



Pressure Mounting



Bucks On The Bubble Again As Season Rolls On

BALL IN HIS COURT — Jake Diebler is in his second full season as the Ohio State men's basketball coach, and so far the results have been mixed. Heading into the homestretch of the regular season, the Buckeyes can be viewed as either being on the cusp of making the NCAA Tournament for the first time in four seasons or on the verge of missing it a fourth consecutive time.

By **GREG WILSON**

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Editor

Ohio State came into this season needing to take a step forward in head coach Jake Diebler's second season. Whether they have is largely up for debate.

The Buckeyes started the season 6-0, mostly wins over low-major teams, which was the best start for the men's team since the 2019 season. But some of the same

cracks that ultimately were what forced OSU to crumble toward the end of last season began to show up again soon after.

Against Pittsburgh on Nov. 28, the Buckeyes allowed the Panthers to grab 16 offensive rebounds and turned the ball over 13 times compared to Pitt's five. They were still in the game, holding a lead until the last second when Pitt made a buzzer-beating three to take a 67-66 win and hand Ohio State its first loss of the season.

Then, when the Buckeyes got further into play against stronger Power Four teams, the production that the bench was giving started to take a steep decline. That was most obvious against an undefeated Nebraska squad on Jan. 5 when, in 22 combined minutes, players who came off the bench scored zero points on two total shot attempts.

"When guys are in, they have to be aggressive," Diebler said before the Buckeyes went on their West Coast trip to Oregon and Washington Jan. 8-11. "I had a conversation with some guys and told them, 'You're going into the game and passing up open shots. You're going into the game and you're hesitating. That's not helping us win.' We're looking for a few guys to add that."

"What I'm evaluating when the game's going on is, 'Are they being aggressive? Are they executing our schemes defensively?' Offensively, they can make mis-

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OSU Lands Former NFL Head Coach Arthur Smith As OC

By **BOBBY GORBETT**

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

In a span of less than a decade, college football has been flipped on its head. Conferences have expanded to include nearly 20 teams but lack any sort of geographic identity, the season-ending play-off system now includes 12 teams, and perhaps most importantly, the players are being paid and are seemingly free to leave their respective schools to transfer at the end of any given season.

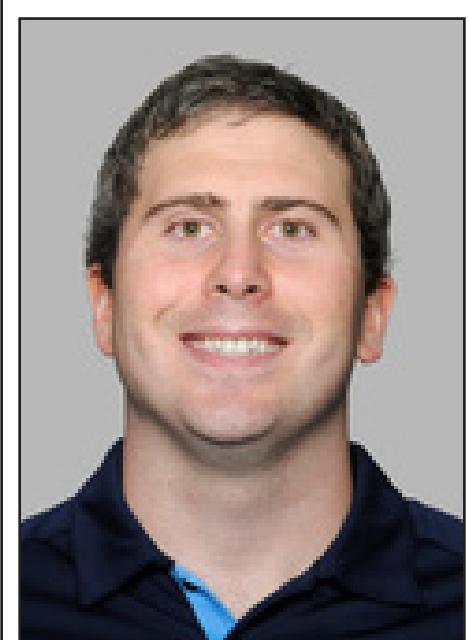
The sport has completely changed with the sweeping rule changes, but it may be a stretch to say college football has become unrecognizable, because each change has, in its own way, brought the sport closer to the most popular league in the country.

For better or worse, college football resembles the NFL more than it ever has, and over the past few years, Ohio State has gotten with the program with the way it hires its coordinators.

Perhaps no move better epitomizes Ohio State's efforts to modernize than its hiring of longtime NFL assistant coach Arthur Smith as its offensive coordinator on Jan. 24.

Considering the Buckeye offense is set to be loaded with superstars, such as rising sophomore quarterback Julian

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Arthur Smith

FAN FORUM



From The Message Board

"I think it's too early to tell if the program is headed in the right direction. If they make the NCAA tournament, I will be satisfied. Surprise player? They have all performed about as I expected, but if I had to name one player, I would say Amare Bynum."

— Terrier Buck

"I think the Bucks are trending in the right direction. They have played ranked teams very well, but it's time to pull an upset or two. If they get a bid to the NCAA tourney, that would show improvement. Brandon Noel's field goal percentage of 64 percent sticks out to me."

— R1TBDBITL

"There have been some encouraging signs and some not-so-encouraging signs. Can the Buckeyes repeat the performance they had against UCLA? Or will it be more of what

we saw against Washington? It's also way too early to tell what the addition of Puff Johnson will do for them. I wasn't convinced that Jake Diebler was the right move when he was hired, and he hasn't convinced me yet that he is to this point. That's not to say that he couldn't get the program going in the right direction, but I'm not seeing it on a consistent enough basis yet.

"I wouldn't say that it has surprised me, but John Mobley Jr. has really taken the next step as a scorer since his freshman year, and we've been seeing that lately. I was impressed with Christoph Tilly early on, but he can disappear for a full game, and he really hasn't been the same since Big Ten play started."

— Greg Wilson, BSB

"To me, the program is trending in the right direction. Ohio State has finally

Ohio State's men's basketball team was just one game over .500 in the Big Ten when BSB went to press. We asked subscribers on the BSB Fan Forum on BuckeyeSports.com whether they feel like the team has taken a step forward in the second year of head coach Jake Diebler's tenure, and what the team could do to finish the season to prove they have taken a step forward. We also asked which player has surprised them the most this season.

started winning close, down-to-the-wire games – such as against Notre Dame, West Virginia and Minnesota – matchups the Buckeyes have struggled to close out in recent years. Recruiting has also taken a step forward, with Jake Diebler poised to land the program's highest-rated player in 15 years in Anthony Thomas. That being said, inconsistency remains a concern on a game-to-game basis. I still need to see Ohio State earn at least one win against one of the Big Ten's powerhouses, advance further in the conference tournament and make an appearance in the NCAA Tournament. Freshman Amare Bynum has been the most pleasant surprise with his early-season breakout, while Wright State transfer Brandon Noel has been a disappointment, struggling to make an impact outside of a handful of games."

— Sam Cipriani, BSB



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OPINION

Bucks Not Alone With Holes To Fill

While the euphoric hangover from winning the program's first-ever national championship should linger for quite a while at Indiana, the midnight oil is burning inside the Woody Hayes Athletic Center as Ryan Day and his coaching staff attempt to figure out ways to get back to the pinnacle of college football.

The first order of business has been crossed off the list with the hiring of longtime NFL coach Arthur Smith as offensive coordinator. Now, Day can train his focus on replacing the bulk of a stellar defense that included projected first-round picks Caleb Downs, Kayden McDonald, Arvell Reese and Sonny Styles.

Additionally, the 2026 schedule isn't exactly friendly with an early September trip to Texas as well as a conference slate that features road trips to Iowa, USC and Indiana, and home dates with Oregon and Michigan. Those six opponents alone combined for a 66-17 record this past season.

With the current playoff format, no team needs to go undefeated anymore to earn a spot in the tournament, but teams with two losses or more – no matter the level of competition – leave themselves to the mercy of the selection committee. Therefore, it would seem prudent for the Buckeyes to return to the Big Ten Championship Game and win it for the first time since 2020 to secure another shot at playing for the national title.

As previously mentioned, there are plenty of holes to fill – receiver Carnell Tate is also a projected first-round pick in the April 23-25 draft – but it's not like Ohio State is the only Big Ten team faced with making lineup adjustments heading into 2026.

