year on campus, he became an assistant on John R. Richards' football staff and helped the Buckeyes win the 1912 Ohio Athletic Conference championship.

The following year, John W. Wilce took over from Richards as head coach and retained Little on staff as Ohio State made the transition from the regional OAC to full-time membership in the Big Ten. The Buckeyes finished that season with a 4-2-1 overall record, including a season-opening 58-0 win against Little's alma mater, Ohio Wesleyan.

His work as an assistant at Ohio State led to Little's first head-coaching job, a two-year stint at the University of Cincinnati, a period during which he also served as head coach of the men's basketball team. In 1916, he became head coach at Miami University, a six-year stay interrupted by two years of service as a U.S. Army infantry captain during World War I.

After compiling a 27-3-2 record at Miami that included two OAC championships, Little caught the attention of longtime Michigan head coach Fielding Yost, who hired him away from Oxford ostensibly to become Yost's hand-picked successor. Little served two seasons on Yost's staff and then took over as head coach of the Wolverines for the 1924 season.

But after guiding Michigan to a 6-2 record – a season that included a 16-6 win at Ohio State in mid-November – Little was on the move again, this time to take over the football program at Wisconsin and to become the school's director of athletics. He spent eight years in Madison before accepting the athletic directorship at Rutgers, a position he held for 22 years.

In December 1953, Little retired as Rutgers AD and began serving full time as executive director of the National Football Foundation and the National Football Hall of Fame (later renamed the College Football Hall of Fame). He remained in that post until his death in February 1957 at the age of 67.

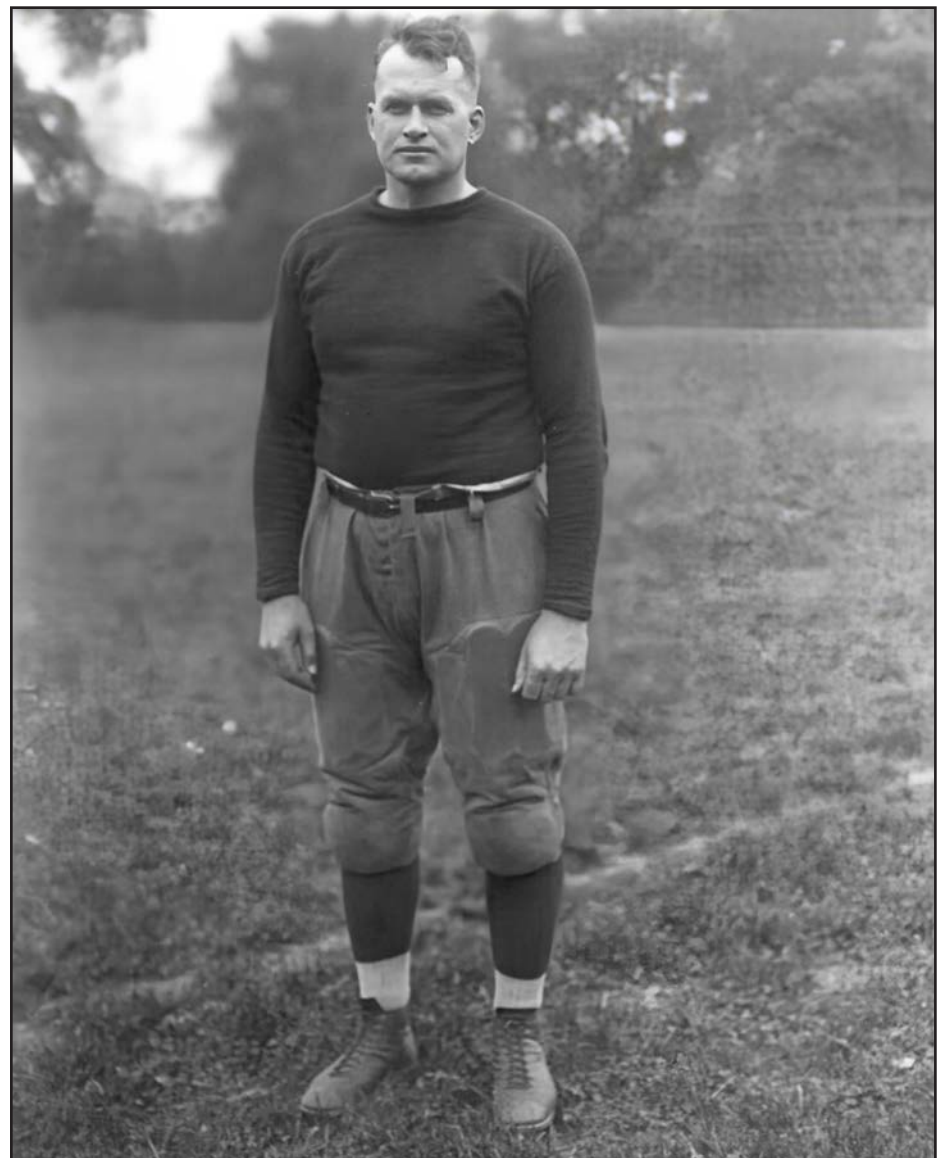
After Little, it would be more than four decades before another defection from Ohio State to Michigan, and this time the Wolverines doubled up – one a former Buckeye captain and the other one of Woody Hayes' most well-liked and valued assistants.

## Igniting 'Ten-Year War'

The 1968 season closed one chapter in the Ohio State-Michigan rivalry. That year, the Buckeyes marched their way to an undefeated season and a national championship, a record that included a 50-14 mauling of the fourth-ranked Wolverines. The victory was the seventh in the rivalry's past nine games, and officials in Ann Arbor had gotten sick and tired of losing to Ohio State.

Hired to turn the tide was 39-year-old Glenn E. "Bo" Schembechler, a no-nonsense coach who had just completed his sixth straight winning season at Miami (Ohio). Although he had no prior affiliation with the Michigan program, Schembechler had an insider's perception into the school's rivalry with Ohio State.

His first coaching job was as a graduate assistant and junior varsity coach with Hayes at OSU in 1951, and Schembechler had lat-



FILE PHOTO

**FLIP-FLOPPING — Former Ohio State assistant coach George Little was the first Buckeye coach to cross enemy lines, later coaching at Michigan for a three-year run, including a stint as head coach in 1924.**

er spent five more years on staff in charge of interior offensive linemen for Hayes. In the university's official media guide for the 1962 season – much of it reportedly written and then personally dictated to a stenographer by Hayes – Schembechler's "evaluation of play execution and personnel is highly regarded by Coach Hayes."

Joining Schembechler on his initial Michigan staff in 1969 was Gary Moeller, who starred at linebacker for Hayes at Ohio State and served as a team co-captain in 1962. After graduation, Moeller played a year of minor-league football before beginning a coaching career at Bellefontaine High School, not far from his native Lima, Ohio, before Schembechler hired him in 1967 for his staff at Miami.

With Schembechler at the controls and Moeller serving as a defensive line coach, the Wolverines engineered one of the most shocking upsets in college football history on Nov. 22, 1969, scoring a 24-12 victory against defending national champion Ohio State that ended the Buckeyes' 22-game winning streak.

The game signified the beginning of what became known as "The Ten-Year War" between Hayes and Schembechler, a decade during which either Michigan or Ohio

State won every Big Ten championship with Schembechler holding a slight 5-4-1 edge in the rivalry.

Schembechler continued to coach the Wolverines through the 1989 season, retiring with a 11-9-1 record against Ohio State. Moeller, who left Michigan following the 1976 season to become head coach at Illinois, returned to Ann Arbor in 1980 and succeeded Schembechler as head coach of the Wolverines in 1990. His five-year mark against his alma mater as head coach was 3-1-1.

Moeller wasn't the only person who played on one side of the rivalry before coaching on the other.

Chuck Heater was a star running back at Michigan during "The Ten-Year War," finishing his career after the 1974 season with 1,995 rushing yards, then the fifth-highest total in program history behind Billy Taylor (3,072, 1969-71), Ron Johnson (2,440, 1966-68), Ed Shuttlesworth (2,343, 1971-73) and Heisman Trophy winner Tom Harmon (2,134, 1938-40).

Heater was born in Weston, W.Va., but attended Columbian High School in Tiffin, Ohio, the same school that produced Ohio State offensive tackle Alan Kline in the early 1990s. While playing for the Tornadoes from

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1968-70, Heater accounted for more than 3,500 total yards and totaled more than 50 touchdowns.

During Heater's varsity playing career at Michigan, the Wolverines enjoyed a 30-2-1 record with each of those three blemishes suffered at the hands of the Buckeyes. As a sophomore in 1972, he rushed for 65 yards on 14 carries during a 14-11 loss in Columbus. The following year, during the famous 10-10 tie in Ann Arbor, Heater accounted for only 12 yards on five carries. As a senior in 1974, Michigan again suffered a narrow defeat, a 12-10 loss at Ohio Stadium during which Heater carried 15 times for 56 yards.

Heater graduated from Michigan in 1975 and spent another year on campus working toward a graduate degree in education psychology before beginning a long coaching career that included three years as defensive backfield coach on Earle Bruce's staff at Ohio State.

The stint included Heater's only taste of victory in the OSU-Michigan rivalry when the Buckeyes took a 23-20 victory in Ann Arbor in 1987. The victory was a bittersweet one, however, since it occurred six days after Bruce had been fired as head coach.

Heater later reunited with Bruce at Colorado State in 1991 and '92, and he also coached with former OSU head coach Urban Meyer on Meyer's staffs at Utah and Florida.

**Crossing Rivalry Lines**

Another of Bruce's former assistants at Ohio State found his way to Michigan later in his coaching life.

Steve Szabo came with Bruce from Iowa State in 1979 and coached interior defensive linemen for the Buckeyes until Bruce relieved him of his duties following the 1981 season, a purge that also included defensive coordinator Dennis Fryzel and defensive backfield coach Nick Saban.

During Szabo's three seasons on Bruce's staff, Ohio State posted a 2-1 record against the Wolverines with the defense allowing an average of only 11.0 points per game.

After leaving Columbus, Szabo crisscrossed the country, taking jobs with three NFL teams as well as nine college programs, including a stint as linebackers coach during Lloyd Carr's final two seasons at Michigan. During those two years, the Buckeyes won a 42-39 shootout in 2006 in one of the more recent "Games of the Century," and they followed with a rain-swept, 14-3 decision in 2007, a game during which OSU running back Chris "Beanie" Wells rushed for 222 yards and two touchdowns while the entire Michigan offense accounted for only 91 total

yards.

Chuck Stobart logged a total of 14 years on the sideline during the OSU-Michigan rivalry – eight with the Wolverines as offensive backfield coach for Schembechler from 1969 to 1976 and six with the Buckeyes from 1995 to 2000. Stobart was in charge of wide receivers for John Cooper from 1995-99 and then served as Cooper's offensive coordinator in 2000.

Stobart, a native of the tiny Ohio River town of Bradbury, Ohio, and a three-sport star at Ohio University, began a 36-year college coaching career at Marshall in 1965. Two years later, he first hooked up with Schembechler at Miami before following the coach to Michigan. During Stobart's eight seasons in Ann Arbor, the Wolverines went 3-4-1 against the Buckeyes.

Stobart left Michigan following the 1976 season to accept the head-coaching job at Toledo, where he posted a five-year mark of 25-30-1. But over his final three seasons, the Rockets were 21-12-1 and captured the 1981 Mid-American Conference championship, the school's first MAC title in a decade.

He also made head-coaching stops at Utah and Memphis before joining Cooper's program in 1995. During his six seasons in Columbus, Ohio State went just 1-5 against Michigan with the lone win a 31-16 decision in 1998.

Four years before Stobart joined his staff, Cooper hired another former Schembechler disciple – a hire that most definitely did not work out the way anyone hoped it would.

Elliot Uzelac had served two separate tours of duty under Schembechler – two seasons during the mid-1970s and five more in the mid-1980s, both times as an offensive line coach. When Cooper hired him before the 1991 season to be his offensive coordinator, Uzelac quickly distanced himself from the easygoing demeanor of predecessor Jim Colletto.

Shortly before the dawn of the 1991 season, star running back Robert Smith quit the team amid allegations that Uzelac had told him that athletics took precedent over academics. Cooper and OSU athletic director Jim Jones tried to get Smith to return to the team, but when Smith said he would do so only if Uzelac were fired, the Buckeyes soldiered on to an 8-4 record without their star tailback.

Shortly after the season, Uzelac was relieved of his duties and Smith returned to the Buckeyes. Smith was eventually a first-round draft pick by the Minnesota Vikings and enjoyed an eight-year NFL career. Meanwhile, Uzelac continued his coaching career unabated,

eventually retiring in his 80s following the 2022 season after three seasons at a Michigan high school.

**Recent Coaching Flips**

More recently, a pair of Michigan assistants jumped to Ohio State following the 2018 season.

Greg Mattison spent 13 seasons over two separate stints and worked for four different head coaches as a defensive assistant for the Wolverines. He was originally hired away from Texas A&M by Moeller to be his defensive line coach in 1992, and he remained in that capacity until Carr took over in 1995 and promoted Mattison to defensive coordinator.

After former fellow Texas A&M assistant Bob Davie was named head coach at Notre Dame in 1997, Mattison moved to South Bend and spent five seasons on Davies' staff and then three more with Davies' successor, Tyrone Willingham.

Mattison served on the same Notre Dame staff with Meyer, who hired him in 2005 to become his defensive line coach and co-defensive coordinator at Florida. Mattison was

helping call the defensive shots for the Gators during their national championship run in 2006 that was capped with a 41-14 Fiesta Bowl blowout of Ohio State.

Mattison also spent three years in the NFL with the Baltimore Ravens before returning to Michigan in 2011 to serve as defensive coordinator for Brady Hoke. He stayed on through the transition from Hoke to Jim Harbaugh before accepting a job from Ryan Day to be co-defensive coordinator of the Buckeyes.

Day actually got a two-fer when Mattison brought with him Al Washington, who had spent one season in Ann Arbor under Harbaugh. A product of Boston College, Washington is the son of former Ohio State linebacker Alvin Washington (1977-80), who still ranks eighth on the program's career tackles list with 345.

Mattison retired following the 2020 season, capping a career that spanned six decades, while Washington left Ohio State after the 2021 campaign to join the staff of former OSU linebacker Marcus Freeman at Notre Dame.

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# Four-Star End Merritt Commits To Ohio State

Ohio State picked up a significant commitment on the defensive side of the ball on March 29, when Bradenton (Fla.) IMG Academy four-star defensive lineman London Merritt (6-3, 250) announced his commitment to the Buckeyes.

## RECRUITING OUTLOOK Braden Moles

Merritt is the No. 101 overall prospect and 10th-ranked defensive lineman in 2025, and he committed during a visit to Ohio State. He was first offered by the Buckeyes last January and has grown his relationship with defensive line coach Larry Johnson, which was a significant part of his interest in Ohio State.

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

Merritt had 31 tackles (four for loss) with five sacks last season at Woodward Academy in Atlanta but will play his senior season at Florida's IMG Academy, which has sent plenty of prospects to Ohio State in recent years.

He is the second commitment on the defensive line for Johnson, who also holds a verbal commitment from Philadelphia Imhotep Institute four-star defensive end Zahir Mathis (6-6, 225).

With a prospect in the fold on the inside and outside, Johnson will likely pursue at least one more end and tackle, with Indianapolis Warren Central four-star Damien Shanklin (6-4, 230), Cincinnati Winton Woods four-star Justin Hill (6-3, 220) and Elkhart, Ind., three-star Mariyon Dye (6-5, 235) targets on the edge and Matthews (N.C.) Weddington three-star Trajen Odom (6-5, 275) and Cleveland Heights three-star Brandon Caesar (6-4, 250) being targeted inside.

### Four-Star Linebacker Alford Pledges To Buckeyes

Merritt was not Ohio State's only pledge on the defensive side of the ball in recent weeks. Vero Beach, Fla., four-star linebacker Tarvos Alford (6-2, 210) announced his commitment to the Buckeyes on March 30.

Alford – no relation to former running backs coach Tony Alford – is the No. 62 overall prospect and eighth-ranked linebacker in 2025, and he chose Ohio State over Florida State, Miami (Fla.), Tennessee and UCF.

"There is a lot of history at Ohio State, and people leave a legacy," he told On3. "I feel like if you go there, you are on the verge of making history."

Much of Alford's recruitment came down to his relationship with linebackers coach James Laurinaitis, who visited Alford twice in January before he was promoted from a graduate assistant. Alford, meanwhile, visited Ohio State last summer and returned this past fall for the Buckeyes' win over Michigan State on Nov. 11.

Alford, viewed as a Will linebacker at

the next level, had an impressive junior season at Vero Beach, collecting 114 tackles (12 for loss), four sacks, an interception and six pass breakups, and he was named TC Palm's Defensive Player of the Year. He spent his sophomore season at John Carroll in Birmingham, Ala., where he had 103 tackles and three sacks.

Alford is the second pledge at linebacker for Ohio State in 2025, joining Akron Hoban three-star Eli Lee (6-3, 215), who joined the Buckeyes' class in October. McKinney, Texas, four-star Riley Pettijohn (6-2, 205) and Dallas Skyline four-star Elijah Barnes (6-2, 225) remain priority targets for Laurinaitis and Ohio State.

### Buckeyes Add N.J. Wideout Jones

A strong recruiting weekend continued for Ohio State, as it added a commitment on March 30 from Wayne (N.J.) DePaul Catholic four-star wide receiver De'zie Jones (6-0, 180).

Jones is the No. 367 overall prospect and No. 49 wide receiver in the class, and he held additional offers from Florida, Michigan State, Ole Miss, Penn State and Texas, among others, with the Nittany Lions viewed as the most significant competition.

"What stands out to me is how much they develop their receivers, and it proves over the years," he told On3. "They produce the best and I want to be next up, so learning from nice players will get me better. Also, they produce tons of (defensive back) talent, so going up against them every day will get me better. The culture over there is beautiful. You can't ask for better."

He was offered by Ohio State in August. He had 52 receptions for 851 yards and six touchdowns last season at DePaul Catholic, building on a sophomore season in which he collected 56 passes for 923 yards and five scores. He lines up for DePaul Catholic both on the outside and in the slot and shows impressive route-running abilities.

Jones is now the lone pledge at wide receiver in Ohio State's class following a decommitment the week prior from Cocoa, Fla., four-star wideout Jayvan Boggs (6-0, 188).

The Buckeyes have hosted (and will continue to host) several notable wide receiver prospects this spring, including Jacksonville (Fla.) Mandarin five-star Jaime Ffrench (6-1, 185) and Sachse, Texas, five-star Kaliq Lockett (6-2, 175).

### Stewart Becomes First Safety In 2025

Ohio State added the program's fourth commitment in three days on March 31, earning a verbal pledge from Wayne (N.J.) DePaul Catholic four-star safety DeShawn Stewart (6-2, 185).

Stewart is the No. 284 overall prospect and No. 24 safety in 2025 and is the teammate of fellow Buckeye pledge Jones. Stewart was offered by the Buckeyes in January.

He had 56 tackles (one for loss) and 19 pass breakups last season for DePaul Catholic and offers versatility for new safeties coach Matt Guerrieri and defensive coordinator Jim Knowles, able to play all over the secondary. As a sophomore, Stewart also

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	
Tarvos Alford	LB	6-2	210	★★★★	Vero Beach, Fla.	
De'zie Jones	WR	6-0	180	★★★★	Wayne (N.J.) DePaul Catholic	
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	
London Merritt	DL	6-3	250	★★★★	Bradenton (Fla.) IMG Academy	
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	
DeShawn Stewart	SF	6-2	185	★★★★	Wayne (N.J.) DePaul Catholic	
Blake Woodby	CB	5-11	175	★★★★	Baltimore St. Frances Academy	

had 26 tackles, six pass breakups and three interceptions.

Stewart is the first pledge at safety in what should be an impressive class for the Buckeyes, with Ohio State and Guerrieri continuing to pursue Olney (Md.) Good Counsel five-star Faheem Delane (6-2, 195) and Cleveland Shaker Heights four-star Trey McNutt (6-0, 180).

### Boggs Decommits From Ohio State

Just as recruiting giveth, recruiting can also taketh away, as the Buckeyes suffered a decommitment on March 26 from Boggs.

Boggs, the No. 189 overall prospect and No. 24 wide receiver in the class, had been committed to Ohio State since October but has since risen up the recruiting rankings and received offers from schools such as Georgia, Miami (Fla.), Notre Dame and Texas A&M.

According to 247Sports, Boggs visited the Bulldogs the weekend of March 29-31, while Miami (Fla.), Missouri, Notre Dame, Oregon and UCF are also in the mix.

Boggs had 93 receptions for 1,504 yards and 24 touchdowns in his junior season, building on a sophomore campaign in which he had 41 catches for 722 yards and six more scores, rising from a former three-star to a top-200 prospect.

### Visitors Set For Spring Game

Ohio State's spring game is now just days away, and the Buckeyes are expected to host dozens of recruits for the annual exhibition at Ohio Stadium on April 13.

Along with summer recruiting camps, Ohio State's spring game is one of the biggest recruiting events on the program's calendar, and the Buckeyes will be rolling out the red carpet for some of the top prospects in 2025 and 2026.

This is the most up-to-date list Buckeye Sports Bulletin had at time of press. But with changes likely to be made to this list – either in the form of new additions or expected visitors not making it – be sure to visit BuckeyeSports.com as the spring game approaches.

Beginning in 2025, Ohio State is expected to host several committed prospects, including Toledo Whitmer four-star offensive tackle Carter Lowe (6-5, 290); Mathis; Houston (Texas) North Shore five-star Devin Sanchez (6-2, 170); Bellefontaine, Ohio, four-star quarterback Tavien St. Clair (6-4, 210); and Baltimore St. Frances Academy four-

star cornerback Blake Woodby (5-11, 175).

The Buckeyes are also expected to host a prospect committed to another school in Buford, Ga., four-star linebacker Jadon Perlotte (6-3, 210), who is committed to Georgia but is expected to be in attendance. Uncommitted prospects expected to attend include Cedar Rapids (Iowa) John F. Kennedy four-star offensive tackle Nick Brooks (6-7, 345); Woodbridge (Va.) Freedom three-star running back Jeff Overton (5-11, 187); Washington, Okla., four-star tight end Nate Roberts (6-4, 235); and Baltimore St. Frances Academy three-star defensive lineman Darrion Smith (6-2, 260).

Roberts is of particular interest to the Buckeyes, because he is one of the team's top targets at tight end in the class. He recently announced his top five schools and had Ohio State along with Oklahoma, Ole Miss, Oregon and Penn State. He is the No. 118 overall prospect and fifth-ranked tight end in the class.

In the 2026 class, expected visitors include Painesville (Ohio) Harvey running back Shahn Alston (5-10, 205); Suwanee (Ga.) Peachtree Ridge four-star cornerback Dorian Barney (6-1, 170); Cleveland St. Ignatius offensive lineman Will Conroy (6-3, 275); Upper Marlboro (Md.) St. Frances Academy four-star safety Jireh Edwards (6-1, 194); Gainesville, Ga., defensive end Xavier Griffin (6-4, 210); Santa Ana (Calif.) Mater Dei five-star wide receiver Chris Henry Jr. (6-5, 185), who is committed to Ohio State; and Carrollton, Ga., five-star safety Zelus Hicks (6-2, 180).

Also expected are Akron Hoban cornerback Elbert Hill (5-10, 170); Cleveland Glenville defensive end Cincere Johnson (6-3, 225); Charlotte (N.C.) Myers Park wide receiver Brody Keefe (6-3, 185); Buford, Ga., four-star defensive lineman Bryce Perry-Wright (6-2, 245); Avon Lake, Ohio, four-star offensive tackle Maxwell Riley (6-5, 263); Vero Beach, Fla., four-star offensive tackle Micah Smith (6-6, 305); and New Orleans St. Augustine five-star defensive lineman Jahkeem Stewart (6-6, 270).

It's likely not a coincidence that many of those prospects in 2026 are in the trenches, as the Buckeyes could be looking to get an early start on the offensive and defensive lines given misses at those positions in the last few cycles. Of particular importance will be Riley, because homegrown offensive tackles – especially one viewed as a top-50 prospect like Riley – can be rare in Ohio, so keeping him home will be a chief priority for Ohio State.



## 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

## How Alford's Departure Impacts Running Back Recruiting

Tony Alford's departure for Michigan was a surprise not only in terms of timing, with Alford leaving after just two spring practices, but also in terms of his destination, with the longtime Buckeye coach leaving for Ohio State's chief rival in the Wolverines.

While most will look forward to the on-field product this year, especially when Alford and the Wolverines visit Ohio Stadium on Nov. 30, there figures to be an impact – for better or worse – on Ohio State (and Michigan's) recruiting efforts.

As it impacts Ohio State in the short term, the Buckeyes do not have any running backs committed in 2025 or beyond. But Alford did lay the groundwork for the next couple of classes, as the Buckeyes have issued 13 offers in 2025 and two to prospects in 2026.

Beginning with the 2025 recruits, the biggest responsibility for Ohio State and the incoming running backs coach will be to close the state borders. This could be especially tough considering Alford has been building a relationship with the likes of Cleveland Villa Angela-St. Joseph four-star Bo Jackson (6-1, 190) and Cleveland Heights four-star Marquise Davis (6-0, 190) for the past few years, something he will try to take advantage of with the Wolverines.

"I've known Coach Alford since my freshman year, and he loves it there and thinks highly of everyone there so far,"

Jackson told 247Sports following a visit to Michigan the weekend of March 22. "It's pretty late in the process for me and with all the changes that happened there I wasn't sure about them. We spent a lot of time on campus yesterday. I loved every minute of it and got to get a real feel for the school and football program."

Ohio State is also involved with some out-of-state prospects, including Santa Ana (Calif.) Mater Dei four-star Jordon Davison (5-11, 203) and Fort Lauderdale (Fla.) American Heritage four-star Byron Louis (5-11, 200), both of whom have also referenced their relationship with Alford in the past when discussing their recruitment.

Ohio State's new running backs coach – whenever he is eventually hired – will have to work hard to build relationships with these prospects in 2025, but there is evidence to suggest the Buckeyes might have needed an upgrade when it came to recruiting the position.

The Buckeyes did secure incoming freshmen James Peoples and Sam Williams-Dixon in 2024, but in recent years, recruiting at the position has left something to be desired. Alford did not sign a scholarship running back in 2023 and signed only Dallan Hayden in 2022.

He did sign TreVeyon Henderson in 2021, but other recent additions such as Evan Pryor (2021), Miyan Williams (2020), Marcus Crowley (2019), Master Teague III (2018) and Brian Snead (2018) have under-achieved once they arrived on campus.

Meanwhile, there have been several notable misses on prospects such as Texas' Bijan Robinson and Florida State's Jaylan Knighton, not to mention late flips in the last few cycles from Mark Fletcher and Jordan Lyle, both of whom landed at Miami (Fla.) after being committed to Ohio State. While it remains to be seen whether Alford's departure will help or hurt Ohio State, the Buckeyes' main priority will be to quickly get a new running backs coach in and on the recruiting trail as a busy summer recruiting season appears on the horizon.

## Sanders Visits For Student Appreciation

Ohio State welcomed double-digit prospects to campus on March 30 for Student Appreciation Day, but chief among them was Charlotte (N.C.) Providence Day School five-star offensive tackle David Sanders Jr. (6-6, 270), the top-ranked tackle in 2025.

Sanders visited Ohio State for last year's spring game, which was his first visit to Columbus. He will also visit Ohio State for an official visit on June 21.

"They're known for making bookend tackles and developing them to be first-round draft picks. I enjoy talking to (offensive line coach Justin) Frye and building the relationship with that coaching staff," Sanders told 247Sports before the visit. "Out of all the schools I'm looking at, I've spent the least amount of time there. I look forward to getting up there and spending more time with them. I really enjoy them and everything they stand for as a program."

Other notable prospects in attendance for Student Appreciation Day included Conroe, Texas, five-star cornerback Dorian Brew (6-2, 185), Delane, Ffrench and Merritt, the latter committing the previous evening.

## Ohio State Offers 2026 Quarterbacks

Ohio State is picking up the pace when it comes to signal callers in 2026. The Buckeyes sent out recent offers to Fort Lauderdale (Fla.) American Heritage's Dia Bell (6-2, 195); Noah Grubbs (6-4, 205) of Lake Mary, Fla.; San Marcos (Calif.) Mission Hills' Troy Huhn (6-4, 205); Cartersville (Ga.) Cass' Brodie McWhorter (6-2, 190); and New Lenox (Ill.) Lincoln East-Way's Jonas Williams (6-3, 185).

Bell is coming off his first season as a starter for American Heritage, throwing for 1,929 yards and 20 touchdowns (with four interceptions) while completing 64.6 percent of his passes. He visited Ohio State for a game this past season and visited for a recruiting camp last summer, where he had the opportunity to throw in front of head coach Ryan Day.

"This has been my dream school for a long time," Bell told BSB after camping with the Buckeyes last summer. "I grew up here. Second grade was when I really got into football, and I lived up here. My dad was working with the Cleveland Cavaliers when LeBron (James) came back, and I just grew with the school as I lived up here."

Grubbs does not hold a composite ranking but does hold offers from Auburn, Duke, Florida, Miami (Fla.), Michigan, Notre Dame, Oklahoma and Penn State, among others. He threw for 3,670 yards and 49 touchdowns as a sophomore.

Huhn threw for 1,623 yards and 16 touchdowns to six interceptions as a sophomore and has picked up offers from Florida State, Notre Dame, Oregon and Penn State, among others.

"It was very exciting," Huhn told

Continued On Page 18

ASK AN ANALYST  
With Bill Greene of BuckeyeScoop

**Running backs coach Tony Alford has left for the same position at Michigan. What did you make of Alford as a recruiter during his time at Ohio State?**

"Boy, it was hit or miss. There were hits, but there were misses, too. There were some dry spells. But overall, if you look at Ohio State during his time, it was really rare that they didn't have a productive running back on the field for them. It's a tough question to answer because I can see both sides of the coin. He's been gone now a couple of weeks, and if you look at the different message boards, you can see people's opinions of him really run the gamut, and I get it. If I was on a debate stage, I think I can take either side and argue it out pretty darn well, either the very successful side or the left a lot to be desired side, so that's a tough one to really evaluate.

"If you look at how Ohio State positioned themselves with him, I think they felt the same way. He didn't get extended in the offseason when some coaches did, but he didn't get fired either like some coaches did. So couldn't you just say Ryan Day pretty much looked at Tony Alford the way everybody else did? Not good enough to get a long extension and a big raise, but not bad enough to get fired, so I think that kind of sums it up."

**Ohio State has been the favorite to land Cleveland Villa-Angela St. Joseph four-star running back Bo Jackson (6-1, 190). Do you think Alford leaving will have any impact on Jackson's recruit-**

**ment and the position as a whole?**

"It's too soon to tell, and we don't know who's replacing him yet. I would put all of those running backs in the uncertain category. They need two in this class, and they've kind of been positioned with Bo Jackson and Santa Ana (Calif.) Mater Dei four-star Jordon Davison (5-11, 203) and Cleveland Heights four-star Marquise Davis (6-0, 190). They've been positioned pretty well in that position, and now with Alford leaving and he's also going to a rival who's just up the road – it's not like he went to San Diego State or Texas Tech – I think it's too soon to tell anything yet with that position.

"The next step is for Ohio State to get the next guy in there. Once you get the next guy in there, is it a guy that already has relationships with Fort Lauderdale American Heritage four-star running back Byron Louis (5-11, 200), Davison, Davis and Jackson, or is it a brand-new guy that has to start over? They have just so much uncertainty. The good thing is nobody's signing anything until next December, so there's plenty of time to build relationships if you're hiring the guy that has no prior relationship with Bo Jackson."

**What impact do you expect Alford to have on recruiting at Michigan?**

"I can't wait to see. It's such a weird dynamic to see a guy – how many coaches have left Ohio State and went to Michigan before? Ohio State has taken coaches from Michigan recently with Greg Mattison and Al Washington. So maybe it's not that big of a deal as we seem to make it. We're going to see what impact he

has with Michigan, and you're going to find out right off the bat with Jackson and Davis. Let's see what happens with those guys. Do they get up there for a visit in the next couple of weeks? It's an interesting one to follow."

**With offensive coordinator Chip Kelly handling much of the running game, should Ohio State be looking to hire a new running backs coach more focused on recruiting?**

"Yeah. That's really the job of the running back coach. He's not designing game plans. If you look at each position on the field individually, I would think running back would be the one that needs the least amount of coaching. You either know how to play that position or you don't. It's really hard to teach someone vision, the instinct you need. Your running back coach is pretty much a recruiter. Just go collect the talent and we'll plug him into the system. They can either play or they can't. It's just a hard position. I think you can take an average quarterback and make him a good quarterback through coaching. I don't know that you could take an average running back and the greatest running back coach in history and make him all of a sudden have vision and know when to cut. It's a position where it's all instinct.

"I don't know of any running back coach in America that is the offensive coordinator. It's kind of a unique position unto itself on the coaching staff where you better be a talent collector. That's what we need you for."

# Ohio State Making Inroads With 2026 QBs

Continued From Page 17

247Sports. "Those are two very high-level coaches (Day and offensive coordinator Chip Kelly) and they developed quarterbacks into the best version of themselves. I am very grateful to have an offer from them. I definitely want to make it (back), hopefully over the summer."

McWhorter has been involved with Ohio State for a while at this point. He was in attendance for last year's spring game and made a visit to campus last fall. He has additional offers from Auburn, Florida State, Georgia, Minnesota and North Carolina, among others.

Williams, meanwhile, visited campus the weekend of March 22, when he received his offer from Day and Kelly, and had previously visited Ohio State last fall. He totaled 2,950 yards last fall and accounted for 31 touchdowns.

## Buckeyes Send Out Additional Offers

In addition to offering the 2026 signal callers, the Buckeyes have sent out a handful of other offers since Buckeye Sports Bulletin

last went to press.

Beginning in 2025, Ohio State offered Princeton (N.J.) Hun School three-star defensive lineman Kole Briehler (6-3, 250) and Westlake Village (Calif.) Oaks Christian four-star defensive lineman Hayden Lowe (6-4, 242). Briehler holds additional offers from Florida, Kentucky, Miami (Fla.), Michigan, Oklahoma, Penn State, USC and Wisconsin, among others, while Lowe is a top-250 prospect and is receiving significant interest from schools like Georgia, Miami (Fla.), Oregon, Texas and USC.

For 2026, Ohio State sent out offers to Las Vegas Desert Pines linebacker Kenneth Goodwin III (6-1, 205); Bradenton (Fla.) IMG Academy cornerback Ksani Jiles (6-0, 175); Santa Ana (Calif.) Mater Dei defensive end Shaun Scott (6-3, 225); and Nashville (Tenn.) Donelson Christian Academy four-star tight end Carson Sneed (6-6, 226).

Goodwin had 40 tackles and six sacks as a sophomore and also holds offers from Georgia, Notre Dame, Ole Miss and Texas A&M, among others. Jiles does not hold a composite ranking but does have offers from Arizona, Florida, Kansas, LSU, Missouri, Notre Dame and Oklahoma, among others.

Scott also does not hold a composite rating, but he figures to rise after a sophomore season with 19 tackles (eight for loss), three sacks, two pass breakups and a blocked punt. He already holds offers from Arizona, Florida, Miami (Fla.), Oklahoma, Penn State and Tennessee, among others.

Sneed is the No. 57 overall prospect and third-ranked tight end in the class. In-state Tennessee figures to have the upper hand in his recruitment.

## Other Notes And Tidbits

- Ohio State hosted Cleveland St. Ignatius three-star athlete Cody Haddad (6-1, 175), a 2025 prospect who decommitted from Wisconsin on April 1, for a visit on March 21. He committed to the Badgers on Jan. 17 and was offered by the Buckeyes just three days later.

- Humble (Texas) Atascocita four-star running back Tory Blaylock (5-11, 190), a 2025 prospect who held an offer from Ohio State, committed to Oklahoma on March 29.

- Nashville (Tenn.) Christian School five-star quarterback Jared Curtis (6-4, 225), a 2026 recruit who held an offer from the

Buckeyes, announced his commitment to Georgia on March 23. He is the ninth-ranked prospect and top-ranked quarterback in the class.

- Cypress (Texas) Cy-Fair four-star defensive lineman Landon Rink (6-2, 270) will announce his commitment on April 3 between Oklahoma, Ohio State and Texas A&M, with the Aggies expected to be his pick.

- USC, a future recruiting and on-field competitor for Ohio State beginning next season, has been on a strong run on the recruiting trail in recent weeks. The Trojans and head coach Lincoln Riley received a trio of blue-chip commitments on March 24 from Austin Warner Robbins, Ga., four-star defensive lineman Isaiah Gibson (6-4, 245), Jacksonville (Fla.) Mandarin four-star safety Hylton Stubbs (6-1, 180) and Manchester, Ga., five-star defensive lineman Justus Terry (6-5, 275).

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

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

### 35 Years Ago — 1989

When Ohio State gave up an average of nearly 400 total yards per game in his first season — almost 200 on the ground and 200 more through the air — head coach John Cooper knew he would be in the recruiting market for defensive standouts.

He was able to sign several outstanding linemen and linebackers and also netted several strong defensive backs. Many of those recruits would have a chance to break into the Buckeyes' lineup as freshmen in 1989, including Darrell Lewis of San Diego.

Signed out of Samuel F.B. Morse High School, Lewis possessed the size, speed and power for which Cooper was looking as he tried to rebuild a defensive secondary which allowed opponents to complete 57.1 percent of their attempts last season for 2,122 yards and 13 touchdowns.

"I don't think anyone was satisfied last year with the way we played on the defensive side of the football," Cooper said. "It was no secret that we needed help in the secondary, and we think the players we recruited, including Darrell Lewis, have a legitimate shot to come in here and play for us this coming season."

### 30 Years Ago — 1994

According to some analysts, the University of Tennessee might have had the best recruiting class in the country. But the Buckeyes were a close second and stole the Volunteers' thunder on a few notable prospects, including Marcus Spriggs.

A 6-6, 285-pound defensive lineman out of Woodson High School in Washington, D.C., Spriggs chose the Buckeyes over Tennessee, Syracuse and Wisconsin. His decision to become a Buckeye took some people by surprise, including Tennessee head coach Phil Fulmer and Woodson head coach Bob Headen.

"I thought he was going to Tennessee. I really did," Headen said. "He was going to cancel his visit to Ohio State, but I told him to take all of his visits. Then, when he came back from Ohio State, he decided that's where he wanted to go."

Spriggs said with all of the opportunity at defensive line for OSU, he couldn't resist the chance to become a Buckeye.

"When I went there I had a good visit. I like the coaching staff, the facilities, the players and the possibility to play early," Spriggs said. "I guess I didn't realize all of the linemen they were losing on defense. When you have a chance to play early in your career, it gives you something extra to shoot for. That's what I'm shooting for now."

### 25 Years Ago — 1999

The various recruiting wrap-up editions started to trickle in. These magazines assessed how schools did with their 1999 classes, and some were already looking toward next year.

The National Recruiting Advisor ranked Ohio State second nationally behind Texas. It also gave OSU high marks for signing the nation's No. 2 running backs crop and the No. 3 defensive backs group.

"Ohio State covered its recruiting needs across the board with

a 24-man class rated second nationally," TNRA wrote. "The Buckeyes especially did well in the secondary, where cornerback Curtis Crosby and free safety Richard McNutt are judged among the very best at their respective spots."

TNRA listed Florida lineman Bryce Bishop as OSU's impact player, saying he could be a "Korey Stringer-type that comes in and competes for an opening right away." It also listed Ohio lineman Adrien Clarke and running back Richard Hall as sleeper signees.

### 20 Years Ago — 2004

Like most of the prospects around the country who had been identified as some of next year's best, Jacksonville (Fla.) Sandalwood running back Maurice Wells had heard extensively from Ohio State. In fact, the university had already offered a scholarship in writing.

Unlike with many top prospects, the Buckeyes may have had an "in" with Wells. The 5-10, 180-pound speedster — who had already been offered by the likes of Florida, Florida State, Georgia Tech, Georgia and Maryland — had lived in Columbus for a time when he was younger and still had numerous family members, including a grandmother and aunts, uncles and cousins on both sides of the family, living close to the university.

"I have a lot of family in the area and really right by the school in Columbus," Wells told BSB. "It would be nice to go there to be with them."

### 15 Years Ago — 2009

Roderick Smith had been rumored to be the next player ready to join Ohio State's class of 2010, but he had some other plans.

The four-star prospect from Fort Wayne (Ind.) Paul Harding had been the subject of reports stating that he would be issuing a verbal commitment in the near future, but Smith told BSB that such rumors were just that.

"The earliest commitment I probably will give will be right after my senior football season," he said. "I'm really not stressing over it too much. I still have one more football season to go, so I'm going to wait until then."

A 6-3½, 215-pound running back, Smith was ranked by Scout.com as the No. 11 tailback in the country. As a junior, he rushed for 1,685 yards and 15 touchdowns, bringing his career rushing total to 5,285 yards. The Buckeyes took notice and became one of three schools to issue him a scholarship offer, doing so in mid-March, a move that caught Smith off guard.

"I didn't know it was going to be so soon," he said. "I was just shocked. I'm a lot interested because I know in the past they've always had great running backs and great linemen that help block. That's what I really like about them."

### 10 Years Ago — 2014

When all was said and done, Jonathon Cooper could have been Ohio's top prospect in the 2016 class. But while Ohio State

was doing its best to keep the Gahanna Lincoln outside linebacker close to home, Michigan was already trying to pry Cooper from the Buckeye State.

The 6-3, 215-pounder recently took visits to both Big Ten rivals. Living so close to Ohio State's campus, Cooper was no stranger to Columbus but was still developing a bond with coaches Luke Fickell and Larry Johnson.

"Being that Ohio State is right down the street, I was able to go there twice in the past week," Cooper said. "Last Thursday, I spoke with Coach Johnson and Coach Fickell. They told me to keep working hard, and they like athletes like me. They said they don't know what position they see me playing but said not to worry about it."

### Five Years Ago — 2019

On March 19, Ohio State's third practice of spring camp featured a priority prospect in attendance when DeaMonte Trayanum returned to campus.

The four-star athlete from Akron Hoban had held an offer from OSU since Jan. 29, 2018, the first of 14 offers, and had made multiple visits with his home-state school since then.

While the Buckeyes were involved with an abundance of running backs for 2020, Trayanum also was an option at outside linebacker and remained a top target, regardless of position. The 6-0, 215-pounder was the 247Sports composite's No. 335 overall prospect, No. 23 running back and No. 6 player in Ohio for 2020.

### One Year Ago — 2023

When Ohio State wants a recruit from Ohio, with rare exception, that prospect usually winds up playing for the Scarlet and Gray. That's been true for as long as trees have been planted in Buckeye Grove.

But that was not the case on March 21, when Cincinnati Moller four-star running back Jordan Marshall (5-11, 193), the No. 91 overall prospect and No. 7 back in 2024, announced he would be playing his college football outside of Ohio.

Even worse, he revealed that he would be taking his skills to Michigan, issuing a significant blow to the Buckeyes' recruiting efforts at the position and in the class.

"Family was the biggest thing for me," he told On3. "Being with (running backs coach Mike Hart's) family and meeting them really meant a lot for me, seeing how much his family means to him and him knowing what family means to me."

"Also, just the community and culture there. It feels like home every time I step into that building, and it's a freaking amazing place. They have one of the best institutions in the world, and I take pride in that and know I have to have a plan after football."

"I think Michigan gives me the best opportunity. Last (reason), they win. I'm trying to play for national championships, not just Big Ten championships."

# Howard Fired From U-M After Disaster Season

Two days after Michigan's season ended with a 66-57 loss to Penn State in the Big Ten tournament, the Wolverines announced the firing of head coach Juwan Howard, who had been at the helm in Ann Arbor since 2019.

## BIG TEN NOTES Greg Wilson

"After a comprehensive review of the program, I have decided that Juwan will not return as our men's basketball coach," athletic director Warde Manuel said. "Juwan is among the greatest Wolverines to ever be associated with our basketball program. I know how much it meant, to not only Juwan, but to all of us for him to return here to lead this program.

"Despite his love of his alma mater and the positive experience that our student-athletes had under his leadership, it was clear to me this program was not living up to our expectations and not trending in the right direction."

Howard released a statement of his own after the news came out.

"My devotion and dedication to this program and, most importantly, to my players and their families provided a challenge that I welcomed and embraced, which required me to grow and expand my capabilities both personally and professionally," Howard said. "My health challenges this past season tested my resolve, but true to the form of a Michigan man, I stood and faced them with the support of my family, players and staff."

The Wolverines finished dead last in the Big Ten with an overall record of 8-24 while going just 3-17 in the conference, giving Howard an 87-72 overall record but just a 49-48 mark in conference play during his time as head coach. Howard previously played at Michigan from 1991-94 as part of the Fab Five, the Wolverines' 1991 recruiting class that also featured Ray Jackson, Jimmy King, Jalen Rose and Chris Webber.

This past season got off to a rocky start for Howard, who sat out for Michigan's first 10 games of the season while he recovered from offseason heart surgery. The Wolverines were off to a 5-5 start by the team he returned on Dec. 16 against Eastern Michigan, but the team won just three more games the rest of the season – 83-66 in his return contest, 73-65 against Ohio State on Jan. 15 and 72-68 against No. 11 Wisconsin on Feb. 7.

In addition to Howard's struggles on the court, he was involved with his share of incidents off the court as well. He was suspended for five games during the 2021-22 season after hitting a Wisconsin assistant coach in the face during a postgame altercation.

And just before Howard's expected return this season, he was reportedly involved in a confrontation with former Michigan strength and conditioning coach Jon Sanderson, who has since left the university. Howard and Sanderson reportedly got into a dispute after Howard's son Jace, a member of the men's team, berated a team trainer, which Sanderson overheard before openly complaining about the team's culture.

After Howard was fired, sophomore point guard Dug McDaniel – Michigan's leading scorer – entered the transfer portal along with freshman guard George Washington III, a former

Ohio State pledge, and sophomore forwards Youssef Khayat and Tarris Reed Jr., who all also announced they would enter the portal. The Wolverines have also had a recruit decommit since Howard was fired, with Bradenton (Fla.) IMG Academy four-star power forward Khani Rooths (6-8, 200) looking for a new school.

McDaniel averaged 16.3 points and 4.7 assists per game but appeared in only 26 of the team's 32 games since he was facing an academic suspension and was allowed to play in only home games once the school's spring semester began. The Wolverines were 0-6 in those road games, going 2-15 overall after McDaniel was suspended.

"Obviously (the season) didn't go as I planned, as we planned," McDaniel said after Michigan's season-ending loss. "I just wasn't handling my business, holding my end of the bargain. I mean, it is what it is."

Washington appeared in 22 games and averaged 1.2 points in 6.6 minutes per contest. Reed averaged 9.0 points and 7.2 rebounds per game in 32 games (31 starts) for the Wolverines, finishing the season with 46 blocks. Khayat got into 17 games, scoring 1.4 points per game and bringing down 1.1 rebounds per outing, playing in just 5.7 minutes per game.

### FAU's May To Replace Howard At Michigan

Michigan announced March 24 that it had hired former Florida Atlantic basketball head coach Dusty May to replace Howard, with May signing a five-year contract with the Wolverines that will average \$3.75 million annually.

"For almost two decades, Dusty May's proven track record as a winner, including Florida Atlantic's magical run to a 2023 Final Four, speaks volumes about him and his coaching," Manuel said. "We are so delighted to welcome Dusty, and his family, to the University of Michigan. He embodies the values of high integrity and outstanding character, coupled with an unparalleled understanding of the game of basketball."

May spent the last six seasons with the Owls in his first head-coaching job and compiled a 126-69 record over that span with two appearances in the NCAA Tournament, including a run to the Final Four as a No. 9 seed in last year's tournament.

They went 25-9 this season and earned another NCAA Tournament berth as a No. 9 seed, suffering a 77-65 loss in overtime to Northwestern in the first round.

Prior to his run at Florida Atlantic, May – a native of Terre Haute, Ind., and a graduate of Indiana University – held assistant coaching positions at Eastern Michigan, Murray State, UAB, Louisiana Tech and Florida and was a student manager under Bob Knight at Indiana.

"The University of Michigan is among the elite institutions in the world, and it is both an honor and privilege to be named its head men's basketball coach," May said. "This is a dream come true for me, my wife, Anna, and my boys Jack, Charlie and Eli."

The news came just a week after Ohio State – which had reportedly had discussions with May for its men's basketball head-coaching position – announced it had stripped the interim tag for head coach Jake Diebler, giving him a five-year deal to coach the Buckeyes.

### Penn State Wrestling Sets Record In Title Win

Penn State won its third straight national championship in wrestling at the NCAA championships in Kansas City, Mo., from March 21-

24, setting a record on the way by scoring 172.5 team points to take the crown. It was exactly 100 points more than second-place Cornell managed, with the Big Red scoring just 72.5 points in distant second.

Penn State's record-breaking win – also the 11th national title in the last 13 seasons, with Iowa (2021) and Ohio State (2015) the only other winners – snapped the previous record set by Iowa in 1986, when the Hawkeyes won the championship with 158 points.

The Nittany Lions – led by head coach Cael Sanderson – sent six different wrestlers to an individual title match, with four of the six coming out with wins. Three wrestlers – Levi Haines at 157 pounds, Aaron Brooks at 197 pounds and Greg Kerkvliet at heavyweight – were the top seeds in their class, and all three came away with national championships.

The other individual winner for the Nittany Lions was ninth-seeded Carter Starocci at 174 pounds, who took down Ohio State's Rocco Welsh – sixth in the class – by a 2-0 decision. Beau Bartlett at 141 pounds and Mitchell Mesenbrink at 165 pounds also advanced to their respective class finals before suffering losses.

### Wisconsin's Storr Entering NBA Draft

Wisconsin sophomore guard AJ. Storr announced March 26 that he will declare for the 2024 NBA draft while maintaining his college eligibility should he opt to return.

"To the incredible fans of the Wisconsin Badgers, as I sit down to write this message, I'm overwhelmed with gratitude for the University of Wisconsin," Storr wrote. "This journey as a student-athlete has been one of the most profound experiences of my life. The unwavering support, guidance, and opportunities I've received from this community have been truly amazing. ... Joining this program under Coach (Greg) Gard has been a dream come true.

"It's been my lifelong ambition to play basketball at the highest level. I find myself at a pivotal moment. I have decided to engage and experience the NBA draft process, all while maintaining my college eligibility. To my family, your unwavering support and encouragement

helped keep alive my dream of one day playing in the NBA."

Storr led the Badgers in scoring this season with 16.8 points per game while adding 3.9 rebounds. It was his first season with the team after transferring from St. John's, where he played his freshman season.

The NBA draft is set for June 26-27 at Barclay's Center in Brooklyn, N.Y., and players have until June 16 to withdraw from the draft. Storr is currently not projected as a first-rounder.

### NCAA Tournament Update For Big Ten Teams

Six Big Ten teams made it into the men's NCAA Tournament and seven women's teams were selected to compete.