Curt Cignetti and his defending national champions lose most of their potent offense starting with Heisman-winning quarterback Fernando Mendoza. But Cignetti seems to be a master of the plug-and-play art of the portal, and he welcomes transfer QB Josh Hoover from TCU where Hoover threw for 9,629 yards and 71 touchdowns. How long Cignetti can hang onto offensive coordinator Mike Shanahan and DC Bryant Haines remains anyone's guess.

Oregon is expected to join the Hoosiers and Buckeyes as preseason conference favorites, and the Ducks got a boost when quarterback Dante Moore decided to return to school for another year. But Moore will be looking at an offensive line that needs to replace both starting tackles, and head coach Dan Lanning is in search of two new coordinators, including a replacement for fourth-year OC Will Stein, who took over at Kentucky.

USC head coach Lincoln Riley tabbed former TCU head coach Gary Patterson to be his new defensive coordinator as Riley begins his fifth season with the Trojans. Offense should not be a problem, however, with QB Jayden Maiava, RB King Miller and exciting young receiver Tanook Hines returning.

Iowa mined the portal for a solid crop of transfers that includes former Elon defensive end Kahmari Brown. Before you pooh-pooh the competition Brown faced while playing at the FCS level, remember Cignetti coached at Elon for two seasons during the mid-2010s. The Hawkeyes need a new quarterback (again), but their running game should get a boost from another FCS transfer. L.J. Phillips Jr. led the FCS in rushing last year at South Dakota with 1,921 yards. No Iowa running back had even half that total in 2025.

Finally, Michigan tries to emerge from the messiness of the last couple of years with new head coach Kyle Whittingham, who won 177 games in 22 seasons at Utah. The Wolverines should be OK on offense with QB Bryce Un-

derwood and RB Jordan Marshall among the key returnees. But the defense took a major hit with respect to attrition although Whittingham brought with him several former Utah standouts, not the least of whom is All-America defensive end John Henry Daley, who had 11½ sacks last year.

EDITOR'S NOTEBOOK

Mark Rea

as an assistant in the Big Ten – first at Northwestern and then as offensive line coach and later as offensive coordinator at Michigan.

Following a stint as head coach at Central Michigan, DeBord returned to Michigan serving in such capacities as strength coach, recruiting coordinator and tight ends coach between 2004 and 2007 before taking an NFL job with the Seattle Seahawks. He later spent two seasons as assistant head coach/offensive coordinator for Tom Allen at Indiana and finished his coaching career back at Michigan in 2020 as an offensive assistant.

In September 2021, DeBord suffered a debilitating stroke and never fully recovered. He died April 15 at the age of 69.

Before Kenny Easley was a four-time All-Pro safety with the Seattle Seahawks, he was a hard-hitting, two-time All-America selection at UCLA. The Virginia native was said to have had more than 300 scholarship offers before deciding to play for the Bruins and helping to lead them to 29 victories over four seasons.

Among those wins was a 17-0 shutout of Ohio State in 1980, only the second time in 16 years the Buckeyes had been shut out at home by a nonconference opponent. Easley totaled six solo tackles for UCLA in that game and also returned four punts. The Bruins made it as high as No. 2 in the national rankings that year before finishing at 9-2 with a season-ending victory against Oregon State in Tokyo.

Easley, who was elected to the College Football Hall of Fame in 1991 and the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 2017, suffered from chronic kidney disease and died Nov. 14 in Seattle. He was 66.

Did You Know?

Did you know that no opposing player had a 100-yard rushing performance against the Ohio State defense this past season? The Buckeyes will enter 2026 with a string of 18 consecutive games in which they have not allowed a 100-yard rusher, the longest streak since 2008-2010 when they didn't allow an opponent to crack the century mark in 29 straight games.

The most recent opponent to rush for 100 or more yards against OSU was Michigan running back Kaleb Mullings, who ran for 116 yards during his team's 13-10 win in 2024. Mullings was a sixth-round draft pick by Tennessee in 2025 and appeared in nine games this past season mostly on special teams for the Titans, who finished with a 3-14 record for the second year in a row.

Did you know that no opposing quarterback eclipsed the 300-yard mark against the Buckeyes during the 2025 season? In fact, only two QBs have topped 300 yards vs. Ohio State over the past four seasons. Sean Clifford of Penn State threw for 373 yards during his team's 44-31 loss in 2022, and Dillon Gabriel of Oregon totaled 341 during a 32-31 win against the Buckeyes in 2024.

Want to win some serious money in an OSU football trivia contest? Name the most recent Ohio State opponent to throw for 400 or more yards against the Buckeyes. The answer is Tulsa QB Davis Brin, who piled up 428 yards during his team's 41-20 loss in 2021.

Finally, did you know Indiana became only the eighth major university in the poll era (since 1936) to win football and basketball national championships? And that six of those eight are current members of the Big Ten?

The Hoosiers joined Maryland, Michigan, Michigan State, Ohio State and UCLA as Big Ten schools with football and basketball titles. The others are Florida and Syracuse.

OHIO STATE

INSIDER

Klare Declares For Draft, Four Bucks Stay

Junior tight end Max Klare was the latest Buckeye to declare for the NFL draft. Klare was with the Buckeyes for just one season after transferring in from Purdue, but he made quite an impact. The former Boilermaker had 43 catches for 448 yards and two touchdowns on the way to earning first-team All-Big Ten honors from the media and coaches.

Klare is projected to be a midround pick in the 2026 NFL draft. He joins four other Buckeyes to forgo an extra year of eligibility to declare for the draft, with safety Caleb Downs, defensive lineman Kayden McDonald, linebacker Arvell Reese and wide receiver Carnell Tate all leaving OSU as well.

Five draft-eligible Buckeyes decided not to enter the NFL draft, with defensive end Kenyatta Jackson Jr., center Carson Hinzman, cornerback Jermaine Mathews Jr., left guard Luke Montgomery and offensive tackle Austin Siereveld all opting to return for another season at Ohio State.

All five players were starters, but Siereveld may have been the most reliable in 2025. Siereveld was a team captain and was solid enough in his first season at left tackle to earn All-Big Ten second-team honors.

Siereveld played in all 14 games for the Buckeyes this season but left Ohio State's season-ending 24-14 loss to Miami in the College Football Playoff with a leg contusion.

A Sincere Note From BSB Publisher Frank Moskowitz

John Cooper used to say, "At Ohio State, we don't rebuild, we reload." Such was the case at Buckeye Sports Bulletin for many years. We would reload with a surge of subscription renewals each year and an influx of new subscribers.

After a very difficult 2025, much of which we openly chronicled in the pages of BSB, we find ourselves in the position of rebuilding to start 2026. We will be concentrating on rebuilding our subscriber and financial base and converting as many subscribers as possible to first-class mail in an envelope – two missions that are somewhat intertwined.

As most of you know, we lost a large number of subscribers – many of whom had been with us for decades – because they were not receiving their BSBs in a timely fashion, something we have no control over. The continued mail problems caused us to fall victim to something akin to the old-fashioned water torture, where you are exposed to a constant drip of a single drop of water until you finally submit or go crazy. In our case, it was a constant drip of replacement papers that we had to send to people who never received their original paper, at the cost of \$3 a drip for a paper we had already paid to mail once. Over the course of a 24-issue publishing schedule, you can see how that would add up. Most publications these days would simply credit your account. We strive to do better than that, just as we pride ourselves on answering the phone when you call to let us know you haven't received your paper.

Taking those phone calls, I've had a chance to talk to many of you who so often tell me how much you enjoy Buckeye Sports Bulletin. This makes me so proud, not for me, but for the staff, who deserve the credit, along with the many alumni who are at news outlets all over the city, state and country and who have helped build our reputation over

the last 45 years.