On the men's side, only Purdue remained, making the Final Four, and it will play against No. 11 NC State, this year's Cinderella team, for a chance to get to the national championship game. The game was scheduled for April 6 at 6:09 p.m.

Illinois made it to the Elite Eight but lost to the overall No. 1 seed in UConn 77-52, just the latest blowout the Huskies have been on the right end of in March. Northwestern and Michigan State were the other two conference teams that were able to win a game in the tournament, but they couldn't make it out of the second round. Wisconsin was upset by No. 12 James Madison, and Nebraska lost to No. 9 Texas A&M in the first round of action.

In the women's bracket as Buckeye Sports Bulletin went to press, Iowa was the only Big Ten team still with a chance to win it all and was scheduled to play against LSU on April 1 for a chance to make it to its second straight Final Four. LSU is the team that beat the Hawkeyes and Caitlin Clark in the national championship game at the end of the 2022-23 season.

Indiana made a run to the Sweet 16 but had to go up against South Carolina, losing 79-75 to the undefeated Gamecocks. Nebraska and Ohio State both were able to win one game but couldn't make it out of the second round while Michigan, Maryland and Michigan State lost in the first round.

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# Buckeyes Impressed By Diebler's Leadership

Ohio State head coach Jake Diebler has earned a significant amount of praise since he was named interim leader on Feb. 14 (and later full-time head coach on March 17) and that support has been especially voiced by those within the Buckeye locker room.

## COURT REPORT Patrick Engels

Throughout Diebler's 8-3 run as both interim and full-time head coach, many players – most of whom were directly recruited by Diebler in high school or through the transfer portal – were complimentary of the way their coach was able to guide the team through an end-of-season run full of adversity and change.

Sophomore guard and leading scorer Bruce Thornton told the media after the team's Big Ten tournament quarterfinal loss to Illinois on March 15 that he felt his coach made the most of his opportunity in the interim chair despite facing the steep challenge of assuming head-coaching duties following a midseason coaching change.

"It was very difficult to be put in this situation and be the head coach literally out of the womb," Thornton said. "I know it was always his dream, his desire to be a head coach, but he probably never thought that it would be this soon. But he had the opportunity in front of him, and he took full advantage of it."

Fellow sophomore guard and backcourt mate Roddy Gayle Jr. expressed a similar sentiment following the loss to the Illini. Gayle pointed to Diebler's ability to keep his team levelheaded and prepared in the weeks after Chris Holtmann's firing as something that impressed him the most about his coach, an effort that he thinks helped the Buckeyes stay motivated and confident during the final stretch of the season.

"I think Coach Diebler did an amazing job," Gayle said. "He led us. He didn't know what was going on, either. I feel like he did an amazing job of being able to lead us and give us faith and hope to finish the season the way we wanted to and put us in the position we are in."

Diebler's display of leadership and preparedness ultimately helped the 37-year-old land the full-time head-coaching role at Ohio State, a scenario that many thought was unlikely when he first took over in mid-February. But Diebler's new title – which came with a five-year, \$12.5 million contract – did not stop those within the locker room from delivering praise.

One of those players who were most complimentary of Diebler in the days following his hiring was fifth-year guard Jamison Battle. He said Diebler stayed true to his core values while in the head-coaching chair, a showing of authenticity that he added has impressed him since Ohio State contacted him out of the transfer portal.

"You look at what he's done, obviously,

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

### 22-14 Overall (9-11 Big Ten) Final season statistics

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	35-35	1177-33.6	181-424	.427	58-174	.333	130-153	.850	15-114	129-3.7	59-1	168	42	1	41	550-15.7
BATTLE, Jamison	35-35	1099-31.4	179-382	.469	91-210	.433	88-95	.926	42-140	182-5.2	71-1	49	55	8	14	537-15.3
GAYLE JR., Roddy	36-35	1114-30.9	169-376	.449	29-102	.284	119-143	.832	36-129	165-4.6	76-0	110	87	6	27	486-13.5
KEY, Zed	36-2	554-15.4	82-161	.509	3-12	.250	71-100	.710	66-81	147-4.1	72-0	18	29	23	15	238-6.6
OKPARA, Felix	35-34	824-23.5	99-169	.586	0-6	.000	33-56	.589	79-145	224-6.4	100-5	18	34	83	14	231-6.6
BONNER, Dale	36-2	694-19.3	60-183	.328	27-93	.290	30-46	.652	7-75	82-2.3	37-0	43	26	3	29	177-4.9
ROYAL, Devin	33-0	371-11.2	59-116	.509	3-20	.150	34-48	.708	33-45	78-2.4	62-1	12	28	10	10	155-4.7
MIDDLETON, Scotty	30-1	459-15.3	47-118	.398	28-62	.452	10-20	.500	11-32	43-1.4	27-0	20	18	7	11	132-4.4
MAHAFFEY, Evan	36-35	795-22.1	63-146	.432	2-17	.118	26-42	.619	46-105	151-4.2	87-3	60	33	25	37	154-4.3
HARDMAN, Bowen	18-0	76-4.2	11-25	.440	9-21	.429	2-4	.500	0-8	8-0.4	1-0	0	0	0	1	33-1.8
BAUMANN, Colby	4-0	07-1.6	0-0	.000	0-0	.000	5-6	.833	0-0	0-0.0	0-0	0	0	0	0	5-1.3
CHATMAN, Taison	17-0	71-4.2	6-18	.333	4-15	.267	1-2	.500	2-6	8-0.5	9-0	6	9	0	0	17-1.0
PARKS, Austin	9-0	20-2.2	1-1	1.000	0-0	.000	1-2	.500	0-5	5-0.6	3-0	1	1	0	1	3-0.3
ETZLER, Kalen	7-0	14-2.0	0-5	.000	0-4	.000	0-0	.000	1-4	5-0.7	4-0	2	2	0	1	0-0.0
SPENCER, Owen	2-1	06-2.8	0-2	.000	0-0	.000	0-0	.000	0-0	0-0.0	3-0	0	0	0	0	0-0.0
Team									56-52	108				17		
<b>Total</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>7280</b>	<b>957-2126</b>	<b>.450</b>	<b>254-736</b>	<b>.345</b>	<b>550-717</b>	<b>.767</b>	<b>394-941</b>	<b>1335-37.1</b>	<b>611-11</b>	<b>507</b>	<b>381</b>	<b>166</b>	<b>201</b>	<b>2718-75.5</b>
<b>Opponents</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>7275</b>	<b>913-2133</b>	<b>.428</b>	<b>249-717</b>	<b>.347</b>	<b>453-638</b>	<b>.710</b>	<b>376-859</b>	<b>1235-34.3</b>	<b>655-14</b>	<b>429</b>	<b>388</b>	<b>98</b>	<b>183</b>	<b>2528-70.2</b>

he's a leader of men," Battle said on March 19 following Ohio State's first-round NIT win over Cornell. "I think that's what it takes to be a coach in this day and age. He's all about relationships. I know I can speak on it, the relationship I had with him before coming here, and him recruiting me and him getting me here. That was part of the reason I came here.

"He's really never changed over this time. He's always around us. He's always with us. He's coming to the trainer room, seeing what's up, saying what's up to the guys. He's on the court working out with guys. So it's just stuff like that, when you see that, you know he's got it."

Battle also expressed after the season-ending loss to Georgia in the NIT that he is confident the team can continue to build upon the positive momentum they created under Diebler's watch this season and he is excited to see what the Buckeyes can accomplish in the future.

"I know he's not satisfied," Battle said. "He doesn't want to live on these eight games that we've played. He wants to build something himself and start something new, and I think that's what he's going to do. That's the type of brand he is as a person, the type of character he has. So it's exciting to see just because of how much hard work he's put in with us."

### Freshman Guard Middleton Enters Transfer Portal

Ohio State freshman guard Scotty Middleton announced April 1 that he is entering the transfer portal after just one season with the Buckeyes.

"It has been an honor to suit up for Ohio State for this past season," Middleton wrote on Twitter. "I will cherish the memories and relationships I've built forever. I have decided to enter the NCAA transfer portal and go through the NBA draft process while maintaining my college eligibility."

Middleton – who has three seasons of eligibility remaining – joined Ohio State as a four-star prospect out of Sunrise Christian in Wichita, Kan. He appeared in 30 games this season for the Buckeyes (with one start) and averaged 4.4 points and 1.4 rebounds on 39.8 percent shooting in 15.3 minutes

per contest.

He scored what turned out to be a season-high 13 points in the first game of the season against Oakland, doing so on 4-of-7 shooting and adding a season-high eight rebounds. His freshman campaign and Ohio State career were cut short by three games when he missed the Buckeyes' entire NIT run to tend to a family matter.

With both Middleton and Battle moving on from the program, Ohio State is likely to search the transfer portal for a reliable option on the wing, though freshman Devin Royal and sophomore Evan Mahaffey could fill that role and are expected back in Columbus next season.

### Leading NIL Collective Backs Diebler Hire

Ohio State and Diebler also received an important backing from the program's largest NIL collective in the days following the hiring.

The Foundation – the top NIL collective for both Ohio State football and men's basketball that includes five former Buckeye ballers on its board – released a public statement on March 19 saying that it is both excited to work with Diebler and ready to provide the necessary funds needed for both recruiting and the transfer portal to help the program succeed during his tenure.

"We believe in Diebler and have supported him since the beginning," the statement read. "Our group has had several conversations and meetings with (incoming athletic director Ross Bjork) about our relationship with Jake and how he has been great to work with The Foundation.

"We have ample funds raised and pledged from donors who are close with Jake. We are ready to make a big splash in basketball, just like we did for football in January. We're locked and loaded and ready to go. We are going to work with him to bring the first Ohio State championship back to The Ohio State University since 1960. It can happen next season."

The Foundation's strong public backing of Diebler and the men's basketball program could prove essential for the Buckeyes moving forward this season and beyond as they look to both retain their core players

from this past season and bring in high-profile recruits and transfers.

The importance of player retention is something Diebler has consistently stressed since he was officially named Ohio State's head coach, saying that it may even take precedence over other aspects such as recruiting and the transfer portal. This emphasis – coupled with The Foundation's financial support – will be critical in bringing back the Buckeyes' most impactful young players, a group that includes sophomores Gayle, Thornton and Felix Okpara along with Royal, all of whom could garner transfer interest from other teams and their respective collectives. Ohio State has already lost Middleton to the transfer portal.

But The Foundation could also help fortify Diebler's roster by bringing in a group of high-profile impact transfers similar to that of the football team's portal additions this winter, which included projected safety Caleb Downs, quarterback Will Howard and running back Quinshon Judkins, among others.

While Ohio State has yet to show any official interest in specific transfers, the team's top collective has already publicly suggested that they are interested in assisting with the potential reunion between Ohio State and former South Carolina guard Meechie Johnson.

When Johnson – who spent his first two collegiate seasons at Ohio State before playing his next two with the Gamecocks, where he was the team's leading scorer this season at 14.1 points per game – announced his entry to the portal on March 25, The Foundation's official Twitter account made its interest in bringing him back to Columbus known, responding to the announcement of the news with eyeball and Buckeye emojis.

### Basketball Great James Congratulates Diebler

Ohio State's hiring of Diebler also garnered the support of one of the more recognizable names and biggest superstars in the world of sports.

Shortly after Diebler was officially hired as Ohio State's head coach on March 17, four-time NBA champion and all-time NBA scoring leader LeBron

James congratulated the coach on his new gig on his Instagram, sharing a post made by Ohio State's men's basketball account that featured Diebler and writing "CONGRATS DIEBS!!!!" to his more than 159 million followers.

James is no stranger to Ohio State and the men's basketball program. James and his son, Bronny, paid a visit to Columbus in September 2023 to meet with Holtmann and the Buckeyes, who emerged as one of three finalists to sign the high-profile recruit along with USC and Oregon before the younger James eventually signed with the Trojans.

The James family – this time without LeBron – returned to Ohio State this past October as Los Angeles Sierra Canyon three-star shooting guard Bryce James (6-4, 180) – LeBron's youngest son – paid an unofficial visit to Holtmann and the Buckeyes. Bryce was offered a scholarship by Ohio State while he was on campus on Oct. 8, and Diebler was reportedly heavily involved in both Bryce and Bronny James' recruitments.

James, who said on many occasions that he would have committed to Ohio State if he had been required to play a year of college basketball instead of declaring for the NBA out of Akron St. Vincent-St. Mary in 2003, has also gifted merchandise and athletic gear to the program in years past.

## Hardman Enters Transfer Portal

Ohio State sophomore guard Bowen Hardman entered his name in the transfer portal on March 28 after two seasons with the Buckeyes.

Hardman, a former three-star prospect out of Cincinnati Princeton, saw limited action in his short Ohio State career, logging just 3.8 minutes and 1.8 points per game in 25 appearances. He did make a slight impact from beyond the arc in his two seasons in Columbus, however, netting 13 of his 28 three-point attempts, good for 46.4 percent.

While Hardman's defense mostly prevented him from garnering significant playing time from either Holtmann or Diebler, his success as a spot-up three-point shooter did earn him a slight uptick in minutes this season.

Coming off a freshman season when he saw playing time only at the end of games that had already been decided, Hardman earned his first impactful minutes as a sophomore with Holtmann at the helm, logging seven or more minutes in three conference games against Nebraska on Jan. 23, Northwestern on Jan. 27 and Wisconsin on Feb. 13. Hardman's impact was most felt in Ohio State's 83-69 road loss to the Huskers, where he scored a career-high 11 points on 4-of-8 shooting, including 3-of-7 shooting from deep.

Hardman's playing time was diminished when Diebler took over as interim head coach on Feb. 14, with the sophomore failing to earn more than six minutes of action in his final six appearances.

With Hardman leaving the program, Ohio State – barring any further transfers – will have four scholarship players returning to its backcourt for next season, a group that includes starters Gayle and Thornton along with current true freshman Taison Chatman, and will also add Juni Mobley to the group.

## Bittersweet End For Fifth-Year Battle

Ohio State's loss to Georgia in the NIT quarterfinals on March 26 marked the end of the fifth-year Battle's collegiate career, but the disappointing finality of it all did not stop him from reflecting on the joy he experienced while playing the sport he loves.

As the veteran's attempted game-winning three bounced off the rim as the game clock expired – sending the Buckeyes home with a 79-77 loss to the lower-seeded Bulldogs – Battle couldn't help but crack a smile, a reaction that he said expressed the feeling of contentedness he had with his long and eventful college career.

"How can I be mad at that moment?" Battle said. "I've played 100-plus games in college basketball. I've played for five years. I got to play at home. I got to play at Ohio State. I played in the best conference in the (nation). How could I be mad at that? How can I be mad at that one single moment?"

"Yes, there's always going to be an end to something. But I think back on what I did in my college career and the growth that I had, just the times that I had with so many different people. There are so many different people I met. It's just a culmination of those things. You can never take that stuff for granted. And there's no reason for me to sit back and be like, 'Oh, man, it's over.' It's over, but I know there is something in the future for me."

It's been an eventful college basketball career for the veteran Battle – who recorded his 2,000th career point in the first half of the Buckeyes' loss to the Bulldogs – one that includes 138 games played and over 4,800 minutes logged for three different Division I programs.

Despite entering college in 2019 as a zero-star forward out of Minneapolis De La Salle, Battle made his mark at his first stop at mid-major George Washington. There, he quickly became one of the top players in the Atlantic 10, averaging 11.8 points and 5.2 rebounds as a freshman before increasing those averages to 17.3 points and 5.2 rebounds as a sophomore.

Battle's strong start to his career earned him transfer interest from Power Five schools, allowing him to return to his home state and play for head coach Ben Johnson and Minnesota for two seasons. He became one of the leading forces on the Gophers from 2021-23, starting each of his 56 games with the program and averaging 15.1 points and 4.8 rebounds per contest along with 33.9 percent shooting from deep.

But while Battle took pride in playing in his home state for those two seasons, it was his one year in Columbus that he will look back on most fondly. He said after the Georgia game that he enjoyed this season more than any of the previous four due to the chemistry and togetherness that existed on the team.

"We didn't make the (NCAA) Tournament, but in the end, this group is the most fun I've had," Battle said. "This is the most connected I've been with a team. I didn't take it for granted. I lived out every moment. I can't help but be sad that it's over, but be glad that it happened."

For Battle, it is these types of moments that made him proud to represent the Scarlet and Gray for his final collegiate season, a unique experience that he will take with him as he enters the next phase of his basketball career.

"I'm just so thankful that I had the opportunity to come to Columbus, to come to Ohio State and such an immense university," he said. "I felt the support of fans for these last however many games. In the end, I was just so blessed and so fortunate to have a five-year career in college, to score 2,000 points, to win some games and go to the NIT."

## Mobley, White Still Committed To Diebler-Led Program

Following Holtmann's firing on Feb. 14, Ohio State's two signees for the class of 2024 – Mobley (6-0, 150) and Ottawa (Ohio) Glandorf three-star small forward Colin White (6-6, 180) – both indicated that they were committed to the program but keeping a close eye on the program's direction.

That commitment was ensured following news of Diebler's hiring, with Mobley and White both confirming their allegiance to the now-Diebler-led Buckeyes on March 17.

According to The Columbus Dispatch, Mobley – the nation's 50th-best prospect and fifth-best combo guard who committed to Ohio State in October 2022 – and his family met with Diebler in Columbus after the hiring was made, where the high school senior guard doubled down on his desire to play for the Buckeyes.

Mobley's commitment ensures that an elite offensive talent will be joining Ohio State next season. He averaged 19.9 points and 5.0 assists per game for Wasatch Academy during Nike EYBL Scholastic League play.

White, the nation's 184th-best prospect and seventh-best prospect in Ohio, also expressed his allegiance to Ohio State, saying that he is looking forward to learning under the tutelage of Diebler, who was his primary recruiter in the months before White's commitment last August.

"Colin is committed to the Buckeyes and is extremely excited to play for Coach Diebler," Terry White, Colin's father, told the Dispatch. "We are extremely excited for Coach Diebler and his family. The Ohio State University and Buckeye Nation will be proud of the men's basketball program, and we are extremely excited and blessed to be a part of it."

White will enter the program following a sensational senior season and career at Ottawa-Glandorf. He led the Titans to a fourth straight Division III regional championship by averaging 24.9 points, 8.2 rebounds, 3.1 assists and 2.6 points heading into the team's Division III state semifinal matchup against Canal Winchester, an impressive stat line that helped him to be named Ohio Mr. Basketball on March 20.

White – who eclipsed 2,000 career points during Ottawa-Glandorf's 61-59 loss to Canal Winchester on March 22 – is now the 12th Ohio State signee to earn the distinction and the third in four years, joining Royal in 2022 and Malaki Branham in 2021.

"Colin's tough, he's smart, he's versatile," Diebler said on March 22. "I think Colin has a bright future here in this program. What I love about him most is he loves this place. His high school career is impressive. To go to four straight semifinals, that's pretty rare."

With both Mobley and White now set to play for Ohio State, Diebler said his program is adding two high-character and talented individuals who both bleed scarlet and gray, a reality that he said gets him

excited for the potential of this Buckeyes' squad next season.

"Both of our freshmen coming in – (White) and Juni Mobley – they love Ohio State," Diebler said. "And they care a great deal about this place and this program. Aside from their abilities – they're both talented, certainly – that excites me the most."

## Holtmann Hired As DePaul's Head Coach

It took exactly one month for Holtmann to find a new home. The former Ohio State leader was named on March 14 as the next head men's basketball coach at DePaul, a reported six-year deal that will allow him to rejoin the Big East coaching ranks and begin turning around a Blue Demons program that is coming off the worst season in program history.

"I am very excited about this opportunity to be the head men's basketball coach at DePaul," Holtmann said in a statement. "During this process, I was extremely impressed with the commitment, eagerness and vision of (DePaul athletic director) DeWayne Peevy and President (Robert) Manuel to build a successful Big East basketball program. My wife, Lori, and our daughter, Nora, look forward to getting to Chicago and spending time in the DePaul community. We can't wait to get to work!"

Holtmann, who was fired by Ohio State and athletic director Gene Smith on Feb. 14 following a stretch of nine losses in 11 games, joins a DePaul program that finished the season with a 3-29 record and 0-20 conference record, both of which were the worst marks in program history. The Blue Demons fired head coach Tony Stubblefield on Jan. 22 after three losing seasons and are seeking their first NCAA Tournament appearance since 2003-04.

"There will be difficult days," Holtmann said at his introductory press conference on March 18. "And as (Peevy) said to me yesterday when I arrived, (I'm) ready to help build this brick by brick. There will be difficult days when you're competing at the highest level. I see these challenges – we see these challenges, our family, our staff – as (a) great opportunity. ... A great opportunity to hear our names called on Selection Sunday for the first time in a couple of decades. We will get there."

Holtmann will look to put DePaul back on the map in the Big East, a league where he has had previous success leading Butler. The former Buckeye coach racked up a 70-31 record and three straight NCAA Tournament appearances while leading the Bulldogs from 2014-17, a run that also included him winning Big East Coach of the Year in 2016-17.

The hiring makes DePaul the fourth Division I program Holtmann has led in his 14-year head coaching career, joining Gardner-Webb of the Big South Conference (2010-13), Butler and Ohio State (2017-24).

In his seven seasons leading the Buckeyes, Holtmann amassed a 137-86 record and took the program to the NCAA Tournament in four of his first five seasons, with the lone missed appearance occurring in 2020 when the NCAA canceled the Big Dance due to COVID-19. But his tenure was ultimately defined by a poor stretch of play from 2022-24, where he held a 30-30 overall record and a 9-25 mark in Big Ten play before his dismissal.

# Diebler Leads Ohio State To NIT Quarterfinals

By **PATRICK ENGELS**

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

Ohio State continued its upward trajectory since Buckeye Sports Bulletin last went to press, earning three postseason wins in five attempts to extend its season into late March.

The Buckeyes, who named Jake Diebler as the program's 15th head coach on March 17, went 1-1 in the Big Ten tournament held in Minneapolis, securing a wire-to-wire upset victory over Iowa on March 14 before ultimately falling to Illinois on March 15.

The Buckeyes' run in the Big Ten tournament – along with their stretch of six wins in eight attempts under Diebler's leadership – was not enough to secure a berth in the NCAA Tournament, but it did earn them a No. 2 seed in the NIT. There, the Buckeyes won their first two games, taking down Cornell on March 19 and Virginia Tech on March 23 at Value City Arena before falling to Georgia in the quarterfinals on March 26 at home to end their season.

In all, Diebler finished with an 8-3 overall record in his first stint in the head-coaching chair, including a 2-1 record as Ohio State's full-time head coach following his promotion.

## Bucks Handle Iowa To Advance In B1G Tourney

Ohio State (20-12, 9-11) kept its NCAA Tournament hopes alive March 14 at the Target Center in Minneapolis with a 90-78 win over Iowa (18-14, 10-10) in the second round of the Big Ten tournament.

The 10th-seeded Buckeyes, who never trailed in the contest against the seventh-seeded Hawkeyes, shot a stellar 51.7 percent from the field (31 of 60) and 55.0 percent from three (11 of 20) while holding a 37-16 edge in bench points.

"I'm really proud of how connected our team was on both sides of the ball," Diebler said after the game. "We knew this was going to be a 40-minute game, and we knew Iowa was capable of going on big runs. But I wanted to stay aggressive. I felt like our guys stayed together and stayed aggressive for 40 minutes."

Both teams showed no nerves at the start of this quasi-NCAA Tournament elimination game, with the Buckeyes and Hawkeyes exchanging blows in the game's first minutes to lead to a 15-15 tie with 12:19 to play in the half after a Patrick McCaffery layup. Ohio State – which made 13 of its first 18 shots and each of its first five attempts from three – began to create some separation as the half progressed, going on a 10-2 run to go up 25-17 on a Scotty Middleton three and later stretching its lead to 31-22 with 7:40 left following a Zed Key layup.

Iowa answered with a 9-3 run, and after two Buckeye triples from Minneapolis native and freshman guard Taison Chatman and sophomore guard Roddy Gayle Jr., the Hawkeyes scored five straight to trail 40-38 with just 54 seconds left in the half. But a three from Middleton – his third of the half – followed by a Gayle block on the other end gave the Buckeyes a 43-38 lead at the

break.

Ohio State shot a strong 60.7 percent from the field (17 of 28) and 72.7 percent from three (8 of 11) in the first half. Iowa also was sharp on offense, making 14 of its 26 attempts in the half (53.9 percent) and five of its nine tries (55.6 percent) from three.

The hot three-point shooting continued for both squads coming out of halftime. They combined for four threes before the first media timeout, and Ohio State led 51-48 with 15:45 left. Iowa's offense cracked first with just two makes in its next seven attempts along with three turnovers, allowing Ohio State to create some separation and go up 67-56 with 10:54 left on a layup from Key.

The Hawkeyes made four free throws to trail 67-60, but that was the closest they would get the rest of the night. Ohio State forward Jamison Battle scored on the next two possessions, including an old-fashioned three, to give the Buckeyes a 73-62 lead with 8:59 left, and after the Hawkeyes scored on back-to-back possessions to trail 73-65, Ohio State closed the door on any Iowa comeback with a 17-13 stretch to close out the contest.

"I'm not an expert on all of these metrics and analytics," Diebler said. "But I know there's not a team right now that is more connected and has more momentum than what we have. We have an opportunity tomorrow to take it up to another level."

Ohio State was led by Battle, who scored each of his 23 points in the second half on 6-of-12 shooting and grabbed a team-high nine rebounds. Bruce Thornton (14), Middleton (11) and Gayle (10) each scored in double figures, while Thornton also dished out a game-high nine assists.