If you are reading this, I am assuming you are not among the readers who have fled over the delivery issues. You are the most loyal of the loyal. That is why I am reaching out to you today.

While we usually are promoting special offers with reduced subscription prices, today I am asking you to pay full price. I am also asking you, if you are able, to renew for two years. Each issue we will list the latest names, with city and state, of those who renew for two years at full price under the heading, "I Believe In BSB." For those who have recently renewed or are preserving funds, you can always become a VIP for as low as \$50 and have your name listed in the paper as well.

As far as upgrading to first class, for the time being, we are lowering the cost of an annual first-class subscription by \$10. We believe that getting subscribers to upgrade will cut down on the \$3 dripping.

One year of BSB with regular-mail service is \$129.95. Two years is \$259.90. One year first class at the temporary adjusted rate is \$199.95. Two years is \$399.90. For information on how to become a Buckeye Sports Bulletin VIP consult your latest issue.

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I truly believe that the BSB staff and readers are a family. As a family we will rebuild Buckeye Sports Bulletin together. With your help, next year we will simply reload!

Fellow offensive linemen Hinzman and Montgomery also had impressive seasons for the Buckeyes. Each player earned All-Big Ten honors after helping the Buckeyes finish the regular season second in the country, allowing just one-half sack per game.

On the defensive end, Jackson had an impressive first season as a starter. He had 28 total tackles and 6½ sacks, tied for the second most on the team.

Like Jackson, Mathews was also a regu-

lar starter for the first time in his career in 2025. Mathews performed admirably opposite veteran cornerback Davison Igbinosun. Mathews had 26 total tackles, including 1½ for loss, a forced fumble and two interceptions.

Ohio State Has Three More Enter Portal

Three more Buckeyes entered the transfer portal since BSB last went to press, with freshman safety Cody Haddad, sophomore defensive lineman Joshua Mickens and freshman defensive lineman Trajen Odom all finding new homes.

All three players failed to make much of an impact during their time in Columbus.

Mickens was with the program the longest, spending three years in Columbus and appearing in 14 games. He logged six total tackles, including one sack, during his time as a Buckeye. He has since committed to UConn.

Haddad did not appear in a single game in his only year at Ohio State. The former three-star recruit out of Cleveland St. Ignatius has committed to Iowa since entering the portal.

Odom appeared in two games this season but didn't record a stat. Like Haddad, Odom was a three-star prospect out of high school. He committed to Arkansas five days after entering the portal.

The Buckeyes had 31 total scholarship players enter the transfer portal.

Laurinaitis Inducted Into Hall Of Fame

Former Ohio State linebacker James Laurinaitis is a Hall of Famer.

The current Buckeye linebackers coach was selected as the newest member of the

College Football Hall of Fame class of 2026 on Jan. 14 and is the 29th former OSU player to be enshrined.

Laurinaitis – a Wayzata, Minn., native who played at Ohio State from 2005-08 – finished his college career with 375 tackles, 24½ tackles for loss and 13 sacks. He also added nine interceptions and four forced fumbles.

Those numbers were enough to make him a three-time All-American and the Nagurski Award winner, which goes to the best defensive player in college football each year, in his 2006 sophomore campaign. He was the Big Ten Defensive Player of the Year twice in his career at Ohio State (2007, 2008).

After his Buckeye career, Laurinaitis was selected in the second round of the 2009 NFL draft by the St. Louis Rams with the 35th overall selection. He lasted eight seasons in the NFL, seven of them with the Rams, and he spent five games in 2016 with the New Orleans Saints before retiring.

In each of his seven seasons in St. Louis, he played all 16 games. Laurinaitis finished his pro career with 871 total tackles (664 solo), 49 tackles for loss and 16½ sacks. He added 35 passes defended, 10 interceptions and two forced fumbles.

He joined the Buckeyes in 2023 as a graduate assistant before being promoted to full-time linebackers coach, leading up to the 2024 season, and has boasted impressive seasons from his linebackers and strong recruiting classes at the position.

Laurinaitis joins an impressive group of former Buckeye linebackers in the College Football Hall of Fame. He is the fourth to be enshrined, joining Randy Gradishar (class of 1998), Chris Spielman (2009) and Tom Cousins (2016).

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Sayin, Jackson Named Freshman All-Americans

For outstanding debut seasons in 2025, Ohio State redshirt-freshman quarterback Julian Sayin and true freshman running back Bo Jackson each earned Freshman All-America honors from the Football Writers Association of America on Jan. 14.

Not only was Sayin one of the best freshman quarterbacks in the country last year, but he was one of the best players in the country. On the way to being a finalist for the Heisman Trophy, Sayin threw for 3,610 yards, 32 touchdowns and eight interceptions. He also finished the season completing 77.0 percent of his passes, the best mark in the country.

Sayin overcame an early interception to help lead Ohio State to its first win over Michigan since 2019. In the regular-season finale, Sayin threw for 233 yards and three touchdowns, while completing 19 of 26 passes.

Jackson had a similarly impressive performance against the Wolverines, running

for 117 yards on 22 carries.

For the season, Jackson carried the ball 179 times to pick up 1,090 yards and six touchdowns. Like Sayin, Jackson also earned All-Big Ten second-team honors.

OSU-IU Date Set For 2026

The Big Ten revealed on Jan. 20 that Ohio State will be playing against Indiana on Oct. 17 in Bloomington, Ind.

The Hoosiers won the program's first-ever national championship on Jan. 19, finishing a historic 16-0 season that included winning the Big Ten championship for the first time since 1967 and quarterback Fernando Mendoza winning the first Heisman Trophy in school history.

The Buckeyes will be looking for revenge after Indiana was able to beat them in the Big Ten Championship Game on Dec. 6, keeping Ohio State from its first conference title since the 2020 season.

Both teams will look very different from last season, with Ohio State losing many impactful defensive starters to the NFL,

along with Tate on the offensive side. Sayin – who was fourth in Heisman voting – will still be under center for the Buckeyes.

The Buckeyes' game against the defending national champions does not have a scheduled time yet. It's the only conference game with a set date, but Ohio State's non-conference slate is fully set already. The season will begin on Sept. 5 against Ball State at home before the Buckeyes go on the road to finish the second half of a home-and-home series against Texas on Sept. 12. The last nonconference matchup is on Sept. 19 against Kent State.

The conference opponents Ohio State will play have already been revealed, with no dates for the games yet. The Buckeyes will also play away games against Iowa, Nebraska and USC. They have home games against Illinois, Maryland, Michigan, Northwestern and Oregon.

The rest of the Big Ten schedule was set to be revealed on Jan. 27 at 5:30 p.m. on the Big Ten Network, right after BSB went to press.

OSU Football Worth \$1.55 Billion

According to a story from Andrew Beaton of the Wall Street Journal published on Jan. 18, Ohio State has one of the most valuable college football teams in the country.

Beaton published a study by Dr. Ryan Brewer, a professor at Indiana, which had Texas' football program as the most valuable in the country at \$2.2 billion. The study had Texas A&M (\$1.59 billion) as the second-most valuable program, Ohio State third at \$1.55 billion, LSU fourth at \$1.54 billion and Michigan fifth at \$1.46 billion.

Beaton wrote that Brewer's study attempted to find out what each team would be worth if it were sold on the open market: "Brewer's study examines industry trends, cash flows, revenue and broader economic shifts to calculate what each team would be worth if it could be bought and sold on the open market – just like a sports franchise."