Iowa was led by junior forward Payton Sandfort, who scored 19 points on 5-of-13 shooting, including 4-of-8 shooting from three. Tony Perkins (13), Ben Krikke (13) and Owen Freeman (10) were also in double figures. Freeman pulled down nine rebounds, but the Buckeyes held a 42-36 advantage on the glass.

## NCAA Dreams Dissolve In Quarterfinal Loss To Illinois

Ohio State (20-13, 9-11) saw its NCAA Tournament hopes fade away March 15 at the Target Center, suffering a 77-74 defeat to Illinois (24-8, 14-6) in a Big Ten tournament quarterfinal matchup that had the Buckeyes in the lead or tied for all but 1:32 of the second half.

The Buckeyes, who held a second-half lead that was as high as 10 points, led Illinois 67-62 with 5:12 left but missed eight of their final 11 shots and were held scoreless in the final 1:44 of game action as the Fighting Illini took control.

Ohio State was also called for 27 personal fouls compared to just 13 whistled on Illinois – the second-largest foul disparity in any Big Ten game in the last six seasons – allowing the Illini to hold a 32-13 advantage in free-throw attempts and a 21-10 margin in points from the line.

"I'm really proud of how our guys fought all the way until the end against who I think is one of the top 10-to-15 teams in the

### Ohio State 90, Iowa 78

March 14, 2024  
Target Center • Minneapolis

	1	2	F
Ohio State (20-12, 9-11)	43	47	90
Iowa (18-14, 10-10)	38	40	78

Ohio State	Total	FG	FT	Reb.	A	PF	Pts.
Battle	30	6-13	9-9	2-7	2	3	23
Thornton	33	4-9	3-5	0-6	9	1	14
Gayle Jr.	34	4-7	1-3	0-4	4	2	10
Okpara	21	2-6	0-0	1-4	0	5	4
Mahaffey	22	1-5	0-2	2-5	1	2	2
Middleton	16	4-4	0-0	0-1	0	1	11
Royal	17	3-3	2-3	3-2	0	3	8
Key	11	4-6	0-0	1-2	0	3	8
Bonner	13	2-4	2-4	0-0	2	1	7
Chatman	3	1-3	0-0	1-0	0	0	3
<b>Totals</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>31-60</b>	<b>17-26</b>	<b>10-32</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>90</b>

**Percentages:** FG: 51.7%. FT: 65.4%. **Three-point field goals:** 11-20 (Thornton 3-5, Battle 2-4, Middleton 3-3, Bonner 1-3, Chatman 1-3, Gayle 1-1, Mahaffey 0-1). **Team rebounds:** 1. **Blocked shots:** 5 (Okpara 2, Gayle, Mahaffey). **Turnovers:** 11 (Royal 3, Battle 2, Middleton 2, Thornton, Gayle, Key, Team). **Steals:** 4 (Middleton 2, Bonner 2).

Iowa	Total	FG	FT	Reb.	A	PF	Pts.
Sandfort, Pa	32	5-13	5-6	0-6	3	4	19
Perkins	33	3-8	6-8	0-4	7	4	13
Krikke	23	5-9	3-5	2-0	0	2	13
Freeman	24	4-9	2-4	3-6	0	3	10
Dix	32	3-8	0-0	2-4	2	2	7
McCaffrey	24	3-6	0-2	0-2	2	4	7
Harding	17	1-3	2-2	0-1	5	2	5
Dembele	11	2-5	0-0	0-2	0	2	4
Sandfort, Pr	4	0-1	0-0	0-0	0	0	0
<b>Totals</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>26-62</b>	<b>18-27</b>	<b>11-25</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>78</b>

**Percentages:** FG: 41.9%. FT: 66.7%. **Three-point field goals:** 8-21 (Sandfort, Payton 4-8, Dix 1-5, McCaffrey 1-2, Dembele 0-2, Perkins 1-1, Harding 1-1, Sandfort, Pryce 0-1). **Team rebounds:** 4. **Blocked shots:** 4 (McCaffrey 2, Sandfort, Payton, Dix). **Turnovers:** 8 (Perkins 6, Harding, Freeman). **Steals:** 3 (Freeman, Dix, Harding). **Officials:** Comer, Ek, Szelic. **Attendance:** N/A.

### Illinois 77, Ohio State 74

March 15, 2024  
Target Center • Minneapolis

	1	2	F
Ohio State (20-13, 9-11)	29	45	74
Illinois (24-8, 14-6)	31	46	77

Ohio State	Total	FG	FT	Reb.	A	PF	Pts.
Battle	26	8-16	4-4	3-0	0	4	21
Thornton	37	8-14	2-3	1-2	10	3	20
Gayle Jr.	30	4-10	1-1	2-5	1	3	9
Okpara	24	2-4	0-0	2-8	1	5	4
Mahaffey	11	0-1	0-0	0-2	1	5	0
Key	23	2-6	3-5	4-4	0	3	7
Royal	19	3-7	0-0	1-1	0	4	6
Middleton	16	2-4	0-0	0-1	2	0	5
Bonner	14	1-4	0-0	2-2	0	0	2
<b>Totals</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>30-66</b>	<b>10-13</b>	<b>14-26</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>74</b>

**Percentages:** FG: 45.5%. FT: 76.9%. **Three-point field goals:** 4-15 (Thornton 2-4, Battle 1-4, Royal 0-2, Middleton 1-1, Gayle 0-1, Okpara 0-1, Key 0-1, Bonner 0-1). **Team rebounds:** 2. **Blocked shots:** 5 (Okpara 4, Key). **Turnovers:** 11 (Gayle 3, Thornton 2, Key 2, Okpara, Mahaffey, Royal, Team). **Steals:** 6 (Thornton 2, Battle, Mahaffey, Key, Middleton).

Illinois	Total	FG	FT	Reb.	A	PF	Pts.
Shannon Jr.	36	8-20	1-1	2-1	3	4	28
Rodgers	32	5-8	2-4	5-5	1	1	12
Domask	36	3-16	0-0	0-2	4	1	7
Hawkins	29	2-4	3-5	5-2	2	1	7
Guerrier	20	0-1	0-2	0-4	0	3	0
Dainja	20	7-10	4-8	2-6	0	2	18
Goode	9	1-2	0-0	0-1	2	0	3
Harmon	13	0-1	2-2	0-1	0	1	2
Gibbs-Lawhorn	4	0-0	0-0	0-0	0	0	0
Moretti	1	0-0	0-0	0-0	0	0	0
<b>Totals</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>26-62</b>	<b>21-32</b>	<b>19-25</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>77</b>

**Percentages:** FG: 41.9%. FT: 65.6%. **Three-point field goals:** 4-15 (Shannon 2-7, Domask 1-5, Goode 1-2, Hawkins 0-1). **Team rebounds:** 8. **Blocked shots:** 4 (Hawkins 2, Rodgers, Dainja). **Turnovers:** 11 (Domask 4, Hawkins 2, Shannon 2, Dainja, Harmon, Team). **Steals:** 2 (Shannon 2). **Officials:** Dorsey, Kueneman, Riley. **Attendance:** N/A.

country," Diebler said. "We kept fighting. We kept swinging. We stayed aggressive. A couple bounces here and there could have been the difference in the game. But I'm proud of our effort, our toughness, and our togetherness today."

Ohio State carried over its hot shooting from the night before in the early going, making six of its first eight shots to hold a 15-12 lead at the 13:33 mark on a jumper by Battle. Illinois found its rhythm with two straight baskets to go up 16-15 – the Buckeyes' first deficit of the Big Ten tournament – as part of a 13-3 run for the Illini that put them up 25-18 with 7:14 remaining.

Things seesawed back in the Buckeyes' favor after a basket by freshman Devin Royal, which started a 9-0 run that gave Ohio State a 27-25 lead with 4:21 left. Key tallied three on an and-one during the spurt. But Illinois swung back and eventually led 31-29 at the half. The Buckeyes trailed by just two points at the break despite four key contributors – Battle, sophomore guard Evan Mahaffey, Royal and Thornton – having at least two fouls, with Battle's two fouls forcing him to play just eight minutes in the first half. Meanwhile, Terrence Shannon Jr. was pacing the Illini with 14 points in the half.

Despite the early foul trouble, Ohio State started the second half with a bang, scoring the period's first eight points to lead 37-31 with 18:38 left on a Thornton three. After Illinois battled back to tie it at

38 on a pair of free throws by Justin Harmon, the Buckeyes took off again on an 18-8 run to go up 56-46 after a Thornton layup with 11:00 left.

But that was the largest lead they held all game. Illinois reclaimed momentum with a 13-3 sequence to tie the game at 59 with 7:41 left after a Dain Dainja free throw, one of 22 free-throw attempts for Illinois after halftime.

"Coming into the game, we knew the tougher team was going to win," Gayle said. "Illinois just had a little bit more grit. What they did in the second half wasn't really anything strategic. They just put their head down and went straight to the basket. It's kind of hard, honestly. They just out-toughed us."

Ohio State caught its breath out of the media timeout and went back up 67-62 after a Battle jumper with 5:12 left. But Illinois broke through again with a 9-4 run to tie the contest at 71 after a lengthy Illini possession that included two offensive rebounds and a pair of disqualifying fouls called on Mahaffey and Felix Okpara. The Buckeyes retook a 74-71 lead with 1:44 remaining on a Battle three, but those were their last points of the contest.

Ohio State was held scoreless on its final three possessions – including a Battle layup that was blocked, an offensive foul on Key and a missed fadeaway three from Battle with four seconds remaining – while the Illini scored six from the foul line to secure

## OHIO STATE MEN'S BASKETBALL

### Ohio State 88, Cornell 83

March 19, 2024  
Value City Arena • Columbus

	1	2	F
Cornell (22-8, 11-3)	38	45	83
Ohio State (21-13, 9-11)	44	44	88

Cornell	Total	FG	FT	Reb.	A	PF	Pts.
Gray	26	8-10	3-4	2-3	4	4	19
Williams	26	5-10	2-2	0-1	4	3	14
Noard	25	4-9	0-0	0-4	3	1	10
Hansen	17	2-5	0-0	0-1	4	2	4
Boothby	19	1-4	0-0	0-0	1	0	3
Ragland Jr.	21	7-14	0-0	2-7	1	5	17
Fiegen	25	3-4	0-0	0-5	1	3	9
Okereke	23	3-5	0-0	1-2	6	0	7
Beccles	12	0-4	0-0	0-0	2	2	0
Kiachian	3	0-2	0-0	0-0	0	0	0
Nix	3	0-0	0-0	0-1	0	0	0
<b>Totals</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>33-67</b>	<b>5-6</b>	<b>6-26</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>83</b>

**Percentages:** FG: 49.3%. FT: 83.3%. **Three-point field goals:** 12-33 (Ragland 3-8, Noard 2-7, Williams 2-5, Fiegen 3-4, Boothby 1-4, Okereke 1-2, Hansen 0-2, Beccles 0-1). **Team rebounds:** 3. **Blocked shots:** 3 (Okereke 2, Hansen). **Turnovers:** 9 (Hansen 3, Williams 2, Ragland Jr. 2, Gray, Team). **Steals:** 6 (Gray 2, Boothby 2, Ragland, Okereke).

Ohio State	Total	FG	FT	Reb.	A	PF	Pts.
Battle	39	6-14	2-5	3-5	5	0	17
Gayle Jr.	27	6-14	3-4	2-5	4	4	17
Okpara	24	7-13	2-7	7-0	1	1	16
Thornton	27	3-7	0-0	2-2	4	0	9
Mahaffey	19	0-5	2-2	2-3	3	0	2
Royal	17	5-11	2-2	3-2	1	3	13
Bonner	30	2-7	2-2	0-4	4	3	7
Key	10	2-3	0-0	2-4	0	0	4
Hardman	2	1-1	0-0	0-0	0	0	3
Chatman	5	0-0	0-0	0-0	0	1	0
<b>Totals</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>32-75</b>	<b>13-22</b>	<b>22-29</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>88</b>

**Percentages:** FG: 42.7%. FT: 59.1%. **Three-point field goals:** 11-26 (Gayle 2-7, Thornton 3-5, Bonner 1-5, Battle 3-4, Royal 1-3, Hardman 1-1, Okpara 0-1). **Team rebounds:** 5. **Blocked shots:** 5 (Okpara 3, Gayle 2). **Turnovers:** 10 (Bonner 4, Key 3, Battle, Gayle, Okpara). **Steals:** 4 (Bonner 3, Gayle). **Officials:** Bruno, Comer, Siler. **Attendance:** 4,517.

the victory.

"We're going to leave here with our heads high," Battle said. "We gave it all we've got. Through these last few weeks, we put it all out there on the line. That's all you can do. And I think that's what we did."

Ohio State was led in the loss by Battle and Thornton, who scored 21 and 20 points, respectively. Thornton added a career-high 10 assists, while Okpara had a team-high 10 rebounds and four blocks before fouling out. Illinois was powered by Shannon, who scored 28 points on 8-of-20 shooting, while also going 10 of 11 from the foul line. Ty Rodgers had 12 points and 10 rebounds.

Both teams shot just 26.7 percent from beyond the arc on 4-of-15 shooting.

#### Battle's Three Lifts Buckeyes Past Cornell

Ohio State (21-13) used a strong finish to sneak past Cornell (22-8) in the first round of the NIT played in front of 4,517 fans at Value City Arena on March 19, picking up an 88-83 win over the Big Red. OSU advanced to the second round in Diebler's first game as the program's full-time head coach.

The Buckeyes trailed 81-79 with 1:04 remaining but finished the game on a 9-2 run, including a three by Battle with 43 seconds left to put the Buckeyes on top for good.

"I work on that type of shot with (assistant coach) Brandon Bailey, so it was just another shot," Battle said. "Obviously, it

was a pretty big shot. But it's satisfying for it to go in because against Illinois, I had two opportunities and they didn't go in. But it's a testament to what we've done as a team and the work we put in. Because in the end, the work's always going to show."

Ohio State struggled on offense early on, making just four of its first 22 shots as Cornell – playing without its leading scorer Chris Manon, who was seen in crutches at the end of the Big Red's bench – jumped out to an early 19-9 lead. Gayle broke a 2:52 run without a field goal with a triple, sparking a 17-5 run that allowed them to take a 26-24 lead with 7:00 left before the break.

Four Cornell threes helped put it back up 36-32 with 3:10 remaining, but Ohio State closed the half strong with a 12-2 run – featuring two triples from Battle – to take a 44-38 lead into the locker room.

After a back-and-forth start to the second half, Cornell used a 13-5 run to go back up 57-56 with 13:26 left. The teams then traded leads over the next few minutes – during which Thornton exited the game for good with 10:18 left after an ankle sprain – with Ohio State eventually leading 67-66 with 7:34 left after a Gayle three-pointer.

His triple sparked a 10-3 run for Ohio State to lead 74-69 with 5:07 left, a sequence that was capped by sophomore guard Bowen Hardman's first triple since Feb. 13.

"It's awesome to see different guys stepping up, but it's not surprising at all," Battle said. "We come in, we grind every day. In the end, good things are going to come if you continue to do that."

But the upset-hungry Big Red provided yet another response.

Taking advantage of the Thornton-less Buckeyes, Cornell scored on its next three possessions to hold a 76-75 advantage with 3:14 left after a layup by Isaiah Gray, who was called for a technical foul after the basket. His blunder allowed the Buckeyes to go up 79-76 after a jumper by Battle, but Cornell instantly responded with a three-pointer from guard Nazir Williams and another layup from Gray to lead 81-79 with 1:04 left.

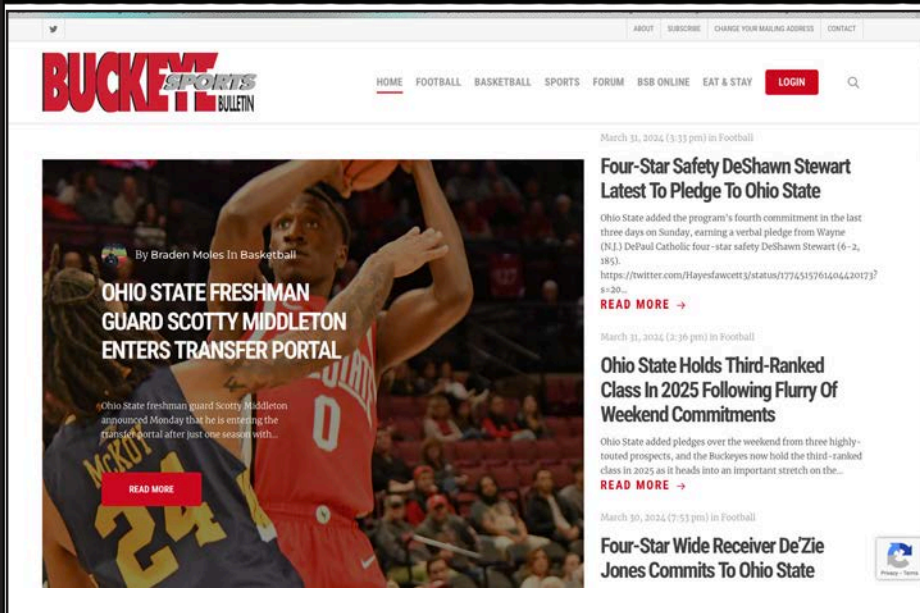
Ohio State delivered the final blow in this back-and-forth second-half battle. Following a 30-second timeout from Diebler, a driving Dale Bonner found Battle in the corner, who knocked down his third three-pointer of the night to give Ohio State an 82-81 lead with 43 seconds remaining. The Buckeyes then turned a Gayle steal on the other end into a breakaway Royal dunk to lead 84-81 and tacked on four free throws to close the game on the previously mentioned 9-2 run.

"For a lot of guys on this team, it's their first postseason experience," Diebler said. "I'm proud of how we were able to get a win. That first game is so tough. Our guys played hard. This was a unique game. You saw their effort. You saw the toughness. You saw the togetherness. Our guys were committed to giving it all they had."

Ohio State was led in the win by Gayle and Battle, who each scored 17 points. Okpara had a career-high 16 points alongside seven offensive rebounds, helping the Buckeyes hold a 22-6 edge on the offensive glass and 15-7 advantage in second-chance

Continued On Page 24

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# Georgia's Late Rally Ends Buckeyes' Season

Continued From Page 23

points. Cornell was led by Gray, who finished with 19 points on 8-of-10 shooting. Guy Ragland Jr. (17), Williams (14) and Cooper Noard (10) were also in double figures.

Ohio State had 22 free-throw attempts to just six for Cornell, but the Buckeyes connected on just 13 of 22 (59.1 percent), while the Big Red made five of their six.

## Free Throws Push Bucks To NIT Quarterfinals

Ohio State (22-13) used strong defense and near-perfect free-throw shooting to stave off a late Virginia Tech (19-15) rally on March 23 in front of 7,541 at Value City Arena, defeating the Hokies 81-73 to advance to the NIT quarterfinals.

The Buckeyes had their 36-26 halftime lead shrink to as few as three points in the second half but managed to hold on due to the defense, which forced five turnovers in the final 3:52. Ohio State also was strong from the charity stripe, making 29 of its 32 attempts from the line (90.6 percent) – including 26 of 28 (92.9 percent) in the second half alone – to secure the win.

"We lean on our maturity and collective toughness during those stretches," Diebler said. "It was choppy. We missed some shots we usually make. We struggled on a couple finishes around the rim. But we've talked about it – stay aggressive, move on quickly, don't let one play affect the other. And our guys have really embraced that."

It was a back-and-forth battle early on between the No. 2 and No. 3 seeds of the NIT, with the teams exchanging runs to give way to a 17-17 tie with 8:00 left in the first half, with Gayle and Bonner each scoring five in the stretch. The Buckeyes then took off on a 17-4 run and held the Hokies to just two makes in their next eight attempts to lead 34-21 after a Gayle layup with 1:49 left.

Virginia Tech broke its 3:14 scoring drought with a Hunter Cattoor triple and later added a Mylyjael Poteat basket to cut the deficit to 34-26, but Gayle added two free throws with 23 seconds left to take a 36-26 lead into the half.

The Buckeyes built upon their lead during the early portion of the second half, going up 45-32 after an old-fashioned three by Thornton with 16:25 left. But the Hokies managed to cut into that deficit as the period progressed and, after an extended back-and-forth, found themselves trailing 54-46 with 10:34 left following an and-one by Sean Pedulla.

Virginia Tech continued to crawl back into the game due to the efforts of Pedulla, who tacked on seven of the Hokies' next 15 points to help his team trail 65-61 with 5:24 left.

Ohio State tried to reclaim some momentum from the line with two Battle free throws, but an and-one from center Lynn Kidd on the ensuing possession shrank Ohio State's lead to 67-64 entering the game's final media timeout. After the break, the Buckeyes got two Battle free throws, an Okpara dunk and free throw to go up 72-64 with 1:44 left.

"In the end, you have to make free throws, and that was what ultimately helped us today," Battle said. "That's something we worked on in practice. It was staying focused and honing in."

Thornton checked out with 1:44 left due to injury – this time due to a knee ailment – and Virginia Tech cut the deficit to six on three separate occasions in the final 1:31. But the Buckeyes went 7 of 8 from the free-throw line in the final minute to close out the win.

"We have older guys on the team, and each game we play right now might be the last time we play with them," Okpara said. "We're trying to keep our family going for as long as we can."

Ohio State was led by Battle, who netted 17 of his 21 points from the free-throw line (17 of 18) while also adding three assists and a season-high 10 rebounds for a double-double. Bonner had a season-high 12 points with five rebounds and two steals, while Okpara (13), Thornton (12) and Gayle (11) each scored in double figures. Thornton also passed out seven assists.

Virginia Tech was powered by Cattoor and Pedulla, who each notched 18 points on identical 6-of-15 shooting, with Pedulla passing out a game-high eight assists. The Hokies were also solid from the line, hitting 16 of 20 (80 percent).

## Comeback Falls Short In Season-Ending Loss To UGA

Ohio State's (22-14) season came to a disappointing end March 26 at Value City Arena, with the Buckeyes coming back from 13 down but ultimately running out of gas down the stretch in a 79-77 loss to fourth-seeded seed Georgia (20-16) in the NIT quarterfinals in a game played before 7,641.

The Buckeyes used a 17-0 second-half run to help take a six-point lead with 4:50 left, but Georgia outscored Ohio State 15-7 the rest of the way, with 10 of the Bulldogs' points coming from guards Noah Thomasson and Blue Cain. Ohio State also misfired on its last four shot attempts, including two misses from Thornton and Battle in the final five seconds of play.

"I'm proud of the way we responded to multiple lead changes and the fight that we showed," Diebler said. "It just felt like we ran out of gas there a little bit. I felt like they hit some shots that were tough, and we missed a couple that I'd love to give those guys a second run at. I'm proud of the way our guys fought all the way to the end."

It was a slow start for the Buckeyes in this win-or-go-home matchup, missing four of their first 13 shots, and Georgia raced out to a 15-8 lead with 12:57 remaining before the break. Royal provided some relief with an old-fashioned three, and Chatman later tied the game at 15 on a jumper at 10:56.

The Bulldogs reclaimed a 21-17 advantage on a bucket by Dylan James, but Ohio State answered with a 12-4 run sparked by a dunk from Okpara to lead 29-25 with 4:18 remaining after another Okpara dunk. The pendulum swung back in the Bulldogs' favor in the ensuing minutes, and they made

### Ohio State 81, Virginia Tech 73

March 23, 2024  
Value City Arena • Columbus

	1	2	F
Va. Tech (19-15, 10-10)	26	47	73
Ohio State (22-13, 9-11)	36	45	81

Virginia Tech	Total	FG	FT	Reb.	A	PF	Pts.
	Min	M-A	M-A	O-D			
Pedulla	38	6-15	5-8	0-6	8	2	18
Cattoor	37	6-15	4-4	1-2	2	2	18
Kidd	21	6-10	1-1	1-5	0	4	13
Collins	29	1-7	3-4	0-3	3	3	5
Beran	22	0-2	0-0	0-4	1	4	0
Young	20	2-4	2-2	0-2	1	1	6
Nickel	12	2-7	0-0	0-0	0	2	6
Poteat	13	2-3	1-1	0-6	0	4	5
Wessler	7	1-1	0-0	2-2	1	3	2
Camden	1	0-0	0-0	0-0	0	0	0
<b>Totals</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>26-64</b>	<b>16-20</b>	<b>7-31</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>73</b>

**Percentages:** FG: 40.6%. FT: 80.0%. **Three-point field goals:** 5-21 (Pedulla 1-7, Cattoor 2-5, Nickel 2-4, Collins 0-2, Young 0-2, Beran 0-1). **Team rebounds:** 4. **Blocked shots:** 0. **Turnovers:** 15 (Pedulla 5, Cattoor 2, Kidd 2, Beran 2, Wessler 2, Nickel, Poteat). **Steals:** 7 (Pedulla 3, Cattoor, Collins, Young, Wessler).

Ohio State	Total	FG	FT	Reb.	A	PF	Pts.
	Min	M-A	M-A	O-D			
Battle	37	2-8	17-18	1-9	3	2	21
Okpara	24	6-9	1-2	2-4	0	4	13
Thornton	33	5-12	2-2	1-5	7	3	12
Gayle Jr.	22	4-12	2-2	0-4	2	2	11
Mahaffey	21	0-1	0-0	0-1	0	1	0
Bonner	24	3-8	4-4	1-4	0	2	12
Royal	19	2-8	1-2	1-3	1	2	5
Key	12	1-2	2-2	0-1	1	3	4
Chatman	8	1-1	0-0	2-1	0	0	3
<b>Totals</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>24-61</b>	<b>29-32</b>	<b>8-32</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>81</b>

**Percentages:** FG: 39.3%. FT: 90.6%. **Three-point field goals:** 4-17 (Battle 0-5, Bonner 2-5, Gayle 1-2, Thornton 0-2, Chatman 1-1, Royal 0-1, Key 0-1). **Team rebounds:** 3. **Blocked shots:** 5 (Okpara 2, Mahaffey 2, Battle). **Turnovers:** 12 (Battle 5, Chatman 2, Okpara, Thornton, Gayle, Bonner, Royal). **Steals:** 10 (Thornton 2, Bonner 2, Key 2, Okpara, Gayle, Mahaffey, Royal). **Officials:** Burris, Ek, Pearson. **Attendance:** 7,541.