According to Brewer, college football, as

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Ohio State Has 137 Academic All-Big Ten Honorees

Ohio State had 137 athletes earn Academic All-Big Ten honors during the fall, as announced by the Big Ten.

That number falls slightly short of the record-setting 147 in the 2024 fall semester but eclipses the 2022 and 2023 totals of 124 student-athlete honorees.

The field hockey, football, men's and women's cross country, men's and women's soccer and women's volleyball teams were all recognized for their academic performance in the fall, with the football team leading the way with 61 players on the list, which is a program record. That topped the 56 All-Big Ten selections last fall.

The list includes starters Caleb Downs (real estate and urban analysis), Jayden Fielding (sport industry), Carson Hinzman (human development & family science), Eddrick Houston (sport industry), Brandon Inniss (sport industry), Will Kacmarek (human development & family science), Tywone Malone Jr. (human development & family science), Jermaine Mathews Jr. (sport industry), Jaylen McClain (sport industry), Kayden McDonald (communication), Joe McGuire (sport industry), Luke Montgomery (sport industry), Arvell Reese (human development & family science), Julian Sayin (sport industry), Austin Siereveld (sport industry), Jeremiah Smith (sport industry), Sonny Styles (sport industry), Lorenzo Styles Jr. (human development & family science) and Carnell Tate (sport industry).

Women's soccer was next with 18 academic All-Big Ten honorees, while field hockey had 16 selections, men's soccer had 12, women's volleyball had 11, women's cross country had 10 and men's cross country had nine.

Three Buckeyes were recognized for carrying a 4.0 grade-point average. Those three were Jack Agnew (exercise science) and Will McGraw (operations management) from the men's cross country team and Ava Bramblett (health sciences) from the women's soccer team.

The following is a complete list of Ohio State's fall academic All-Big Ten honorees, including their major. The list is in alphabetical order by sport. **Bold indicates 4.0 grade-point average.**

Men's Cross Country – Colby Adams, information systems; **Jack Agnew, exercise science**; Kevin Agnew, electrical and computer engineering; Colin Cernansky, logistics management; Weston Day, business; Connor

Long, exercise science; **Will McGraw, operations management**; Liam Shaughnessy, health sciences; Keegan Souhan, chemical engineering.

Women's Cross Country – Katie Castelli, sports coaching; Audrey DeSantis, exercise science; Lillian Eckels, criminology & criminal justice; Teodora Iovi, biochemistry; Hailey Kahl, pre-health sciences; Ana Karmol, environment, economy, development & sustainability; Zoee Lehman, health sciences; Sydney Paul, exercise science; Mia Robillard, mechanical engineering; Emmi Von Scherr, consumer and family financial services.

Field Hockey – Zella Bailey, consumer science; Emily Barker, health sciences; Madeline Bogle, pre-health sciences; Makayla Carahaly, speech and hearing science; Mary Davis, management & industry exploring; Grace Dixon, pre-health sciences; Reagan Eickhoff, human resources; Katherine Fichtner, criminology & criminal justice; Sienna Golden, finance; Loryn Jordon, sport industry; Anne Krebs, biology; Victoria Kutz, marketing; Camryn Standish, finance; Madelyn Stevens, exploration; Olivia Wallace, communication; Makenna Webster, sport industry.

Football – David Adolph, marketing; Deontae Armstrong, sport industry; Devontae Armstrong, sport industry; Nolan Bundo, sport industry; Bennett Christian, human development & family science; Alec DelSignore, communication; Sam Dixon, sport industry; Caleb Downs, real estate and urban analysis; Jayden Fielding, sport industry; Mylan Graham, human development & family science; Dianne Griffin, sport industry; Zach Hayes, marketing; C.J. Hicks, human development & family science; Carson Hinzman, human development & family science; Eddrick Houston, sport industry; Brandon Inniss, sport industry; Julian Goines-Jackson, criminology & criminal justice; Collin Johnson, marketing; William Kacmarek, human development & family science; Lincoln Kienholz, sport industry; Dominic Kirks, sport industry; Maxence LeBlanc, agricultural systems management; Shawntel Lodge, sport industry; Simon Lorentz, construction systems management; Mason Maggs, finance; Tywone Malone, human development & family science; Jermaine Mathews, sport industry; Jaylen McClain, sport industry; Kayden McDonald, communication; Joseph McGuire, sport industry; Nicholas McLarty, economics – business; Eric Mensah, sport industry; Joshua Mickens, construc-

tion systems management; Bukari Miles, economics – business; Luke Montgomery, sport industry; Ian Moore, criminology & criminal justice; Jason Moore, journalism; Keenan Nelson Jr., sport industry; Joshua Padilla, sport industry; James Peoples, sport industry; Payton Pierce, communication; Arvell Reese, human development & family science; Elijah Riggs, business; Leroy Roker, sport industry; Ryan Rudzinski, finance; Julian Sayin, sport industry; Brennen Schramm, marketing; Aaron Scott, sport industry; Austin Siereveld, sport industry; Jeremiah Smith, sport industry; Will Smith, sport industry; Garrett Stover, communication; Sonny Styles, sport industry; Lorenzo Styles, human development & family science; Carnell Tate, sport industry; Jelani Thurman, sport industry; Ahmed Tounkara, computer science & engineering; Gabe VanSickle, business; Joseph Velazquez, sport industry; Bryce West, sport industry; Damarion Witten, sport industry.

Men's Soccer – Ashton Bilow, sport industry; Marko Borkovic, consumer and family financial services; Tanner Creech, finance; Nathan Demian, computer & information science; Thomas Gilej, sport industry; Luke Laramore, business; Jacob Maisonneuve, electrical and computer engineering; Luciano Pechota, finance; Andre Roberts, accounting; John Rush, sport industry; Nicholas Skubis, finance; Robert Stoller, finance.

Women's Soccer – Jacinda Bonham, finance; Jadin Bonham, accounting; **Ava Bramblett, health sciences**; Lillian Danner, health sciences; Mirann Gacioch, sport industry; Natalie Garcia, marketing; Ava Greco, psychology; Nette Nina Hiltunen, sport industry; Arden La Rose, exercise science; Sophia Louder, biology; Berkley Mape, psychology; Mai Ly Marella, environmental engineering; Mia McSweeney, economics; Maliah Morrison, pre-health sciences; Peighton Northrup, sport industry; Anika Poremba, human development & family science; Molly Pritchard, sport industry; Amanda Schlueter, finance.

Women's Volleyball – Kaia Caffee, sport industry; Na'vea Gauthier, psychology; Kamiah Gibson, social work; Olivia Hasbrook, communication; Kaitlyn Hoffman, biology; Zaria Ragler, social work; Ava Shankle, communication; Mia Tuman, sport industry; Ella Wrobel, sport industry; Reese Wuebker, fashion and retail studies; Abigail Yoder, biology.



Continued From Page 5

a whole, is more valuable than it used to be.

"There's more value in college football than there's ever been," Brewer said. "Even though they're paying players and it's more expensive, it's also worth more."

OSU Falls To No. 5 In Final AP Poll

After spending most of the season as the

No. 1 team in the AP top 25, Ohio State fell to No. 5 in the final poll released on Jan. 20 after two straight losses to end its season.

Indiana was ranked the No. 1 team in the final standings after winning its first national championship in program history, while runner-up Miami (Fla.) was No. 2. The Hoosiers and Hurricanes were the only two teams to beat the Buckeyes this year, doing so in the Big Ten Championship Game and the Cotton Bowl, respectively.

Ole Miss followed those two at No. 3 after falling against the Hurricanes in the Fiesta Bowl, and Oregon was No. 4 after getting beaten badly by the Hoosiers in the Peach Bowl.

Rounding out the top 10 after the Buckeyes were No. 6 Georgia, No. 7 Texas Tech, No. 8 Texas A&M, No. 9 Alabama and No. 10 Notre Dame.

The Fighting Irish opted out of participating in a bowl game after not making the College Football Playoff due to Miami

jumping them in the final CFP rankings. Notre Dame was ranked ahead of No. 13 Oklahoma, which made the College Football Playoff and lost to Alabama in the first round.

Other Big Ten teams in the final top 25 were No. 17 Iowa, No. 20 USC and No. 21 Michigan. Illinois was two points away from No. 25 TCU in the final rankings after beating Tennessee in the Music City Bowl in December. Washington also received votes.

Seven Former Bucks Selected In NFL Draft

Seven former Ohio State football players were selected in the 2026 United Football League draft from Jan. 13-14.

The Columbus Aviators selected tight end Gee Scott Jr. and offensive lineman Matthew Jones during the free-agent portion of the draft, which featured players not on NFL rosters at the end of the 2025 season.

Defensive tackle Antwuan Jackson Jr.

and cornerback Shaun Wade were selected by the Dallas Renegades, while offensive tackle Nicholas Petit-Frere was drafted by the DC Defenders.

Before the draft, the Houston Gamblers placed cornerback Damon Arnette on their 12-man reserve list, and the Louisville Kings did the same with linebacker Steele Chambers, preventing other teams from selecting them. Arnette also played for Houston last season, while Chambers spent 2025 with Memphis before Louisville took over the roster.

'Shoe, Schott Set For Renovations

Over the next two years, Ohio State is slated to experience a slew of renovations to its scoreboards in the Schottenstein Center and Ohio Stadium.

Ohio State's board of trustees has approved the replacement and upgrade of the Schottenstein Center scoreboard, which hasn't been replaced since 2008.

BSB Subscribers Show Support Through VIP Program

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

"We want to thank the many BSB readers who have stepped up and shown their support for Buckeye Sports Bulletin through the VIP program," BSB publisher Frank Moskowitz said. "It is a true vote of confidence in what we are doing now, what we have done the previous 43 years and what we plan to do in the future."

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

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

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

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

And those who donate \$150 or more will have their names listed as Elite-Plus VIPs. The four largest Elite-Plus donors to the Buckeye Sports Bulletin VIP program will have their names listed in each issue as Wachsman Level Elite Plus donors, in honor of the late BSB assistant publisher, Karen Wachsman, and our largest donor will be designated as the Woody Level Wachsman Elite-Plus Donor.

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

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

Woody Level Elite Wachsman Donor (in honor of late BSB assistant publisher Karen Wachsman): Roosters Foundation.

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Recruiting Wrap-Up The Next Issue Of BSB Print

The next print edition of BSB, our big annual Football Recruiting Wrap-Up (Feb. 14 cover date) will be mailed on Feb. 10. After that there will be a traditional scheduled three-week gap to keep us in line with our 24-issue publishing schedule, and the next issue will be mailed on March 3 with a March 7 cover date.

There is no reason to wait for your next Buckeye Sports Bulletin print edition to get the latest OSU sports news, including ramped up coverage of the popular winter sports like men's and women's basketball, hockey and wrestling. The BSB staff will be reporting from every press conference or other availability and following all of the Ohio State sports activity. Watch for any late-breaking recruiting news as Ohio State heads toward the traditional National Signing Day on Feb. 4. All the news is available in real time at the electronic BuckeyeSports.com, free to Buckeye Sports Bulletin subscribers.

BuckeyeSports.com 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

The \$5.2 million project will replace the existing center-court scoreboard, the 360-degree ribbon board and any outdated LED signs.

The scoreboard is expected to be completed by September, which means it will be ready for next basketball season.

Ohio Stadium is also set to receive various upgrades. While the Buckeyes will add premium seating in the south end zone beginning next season, the board of trustees also approved a contract in December to install a new scoreboard in the north end zone. That renovation will have a \$6.5 million budget and will encompass replacing the north end zone video board and other upgrades, including the east and west ribbon boards, B-deck video boards, interior and exterior audio at the Woody Hayes Athletic Center, and the WHAC video board, all of which are scheduled for completion before the 2026 season.

A separate \$22 million project, planned for 2027, will upgrade the south end zone scoreboard, ribbon boards, Pay Forward Society signage, and audio systems and will be submitted to the board of trustees for approval at a later date.

The north end zone scoreboard was last replaced in 2009, and the south end zone underwent renovations in 2012.

"We're hoping we can get some things installed by 2026. If not, everything would be installed by 2027," said Ohio State athletic director Ross Bjork in August.

Sensabaugh Sets Career High

Former Ohio State guard Brice Sensabaugh set a new career high with 43 points in the Utah Jazz's 128-126 loss to the Chicago Bulls on Jan. 14 at the United Center.

In 34 minutes, Sensabaugh was 15 of 22 from the field and made five of his 10 shots from three-point range. He also was a perfect 8 for 8 from the charity stripe, adding five rebounds, two assists and two steals.

Sensabaugh is in the midst of a career-best scoring season with the Jazz, averaging 11.7 points per game in 21 minutes of action, up from the 10.9 mark he set

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 always lively.

Don't forget the complete edition of each BSB is posted at BuckeyeSports.com immediately upon completion of the paper, making the site a must for readers having continuing mail problems. This electronic service, while not a substitute for your print edition, is a stopgap as your paper winds its way – frequently slowly – through the postal system and is free to subscribers.

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in the 2024-25 season. While his scoring output has climbed, his contributions in other areas have remained stagnant, as he is again averaging 3.0 rebounds and 1.5 assists per game for the second consecutive season.

The 6-6, 235-pound Sensabaugh spent just one season at Ohio State in 2022-23 before declaring for the 2023 NBA draft, where he was selected 28th overall by Utah in the first round.

OSU SID Emig Named To HOF

After 33 years working with sports information and athletic communications, Ohio State football communications director and associate athletic director Jerry Emig was one of six members named to the College Sports Communicators (CSC) Hall of Fame in the class of 2026 on Jan. 12.

Emig spent a total of 33 years in athletic communications at Southern Illinois-Carbondale, Temple University and Ohio State. Emig, who will retire in March, spent 23 total years at Ohio State, including the past 15 seasons as the head communications contact for the Buckeye football program.

"I am thrilled, appreciative and humbled to be recognized as a CSC Hall of Fame member," Emig said in a statement. "The feeling of pride I have to be included among this distinguished and distinctive group of communicators is real and will be everlasting. I want to thank the CSC Special Awards Committee and current Hall of Fame members for this honor."

"I also want to thank the communications staff at Ohio State University for its spirit, work ethic and leadership that make every day in this profession a pleasure. Working alongside colleagues, coaches, student-athletes and members of the media has been wonderful, and I will forever be grateful that it has positioned me to receive this honor."

Emig graduated from Murray State in 1983 with a degree in communications before earning a master's degree in sports administration from Ohio State in 1986.

The CSC Hall of Fame class of 2026 will be honored in Las Vegas in June.

son in 2021. He also totaled 95 receptions that year, ranking 10th in conference history.

Now, Smith-Njigba and Vrabel will face off in Super Bowl LX with the Seahawks and Patriots winning their respective conference championship games.

OSU Women's Hockey Sends 12 To Olympics

Ohio State's women's hockey team will be well represented at the 2026 Winter Olympics in Milan, Italy, as 12 former Buckeyes will play for their home countries.