### Georgia 79, Ohio State 77

March 26, 2024  
Value City Arena • Columbus

	1	2	F
Georgia (20-16, 6-12)	36	43	79
Ohio State (22-14, 9-11)	35	42	77

Georgia	Total	FG	FT	Reb.	A	PF	Pts.
	Min	M-A	M-A	O-D			
Thomasson	30	8-16	1-3	1-3	1	0	21
Cain	30	5-13	3-3	0-8	1	0	17
Anselem-Ibe	27	5-8	0-2	6-4	1	4	10
James	26	2-4	0-0	0-3	1	1	5
Demary Jr.	28	2-8	0-0	2-4	2	2	4
Hill	26	4-10	1-1	0-2	5	1	9
Melendez	12	3-5	0-0	0-0	0	0	7
DeLoach	16	3-3	0-1	0-2	0	2	6
Tchewa	5	0-0	0-0	0-1	0	1	0
<b>Totals</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>32-67</b>	<b>5-10</b>	<b>10-28</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>79</b>

**Percentages:** FG: 47.8%. FT: 50.0%. **Three-point field goals:** 10-25 (Thomasson 4-11, Cain 4-9, James 1-2, Dylan 0-2, Melendez 1-1). **Team rebounds:** 2. **Blocked shots:** 5 (James 3, Anselem-Ibe, DeLoach). **Turnovers:** 12 (Demary 3, Hill 2, DeLoach 2, Thomasson, Cain, Anselem-Ibe, Team). **Steals:** 6 (Thomasson 2, DeLoach 2, Demary, Melendez).

Ohio State	Total	FG	FT	Reb.	A	PF	Pts.
	Min	M-A	M-A	O-D			
Battle	36	9-17	0-0	1-7	2	2	22
Thornton	37	4-11	3-4	0-5	10	1	13
Okpara	28	6-10	0-0	2-5	2	2	12
Gayle Jr.	34	4-8	3-4	1-2	4	2	11
Mahaffey	14	1-3	0-0	0-2	1	1	2
Bonner	25	2-6	0-0	1-1	1	1	5
Royal	13	2-6	1-1	2-2	0	2	5
Key	10	2-6	1-1	2-2	0	2	5
Chatman	3	1-1	0-0	0-0	1	0	2
<b>Totals</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>31-68</b>	<b>8-10</b>	<b>10-27</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>77</b>

**Percentages:** FG: 45.6%. FT: 80.0%. **Three-point field goals:** 7-20 (Battle 4-9, Thornton 2-4, Bonner 1-3, Gayle 0-2, Okpara 0-1, Royal 0-1). **Team rebounds:** 2. **Blocked shots:** 4 (Okpara 2, Royal 2). **Turnovers:** 10 (Okpara 2, Gayle 2, Bonner 2, Chatman 2, Thornton, Mahaffey). **Steals:** 3 (Thornton, Mahaffey, Bonner). **Officials:** Floyd, O'Brian, Smith. **Attendance:** 7,641.

claim a 75-74 lead with 2:23 left.

Thornton answered on the ensuing possession with a layup to go up 76-75, but that was the final made field goal of the game for the Buckeyes. After a Thomasson jumper, two Blue free throws and a Thornton make from the line put Georgia up 79-77 with 19 seconds left, the Buckeyes missed their final two shots of the game – including a three-point try from Battle as time expired – to end the season.

"Off the hands, it felt like it was good, and it rimmed out," Battle said. "Everything kind of hit me in that moment. Just to play college basketball for five years, I'm so fortunate and so blessed. And to be on a team through the adversity we faced together, to tackle that head on – this team is really special. I just wish we had more time. But in the end, there's a finale to everything, and this was it."

Ohio State was led in the loss by Battle, who scored 22 points on 9-of-17 shooting, including 4-of-9 shooting from three. Thornton added 13 points and 10 assists, while Okpara (12 points) and Gayle (11 points) also reached double figures in scoring.

Georgia was led by Thomasson, who scored 21 points on 8-of-16 shooting, while Cain added 17 points and made four of his nine attempts from three. Frank Anselem-Ibe added 10 points and pulled down 10 rebounds, helping the Bulldogs to a slight 38-37 edge on the boards.



# Media Reacts To Ohio State Hiring Diebler

By **GREG WILSON**

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

After Chris Holtmann was fired on Feb. 14, interim head coach Jake Diebler was able to take a team that had lost seven of its last nine games and earn a berth in the NIT, as well as shed the interim tag to become Ohio State's full-time coach on March 17.

Before the hiring, several different names were rumored to be the possible next head coach for the Buckeyes – including former Florida Atlantic coach Dusty May, who has since been hired by Michigan – but incoming athletic director Ross Bjork elected for the in-house promotion, giving Diebler a five-year deal to coach the Buckeyes.

With a new leader in place for the men's basketball program, here are some reactions from the media about Ohio State hiring Diebler:

"Diebler's 6-2 record as interim (as of March 19) is such a small sample size that it's fair to wonder what happens after another 10, 50 and 100 games. It's one thing to connect with players in the locker room, another to communicate in the huddle when the Buckeyes trail by 10 with five minutes to play. Or lead by three with five seconds left. And how well can Diebler deliver the tough-love message that mediocre won't cut it at Ohio State?"

"Time will tell, but there is something to be said for hiring a 37-year-old straight shooter who feels called not only to coach, but to coach at Ohio State. Diebler will give everything he has, and is, to make this program successful. To make these players successful.

"Among the greatest lines in any sports movie comes from 'Hoosiers,' when Hickory High coach Norman Dale tells his players, 'I love you guys.' ... People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care. Diebler cares deeply.

"Ohio State's new coach wants to give back and pay forward. He also wants to win. It's easy to believe he will. After all, in many ways he already has."

— **Rob Oller,**  
**The Columbus Dispatch**

"College sports are a much different place than they were 10 years ago, and college basketball provides the most extreme example of that. Every offseason the transfer portal is flooded with players, and head coaching jobs open up at the same rate.

"Bjork couldn't act slowly on this decision. If he thought he had a high-quality roster on his hands, then he'd be at the risk of losing it if he moved too slowly or made the wrong hire.

"All that work Diebler had done on the recruiting trail over the past five years would have been for nothing, as the next coach would essentially be starting from scratch. ... Bjork saw a chance to avoid that while still checking off all the other boxes he was looking for.

"Diebler recruited practically the entire roster he's inheriting, including the two members of a 2024 class in Juni Mobley and Colin White. He's an Ohio native from a well-known basketball family in the state with a legendary high school basketball coach for a

father and a former OSU standout, Jon, for a little brother."

— **Stephen Means,**  
**Cleveland.com**

"I do not like the idea of hurriedly promoting the 37-year-old assistant of the guy you just paid \$12 million to hit the road. I adore it. ... OK, maybe that's too strong, and I'm just a sucker for a great story. I'll concede it is possible. Diebler is a great story.

"The coach's son from northwest Ohio did not just run with his opportunity in the big chair this season. He left it in the dust, redirecting a team so aimless it would have followed its GPS straight into the Olentangy River all the way to the doorstep of the NCAA Tournament.

"While any hire based on a small sample size is a big gamble, Diebler feels like the right guy at the right time for Ohio State. ... He earned his shot, and incoming athletic director Ross Bjork recognized a risk worth taking.

"It would have been natural for the new boss from Texas A&M to covet a splash with his first big hire and bring in a bigger name, be it Xavier's Sean Miller (no thanks) or Florida Atlantic's Dusty May (sure, if he would have taken the job).

"But Bjork kept an open mind and showed an admirable measure of humility. The more he watched Diebler, the more he realized it may be time to rip up his original list.

"Evoking the run-and-gun stylings of his dad, Keith – whose teams aspire to take 80 shots per game – the Buckeyes have played faster, harder, and executed with confidence at the end of games. ... This was more than a spark. It was a very good coach pressing all the right buttons and his team responding.

"Call me crazy, but the bet here is Diebler keeps Ohio State's core of talent together, keeps the recruiting momentum going, and elevates the program into a Big Ten contender.

"I like the gamble, and I suspect the Buckeyes will like the reward."

— **David Briggs,**  
**The Toledo Blade**

"As for Diebler, I had a boss one time – let's call him Mr. Bucknuts – who always liked to say, 'My philosophy is to believe in the man, not the plan.'

"That is definitely the case here with Diebler. He is the genuine article based on what we saw from him when he was placed on the firing line these last four weeks. He produced at a level well beyond his years or experience should have allowed him.

"Granted, it helped that everybody – from the assistants, to the players, to the support staff, to the strength coach, to the equipment staff and his two, yes, two athletic directors – were on board and gave him every bit of support he needed to flourish in this role.

"Let's look at the coaches he beat: Purdue's Matt Painter, Michigan State's Tom Izzo, Nebraska's Fred Hoiberg, Michigan's Juwan Howard, Rutgers' Steve Pikiell and Iowa's Fran McCaffery. That's six coaches with a combined 112 years on the bench and a combined 2,296 wins. There are probably three or four legitimate Hall of Famers on that list!

"There is precedent for this move. When Gary Williams left OSU for Maryland in the spring of 1989, AD Jim Jones elevated Randy Ayers – a man with no previous head coaching experience – to the top job. Ayers led OSU to the NCAA each of his first three years and a pair of Big Ten titles with Jim Jackson starring on those teams. Yes, things went off the rails after that. But whoever got this job, the big thing will be to sustain success.

"On the football side, Ryan Day's only head coaching experience came in the three games Urban Meyer missed early in the 2018 season. When Meyer retired at the end of that season, (Gene) Smith and Meyer knew they had a winner on their hands with Day. He has won two Big Ten titles and been to three College Football Playoffs in his first five years. The program is positioned to threaten for national championships for years to come, so, yeah, I'd say that move worked out pretty well."

— **Steve Helwagen,**  
**247Sports**

"Since Diebler took over, the Buckeyes have looked like a different team, playing faster, utilizing a deeper bench, and operating at a higher level at the end of games than they have in a couple of years. They have looked calm at the end of games. They have reflected their head coach.

"By all appearances, Jake Diebler has gotten the most out of this team down the

stretch, and if not for some questionable calls in the Big Ten Tournament against Illinois on (March 15), he would have gotten even more out of them. That clearly meant something to incoming OSU athletic director Ross Bjork.

"He is the kind of guy you'd hope the next head coach would be able to keep. So if you want him around, why not keep him around? This was Ohio State cutting out the middle man. Jumping to the back of the book. Skipping ahead to the good part.

"If Ohio State had gone with a mid-level coach, they were much more likely to land another Holtmann than another Matta. So if insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results, is hiring Jake Diebler the sanest thing that Ohio State could have done?"

"They were choosing between unproven mid-level coaches who have had one or two good years who they don't know, or somebody who is unproven but they do know and they like what they've seen. Neither is a great scenario, and both come with not quite enough information. This may pan out. It may not. That's the nature of the business.

"Ohio State was not going to land a proven head coach from a top-level program, so if this isn't a home run, you just go and hire the same type of mid-level coach you were going to hire anyway, because those guys are around all the time. Jake Diebler may not be."

— **Tony Gerdeman,**  
**Buckeye Huddle**



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# Ohio State Left Reeling After Abrupt End

It can change in the blink of an eye.

Ohio State women's basketball went from presumed Final Four contender to cleaning out their locker rooms in just one half of basketball, blowing a 16-point lead in a 75-63 loss to Duke on March 24. It was a shocking upset, not just because seventh-seeded Duke took down second-seeded Ohio State, but the manner in which the Buckeyes' season came to an end.

## DOUBLE DRIBBLE Braden Moles

Rebounding had been a concern for Ohio State all season, with a lack of consistent post presence often putting the Buckeyes at a disadvantage in margins on the boards. But, by and large, it had not stopped the team from achieving its goals, dropping just one regular-season game after the calendar flipped to 2024 and cruising to a conference championship.

But against the Blue Devils – and dating back to losses against Iowa to end the regular season and to Maryland in the Buckeyes' opening contest of the Big Ten Women's Basketball Tournament – Ohio State was unable to overcome those concerns. In the team's three losses in the final four games of the season, it was outrebounded

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

### 26-6 Overall (16-2 Big Ten) Final Season Statistics

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	32-32	1075-33.6	210-416	.505	60-161	.373	91-106	.858	32-71	103-3.2	62-0	120	75	5	62	571-17.8
MCMAHON, Cotie	32-32	931-29.1	167-363	.460	14-61	.230	114-183	.623	44-159	203-6.3	82-2	68	79	17	36	462-14.4
THIERRY, Taylor	32-32	864-27.0	130-213	.610	13-29	.448	87-115	.757	73-96	169-5.3	74-2	49	32	17	54	360-11.3
TAYLOR, Celeste	32-32	918-28.7	119-291	.409	40-125	.320	45-70	.643	26-105	131-4.1	91-3	109	77	29	80	323-10.1
MIKULASIKOVA, R	31-31	785-25.3	111-230	.483	40-98	.408	29-32	.906	13-85	98-3.2	57-2	80	53	13	13	291-9.4
HARRIS, Rikki	31-0	535-17.3	39-100	.390	25-75	.333	32-47	.681	6-48	54-1.7	51-0	40	21	6	31	135-4.4
SHUMATE, Emma	27-0	259-9.6	38-87	.437	28-67	.418	5-8	.625	11-15	26-1.0	24-0	9	12	9	5	109-4.0
PARKS, Taiyier	30-0	270-9.0	37-80	.463	0-3	.000	16-28	.571	24-38	62-2.1	44-1	8	15	5	15	90-3.0
COLLINS, Diana	18-0	178-9.9	20-66	.303	6-27	.222	8-11	.727	8-13	21-1.2	22-1	4	10	1	9	54-3.0
GREENE, Madison	24-0	300-12.5	21-60	.350	11-31	.355	11-14	.786	6-15	21-0.9	25-0	38	16	1	23	64-2.7
WALKER, Eboni	23-1	240-10.5	23-52	.442	0-2	.000	10-13	.769	25-31	56-2.4	20-0	27	18	1	8	56-2.4
VRES, Karla	6-0	17-2.9	3-3	1.000	0-0	.000	0-0	.000	1-2	3-0.5	3-0	1	1	0	0	6-1.0
HENDERSON, Kaia	15-0	68-4.5	6-17	.353	0-2	.000	0-0	.000	1-9	10-0.7	6-0	6	5	0	0	12-0.8
CARSON, Faith	7-0	12-1.7	1-3	.333	0-0	.000	2-2	1.000	1-7	8-1.1	2-0	3	2	0	0	4-0.6
Team									45-62	107		9				
<b>Total</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>6453</b>	<b>925-1981</b>	<b>.467</b>	<b>237-681</b>	<b>.348</b>	<b>450-629</b>	<b>.715</b>	<b>316-756</b>	<b>1072-33.5</b>	<b>563-11</b>	<b>562</b>	<b>425</b>	<b>104</b>	<b>336</b>	<b>2537-79.3</b>
<b>Opponents</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>6460</b>	<b>737-1779</b>	<b>.414</b>	<b>175-579</b>	<b>.302</b>	<b>398-536</b>	<b>.743</b>	<b>329-821</b>	<b>1150-35.9</b>	<b>573-9</b>	<b>391</b>	<b>674</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>190</b>	<b>2047-64.0</b>

131-82 (with a 40-22 deficit in offensive rebounds) and faced a 38-22 disadvantage in second-chance points.

While three-point shooting has saved the Buckeyes at points this season, it was perhaps the biggest reason Ohio State was unable to overcome Duke, as OSU shot just 1 of 11 from deep, with the make coming with just 14 seconds left in the game.

"We didn't play as well in the Big Ten tournament, and we didn't play as well today," head coach Kevin McGuff said. "We had a couple clunker games here down the stretch, and that's not how you want to do it. You want to walk off the court on

that last one saying, 'Man, we were right there and we gave it everything we've got.' I wouldn't say that was the case today."

It was a shorter run than anyone expected, with the Buckeyes hoping to build off last season's run to the Elite Eight and continue the program's ascension to one of the top teams in women's college basketball. While Ohio State is in position for sustained success, it marked a disappointing end to several careers, including those of Jacy Sheldon and Celeste Taylor.

"It stinks, because we've got a lot of great kids who played their last game here," McGuff said. "They invested so much in the program and this community. It's just not the ideal way for this to end, but as I told them, I would love to sit in the locker room on the final day and say, 'Hey, we gave it everything we had.' Duke was better today and they deserved to win the game, and we were not very good."

McGuff and several players said the focus this offseason will be on improving the team's rebounding – whether that's working with current players or bringing in some portal additions – but what happens next season is of little concern for Sheldon, who played her last game at Ohio State and suffered a defeat on her home court.

"I haven't really processed it yet," she said. "It hurts a little more when we didn't go out there and play our best game, and that starts with me. I didn't go out there and play my best game. Like I said, it hasn't sunk in yet, but I'm sure it will eventually."

Though the loss had not sunk in for Sheldon, she was still able to reflect on an

impressive career at Ohio State where she helped lead the Buckeyes to a pair of regular-season championships, six wins in the NCAA tournament and the school's first Elite Eight appearance since 1993.

"(I'll remember) a lot," she said. "I've said it a lot, but it's a privilege to play at Ohio State, to put that jersey on, especially being from Ohio. Playing for McGuff is awesome. He's one of the best coaches I've ever played for. I made a lot of relationships I'll never forget."

### Sheldon Surpasses 2,000 Career Points

In Ohio State's 80-57 win over Maine on March 22, Sheldon eclipsed 2,000 points for her Buckeye career, becoming just the eighth player in program history to reach that mark.

"I didn't know that," she said ahead of the contest and just eight points away from 2,000. "I don't want to sound – that doesn't matter. All that matters now is winning this game. And I think in March, it's so important that it doesn't matter how you win."

While Sheldon has never been one to reflect on any accolades, McGuff was more than happy to explain Sheldon's importance to the program and her legacy at Ohio State.

"We could talk for hours about what she's meant for this program," he said. "But just the way she's played on the court and everyone sees that, just the effort, the energy, the leadership, but probably more importantly just how she's represented herself and our program off the court and in

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**Jacy Sheldon**  
Senior Guard  
Dublin, Ohio

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the community has been really special.”

Sheldon finished with 2,024 career points, placing her sixth all-time and behind only Ameryst Alston (2,165 points, 2013-16), Jessica Davenport (2,303, 2004-07), Katie Smith (2,578, 1993-96), Jantel Lavender (2,818, 2008-11) and Kelsey Mitchell (3,402, 2015-18).

Her other appearances in the record book include having the 11th-most assists (399), tied for the 10th-most games played (130), 10th in made three-pointers (187), 10th in made free throws (369), ninth in made field goals (734), sixth in steals (250) and fourth in free-throw percentage (.850). She also tied the program's single-game record with 11 steals in an 82-64 win at Boston college on Nov. 13, 2022.

### Harris' Return Still Up In The Air For Next Year

The conversation regarding a sixth season for redshirt senior guard Rikki Harris is one that remains up in the air at the conclusion of Ohio State's season.

Harris, who has another season of eligibility due to the COVID-19 waiver, said before the loss to Duke that it was something she was looking at, and when asked directly after the game if she was returning, she replied, “That's a Coach McGuff question.”

McGuff was then asked about a return for Harris and said the decision – along with other potential changes on the roster – will be determined in the coming weeks.

“What I do with every player is schedule a meeting,” he said. “Sometimes the season ends and it's raw, like, ‘I want to come back,’ or, ‘I don't want to come back,’ then a week later once the emotions have gone out of it, you're thinking something different. We'll meet with everybody who has eligibility left and figure out who's coming back and what the right fits are.”

Harris appeared in all but one game this season, coming off the bench in every appearance and averaging 4.4 points and 1.7 rebounds in 17.3 minutes per game, most on the team besides the usual starting five.

The only other Buckeye with another year of eligibility due to COVID-19 is Madison Greene, who said before the NCAA tournament that she is returning for her sixth season.

McGuff had previously indicated the team was looking at another year of eligibility for Eboni Walker due to her missing most of the 2021-22 campaign at Syracuse due to injury, but there has not been an update since earlier this season, and her status remains up in the air.

### Walker Returns To Team For Final Stretch

Speaking of Walker, after being away from the team for several weeks in February due to an undisclosed reason, she was present for Ohio State's Selection Show watch party on March 17 and was available in the postseason for the Buckeyes.

While neither Walker nor McGuff explained why she was away from the team, missing the final two games of the regular season and the Big Ten Women's Basketball Tournament, Walker said she was happy to return in time to close out the season.

“It feels great,” she told Buckeye Sports Bulletin following the win over Maine. “I always love being around the team, being able to support my family, in a sense. It's

been great.”

She did not appear in the loss to Duke but did check in late against Maine, with the 5,684 in attendance showering her with applause.

“That's just a testament to Buckeye Nation,” Walker said. “They love me and they show it every game. I love them. I can't put too many words to it, but it's amazing.”

### Sheldon, McMahon Earn All-America Honors

Several Buckeyes have received honors since BSB last went to press, with Sheldon earning a second-team All-America nod from The Associated Press and McMahon receiving an honorable mention from the organization.

Sheldon is the first Buckeye to receive an Associated Press All-America honor since Mitchell, who earned a trio of second-team nominations (2015, 2017-18) and a first-team nod in 2016. Sheldon becomes the sixth Buckeye to earn an All-America honor from The Associated Press, joining Mitchell, Davenport (2005-07), Lavender (2009-11), Samantha Prahalis (2012) and Smith (1996), while Sheldon was also an honorable mention in 2022.

Sheldon was also named to the USBWA All-America third team and The Sporting News Women's All-America second team in addition to first-team All-Big Ten honors.

McMahon, meanwhile, earned first-team All Big Ten in addition to a USBWA All-America honorable mention.

In addition to the All-American honors, Taylor was named a finalist for Naismith Defensive Player of the Year, Sheldon was named a semifinalist for Naismith Player of the Year and McGuff was named a semifinalist for Naismith Coach of the Year.

### Sheldon, Taylor Set For WNBA Draft

With the collegiate careers of Sheldon and Taylor now finished, the focus shifts to the 2024 WNBA draft, set for April 15 in Brooklyn, N.Y., and even with the disappointing end to the regular season for Ohio State, Sheldon is still widely projected as a potential lottery selection.

Most mock drafts placed her in the second half of the first round. The latest mock draft from The Athletic on March 20 had Sheldon going ninth overall to the Dallas Wings, while ESPN's mock draft on March 12 projects Sheldon to land with the Connecticut Sun at No. 10.

“I'm mocking one of my favorite players in the country at this spot, because Dallas could still use some backcourt defense, and Jacy Sheldon is one of the best perimeter defenders in the country,” wrote The Athletic's Sabreena Merchant. “Like (LSU's Angel) Reese, she always plays hard, even though she is at the top of Ohio State's full-court press, a demanding defensive system. Sheldon has great anticipation in help defense and is shooting (37.3) percent on three-pointers this season, including 41 percent on catch-and-shoot jumpers.”

Taylor is not projected as a lottery selection but will enter her name into the WNBA draft and could be a valuable selection in the second or third round, especially given her defensive acumen. Taylor had originally planned to enter last year's WNBA draft before returning to college for a fifth season and transferring to Ohio State.

### Collins, Shumate Hit Transfer Portal

Ohio State redshirt sophomore guard Emma Shumate and freshman guard Diana Collins have both entered the transfer portal since the Buckeyes' season ended.

Shumate announced March 27 that she is entering the portal after three seasons with the Buckeyes and with two seasons of eligibility remaining.

“Buckeye Nation, I cannot put into words how much your persistent love and support has meant to me the past two years,” Shumate wrote on Instagram. “Thank you for making my time here so special. ... I am so grateful to have had the opportunity to play for my home state of Ohio. I am taking some truly invaluable memories and friendships with me. ... I have decided it is in my best interest to enter the transfer portal.”

Shumate spent the last three seasons at Ohio State, taking a redshirt in the 2021-22 season following a transfer from West Virginia, and she contributed off the bench in each of the past two seasons. She appeared in 58 games for the Buckeyes, averaging 2.8 points and 10.5 minutes per contest while shooting 33.6 percent from deep, where 119 of her 162 career field-goal attempts were launched from.

She scored a career-high 22 points this past season in an 85-45 win against Ohio University on Dec. 5, connecting on 6 of 10 three-point attempts, and it was one of two career games where she reached double digits. While she averaged 11.3 minutes per game in 2022-23, that fell to 9.6 minutes per game this past season, with five or fewer minutes played in 11 of her 27 appearances this year.

Collins, meanwhile, joined Ohio State this season as a four-star prospect and announced her entry to the portal on March 29. She appeared in 18 games, averaging 9.9 minutes and 3.0 points per game. She was utilized as a regular off the bench through the first half of the season but appeared in just eight games once the calendar flipped to 2024.

“The lifelong relationships and lessons that I learned this year have been truly unforgettable,” Collins said in a statement. “This decision has been one of the toughest I've had to make.”

While both would have been in line for more minutes next season, a role in the starting five was not guaranteed with the Buckeyes expected to return Greene and Kaia Henderson at guard. A decision is also still to be made on a return for Harris.

Ohio State is also welcoming in a highly ranked recruiting class that features shooting guard Ava Watson and five-star point guard Jalonni Cambridge, the younger sister of current Ohio State guard Kennedy Cambridge.

### Sheldon Is Plank's Lady Buck Of The Month For March

Following her final game at Ohio State, Sheldon was honored with Plank's Lady Buck of the Month award for March.

While the season did not end how she would have hoped, she averaged 16.5 points, 5.0 assists, 2.3 rebounds and 1.0 steals on 45.6 percent shooting in four games, including three postseason contests in March, bringing to a close one of the more impressive careers in program history.

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**TIM POND**, member of both the Bishop Watterson High School and the Otterbein University Basketball Halls of Fame, recently

offered his publication entitled “Coaching Youth Basketball: Coaching the Coaches” for sale on Amazon.com. Access to this instructional manual was previously limited to attendees of his basketball clinics and camps only.

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# Buckeyes Come Up Short In NCAA Tournament

By **BRADEN MOLES**

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Editor

Second-seeded Ohio State's hopes of another run to the Elite Eight went up in smoke on March 24 when the Buckeyes' NCAA Women's Basketball Tournament run came to an end with a 75-63 loss to Duke, sending Ohio State packing after just two postseason games.

The Buckeyes ended their season with three losses in four games. They suffered a loss in the regular-season finale to Iowa, dropped their opening matchup against Maryland in the Big Ten Women's Basketball Tournament and then defeated Maine in the opening round of the NCAA tournament before falling to the Blue Devils, finishing with a 26-6 overall record.

This was the seventh NCAA tournament appearance for Ohio State under head coach Kevin McGuff and the third time – along with 2014-15 and 2017-18 – that the Buckeyes failed to make it out of the first weekend.

## Ohio State Takes Care Of Business Against Maine

Second-seeded Ohio State (26-5) took care of business in the opening round of the NCAA Women's Basketball Tournament on March 22, using strong play on the defensive end in an 80-57 win over No. 15 Maine (24-10) at Value City Arena.

The Buckeyes forced the Black Bears into 22 turnovers that resulted in 24 points, while it also held a 15-2 advantage in second-chance points and added 15 points on the fast break.

Upset-minded Maine – which had shot just 30.2 percent from deep entering the contest – connected on its first four attempts from three (with three coming from senior guard Olivia Rockwood) to take a 14-11 lead with 3:55 left in the first quarter.

"They showed up like a championship team should, and they were ready to go, and they made some big shots early," McGuff said. "I think we adjusted, finally, to kind of get them out of rhythm. They were ready. I was impressed with their team."

Out of a timeout, the Black Bears had their first missed three-pointer of the game, and Celeste Taylor knocked down the Buckeyes' first on the other end, allowing Ohio State to close the first on a 9-2 run to lead 22-16.

Ohio State held Maine scoreless for the first 3:04 of the second quarter, and after a layup from Black Bears guard Anne Simon, the Buckeyes responded with a 12-0 run, with the scoring output coming from Jacy Sheldon, Rebeka Mikulášiková and Taylor Thierry. It was part of an extended 27-4 run going back to 3:25 in the first quarter and left the Buckeyes leading 38-18 with 2:53 left in the half.

"I thought our defense really started to pick up," McGuff said. "We started to be a little more effective with the press. We got some turnovers and kind of sped them up a little bit. I think that's kind of where it started."

Maine scored on its next three possessions – with two baskets from Simon and a jumper from junior forward Adrianna Smith – but the Buckeyes were able to take a 43-24 lead into the half after a buzzer-beating triple from Madison Greene.

The Black Bears shot 52.6 percent in the first half (10 of 19), slightly outpacing the Buckeyes at 51.9 percent, but committed 13 turnovers that turned into 14 points for Ohio State, while the Buckeyes also held a 9-2 advantage in second-chance points.

Ohio State continued playing strong defense out of the half. Taylor forced a turnover on Maine's first possession and helped hold the Black Bears to just one make in their first four attempts of the quarter. Simon hit a layup with 5:19 left to cut the deficit to 50-33, but the Buckeyes scored on their next three possessions, capped by a three from Taylor, to push the lead back to 57-33 with 3:54 left.

The teams traded baskets over the next few minutes, and a pair of free throws from Sheldon – part of a 19-point performance in which she surpassed 2,000 points for her Ohio State career – put the Buckeyes up 66-45 going into the fourth.

Ohio State and Maine then traded three-pointers early in the frame, with each team knocking down a pair from deep, and the Buckeyes maintained a 74-53 lead with 5:50 left in the contest. From there, Ohio State was able to clear out the bench and close out the win.

"It's big for us," Sheldon said of the victory. "I think we've done a good job all season in the Big Ten regular season, especially, focusing on the game in front of us and the next game. That's what we're going to continue to do."

Sheldon led the Buckeyes with 19 points on 7-of-14 shooting, while Cotie McMahon (13 points), Thierry (12 points) and Taylor (12 points) also reached double digits, and Taylor had a team-high six rebounds and five assists.

Simon led the Black Bears with 25 points.

## Duke Outplays OSU On Boards, From Deep

The season for Ohio State (26-6) came to a disappointing end on March 24 after the Buckeyes blew a 16-point lead in a 75-63 loss against seventh-seeded Duke (22-11), coming up one game short of the Sweet 16.

The Buckeyes led 30-14 with 5:07 left in the second quarter but were outscored 61-33 the rest of the way and allowed Duke to shoot 61.9 percent from the field (13 of 21) in the second half. Additionally, Ohio State connected on just one three-pointer in 11 attempts and was hounded on the boards, finishing with a 38-20 deficit in rebounds.

"It seems like rebounding is a huge issue for this team for some games, and it was prevalent in this game," Thierry said. "But we just need to focus on getting offensive rebounds, defensive rebounds, and not letting the other team get more rebounds than us, because that's how a lot of our fouls came in."

"A lot of people had four or five fouls at the end of the game, so we just have to work on rebounding, especially as we move forward to next year."

The Buckeyes came out with energy.

McMahon tallied an old-fashioned three-point play, and Taylor – going up against her former team – forced two early turnovers to allow Ohio State to take a 12-4 lead with 5:54 left in the first. Duke answered with four makes at the line, but the Buckeyes closed the frame on an 8-2 run, with four points by McMahon, to lead 20-10 at the end of the first.

Ohio State held Duke without points for the first 3:07 of the second quarter, going up 25-10 before a make by Blue Devil sophomore guard Ashlon Jackson, the first made field goal by Duke since there was 8:05 left in the first. Jackson's score opened things up for Duke, which later connected on back-to-back three-pointers to cut the deficit to 30-20 with 4:07 left in the half.

The Buckeyes halted the Blue Devils' momentum with back-to-back scores by Sheldon and McMahon, but Duke responded with an 8-2 run to make it 36-28 on a layup by Kennedy Brown with 1:51 left, forcing McGuff to call a timeout. The Buckeyes were still unsettled out of the break, however, missing a shot and turning the ball over as the Blue Devils made it 36-32 at the half.

After Ohio State held Duke to 18.2 percent shooting (2 of 11) in the first quarter, the Devils shot 61.5 percent in the second (8 of 13), outscoring OSU 22-16 in the frame, and closing the first half on a 12-2 run.

"Once we got our bearings, got our rhythm, once we had some success finding scoring, I thought we played with great poise and confidence and got to the spots we needed to get to," Duke coach Kara Lawson said. "I was hoping that barrage in the beginning wasn't going to put us too far down where we wouldn't be able to come back. That second quarter was big for us."

Duke scored first out of the locker room with a basket by Brown to make it a one-possession game, down just 36-34, but back-to-back baskets by McMahon helped settle things down, and the Buckeyes eventually went up 42-36 on two from the line from McMahon. But another triple from the Blue Devils, this time by Taina Mair, began a 7-2 run to make it 44-43 with 5:06 left in the frame.

Ohio State maintained a 46-43 lead with

3:50 left in the third with two more from McMahon, at which point Taylor went to the bench with her fourth foul. With the Big Ten Defensive Player of the Year on the bench, Duke then took its first lead of the game with 1:26 left in the quarter, going up 49-47 after a layup from freshman forward Delaney Thomas. After a timeout by the Buckeyes, they were able to hit a trio of free throws in the final minute of the quarter to trail just 51-50 entering the fourth.

Ohio State and Duke traded scores throughout the early minutes of the fourth quarter, and with the game tied at 54, Taylor fouled out of the contest with 6:38 remaining. The Buckeyes were able to retake a 57-56 lead after a free throw from fifth-year guard Rikki Harris, who subbed in for Taylor, but a personal 7-0 run by Duke guard Reigan Richardson pushed the Blue Devils' lead to 63-57 with 3:43 left, leading to a timeout by the Buckeyes.

"It was tough," McGuff said. "Obviously we rely on (Taylor) on both ends of the floor, and so when she went out of the game that was certainly a significant moment and unfortunate."

Thierry scored out of the break, but Duke was able to close on a 12-4 run and hold Ohio State with just one basket – a triple from Sheldon, Ohio State's first of the night with just 14 seconds remaining – in the final three minutes of the contest.

McMahon led the Buckeyes with 27 points on 9-of-17 shooting, while Sheldon had 13 points and four assists in her final game at Ohio State. Richardson led the Blue Devils with 28 points on 11-of-18 shooting, including all three of her shots from distance.

Ohio State connected on just 8 of its 27 shots in the second half (29.6 percent), hitting 1 of 7 from beyond the arc in the final 20 minutes.

Ohio State 80, Maine 57							
March 22, 2024 Value City Arena • Columbus							
	1	2	3	4	F		
Maine (24-10, 14-2)	16	8	21	12	57		
Ohio State (26-5, 16-2)	22	21	23	14	80		
Maine	Total	FT	Reb.				
	Min	M-A	M-A	O-D	A	PF	Pts.
Rockwood	35	5-10	0-0	0-3	0	4	15
Simon	39	11-21	2-5	0-3	3	4	25
Talon	11	1-2	0-2	1-2	2	1	2
Bornemann	31	1-1	0-0	0-4	0	4	2
Smith	37	5-7	0-0	0-6	6	3	11
Hodgson	14	0-0	0-0	0-0	0	0	0
Streams	1	0-0	0-0	0	0	0	0
Christopher	4	0-1	0-0	1-1	0	0	0
Kahelin	14	0-0	0-0	0	0	0	0
Gallego	10	0-1	0-0	0-1	1	2	0
Gibson	1	0-0	0-0	0	0	0	0
Nenadic	1	0-1	2-2	0	0	0	2
Dotsey	1	0-0	0-0	0-0	0	0	0
Soler	1	0-0	0-0	0	0	0	0
<b>Totals</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>23-44</b>	<b>4-9</b>	<b>3-22</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>57</b>
<b>Percentages:</b> FG: 52.3%. FT: 44.4%. <b>Three-point field goals:</b> 7-19 (Rockwood 5-10, Simon 1-5, Smith 1-2, Christopher 0-1, Talon 0-1). <b>Team rebounds:</b> 3. <b>Blocked shots:</b> 0. <b>Turnovers:</b> 22 (Smith 9, Simon 3, Team 3, Hodgson 2, Rockwood 2, Bornemann, Kahelin, Talon). <b>Steals:</b> 6 (Simon 3, Rockwood 2, Smith).							
Ohio State	Total	FT	Reb.				
	Min	M-A	M-A	O-D	A	PF	Pts.
Thierry	18	4-6	4-6	5-0	1	1	12
Sheldon	35	7-14	3-3	1-3	4	2	19
Taylor	33	3-4	4-5	0-6	5	1	12
Mikulášiková	26	3-5	2-2	2-2	3	3	9
McMahon	28	5-11	3-5	0-2	2	1	13
Greene	11	1-2	0-0	0-1	1	1	3
Harris	16	1-4	0-0	0-0	1	1	3
Shumate	12	2-6	0-0	0-0	0	2	5
Henderson	2	0-0	0-0	0-0	0	0	0
Parks	12	2-3	0-0	1-1	0	3	4
Collins	3	0-0	0-0	0-0	0	0	0
Walker	2	0-0	0-0	0-0	0	1	0
Carson	2	0-0	0-0	0-3	0	0	0
<b>Totals</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>28-55</b>	<b>16-21</b>	<b>9-20</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>80</b>
<b>Percentages:</b> FG: 50.9%. FT: 76.2%. <b>Three-point field goals:</b> 8-23 (Sheldon 2-7, Taylor 2-3, Greene 1-2, Harris 1-3, Mikulášiková 1-2, Shumate 1-5, McMahon 0-1). <b>Team rebounds:</b> 2. <b>Blocked shots:</b> 2 (Taylor, Thierry). <b>Turnovers:</b> 11 (Shumate 3, Taylor 3, Greene, McMahon, Sheldon, Taylor, Walker). <b>Steals:</b> 11 (Taylor 6, Harris 2, Collins, McMahon, Parks). <b>Officials:</b> Camy, Catanzariti, Greene. <b>Attendance:</b> N/A.							

Duke 75, Ohio State 63							
March 24, 2024 Value City Arena • Columbus							
	1	2	3	4	F		
Duke (22-11, 11-7)	10	22	19	24	75		
Ohio State (26-6, 16-2)	20	16	14	13	63		
Duke	Total	FT	Reb.				
	Min	M-A	M-A	O-D	A	PF	Pts.
Brown	30	4-6	1-1	2-3	1	4	9
Jackson	27	4-6	4-5	0-4	3	3	13
Donovan	13	0-1	0-0	1-5	1	4	0
Mair	31	1-9	8-9	0-3	4	2	11
Richardson	32	11-18	3-4	2-5	1	1	28
Okanawa	13	1-2	2-2	1-1	1	3	4
Thomas	27	1-1	6-6	1-7	1	2	8
Koabel	17	0-1	0-0	0-0	1	2	0
Emsbo	10	1-1	0-2	1-1	0	1	2
<b>Totals</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>23-45</b>	<b>24-29</b>	<b>8-30</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>75</b>
<b>Percentages:</b> FG: 51.1%. FT: 82.8%. <b>Three-point field goals:</b> 5-13 (Richardson 3-3, Jackson 1-3, Mair 1-5, Koabel 0-1, Okanawa 0-1). <b>Team rebounds:</b> 1. <b>Blocked shots:</b> 5 (Emsbo 4, Donovan). <b>Turnovers:</b> 16 (Brown 5, Okanawa 4, Jackson 2, Mair 2, Donovan, Richardson, Team). <b>Steals:</b> 7 (Richardson 3, Brown, Koabel, Mair, Thomas).							
Ohio State	Total	FT	Reb.				
	Min	M-A	M-A	O-D	A	PF	Pts.
Mikulášiková	37	2-6	2-2	0-3	5	5	6
McMahon	37	9-17	9-13	0-5	0	3	27
Thierry	33	2-5	1-2	1-1	1	5	5
Sheldon	40	5-13	2-4	2-1	4	3	13
Taylor	28	3-10	0-0	1-1	1	5	6
Harris	15	0-2	4-6	0-2	0	0	4
Parks	3	1-1	0-0	0-0	0	1	2
Greene	7	0-0	0-0	0-0	2	0	0
<b>Totals</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>22-54</b>	<b>18-27</b>	<b>5-15</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>63</b>
<b>Percentages:</b> FG: 40.7%. FT: 66.7%. <b>Three-point field goals:</b> 1-11 (Sheldon 1-4, Harris 0-1, Mikulášiková 0-1, Taylor 0-4, Thierry 0-1). <b>Team rebounds:</b> 3. <b>Blocked shots:</b> 0. <b>Turnovers:</b> 9 (Mikulášiková 3, Sheldon 2, Taylor 2, McMahon, Thierry). <b>Steals:</b> 7 (Taylor 4, Thierry 2, Harris). <b>Officials:</b> Camy, Greene, Resch. <b>Attendance:</b> 8,333.							



MARCH/APRIL						
SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
					29 @STP 7:37	30 @STP 3:07
<b>HOME OPENING NIGHT</b>						
31 @STP 3:07	2 OMA 6:15	3 OMA 6:15	4 OMA 6:15	5 OMA 6:15	6 OMA 2:05	
7 OMA 1:05	9 @LOU 6:05	10 @LOU 11:05AM	11 @LOU 6:35	12 @LOU 7:15	13 @LOU 7:15	
14 @LOU 1:05	16 BUF 6:15	17 BUF 12:05	18 BUF 6:15	19 BUF 6:15	20 BUF 4:05	
21 BUF 1:05	23 @SYR 6:35	24 @SYR 6:35	25 @SYR 6:35	26 @SYR 6:35	27 @SYR 1:05	
28 @SYR 1:05	30 TOL 6:15					

JUNE						
SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
						1 LHV 5:05
2 LHV 1:05		4 @IND 7:05	5 @IND 1:35	6 @IND 7:05	7 @IND 7:05	8 @IND 7:05
9 @IND 1:35		11 IOW 7:05	12 IOW 12:05	13 IOW 7:05	14 IOW 7:05	15 IOW 7:05
16 IOW 1:05		18 @WOR 6:45	19 @WOR 6:45	20 @WOR 6:45	21 @WOR 6:45	22 @WOR 4:05
23 @WOR 1:05		25 OMA 7:05	26 OMA 7:05	27 OMA 12:05	28 OMA 7:05	29 OMA 7:05
30 OMA 1:05						

AUGUST						
SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
				1 SYR 7:05	2 SYR 7:05	3 SYR 7:05
4 SYR 1:05		6 @STP 8:07	7 @STP 2:07	8 @STP 8:07	9 @STP 8:07	10 @STP 7:37
11 @STP 3:07		13 @IOW 7:38	14 @IOW 1:08	15 @IOW 7:38	16 @IOW 8:08	17 @IOW 7:08
18 @IOW 2:08		20 IND 6:15	21 IND 12:05	22 IND 6:15	23 IND 7:05	24 IND 7:05
25 IND 1:05		27 @GWN 7:05	28 @GWN 7:05	29 @GWN 7:05	30 @GWN 7:05	31 @GWN 6:05

MAY						
SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
			1 TOL 6:35	2 TOL 6:15	3 TOL 7:05	4 TOL 4:05
5 TOL 1:05		7 @IOW 7:38	8 @IOW 1:08	9 @IOW 1:08	10 @IOW 8:08	11 @IOW 7:08
12 @IOW 2:08		14 LOU 7:05	15 LOU 12:05	16 LOU 12:05	17 LOU 7:05	18 LOU 7:05
19 LOU 1:05		21 @OMA 7:35	22 @OMA 7:35	23 @OMA 7:35	24 @OMA 7:35	25 @OMA 7:05
26 @OMA 3:05		28 LHV 7:05	29 LHV 6:35	30 LHV 7:05	LHV 7:05	

JULY						
SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
	1 @TOL 7:05	2 @TOL 7:05	3 @TOL 7:05	4 TOL 4:05	5 TOL 7:05	6 TOL 5:05
		9 @IND 7:05	10 @IND 1:35	11 @IND 7:05	12 @IND 7:05	13 @IND 7:05
14 @IND 1:35					19 @LOU 7:15	20 @LOU 7:15
21 @LOU 6:05		23 MEM 5:05	24 MEM 12:05	25 MEM 7:05	26 MEM 7:05	27 MEM 7:05
28 MEM 1:05		30 SYR 7:05	31 SYR 12:05			

SEPTEMBER						
SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
1 @GWN 1:05	2 DUR 6:15	3 DUR 6:15		5 DUR 6:35	6 DUR 7:05	7 DUR 7:05
8 DUR 1:05		10 STP 6:15	11 STP 6:15	12 STP 6:15	13 STP 7:05	14 STP 7:05
15 STP 1:05		17 @TOL 6:35	18 @TOL 12:05	19 @TOL 6:35	20 @TOL 7:05	21 @TOL 5:05
22 @TOL 2:05						

## 2024 PROMOTIONAL SCHEDULE

- TUE.** "TANSKY TUESDAY DIME-A-DOG" NIGHTS  
- 4/2, 4/16, 4/30, 5/14, 5/28, 6/11, 6/25, 7/23, 7/30, 8/20, 9/3, & 9/10
- WED.** "MILITARY & FIRST RESPONDERS" GAMES  
- 50% off all available tickets (max of 4) for active & retired Military & First Responders  
"DOLLAR DAYS" - \$1 select concession items (4/3, 5/1, 5/29, 6/26 & 9/11)  
"STUDENT ID NIGHT"  
- Students 14 and above can present a valid ID and for \$10 receive a Reserved Seat ticket AND \$5 in Clippers Cash for food, beverage or souvenir purchase
- THU.** "COPA DE LA DIVERSIÓN"  
- Clippers transform into Los Veleros on Thursday Nights  
"THIRSTY THURSDAYS"  
- Beverage Specials on Beer, Margaritas & Soft Drinks  
"STUDENT ID NIGHT"
- FRI.** "\$5 FRIDAY"  
- \$5 for a slice of Donatos Pizza & a Small Pepsi  
- \$5 Beers (small) and Wine  
"STUDENT ID NIGHT"
- SAT.** "PARTY-AT-THE-PARK" - Starting on MAY 18  
- Pre-Game live music from 5:30p-6:45p on the Stage on the RF Concourse
- SUN.** "FAMILY DAY & SENIOR DAY"  
- \$18 Bleacher or \$27 Reserved Family Pass for 2 Adults & up to 4 Kids (18 & under) or Seniors (60 & over)  
- \$3 Bleacher or \$5 Reserved Seat (60 & over)  
- First 500 kids (12 & under) receive a victory bell courtesy of Dor-Mar  
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# Icers Work Toward Better Start Next Season

Good, but not good enough. Too little, too late.

Those cliches not only described Ohio State's 2-1 loss in the Big Ten tournament semifinal to Michigan State on March 16 but the season as a whole, when the Buckeyes struggled for two-thirds of the season before resembling an NCAA tournament team like the one last season that reached the regional final.

## IN THE CREASE Craig Merz

But there was too much to overcome for that to happen again. Having 15 newcomers among 26 players on the roster plus two new assistant coaches resulted in a horrible start, meaning the only way Ohio State could qualify for the NCAA tournament was to win the Big Ten. It was a valiant effort down the stretch, but when the No. 4 Spartans were able to close out the playoff win, the Buckeyes (14-20-4, 4-18-2) were finished.

That conference record is ghastly and earned them last place among the seven teams. What it doesn't reflect is the growth of the team to sweep then-No. 4 Wisconsin in the middle of February, win a game at Michigan State the following weekend and later take two of three at No. 5 Wisconsin in the quarterfinals on the Badgers' home ice to advance to the semifinal.

"Right from the beginning, I said if we can just keep getting better and put ourselves in a good spot toward the end of the year – obviously everybody wants to win now, but when you look at it, we almost put up 15 wins, we beat some good teams," coach Steve Rohlik said. "We played our best hockey down the stretch, so certainly not a perfect year.

"But I think there were a lot of good things, and then you throw in 15 new guys on top of that. We knew there was going to be some challenges, and I'm really proud of the group, to be honest. I'm proud of the older guys and proud of the group that they all came together and obviously showed that we could compete."

The goal for next season is not to be in a similar situation, however difficult that may be. The Buckeyes had eight seniors this season, and only three were eligible for a fifth season under the COVID-19 waiver. By the way, that waiver expires after the 2024-2025 season and a bit of normalcy will return to roster management.

Of the three who could come back, forwards Joe Dunlap and Patrick Guzzo will return while Matt Cassidy will not. That leaves the Buckeyes down six players already.

Then, their leading scorer, sophomore Stephen Halliday, and junior forward Cam Thiesing opted to leave early to sign pro contracts with the NHL's Ottawa Senators and New York Islanders, respectively.

It's reminiscent of last year when defenseman Mason Lohrei (Boston Bruins) and Cole McWard (Vancouver Canucks) as well as goaltender Jakub Dobeš (Montreal Canadiens), all sophomores, turned pro. It makes for a lot

of juggling, and that's before mentioning the transfer portal.

"You do everything you can to develop these guys. That's No. 1," Rohlik said. "You want to bring in the right kids. You want to develop these guys and give them a chance and an opportunity to chase their dreams while they're getting a great education.

"So now the NHL is knocking quite a bit at these kids and they want opportunities to bring them to their teams, and you're trying to balance that with the freshmen you're bringing in, and then balance that with some grad transfers or regular transfers that might fit into your program, so certainly it becomes a little bit of a balancing act."

### Looking Ahead

As Buckeye Sports Bulletin was going to press, Ohio State had seven freshmen committed for the 2024-25 season and no current players had entered the portal. The window opened March 31 and closes May 14.

Not only is it important to choose the transfers wisely, but this season showed integrating them quickly into a new school, new teammates and a new system is imperative.

"It starts now with the hunger from our guys. It starts with our offseason workouts," Rohlik said. "I think our guys are really excited about that. They're really excited about getting in the weight room, and then it's their attitude.

"We've got a lot of guys coming back that you could see the fire and you could see the team aspect down the stretch. You can see guys fighting for one another, and that's something that you can carry over. The young guys will see that, and the transfers will see that."

Even as the losses piled up, the players insisted they were better than the record showed.

"Honestly, we kind of had a little bit of bad luck at the beginning," Halliday said before the semifinal game. "We would outplay teams but didn't get the results. It's a testament to sticking with it that we are where we are now."

Rohlik expects a bounce back next season after taking a big step back from the 21-16-3 record last year.

"You start with a great nucleus," he said. "We've got a really good core group coming back. That's really important, and we're excited about a lot of these young guys coming in."

Rohlik expects to have back junior goalie Logan Terness (11-12-3, 3.1 goals-against average, .904 save percentage) and freshman Kristoffer Eberly (3-8-1, 2.98, .911). They alternated games in the second half of the season.

As it stands, sophomore Davis Burnside, who tied for second behind Halliday in team scoring with 26 points (nine goals, 17 assists), will be the leading point producer returning. Freshman Max Montes (nine goals, nine assists) had a strong finish to the season, and freshman defenseman Theo Wallberg (two goals, 19 assists) will anchor the defense.