Five current Buckeyes will represent their nations, with forward Joy Dunne (United States), forward Sanni Vanhanen (Finland) and defender Mira Jungåker, forward Hilda Svensson and defender Jenna Raunio of Sweden all making their national teams.

Ohio State class of 2024 graduates defender Cayla Barnes and forward Hannah Bilka will also represent the USA. Former Buckeye goaltender Andrea Braendli, a 2022 graduate, is set to be the starting goaltender for Switzerland.

Canada's roster features four former Ohio State skaters in forward Jenn Gardiner (2024 grad), defender Sophie Jaques (2023), forward Emma Maltais (2023) and forward Natalie Spooner (2012).

The current players will leave the team in the middle of the season to represent their countries. They will miss two games against top-ranked Wisconsin on the road on Feb. 7-8 and two home contests against Minnesota on Feb. 13-14.

Ohio State has reached the championship game in each of the last four seasons, claiming national titles in 2021-22 and 2023-24. The Buckeyes are off to a 21-3 start in the 2025-26 season.

The women's hockey competition will span from Feb. 5-19, with the Winter Olympics opening ceremony not happening until Feb. 6.

Spirit Squad, Dance Win Titles

Ohio State's dance and spirit squads continued their dominance since BSB last went to press. In Orlando at ESPN's Wide World of Sports Complex at Walt Disney Resort for the UCA and UDA national championships, the Buckeyes' dance team secured its third straight D1A jazz national championship on Jan. 18 after the spirit squad won its third straight national championship on Jan. 17.

The dance team won the title with a score of 96.7833 in the final round. The Buckeyes defeated LSU (95.5667) and Minnesota (93.7500), which finished second and third, respectively.

Ohio State also had an impressive showing in the pom finals. The Buckeyes finished third with a score of 96.4000. Minnesota won the event with a score of 97.3667.

The spirit squad, which comprises dance and Brutus, scored 188.5333 out of a maximum 200 points to win its third straight title. Oklahoma finished second with a score of 182.6333.

Brutus won his own championship as well, taking home first place in the D1A mascot finals with a score of 95.20, ahead of Minnesota's Goldy Gopher (second place, 95.06) and Tennessee's Smokey (third, 94.86).

Diebler Hasn't Matched Success Of U-M's May

Continued From Page 1

takes. I just want to see them be aggressive."

To begin the West Coast trip, Ohio State had a solid second-half performance against Oregon and came away with a 10-point win, with sophomore guard Gabe Cupps scoring nine points, the most points he has scored in a single game this season.

But that production didn't last long, with the bench scoring just four points in the loss to Washington, all from sophomore center Ivan Njegovan, who had an extended stretch in the game with Christoph Tilly suffering a head injury.

Rebounding has also been an issue at times, with the Buckeye struggling on the boards in the first bunch of Power Four games. The loss to the Cornhuskers was also evidence of that when they outrebounded the Buckeyes 38-29.

Despite the fact that Diebler had made it a point to make the roster bigger with one objective of that being improving rebounding, the Buckeyes were showing the same problems they had the year before to that point.

"That was certainly a game within the game that was really disappointing," Diebler said after the loss. "We see ourselves turning and staring at the ball. There were a couple of times where we got caught when the shot goes up, and we look, and we look,

and a guy flew by us (to get the rebound)."

There also wasn't any encouragement to be found from the fact that senior forward Brandon Noel was injured in that game, and it was soon after reported that he would be out indefinitely, making the depth on the bench even shallower.

Noel has since been at games in a boot and on crutches, so the outlook doesn't seem promising for him to return anytime soon.

Another glaring issue that showed up in the Nebraska game that had become somewhat of a pattern was the failure to close the game when they held a late lead. After going down by as many as 14 points in the first half, Ohio State came back to lead with just over five minutes to go in the game only to fall by three.

Multiple times, Ohio State started a game slowly and dug itself into a hole that it had to climb out of throughout the game. The Buckeyes would be successful at making it a close game again, only to prove unable to hold on late in the contest.

With all of these problems, Ohio State is squarely on the bubble again when it comes to the NCAA Tournament and is at real risk of missing the 68-team event for the fourth straight season, which would be the first time since a six-year drought that lasted from 1993-98. That streak led to the firing

of head coach Randy Ayers in 1997.

In the most recent version of Bracketology, done by ESPN before BSB went to press, the Buckeyes were placed as a 10th seed in the tournament, slotted against No. 7 seed Tennessee. That version came out before Ohio State lost to No. 3 Michigan on Jan. 23 in Ann Arbor.

The comparison to the Wolverines is tough to avoid since both teams hired new head coaches around the same time two seasons ago, with U-M going with former Florida Atlantic head coach Dusty May and the Buckeyes promoting then-assistant and interim head coach Jake Diebler to be the head man.

Since the start of last season, both May's and Diebler's first full years leading their respective teams, Michigan has a record of 45-11 (.804 winning percentage) and a Sweet 16 appearance in the 2025 tournament as a No. 5 seed. Since that same time, Ohio State has a record of 30-21 (.588) and missed the NCAA Tournament last year.

Not only did the Wolverines make the tournament in May's first season and win two games, but they are also showing major improvements in year two, with an 18-1 record as BSB went to press with their only loss coming at home to Wisconsin earlier in January. They have major wins over ranked teams, beating then-No. 21 Auburn by 30 points on Nov. 25, then-No. 12 Gonzaga by 40 points a day later and No. 24 USC by 30 points on Jan. 2.

As mentioned above, the Buckeyes have fallen into some of the same ways that came back to haunt last year's team.

But there have been some encouraging signs of late. On Jan. 17 against UCLA, each of the problems the Buckeyes have had was gone, proving that there is potential for this team to play like Diebler thought it could.

In that game, the Buckeyes got out to what had been somewhat of an uncharacteristic fast start to the game, took a big lead against the Bruins and were able to hold on to it throughout the entire game, ultimately winning 86-74.

While there wasn't much scoring from the bench players – Njegovan scored two points and Cupps, Taison Chatman and Colin White all didn't score – Diebler was still pleased with what he saw from those four when they were in the game.

"I want the guys to play with joy, passion and aggressiveness, and I felt like we did that today," he said. "It's contagious. It got the best of me sometimes and got me fired up."

It was a game where production from the

bench wasn't needed, however, with sophomore guard John Mobley Jr. scoring a career-high 28 points and senior guard Bruce Thornton and junior forward Devin Royal reaching 21 and 22 points, respectively.

While Thornton, Mobley and Royal have each had strong seasons again, there hadn't been a game until that point when each of them was playing as well as they did against the Bruins.

"We felt like, coming into the season when we were putting this team together, that we had one of the best backcourts in the country," Diebler said. "We have multiple guys who are capable of being really good offensively on any given night. We've been fighting to have some days like this where we have three or four guys rolling."

Diebler was pleased with the way his team responded coming off the loss to Washington.

"In this league, you can't hold on to the previous game, win or lose," Diebler said. "You have to get ready for the next one. I was really proud of the way our guys responded and played with a mentality consistently in this game that we've been fighting for."

In that game, Ohio State also outrebounded the Bruins 37-27. The Buckeyes allowed 14 offensive rebounds in the game, but on shots that OSU missed, Buckeye players had 12 offensive rebounds compared to UCLA's 13 defensive rebounds, nearly matching their total on that side of the ball.

Then, against Minnesota, Ohio State started fast again, going up 10-0 in the first half and taking another 10-point lead early in the second half. They gave up that lead and went to overtime but came through with a win thanks to the heroics of White, who had a clutch steal and a fastbreak layup in the extra period.

But even if the starters have to continue to carry a large workload, Diebler is confident that they will hold up down the stretch of the season, and he's well aware of the effect that potentially overplaying them could have on them when they get into the later months.

"We lean on sports science," Diebler said. "We're very efficient with our time. We have a great staff that helps us recover every day. I don't think we're at a point where it has to be this way. We're continuing to work with some guys to step up and give us more. We're seeing some better play."

Reinforcement On The Way

Overworking the starters could end up

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SONNY BROCKWAY

CLIMBING TO THE TOP — Senior guard Bruce Thornton (2) is on pace to become the all-time points leader at Ohio State, but what he really wants is his first opportunity to play in the NCAA Tournament.

being less of an issue soon, however. The Buckeyes gained a new player after the halfway point of the regular season, with former North Carolina and Penn State forward Puff Johnson gaining immediate eligibility due to a temporary restraining order against the NCAA (for more information on Johnson's situation, check out Court Report

on pages 28-29). Johnson made his Buckeye debut on Jan. 23 at Michigan, playing five minutes without scoring.

"What a time in college basketball," Diebler said when first asked about adding Johnson to the roster.

Johnson was officially on the bench for the first time when the Buckeyes played

Minnesota but wasn't in uniform since Diebler didn't feel that it would have been a good idea to play him yet.

Because Johnson didn't have eligibility before, he wasn't allowed in the facility for team activities, meaning he didn't get to practice with them, run through plays with them, or build any chemistry with them.

Diebler felt that he needed to work Johnson out, get him into game shape, help him learn the playbook and allow him to build relationships with his new teammates.

"We're starting to slowly get him integrated into practice," Diebler said on Jan. 20. "I've worked him out. He's working really hard. He came here in good condition. The most important thing is his health and safety. The next part is our team and making sure that it makes sense and he gets familiarized with what we're doing."

"What we do offensively and defensively is not easy. It's very much feel and basketball IQ. Thankfully, he's great in those areas. I'm looking forward to him getting on the court with us. It just has to be done the right way."

He didn't feel as if the chemistry would be an issue with his team.

"I don't, because of the guys in our locker room and the type of young man that he is," Diebler said when asked if he worries about the team chemistry being disrupted. "We have to be realistic about this. We can't just throw him in and play him 30 minutes and expect everything to look normal. We're going to take it one day at a time. It's a fair question, but I'm not worried about it."

"We've had dialogue with our team for probably a month, that there was potential to add somebody. The most important thing to me was to have transparency with those guys."

Thornton said that there isn't any selfishness with the players on the team, even if Johnson could take away some playing time from others after joining in the middle of the season.

"At the end of the day, we're all trying to win," Thornton told BSB. "We all know the sacrifices we need to make to make that happen. There will probably be somebody losing minutes, but that's not in my control."

Johnson got his first action in the loss to Michigan, playing in just under five minutes, with the only stat he recorded being a personal foul. But the process of getting Johnson integrated is moving quickly, and soon he will be able to provide more relief off the bench while Noel is still absent.

With five years of college basketball under Johnson's belt (three at UNC and two at Penn State), Diebler is excited about the experience he brings to the team, especially since his arrival comes at a time when OSU needed some reinforcements.

"We've dealt with some injuries, one that's going to last us a little while with Brandon (Noel), and two some stuff in-game that's been impactful," he said. "It's worked out well that we're able to add someone with experience."

Chasing Record, March Uncertain

If the Buckeyes aren't able to make it to the NCAA Tournament, it will be the fourth straight season they miss out, as mentioned above.

Thornton is in his fourth and final season with Ohio State and is having his best season yet. So far, he is averaging 20.1 points per game (first on the team), 5.6 rebounds (second behind Royal's 5.8) and 3.6 assists (first).

With at least 13 games left this season (which includes a Big Ten tournament matchup since all 18 teams make it in), Thornton (1,869 points) is just 227 points behind Dennis Hopson (2,096) in career scoring at Ohio State. With his 20.1-points-per-game average, Thornton is on pace to break the record set from the 1984-87 seasons.

If he averages 17.5 points per game the rest of the year, he would break Hopson's record, going down as one of the best Buckeyes of all time. But even so, there is still a very real chance that Thornton, who chose to stick with the Buckeyes through a period of change, will never make an appearance in the NCAA Tournament, despite his résumé.

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Smith's Background Could Deliver Big Results

Continued From Page 1

Sayin and junior wide receiver Jeremiah Smith, one would think head coach Ryan Day had his pick of the litter when selecting a new offensive coordinator to replace Brian Hartline.

But instead of hiring a decorated collegiate coordinator, Day hired one whose most recent experience coaching at the college level was as a defensive (yes, defensive) intern at Ole Miss in 2010.

That isn't to say Arthur Smith is not qualified to be Ohio State's offensive coordinator. In fact, the opposite is likely true. Smith, much like current Ohio State defensive coordinator Matt Patricia, has the qualifications to be a head coach at the NFL level, because not too long ago, that's what he was.

After spending 10 seasons as an assistant coach with the Tennessee Titans, Smith was hired as the head coach of the Atlanta Falcons, a position he held for three seasons from 2021-23.

Without a reliable solution at quarterback, Smith was unable to elevate the Falcons above a record of 7-10. Atlanta finished each season under Smith with exactly seven wins, and he was ultimately fired after his third season there.

But the Buckeyes are not hiring Smith to be a head coach. They're hiring him to be an offensive coordinator, something

he's proved to be perfectly capable of doing.

After graduating from North Carolina in 2005 and spending a season there as a graduate assistant, Smith, the son of FedEx founder Frederick Smith, first coached in the NFL from 2007-08 as a defensive quality control coach for the Washington Redskins. After his brief stint in the SEC, Smith found a home in Tennessee.

Working as a lower-level assistant coach for his first five years with the Titans, Smith received his big break when tight ends coach Mike Mularkey was promoted to head coach, leaving that position open for the former Tar Heel. Smith did well enough coaching that position group that when former Buckeye defensive lineman Mike Vrabel was brought on as the new head coach in 2018, he was able to stay on staff.

Vrabel must have been a fan of Smith's work because the next year, he promoted him to offensive coordinator.

That's when Smith made a name for himself. Using a dominant rushing attack and heavy personnel groupings, Smith helped the Titans become one of the best offenses in the NFL during his two years as the team's offensive coordinator.

In his first year as the team's OC, Smith led the Titans to top-12 finishes in both points per game and total yards per

game.

In the playoffs, the Titans found a new gear, using their run game to upset the Tom Brady-led Patriots in the wild card round and the Lamar Jackson-led Baltimore Ravens in the divisional round.

The next season was Smith's most impressive as an offensive coordinator. He helped then starting quarterback Ryan Tannehill to a career-best season and led the Titans to top-five finishes in points per game and yards per game.

Smith's success with the Titans made it so that even when he was fired by the Falcons, many NFL teams were interested in making him their offensive coordinator.

The Pittsburgh Steelers were ultimately successful in acquiring Smith, and although he may not have had the same success he had as Tennessee's offensive coordinator, he did an admirable job helping an offense void of the superstar talent or elite quarterback play that often wins in the NFL.

The Steelers ranked outside of the top 20 in total yards per game in both years under Smith but produced enough offense to qualify for the playoffs in two straight seasons.

Smith became available after this season because longtime Steelers head coach Mike Tomlin stepped away from the team at the end of the season. Once again, there were plenty of interested parties.