Veteran leadership will be provided by Guzzo (eight goals, seven assists) and Dunlap, who was out with an injury until the first weekend in January but still had three goals and five assists in 13 games.

"You've got a couple of guys that have been there, done that," Rohlik said. "You build around and it and the rest of these guys

like that, and it gives you a good feeling as a coach."

### Moving On

Halliday's departure is substantial. The fourth-round pick (No. 104 overall) of the Senators in the 2022 NHL draft had 36 points (10 goals, 26 assists) this season and in 78 career games posted 77 points (19 goals, 58 assists).

Another season in college would have helped him, but a two-year entry-level contract with the Senators beginning with 2024-25 season was the lure. He signed an amateur tryout agreement (ATO) to play the remainder of this season for the Senators' Belleville (Ontario) affiliate in the American Hockey League.

Thiesing was wooed by the Islanders and the Toronto Maple Leafs because his physical play is better suited for the pros than college. He led the Buckeyes with 15 goals during the 2022-23 season. In 108 career games he had 62 points (32 goals, 30 assists). This season he had nine goals, seven assists and a team-high 55 penalty minutes.

Five other Buckeyes signed contracts:

- Defenseman Scooter Brickey elected to return for a fifth season in college in 2023-24 and it paid off with a contract for the 2024-25 season with the Wilkes-Barre/Scranton Penguins of the AHL, the top minor-league team for the Pittsburgh Penguins. He joined the "Baby Pens" on an ATO for the remainder of this season.

He played his first three years at Western Michigan before transferring to Ohio State for the 2022-23 season. At 6-4, 215 pounds, he was pro-ready physically a year ago but felt he needed to work on his skating and shooting.

He entered this season with six goals in 96 games but scored 13 in 37 games to rank second nationally for defensemen, and he was named to the All-Big Ten second team.

"Last year, I could have maybe gone to a different level, but I thought there's a lot of things in my game I still needed to improve on, and with the coaching staff here and video-wise it just really helped me improve my game overall," he said. "I think it was the best decision of my life coming here and coming back again for a fifth year."

- Forward Michael Gildon and defenseman Mason Klee inked deals with Worcester (Mass.) of the third-tier, or Double-A, ECHL. Gildon played five seasons for the Buckeyes, and Klee spent four seasons at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute before transferring.

It will be a Buckeye reunion because former Ohio State defenseman C.J. Regula also signed with the Railers, an affiliate of the New York Islanders. He spent his fifth season at RPI after four with the Buckeyes.

- Dalton Messina had a memorable start to his pro career. After signing with the Toledo Walleye of the ECHL on March 22, the forward scored twice in his second game the next night. He scored 20 points (seven goals, 13 assists) in 87 Buckeye games with 14 points (six goals, eight assists) coming this season.

- Riley Hughes, a forward, signed with Iowa in the ECHL. The graduate transfer had a goal and four assists for the Buckeyes following four seasons at Northeastern.

"I couldn't be happier for those guys," Rohlik said. "That speaks volumes of my staff

		Men's Hockey									
		GP	Pts.	W	L	T	OW	OL	SW		
Michigan State	24	52	16	6	2	0	1	1			
Wisconsin	24	50	16	7	1	2	2	1			
Minnesota	24	41	13	7	4	3	1	0			
Michigan	24	36	11	11	2	1	1	1			
Notre Dame	24	31	9	13	2	0	1	1			
Penn State	24	27	7	14	3	0	1	2			
<b>Ohio State</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>2</b>			

**Overall records** — Wisconsin 26-12-2, Michigan State 25-9-3, Minnesota 23-11-5, Michigan 22-14-3, Notre Dame 15-19-2, Penn State 15-18-3, **Ohio State 14-20-4.**

- standings courtesy of College Hockey Inc.

and what they're doing in the development part of things."

### Then There Was One

Beating Wisconsin in the quarterfinals made the Buckeyes the first No. 7 seed to win a series, but their historic run ended before a sellout crowd of 6,555 at Munn Ice Arena in East Lansing, Mich., on March 16 when the Spartans (23-9-3) prevailed in a wild game that had just three minor penalties and an equal number of goal challenges that, after video reviews, resulted in two scores being overturned, including the tying goal for the Buckeyes in the third period.

Michigan State led 1-0 in the final frame until Montes tied it at 2:03. However, the Spartans scored the winner just 13 seconds later. At 4:22, freshman defenseman Nathan McBrayer thought he had his first career goal to make it 2-2, but the Spartans were successful in challenging that a Buckeye was offside.

The loss was stinging enough but made even more so a week later when Michigan State defeated Michigan for its first tournament championship, leaving the Buckeyes as the sole school without a tournament title since its inception in 2014.

Ohio State lost in the final to Wisconsin in overtime in 2014 and in overtime to Notre Dame in 2019. The Buckeyes won the 2019 regular-season title.

"We've been close," Rohlik said. "If you keep doing things the right way, keep building with the right kids, keep working your tails off, you're going to get that opportunity. And it's tough to win in the best league in the country.

"We're fortunate to have a league championship, and we've been fortunate to have opportunities to win playoff championships and we've been fortunate to play in NCAA tournaments. Those are always the goals."

Michigan State, Michigan, Minnesota and Wisconsin occupied a quarter of the 16-team NCAA field. Wisconsin lost 3-2 in overtime to reigning national champion Quinnipiac in the first round. Minnesota won its opener 3-2 over Omaha before losing in the quarterfinals to Boston University, 6-3.

Michigan downed North Dakota 4-3 and Michigan State defeated Western Michigan 5-4 to set up a rematch in the quarterfinals on March 31. The Wolverines won 5-2 to advance to the Frozen Four in St. Paul, Minn.

Michigan will play Boston College, and it will be Boston University vs. Denver in the April 11 semifinals. The title game is April 13.

# Second Women's NCAA Hockey Title Twice As Nice

By **CRAIG MERZ**

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

When Nadine Muzerall became the third head coach in three years for the struggling Ohio State women's hockey team just 20 days before the 2016-17 season opener, she saw a group of determined but frazzled players who were worn down by the turmoil enveloping them.

First-year coach Jenny Potter was fired in August 2016 because of several NCAA recruiting violations. She had been hired in April 2015 to replace Nate Handrahan after he resigned before he could be fired for violating university policies on sexual harassment, inappropriate conduct and retaliation in regard to his players.

"I'm a redshirt sophomore having been through three coaching changes," goaltender Cassidy Sauve told BSB at the time. "It's really taught us how to work through adversity, and I think a lot of other teams don't have that where they had to deal with so much adversity in a short amount of time."

Enter Muzerall, who was an assistant coach at Minnesota from 2011-16, winning four national championships during the span. She also won an NCAA title as a player there in 2000. During the interview process at Ohio State, she went before a hiring board that included members of the hockey team.

"The questions they asked and honestly, the looks on their faces, they looked broken," she said in an interview with BSB shortly after taking the job. "I felt sympathy but I felt, you know what, it's not on these kids. They really need to have the experience and the opportunity student-athletes should have and that's been missing."

"I know from my experience in college I wouldn't trade it for anything. It was far and away the highlight of my life, and those kids were being stripped from that. I know I can change this program for the better."

Muzerall has done far more than make the Buckeyes better. She has made them the best.

Fast-forward to March 24 inside Whittemore Center Arena in Durham, N.H., where Muzerall is gathered at center ice surrounded by faces as opposite of broken as they could be. Smiles and laughter are everywhere as players, coaches, staff, her children and even retiring athletic director Gene Smith and new president Ted Carter are posing with the NCAA championship trophy – again.

After taking over a program that had gone 10-25-1 the season before Muzerall arrived, this year she steered the No. 1 seeded Buckeyes to a school-record 35 wins against four losses, capped by a 1-0 victory over No. 2 Wisconsin in the title game for their second-ever championship in just the past three seasons. They won it in 2022 and came agonizingly close last season but lost by the same 1-0 score to the Badgers in the

final.

"(The wins record) means a lot, because I think what it's showing is the growth of this program at Ohio State," Muzerall said. "We came from a background of below .500 when I took over. Just to see the growth of this team throughout the years, there's always some milestone each year."

## Second To None

Muzerall understood the significance of winning a second title. Since the women's tournament was established in 2001, the Buckeyes are the just the fifth school to win a championship, but entering the Frozen Four this season, they were the only one to win it all only once.

Wisconsin leads with seven followed by Minnesota (six), Minnesota-Duluth (five) and Clarkson (three). After defeating Clarkson 4-1 in the semifinal on March 22, Muzerall talked of creating a dynasty.

"We're building our own tradition that we are going to be contenders every year," she said. "We're building our legacy. We're just newer at it."

"We don't want to be that one-hit wonder. We've been to the championship game a couple times now, but I think what still motivates them is to get over that hump and try to leave a legacy and grow the tradition at Ohio State."

After the title game she said, "The peak of the mountain is very small because not many people can stand there for very long. Legacies obviously take time. Two is fantastic. I want to push to obviously three and more. It's going to take continued time and effort. Because you don't want to be part of history, you want to continue to push and be the future, as well."

The latest victory brought everything full circle in a way for Muzerall. She went 14-18-5 in her first season, and among her players were the Dunne sisters from suburban St. Louis – Jessica, a junior defender, and red-shirt freshman forward Jincy, a member of the U.S. women's national team who sat the previous season because of concussions.

Jincy would go on to become one of the greatest players in program history, earning All-America honors three times, helping the Buckeyes to their first Frozen Four in 2018 and being named to the Western Collegiate Hockey Association's 25th anniversary Top 25 team.

Her younger sister may be better.

Joy Dunne was named NCAA and WCHA Rookie of the Year this season

when she led the Buckeyes with 24 goals while adding 18 assists. She scored against Clarkson but will be forever remembered for scoring the lone goal against Wisconsin with 7:12 left in regulation before 4,378 fans, the third-highest ever for a championship game and the highest since 2006.

"When I made my decision to come to Ohio State, the goal was to win a national championship, to become a better player every day, and that just kind of happened," Joy Dunne said. "When Muzz was recruit-

ing me, everything she said was true. She meant it, and she cared."

The winning goal exemplified why Muzerall is so successful. Good, smart defending combined with skill produced the right play at the right time.

Wisconsin was headed for the potential breakthrough goal when Britta Curl, going for a record fourth championship in her sixth season, got a partial break, but defender Cayla Barnes tracked her down, stole the puck and started a breakout the other way with a pass to Hannah Bilka who, like Barnes, was a transfer this season from Boston College.

"We knew going against such a great opponent as Wisconsin we were going to need our leaders to be our experienced players, and that is Cayla Barnes," Muzerall said. "She was so responsible back there. You want to have the puck on the stick of somebody like Barnes because she just has such a high IQ and a great vision of the ice. She knows to move it fast and be simple with the plays and then move up."

Bilka skated into the zone and dropped a pass to Dunne in the right circle. Her wrist shot from the right circle deflected off a Wisconsin player's stick into the upper left corner.

"I've been working on that shot forever," Dunne said. "Great line mates set me up for a great pass to just take a shot. It took so much work to get there, but I think having my team and my coaches and my family and Jesus believe in me, I think that's really what gave me the confidence to just go out and play."

"Yes, I scored the goal, but there was so much in that game. Blocks, great saves – it took a team. It took behind-the-scenes work. It took everything. This is what we worked for. I'm so thankful because this is an amazing team to win a national championship with."

## Best Served Cold

The goal denied the Badgers (35-6-0) the chance to become the first repeat champion since Clarkson in 2017 and 2018.

"Not a lot of people on our team have experienced this kind of hurt, when you get so close but you don't quite make it," Badgers forward Casey O'Brien said. "This is something that none of us want to experience ever again. So, I think next year, the group that's there, whoever comes back is going to be fired up, and I think they're going to do everything they can to win."

A year earlier, those were the Buckeyes' sentiments after their one-goal loss. Goalie Raygan Kirk said the team was on a "revenge tour" this season. She stopped 29 Wisconsin shots for her 10th shutout of the season and her fourth in the last six games.

"I just tried to treat it like any other game and give it my all and just stay focused," Kirk said. "I was having the time of my life out there. I think you have to remember it is just a hockey game. You have to have fun."

Wisconsin entered this season's title game with the top-scoring team in the country (Ohio State was second) and was brimming with confidence.

The Buckeyes swept the Badgers at home 3-0 and 2-1 in overtime in November, but in the last series of the regular season, the Buckeyes won again, 3-1, before losing 4-2. Then, Wisconsin soundly beat Ohio State 6-3 to win the WCHA tournament final.

That's why winning the national championship game was special.

"You have these visions throughout the year, but when it really happens, it seems so surreal," Muzerall said. "I was very proud of how they punched back after a tough loss the last time we played against Wisconsin. I think it showed a lot of character of not letting that get to them on the high stage."

## One Step At A Time

As much as the teams wanted a rematch, they had to get through the semifinals. Ohio State did its part vs. Clarkson, and the Badgers stunned No. 3 seed Colgate 3-1. Clarkson stunned the Buckeyes with the first goal only 2:25 into the game.

"It was kind of a wake-up call," forward Sloane Matthews said. "I don't think we had the right mindset necessarily going in. We were playing not to lose instead of to win and score goals. When that first goal went in, the bench kind of took a reset."

"We just went back out and kept fighting and kept pushing because we knew one was going to pop, and it was just a matter of when."

Makenna Webster tied it at 13:53 of the first period before Matthews potted the go-ahead score at 13:12 of the third period. Dunne extended the lead to 3-1 with three minutes left, and Hadley Hartmetz added the final tally into an empty net with 1:54 to play.

Barnes, Dunne, Kirk and Webster were named to the Frozen Four All-Tournament Team, and Kirk was voted the Most Outstanding Player, saving 45 of 46 shots in the two games.

Kirk is out of eligibility next season. She is among eight seniors and eight graduates, some of whom may be able to take advantage of the added year because of the pandemic. But as it stands, 13 of the top 18 scorers will need replacing.

With a good nucleus returning led by Dunne, a strong incoming freshman class and the lure to transfers of playing in a championship program, no one should feel sorry for the Buckeyes. Muzerall has the team on top because eight years ago she looked at a downtrodden program and saw potential. She's indebted that university officials felt the same way about her.

"As much as I took a chance on Ohio State, Ohio State took a chance on me, because I was just a second assistant at Minnesota, my alma mater" she said. "We had a lot of success, but a lot of people at Ohio State believed in me and what I could do."



Nadine Muzerall



Joy Dunne



Cayla Barnes



Raygan Kirk

# OSU's Mendez Wins National Championship

Ohio State sophomore Jesse Mendez came out on top of the 141-pound weight class at the NCAA championships in Kansas City, Mo., from March 21-23, as top-seeded Mendez knocked off Penn State's Beau Bartlett, the second-seeded wrestler in the class, to secure an individual national championship.

## ON THE MAT Greg Wilson

"This is a goal I set at a young age," Mendez said. "My dad and I have been talking about this since I was 7 years old, so to finally get it done, it's a feeling you can't describe. I'm grateful for the people around me that helped me get here. I'm excited to do it two more years in a row."

Mendez is the first individual champion at Ohio State since Kyle Snyder won the last of his three consecutive heavyweight titles in 2018. Mendez' title helped Ohio State finish eighth in team scoring with 62.0 points, while Penn State took first with an NCAA-record 172.5 points.

With Mendez' run at the NCAA championships, he finished the season with a 30-2 record, with his only two losses coming against Pittsburgh's Cole Mathews on Dec. 10 and against Bartlett on Feb. 2 when the Buckeyes visited the Nittany Lions during the regular season.

Mendez started the season as the No. 5 wrestler in the country in his class and worked his way up to No. 3 heading into the Big Ten tournament. There, he knocked off the only wrestlers ranked ahead of him – Bartlett and Iowa's Real Woods – to secure the top seed at 141 pounds for the NCAA championships.

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SONNY BROCKWAY

**NATIONAL CHAMPION — Ohio State wrestler Jesse Mendez took home some hardware at the NCAA Wrestling Championships, winning the 141-pound bracket to become the Buckeyes' first national champion since Kyle Snyder in 2018.**

His journey through the NCAA bracket began against No. 33 Todd Carter of George Washington, which ended in dominant fashion with a 19-4 technical fall. He continued that dominance in the second round against No. 17 Isaiah Powe of Chattanooga, scoring a quick takedown and a two-point near fall before pinning Powe in 4:37 to move on to the quarterfinals.

"Jesse can score when his opponent shoots and he forces his opponent underneath him," head coach Tom Ryan said. "This offseason he worked hard on his riding and pinning, as well as his bottom game."

He faced off against No. 9 Brock Hardy from Nebraska, whom Mendez notched a win over earlier this season at the Cliff Keen Invitational in an 11-3 major decision. But this time around, Hardy kept things close. It was scoreless through the first period, and Mendez scored an escape point to start the second period and found an opening with a minute remaining, taking Hardy down to the mat, but time expired in the period before Mendez could pick up a point.

Hardy started the third on bottom to try to even the score, but Mendez was aggressive in trying to earn some riding time, enough so that he was able to score two points for a near fall. Hardy scored a reversal with a minute remaining, but Mendez was able to come back with a reversal of his own, locking Hardy's legs and arms up over his own head in a "spladle," which he held until time ran out to win 6-2, securing his All-America status for the second straight year.

"I've never drilled a spladle in my life," Mendez said. "But when you see it and you're mid-match, you've just got to rip it. That's kind of what happened."

His semifinal match was against No. 5 Anthony Echemendia from Iowa State, a

former Buckeye who transferred away from Ohio State following the 2020-21 season after being arrested and charged with felonious assault.

Mendez scored a takedown halfway through the first period, earning 1:29 of riding time from holding the advantage until time ran out. Mendez escaped to start the second period, extending his lead to 4-0, which would remain the score through the second.

Echemendia started neutral to begin the third period, and he scored a takedown just 20 seconds in. Mendez escaped in time to keep his riding time over a minute and lead by two points, but he received two stalling warnings to bring Echemendia within one with just under a minute to go. Echemendia started to be even more aggressive realizing his time was running out, and with seconds left in the bout he came close to landing a takedown, but Mendez kept control and ran the clock out with the lead and a riding time point in the 6-4 win.

In the rubber match with Bartlett, the first period was spent with both wrestlers going away from their usually aggressive approaches, and it remained scoreless.

Mendez started the second period on bottom and escaped in seven seconds. Bartlett was then able to get to Mendez' leg late in the period and flip him to the mat, but Mendez kept moving and got ahold of Bartlett's leg to avoid the takedown, going into the third with a 1-0 lead.

Bartlett was on bottom to begin the third, but Mendez was able to stay on top for 37 seconds before the Nittany Lion was able to escape and tie the match at one. With 20 seconds left, Bartlett got both of Mendez' legs and took him to the mat, but before he got points for the takedown, Mendez was able to roll out of it and take control of Bartlett, pushing his back to the mat for a takedown and three points.

After a challenge by Penn State head coach Cael Sanderson and a review, it was ruled the correct call, giving Mendez the 4-1 decision and the national championship.

"That's one of those spots where you just have to go," Mendez said. "There's no stopping in wrestling. There's no being like, 'Oh s-t, I'm about to lose the national finals.' You keep wrestling and you go get it."

Mendez was excited to be on top of the class, but it also wasn't a surprise to him since becoming a national champion has been in his plans all along.

"It's one of those things, even if you're not the guy yet, you have to walk like you're that guy and you have to talk like you're that guy," he said. "The first moment I stepped on campus I said I was going to be a national champion. If you don't act that way and don't carry yourself like a national champ, you won't be. Ever since I was a kid, I've always had that confidence."

## Welsh, Feldman Finish As All-Americans

Along with Mendez, both freshman Rocco Welsh (174 pounds) and redshirt freshman Nick Feldman (heavyweight) earned All-America status, with Feldman finishing in fifth and Welsh making it to the title match before losing to Penn State's Carter

Starocci.

Welsh, who was supposed to redshirt this season before starter Carson Kharchla was lost due to an injury, wound up as the sixth-seeded wrestler in his class. He suffered a 2-0 decision loss to ninth-seeded Starocci.

"Once I got my redshirt pulled, me and Tom were talking in the weight room and I remember asking him, 'Do you think I'm ready?' He was like, '100 percent. There's no one more ready than you.'" Welsh recalled. "After that I was like, 'My coach believes in me, so I just have to believe in myself,' and a week after that I beat a top-20 kid from NC State. After that I was training good and kept beating good kids so my confidence just kept growing."

Welsh won his opening matchup in a 4-2 decision over Navy's Danny Wask and followed it up with a 4-1 sudden victory over Campbell's Austin Murphy. Welsh then pulled off his first upset of the tournament, notching a 4-1 sudden victory over Illinois' Edmond Ruth, the third-seeded wrestler in the class, and made it to the finals with yet another 4-1 sudden victory, this one over Colorado's Lennox Wolak.

Feldman won his opening matchup with a pin fall over Hofstra's Keaton Lever in 2:27 and then won an 11-2 major decision over Iowa's Bradley Hill. But he ran into a brick wall in the quarterfinals in the form of top-seeded Greg Kerkvliet from Penn State, who sent Feldman to the consolation bracket with a 1-0 decision.

In the consolation bracket, Feldman registered an 8-5 sudden victory over Oklahoma's Josh Heindselman and a 10-4 decision over Campbell's Taye Ghadiali. He suffered a 14-5 major-decision loss to Air Force's Wyatt Hendrickson, the third-seeded wrestler in the class, but notched an 11-4 decision over Arizona's State's Cohlton Schultz (4) to nab fifth in the bracket.

While Mendez was the only wrestler to come away with a championship, Feldman said that gives him motivation heading into next season.

"Being around Jesse since we got onto campus has been such a blessing," Feldman said. "The work that he puts in, it's incredible. It shows in his wrestling, and it shows in how he lives his life. Being around him every day is motivating. I can always count on him to keep pushing me, and I've turned into a better leader and a better wrestler because of it."

"I love seeing him achieve his goals, and it pushes me harder to achieve my goals. As proud as I am of him, he's the same age as me so I should be accomplishing the same stuff he is."

With three All-Americans and a national champion set to return next season, Ryan is looking forward to what the young team might be able to accomplish in the future.

"We're in a good spot," Ryan said. "We have a lot of points returning. What people don't see, these are elite wrestlers, but these are really great men. They're great examples. They set a really high standard. We're super excited for what's coming. There's some really good guys who redshirted this year and some good groups coming in."



# OSU Trying To Stay Loose After Cold Streak

After taking two of three games from West Virginia from March 15-17 to move to 10-8 on the season, Ohio State (12-12, 2-1 Big Ten) came back to Columbus for its home opener, a three-game series against Georgetown. The Buckeyes were excited to be at Bill Davis Stadium and were looking to get the seven-game homestand off to a hot start.

## FROM THE STRETCH Greg Wilson

"I'm really excited to play at home and get that home crowd going," sophomore shortstop Henry Kaczmar said. "Especially because I feel like we're going to bring a lot to the table this year and I'm excited to show the fans that."

But it didn't go as planned. The Hoyas came to town and swept the Buckeyes, winning 5-1, 8-5 and 4-2 in 10 innings from March 22-24. Head coach Bill Mosiello said it was tough after they felt like they had some momentum going.

"We beat a good West Virginia team two out of three," Mosiello said. "They showed they're a good team by going out and beating Oklahoma (on a West Coast swing). You think, 'Oh man, that's great,' and you're going home then boom, boom, boom, (the momentum) quickly just stops."

Mosiello said he thinks the losses happened because some of the hitters were trying to do too much, and he wants to make sure that is a trend that doesn't continue. He wants his players to always be playing loose and free when they're on the field.

"You're always wanting to be relaxed," Mosiello said. "The goal is to see (important at-bats) like it's just any other at-bat for you. The more they pile up – how many more chances are we going to have with a guy on second base with two outs? Talk is cheap. It's your actions and how you prepared for all that stuff."

"We have mental skill training that we do. We go over those things, put ourselves in those situations, work on our breathing. We've overprepared for all of that stuff. But as a coach, you don't really ever know what someone's thinking in the box. That's the unknown of sports."

The preparation for those moments comes throughout the season, but Mosiello never wants to make a big deal out of the times the players fail to come through in important moments. He believes once it's brought up and everyone is aware it's a problem, the hitters won't be able to relax when they get into those situations.

"I don't ever want to talk about it because the more you talk about it, the more they think about it," he said. "That's the hard deal with it. 'Get hits with guys in scoring position.' Well they're already starting to press. It's just an elephant in the room. We just have to get it."

One way Mosiello tries to keep his players from thinking too much is to win what they call the "freebie war" every game. He wants to always beat the other team in things like stolen bases, walks and extra bases taken, among others.

He keeps a board up in the team room

where he keeps track of which team wins the war each game and marks whether that game was a win or a loss. The correlation is a strong one, as in every game they have won, they have also won the freebie war, and in almost every game they have lost, they have also lost the freebie war.

"It's sort of like a football battle of turnovers, interceptions, rushing for over 100 yards and not letting the other team do it," Mosiello said. "This shows we're doing a good job of playing some pretty solid baseball. You just have to get that hit at the right time."

### Bullpen Working Through Struggles

One of the biggest issues for Ohio State throughout the first stretch of this season has been the bullpen. The starting pitching has been fairly consistent, with lefthander Landon Beidelschies holding a 3.35 ERA, lefty Gavin Bruni with a 5.34 ERA and righthander Colin Purcell with a 6.58 ERA through March 31, but when they come out, it has been hit or miss for the Buckeyes' pitching.

There have been seven times in 24 games the Buckeyes have had 10 or more runs scored against them, with the majority of those runs scored off relief pitching. Now 24 games into the season as of March 31, nine bullpen arms have an ERA of 5.00 or above, and five of them have an ERA of 10.00 or higher.

With a three-game conference series every weekend, and midweek games in between those, Mosiello is going to have to continue to dig into the depths of his bullpen, and he said they are going to have to step up.

"Some of these guys are going to get to show their worth," Mosiello said. "They're going to get the ball to be able to add to the depth of our bullpen."

The four main arms Mosiello likes to go in relief have been Gavin DeVooght (1.15 ERA), Zach Brown (3.97), Justin Eckhardt (4.50) and Blaine Wynn (5.87) – all righthanders – who have been getting most of their appearances in the weekend games.

The bullpen had an improved series even in the sweep against Georgetown, with four relievers throwing at least an inning without giving up an earned run, so Mosiello is hoping that the momentum from those games will carry into Big Ten play and the offense will be able to get hot at the same time. As of March 31, the team ERA sat at 5.99, compared to 5.67 for opposing pitching staffs.

### Kaczmar's 18-Game Hit Streak Comes To End

Kaczmar went 0 for 3 on Opening Day against Boston College but came out against Brigham Young the next day, going 3 for 5 with three RBI in a 7-2 win. That began one of the longest hitting streaks in Ohio State baseball history.

Following his performance against the Cougars, Kaczmar recorded a hit in the next 17 games – including seven multi-hit outings – with his 18-game streak coming to an end against Georgetown on March 23. The longest ever hitting streak for a Buckeye was accomplished by Jay Semke in 1987, when he had a hit in 23 straight games.

Even though his hitting streak came to an end, Kaczmar was walked against the Hoyas to extend his streak of getting on base, which

he has done in every game this season.

Through March 31, Kaczmar is second on the team in hitting with a slash line of .319/.434/.415, walking 12 times and being hit by a pitch seven times. He also has a home run and 14 RBI through 24 games.

He was named a Big Ten Player to Watch before the season, along with Beidelschies and Bruni, and so far he has lived up to the expectations. He is coming off a freshman season in which he hit .293/.377/.452, and he has made big improvements at the plate after already finishing as one of the best hitters in the Ohio State lineup.

### Left Field Could Go Through Changes

Junior Trey Lipsey began the season as the starting left fielder and kept that spot through the series with Georgetown, only taking breaks as designated hitter while junior Nick Giamarusti got some time in the field. Lipsey, however, has had a rough first half of the season, and it has gotten to the point where Mosiello feels he may need to make some changes and try new things out.

"Offensively, Lipsey and (Josh) Stevenson are kind of the two bugaboos," Mosiello said. "Stevenson is such a premier center fielder and that's why he's out there, but there might have to be some changes in left field. Lipsey, I've given him a lot of rope. He's got a lot of at-bats. I'm one of those guys, I'm not into changing the lineup every day and making switches

all the time."

But against Purdue, Giamarusti was in left field on March 29 with Lipsey on the bench. The fact that the Boilermakers' three starting pitchers for the weekend series were all left-handed went into the decision since Lipsey hits from the left side, but it also mattered to Mosiello that Lipsey has not been able to match the stats he put up as a freshman, let alone improve on them.

Through 24 games, Lipsey was hitting .218/.314/.396. In his freshman season in 2022, he was able to slash .293/.461/.482 while hitting seven home runs, but he hasn't been able to get back to that since.

Giamarusti has been taking advantage of his opportunities when they have come with 16 games played and a .300 average in 50 at-bats. He has hit three home runs and knocked in 15 runs while also going a perfect 8-for-8 on stolen bases to this point. He's reaching base at a .429 clip, and Mosiello thinks he deserves to start playing more.

The outfielder is a transfer from John A. Logan in Carterville, Ill., where he played one season after playing his freshman year at Pittsburgh. Mosiello said he likes players who come with that type of experience.

"They have a little bit of a feel for what a D-1 program looks like as opposed to just a junior college guy," he said. "They've obviously gone through a little adversity, but he's earned that leadoff spot."

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# New Faces Could Lead Bucks Back To The Top

There was a lot of talk about the myriad stars who returned for Ohio State for the 2024 football season, and while they should not be minimized, this spring was all about the new faces.

**THE FACTS MAN**  
**Mike Wachsmann**

To borrow a baseball adage, it was hard to tell the players without a scorecard, but it wasn't hard at all to see that the Buckeyes are oozing talent at nearly every turn. Whether it will be enough talent to break the streak of losses to Michigan and win their first national title since 2014 remains to be seen. But if all of that happens, it will most likely be because of the contributions of newcomers.

In one corner you have quarterback Will Howard, who lost his black stripe on March 30, a player who may not evoke memories of C.J. Stroud but who is good enough to put pressure on opposing offenses with both his legs and his arm. He does not have to be great, just good enough. He might be the first "game manager" the Buckeyes have had in some time, and that will be perfectly fine if the other neophytes do their thing.

Running back Quinshon Judkins was maybe the offensive acquisition of the portal season, and he gives the Buckeyes the best running back combination in the country along with holdover TreVeyon Henderson. Judkins has a nose for the end zone and does not shy away from contact, and he will be vital to the team's success.

Freshman Jeremiah Smith was touted as the nation's top recruit for 2024 and was living up to that billing early in camp. He was seen snagging a deep pass

from Lincoln Kienholz during a March 30 practice and made veteran corner Denzel Burke look like a newbie on another one off the hand of Devin Brown. From his fluid route running to his ability to get contested balls, Smith was making believers out of everyone – his head coach included.

"I'm going to be careful what I say, but he's been certainly a pleasure to watch, and we're all really excited about his future," Buckeyes boss Ryan Day said. "If he continues on the path that he's on, he's going to play a lot of football and certainly will have a chance to start as well."

A chance? A chance? Here's a prediction that may seem bold, but really isn't – Smith will not only start, but will win Big Ten honors this season. Folks, he's that good.

Defensively, Caleb Downs has shown every bit the football savvy and ability he did at Alabama, where he was a freshman All-American as well as making a handful of non-freshman All-America teams, too. He's dynamic in the return game – no word yet on whether he will be handling punts for the Buckeyes – and has a thumper's mentality. He should be a perfect fit for Jim Knowles' safety-driven scheme.

There are also new starters in other positions, and they will also have to play well. But they have been in the program and own a comfort level the newcomers may not. Should the Buckeyes reach their goals – and there is no reason to believe they can't given the stacked roster – this quartet of Downs, Howard, Judkins and Smith will be a major reason.

## Fans Seem To Like It

Any Ohio State hoops fan who thought the Buckeye brass was going to make a splashy basketball hire hasn't been paying attention. The Ohio State job is a good one, but not a great one, and as such the big-name candidates don't exactly flock to it. Maybe it has something to do with play-

ing second fiddle to football, but basketball has been, with the exception of the Thad Matta era, largely an afterthought.

This is why it wasn't very surprising to see interim coach Jake Diebler elevated on March 17 to full time after the Buckeyes made a late-season run, which included finishing one game short of the NIT semifinals. Ohio State finished 22-14, and it's interesting to note that only three Big Ten teams – Purdue, Illinois and Nebraska – had more total victories than the Buckeyes.

The Buckeyes played looser under Diebler than they ever did under previous coach Chris Holtmann, and it was just a more entertaining product. There was good spacing, extra passing and a commitment to defense, and Diebler wasn't afraid to let the boys get up and down the floor if they wanted to. Ohio State scored 80 or more points in four of Diebler's 11 games, which isn't too far off from the six it accomplished under Holtmann in far more contests this season. Interestingly, all six under Holtmann were in a consecutive streak from Nov. 24 to Dec. 9.

"Jake Diebler possesses all of the characteristics we were seeking as we conducted a very comprehensive and thorough search for a new head coach," incoming athletic director Ross Bjork said. "Those include coaching ability, passion, energy, program knowledge, character, integrity and ties to Ohio. As an Ohio native, the son of a longtime Ohio high school coach and with deep connections to Ohio State, Jake knows what it takes to lead this program on a championship course."

Moments after the announcement was made to the team by Bjork, a cacophony of cheers and claps erupted from the players. They definitely seem to play hard for Diebler, and he understands the task that's at hand.

"It's a blessing and a privilege to serve this program, and I'm excited for this opportunity," Diebler said. "I'd like to thank Ross Bjork and President (Ted) Carter for believing in me and the vision that I have moving forward. Ohio State basketball is special and means so much to me and my family. I look forward to serving the entire Ohio State basketball family as best as I possibly can."

It seems dicey to hire an interim – pessimists will say he was part of the problem in the first place as a member of Holtmann's staff – but assuming Diebler brings in assistants with experience, it can certainly work out. He took a step in that direction by bringing former Matta right-hand man Dave Dickerson back into the fold, and his experience should help Diebler keep the missteps to a minimum.

It's impossible to forecast how the next few seasons will go, especially since we have yet to see what kind of fallout (or reward) looms in the transfer portal. But one thing is certain – there is once again excitement and, most importantly, hope in the men's basketball program.

## Jesse Men-Does It With Win At NCAA Wrestling

While most of America was slacking off

in productivity by watching the big hoops event, yours truly was hunkered down for the real showcase affair of March – the NCAA Wrestling Championships. Or as I like to call it, March Matness.

Ohio State finished in eighth place at this year's event, held in Kansas City, Mo., scoring 62.0 points and tallying three All-Americans, most notably national champion Jesse Mendez at 141 pounds. The sophomore from Indiana was workmanlike in his quest, netting a fall and a technical fall while showing his ability to fend off shots from opponents and dictate the action offensively.

His semifinal match with Anthony Echemendia – a former Buckeye – was one of the best of the tournament, with Echemendia cutting the deficit to 4-3 on a third-period takedown, but a Mendez escape made it 5-3. A stall against Mendez cut the margin to one point, but Mendez sealed the victory at 6-4 with a point for riding time.

Mendez is Ohio State's first national champion since 2018, when Kyle Snyder won his third consecutive – and final – crown at heavyweight. Mendez is tenacious and still learning on offense, so he should be a handful, and a favorite, for the next two seasons.

A bit more surprising was the advancement of freshman Rocco Welsh to the finals at 174 pounds. Unlike Mendez, Welsh's matches were fraught with drama.

He won his opener 4-2 before taking three straight sudden-victory wins, including one over Big Ten champion Edmond Ruth of Illinois in the quarterfinals. He fell 2-0 in the finals to Penn State's Carter Starocci, who etched his name in history as one of only six four-time national champions, but Welsh had nothing to hang his head about. He cut Starocci off on a couple of shots and was active through the second period but was just unable to finish. He could be a title favorite in 2025.

Heavyweight Nick Feldman finished fifth, falling into the consolation bracket after losing a 1-0 decision to Penn State's Greg Kerkvliet in the quarters. Two wins were followed by a loss to eventual third-place finisher Wyatt Hendrickson of Air Force, but Feldman didn't sulk and won 11-4 over Cohlton Schultz of Arizona State to take fifth.

An eighth-place finish with just three All-Americans is pretty good, and it could have been even better had Ohio State not been without last year's national runner-up, Sammy Sasso at 149 pounds. He missed the season after being shot during a carjacking in August but has said he wants to return to competition if possible.

It appears that he is aiming for a 2025 return, which should boost the Buckeyes' fortunes and provide a veteran presence on a team that will be talented but quite young.

If Sasso can come back healthy and return to form, the Buckeyes have a legitimate shot to contend for the national title. Tom Ryan already has one, from 2015, and he's been recruiting well enough to put the Buckeyes into the mix for the foreseeable future.

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# Diebler Trial Run Makes Believer Of New AD

## THE VIEW FROM 15TH & HIGH Frank Moskowitz, Publisher

When Ohio State basketball coach Chris Holtmann was fired on Feb. 14, the assumption was that incoming athletic director Ross Bjork would want to make a big splash with his first major decision as Buckeye AD, bringing in a name coach to try to turn Ohio State's basketball fortunes around.

Plenty of names were being mentioned, but a funny thing happened on the way to Bjork's decision. Interim coach Jake Diebler led the struggling Buckeyes to a stunning upset of No. 2 Purdue in his first game at the helm. Other victories followed, including a comeback win over Michigan State and legendary coach Tom Izzo that snapped a 17-game road losing streak dating back more than a year.

Fans and media types began to wonder if Diebler was throwing a monkey wrench into the search, forcing himself into the hiring discussion.

As it turned out, Bjork did make a big splash with his hire, but it was kind of a reverse splash when he surprised many by promoting Diebler on March 17 and by doing it so quickly.

"We laid out a very specific profile about what we envisioned for Ohio State basketball," Bjork said during Diebler's introductory press conference. "Passion; energy; create a program; identity; a track record of player development; a recruiting machine, especially here in the Midwest and in the state of Ohio; strong leadership skills that can galvanize Buckeye Nation; someone who understands and also can capitalize in modern-day college athletics; born-to-coach. Jake Diebler fits each one of those characteristics, and then some.

"As we looked at all the characteristics, we just thought, 'Look, if we know where we're going, let's pull the trigger.' He's the real deal. He knows how to live at the highest level of college basketball. He's seen it in action. So, to me, that made up for the lack of long-term head-coaching experience, because he just fits where we are in this program right now."

It was a bold move, and the stakes became even higher when archival Michigan hired Dusty May, one of the top choices among Buckeye fans and the media for the OSU job, just a few days later.

Who made the right decision, Bjork or Michigan AD Warde Manuel, will not be known for a few years, but you can bet that fans and observers of both programs will be watching.

I was a bit surprised when reading our "media reaction" piece about the hiring of Diebler (see page 25), that the usually cynical press types seemed very positive about Diebler's hiring.

I would have preferred going the safer route. We had just a month to see what Diebler could do before he was promoted. Running a major college basketball program is a 12-month-a-year job, not just one month. We've gotten a decent sample of what he can do on the sidelines. How is he going to do at all of the other phases? None of us know. And as far as his coaching on the court, was his 11-game sample proof of his coaching acumen or just a case of catching a team on an adrenaline rush, being lifted out from under the pall that had to be hanging over the team with all the public speculation surrounding Holtmann. The players are not deaf and blind.

At the least I would not have jumped to make the decision that quickly. Almost any coach who was worth pursuing would have been involved in the postseason, thus otherwise engaged. Why not take your time and see which proven coach was out there and judge their interest? Diebler wasn't going anywhere. They still could have circled back to their interim coach.

A reason Bjork might have acted quickly may have been retention. Ohio State has a solid nucleus of young talent that, should they return, would be a nucleus of veteran talent. If some of

the key players defect (Scotty Middleton is already in the portal), then Ohio State might have been better off going with a more experienced coach to rebuild.

"Roster retention is probably of greatest importance," Diebler admitted after his hiring.

Which brings up an interesting point. With the massive changes in college athletics over the past few years concerning NIL and the transfer portal, does a "proven" coach really have that much more experience than Diebler?

### Déjà Vu All Over Again

As nearly every Buckeye fan has been reminded by now, the last time Ohio State promoted an assistant coach to head basketball coach was back in 1989, when Randy Ayers was elevated following Gary Williams' departure to Maryland after three seasons. Like Diebler, Ayers had no previous head-coaching experience but still beat out the likes of Nolan Richardson of Arkansas, among others. How serious any of those other candidacies were is unknown, but Richardson, coming off a 25-7 season with the Razorbacks, was thought to be Ayers' stiffest competition.

"We believe we conducted a thorough national search," OSU athletic director Jim Jones said upon the hiring of the 33-year-old Ayers, the first Black head basketball coach at Ohio State and only the fourth in Big Ten history. "We talked to a number of persons for information or recommendations, as well as several potential candidates."

Jones acknowledged that Ayers' lack of head-coaching experience was a consideration in the search.

"As far as I know, there is no one perfect coach in America," Jones said. "I believe Randy fulfills the ideals we were going after. So, we were willing to overlook the fact that he had not been a head coach.

"His hard work, integrity, true concern for our players, commitment to the university and the community, interest in our academic pursuits, ability to teach, enthusiasm and will to win were all important factors for me."

Sounds a little bit like Bjork and the characteristics he mentioned for Diebler above.

I think there is a common recollection that Ayers was not a successful coach at Ohio State. By the end of his tenure, that might have been the case. His Buckeyes were 17-13, 10-8 in conference and finished sixth in the Big Ten his first season of 1989-90 (Williams had been 19-15, 6-12 and eighth in the Big Ten the year before). But in the following two seasons, Ayers's Buckeyes, led by Jim Jackson who was primarily recruited by the young coach, won the Big Ten championship and went to the NCAA Sweet 16 and Elite Eight, respectively. Those were some of the best teams in Ohio State history.

Sadly, by the time Jones fired Ayers in 1997, the Buckeyes had strung together four straight losing seasons and finished no higher than seventh in the conference in those same years.

I have always maintained that Ayers attained success so quickly, and at such a young age, that he ended up losing sight of the details that make a coach and a program great.

Here's hoping that Diebler, a more mature 37, has Ayers' early success and maintains it for years to come.

### The Caitlin Effect

Some people love hamburgers. Not that I mind hamburgers, but I *really* love hot dogs. However, I am very picky about my franks. Low-

end dogs upset my stomach. Nathan's Famous hot dogs really fit the bill for me, and I try to get to Nathan's Mondays at the Press Pub on Fifth Avenue, near the former BSB world headquarters and only a few blocks from the new HQ, to enjoy the Nathan's dogs, priced two-for-one, as many Mondays as I can.

On Monday, March 25, I went to enjoy Nathan's at Press Pub. I got there a little late, but there were still a few patrons there, and all seemed to be watching Caitlin Clark and Iowa vs. West Virginia in the NCAA women's basketball tourney. The Mountaineers were putting up more of a fight than perhaps was expected. As the game wore on the remaining crowd started to thin out, and finally it was down to me and one other guy way down the bar, who was clearly wrapped up in the game, giving running commentary to no one in particular.

They announced last call for food. Then they announced last call for drinks. The Mountaineers continued to battle, trailing by just three with 1:07 to go in the game, and the other guy and I didn't budge. The staff finished their clean-up, and we were *still* there, leaving the workers to stand around and wait. Finally, in the waning seconds of the game, the Hawkeyes and Clark had taken sufficient control at the foul line that I was confident there wasn't going to be any miracle comeback on this night – and I was a little uncomfortable holding up the crew – so I was ready to head for home.

I walked down to the other patron, who was going to wait it out to the bitter end, and asked him, "Did you ever think you would see the day where two slob like you and me would keep a pub from closing just to watch the end of a women's basketball game?"

I'm not so sure he was wild about me referring to him as a slob (which he wasn't), but he nodded in agreement.

If this had been a women's basketball game other than maybe one with Ohio State involved, I would have been gone once my Nathan's were finished and the first rag came out to wipe down the bar for closing. I suspect my fellow slob, who was long finished with his dinner and drinks, would have been gone as well.

Our hanging around was part of what I call the Caitlin Clark effect. Love her or hate her, it's a whole new world for women's basketball thanks to her.

I maintain evidence of the "effect" could also be seen at Value City Arena this season.

Ohio State was averaging 5,668 fans in its first 10 home games this season. Then Clark and the Hawkeyes helped draw a program-record 18,660 to The Schott on Jan. 21. That was a big part Caitlin, but another part the strong play of the Buckeyes leading up to the game, an overtime win for the Buckeyes.

The real Caitlin "effect" came later.

The Buckeyes averaged 9,120 in the five regular-season home games after that huge crowd, an increase of 3,452 per contest over games before Clark and Iowa came to town. You could say the increase was because of how well Ohio State was playing, *but a 61 percent increase in attendance?* Many of the non-hardcore women's fans wouldn't have even known the Buckeyes were playing that well if Clark hadn't drawn so much attention to the team.

That's an effect, and women's basketball will probably never be the same.

### A Frank Flashback

As I have mentioned many times through

the years, my first sportswriting job was in the sports information office at Bowling Green State University back in 1977 and '78. One of the more visible BG athletes at the time was Greg Kampe, now the coach of the No. 14-seed Oakland University team that recently upset No. 3 Kentucky in the NCAA tourney, screwing up millions of brackets. One of the reasons Kampe was so visible at BG back in the day was because he played on both the football and basketball teams.

I recall him as being a diminutive (he was listed at 5-9, 170 in an old program I found) over-achiever with a mop of curly hair. I saw a picture of him recently, and he still has a (thinner) mop of curly hair.

It was 46 years ago that I was at Bowling Green. I'm pretty sure I would have written a story on Kampe for the football or basketball program at the time.

Kampe has been at Oakland since 1984, making him the longest-tenured active coach in NCAA Division I. Surely in his time he has had other offers from other schools. His teams have won three Summit League Tournaments (2005, 2010, 2011) and a Horizon League tournament (2024). Kampe was named Summit League Coach of the Year four times (2000, 2007, 2010, 2011) and GLIAC Coach of the Year in 1988. You have to love a guy who is that loyal!

I'm proud that in terms of longevity, I have him beat by three years, having been at BSB since 1981.

If I bumped into Kampe, what would I ask him?

I'd ask him what he remembers from the Great Blizzard of 1978, one of the most profound experiences of my lifetime, as I am sure it is for anyone who lived in northwest Ohio at the time.

By the way, who is a distant second as longest-tenured coach after Kampe? Michigan State's Izzo at 29 seasons.

### Business Notes

For those of you who continue to complain about the price of Buckeye Sports Bulletin, I wanted to recount a little story.

I ran into McDonald's on a recent morning and ordered an Egg McMuffin. The lady who took my order, a manager-looking type, rings it in and says, "Oh, they raised that price *again*? This is getting *really* expensive." She said it, not me.

There is a group of BSB readers out there who continue to think Buckeye Sports Bulletin is immune to the business realities of our world which even a behemoth like McDonald's is struggling to deal with. We offer many specials throughout the year to help those readers and are so appreciative of the subscribers who pay full price, even when they receive a money-saving offer, and also those who participate in our VIP program. It makes fighting the good fight easier with that kind of support, and I'm talking emotional support, in addition to financial.

Don't forget we are offering gift subscriptions for anyone in the active military for just \$19.95, less than the cost of printing and mailing the paper. It's a chance to send a little bit of home to those who serve and protect us. For military members overseas, be sure to send their APO address. For those serving in the States, just use their regular street address. Don't forget, while it may take a few days to get BSB overseas, our Buckeye servicemen and -women will have immediate and free access to each issue of BSB at BuckeyeSports.com with their gift subscriptions.

We are also still offering gift subscriptions to anyone under the age of 35 for just \$19.95.

As always, if you have any questions, give us a call at (614) 486-2202.

# Reds APRIL LINEUP!



## MARCH 28-31



### THURSDAY // 4:10

- Opening Day presented by GE Aerospace
- Reds Magnetic Schedule and Car Magnet, presented by PNC (To fans in attendance, while supplies last)



### SATURDAY // 4:10

- Kids Opening Day presented by Cutie's
- Kids Reds Cap, presented by Cincinnati Children's Hospital (Kids 14 & younger in attendance, while supplies last)



### SUNDAY // 1:40

- Family Discount Day, presented by Klosterman Bakery
- Reds Sticker Sheet, presented by Texas Roadhouse (To fans in attendance, while supplies last)



## APRIL 5-7



### FRIDAY // 6:40

- Fireworks Friday Post-Game Show

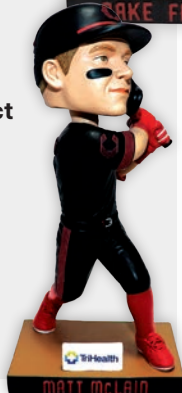
### SATURDAY // 4:10

- Jake Fraley City Connect Bobblehead, presented by PNC (To fans in attendance, while supplies last)



### SUNDAY // 1:40

- Matt McLain City Connect Bobblehead, presented by TriHealth (To fans in attendance, while supplies last)
- Family Discount Day, presented by Klosterman Bakery



## APRIL 8-11



presented by Kroger

### MONDAY // 6:40

### TUESDAY // 6:40 3-2-1 TUESDAYS

- 3-2-1 Tuesdays,\* presented by Budweiser and Bud Light \$3 12oz Beer, \$2 Hot Dog and \$1 Ice Cream Cup available at select concession stands!
- \*Limit 2 per person per transaction



### WEDNESDAY // 6:40

### THURSDAY // 1:10

- Business Day Special Enjoy afternoon baseball and \$10 in concession credits for only \$20!
- Thirsty Thursday Fans can purchase a \$30 package that includes ticket and a \$10 concession credit valid for food and beverages.
- Senior Day Fans 50 and older may purchase select non-premium tickets at half-price in advance of game day only.

## APRIL 19-21



presented by LifeCenter

### FRIDAY // 6:40

- Fireworks Friday Post-Game Show



### SATURDAY // 6:40

- Reds Team Calendar, presented by Kroger (To fans in attendance, while supplies last)



### SUNDAY // 1:40

- Reds Fleece Blanket, presented by Ohio LECET (To fans in attendance, while supplies last)
- Family Discount Day, presented by Klosterman Bakery

## APRIL 22-25



### MONDAY // 6:40

### TUESDAY // 6:40 3-2-1 TUESDAYS

- 3-2-1 Tuesdays, \*presented by Budweiser and Bud Light \$3 12oz Beer, \$2 Hot Dog and \$1 Ice Cream Cup available at select concession stands!
- \*Limit 2 per person per transaction



### WEDNESDAY // 6:40

- Bark in the Park (Ticket packages available for dogs and their owners with pet activities, samples and more in the First Star Fan Zone.)

### THURSDAY // 1:10

- Business Day Special Enjoy afternoon baseball and \$10 in concession credits for only \$20!
- Thirsty Thursday Fans can purchase a \$30 package that includes ticket and a \$10 concession credit valid for food and beverages.
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\*Some restrictions apply. Schedule and promotions subject to change.