The Los Angeles Chargers, led by former Michigan head coach Jim Harbaugh, interviewed him for their vacant offensive coordinator position, as did the Detroit Lions. The Titans even had interest in interviewing him for their head coaching position.

But ultimately it was Day and the Buckeyes who ended up with Smith, and it's easy to see why Ohio State thinks Smith is a good fit.

After a fantastic regular season, the Buckeyes were doomed by an inconsistent run game and poor offensive line play, and although some of Smith's more-recent NFL offenses had their flaws, he always seemed to help his units pick up yards on the ground.

Not only did Smith help Titans running back Derrick Henry become one of the best running backs in the NFL over the last 10 years, but as the head coach of the Atlanta Falcons, his offenses finished third and ninth in the league in rushing yards per game over his last two seasons there.

Although the Steelers slightly went away from their running game last year after adding veteran quarterback Aaron Rodgers, they still finished 11th in the league in rushing yards per game during his first year.

Smith's offenses are also well-known for their reliance on multiple tight ends. From 2021-23, the three years when Smith was the head coach, no NFL team ran more plays with multiple tight ends than the Falcons. Last year, the Steelers were one of just two teams in the NFL to finish the season with two tight ends who

had at least 360 receiving yards.

That approach should work well at Ohio State. Although the Buckeyes are historically not known for their development of the tight end position, they've recruited the position well recently and last year were more than willing to have multiple tight ends taking snaps anywhere on the field.

Last year, Ohio State had two tight ends finish the season with at least 150 receiving yards for the first time since 2014, with former Purdue transfer Max Klare (448 receiving yards) and Will Kacmarek (168 receiving yards) combining for over 600 receiving yards.

With Smith in to run the offense and a new batch of tight end transfers – former Northwestern Wildcat Hunter Welcing and former Ohio Bobcat Mason Williams – entering the program, expect the Buckeyes to continue to utilize their depth at tight end.

Familiar Hire

It is far from the first time Day has gone to the NFL ranks to hire a coordinator. In fact, the last four coordinators hired from outside of the program had professional experience. Former offensive coordinators Bill O'Brien and Chip Kelly, along with Patricia and now Smith, are all former NFL head coaches.

It's clear that Day is prioritizing NFL coaching experience when hiring vital pieces of his staff. He said so himself when asked about his hiring of Patricia, which was not necessarily a popular move at the time.

"I felt like Matt was that guy for a lot of reasons," Day said in March. "I think the first one is his experience, coaching 19 years in the NFL. He's coached in six Super Bowls, has three Super Bowl rings. So the experience speaks for itself. I think he's one of the best minds in the game."

Despite having its detractors, the move to bring in Patricia was undoubtedly a success. Patricia, who, like Smith, was coming off a couple of less-than-stellar stints in the NFL, helped the Buckeyes finish the season No. 1 in scoring defense and No. 1 in total defense, in large part because of his ability to use his star players in a variety of different roles.

One year prior, Ohio State had success with another coach with NFL experience. Kelly was at times maligned for his play-calling in the regular season but did well enough as a play-caller to help the Buckeyes hoist their first national championship since 2014.

With Sayin, Jeremiah Smith, up-and-coming young running backs Bo Jackson and Isaiah West, a veteran offensive line all returning, and now Arthur Smith set to lead the offense and likely call plays, the expectation from many will be for the Buckeyes to win their second national title in three years.



Remembering Buckeyes We Lost In 2025

By DAVID BREITHAUPT

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Contributor

Former Ohio State football player and Ohio Senator **Ben Espy** died Jan. 4 at age 81. Espy played for the Buckeyes from 1962-64 after graduating from Sandusky (Ohio) High School. He played in just 14 games in three years under Woody Hayes, during which he had 31 rushing attempts for 102 yards. He graduated in 1965 with a degree in political science and went on to earn a law degree from Howard University. Beginning in 1982, Espy served as president pro tem of the Columbus City Council before being appointed to an Ohio Senate seat in 1992. After winning the election to that seat, Espy served as the assistant minority leader for two years before being the minority leader for four years. Espy left office in 2002.

Former Ohio State quarterback **Jim Karsatos** died Feb. 8, aged 61, after struggling with a heart condition. Karsatos played for Earle Bruce from 1983-86. In 1985, Karsatos led the team to a Citrus Bowl victory over No. 9 BYU. He was a team captain in 1986, completing 145 of his 272 passes (53.3 percent) for 2,122 yards, 13 touchdowns and 10 interceptions. This led the Buckeyes to a 10-3 record and a 28-12 Cotton Bowl victory over No. 8 Texas A&M. Karsatos finished his college career with 5,089 passing yards and 36 touchdowns. His passing yardage still ranks 14th in program history. Karsatos was drafted as the No. 322 pick in the 12th round in the 1987 draft by the Miami Dolphins, where he spent three years without playing in a regular-season game.

On Feb. 11, **Ben Christman**, a former Ohio State offensive lineman, was found dead in his apartment near the UNLV campus from what was later determined to be heart disease and an irregular heartbeat. He was just 21. Christman began his college career in 2021 at Ohio State, entering the program as the No. 6 player out of Ohio and No. 124 player overall in the class. The four-star redshirted his freshman season at Ohio State and then played just one game in 2022 before transferring to Kentucky. After two seasons with the Wildcats, Christman transferred to UNLV. Though his time at Ohio State was short, he earned accolades from teammates such as wide receiver Julian Fleming, linebacker Teradja Mitchell and running back Miyan Williams.

Donavan Munger passed away on Feb. 19 at age 30. He was a defensive lineman for the Buckeyes and a member of the 2014 national championship team. A pulmonary embolism sidetracked his career early on, but he was able to play in 10 games in 2014 and 11 the following season. Munger graduated from Shaker Heights (Ohio) High School in 2013 and was a four-star recruit.

Gene Millard passed away on April 15 at the age of 90. Millard made history when he scored the first basket at St. John Arena in November 1956. He played for the OSU men's basketball team from 1954-57 and began a coaching career as an assistant to Fred Taylor from 1957-58. Millard went on

to coach four seasons at Washington Court House (Ohio) High School from 1958-62. He became the athletic director and basketball coach for Bexley High School in suburban Columbus from 1962-87, during which he won the class AA state basketball championship in 1983. He again served as the AD for Bexley from 1992 to 96.

Loren Robert (Bob) White passed away quietly at his home in Venice, Fla., on May 7. He was 86. White was recruited by Woody Hayes and debuted in 1957, sharing the fullback role that season with Galen Cisco. He played from 1957-59, rushing for 1,816 yards and 13 touchdowns. White tallied 93 yards on 25 carries in the 10-7 victory over Oregon in the 1957 Rose Bowl, which earned OSU a national title. During his three seasons with OSU, White was a three-time academic All-Big-Ten selection and an academic All-American in 1958. He was fourth in the Heisman Trophy balloting in 1958. White was inducted into the Ohio State Athletics Hall of Fame in 1987.

Jared Fleming, age 31, passed away May 10 after a year-long battle with neuroendocrine cancer. Jared graduated from Van Wert (Ohio) High School, where he claimed the 800-meter state title in 2012 and was a seven-time All-Ohio honoree. He went on to earn a bachelor of science in sport industry from Ohio State, where he was a member of the OSU cross country and track teams from 2015-17. His personal record in the 800m run of 1:48.07 was the third fastest in program history.

Former Buckeye pitcher **Scott Klingenbeck** died unexpectedly on May 20. He was 54 years old. A right-handed pitcher, Klingenbeck played for Ohio State from 1990-92 and was on the 1991 team that won the Big Ten title, earning second-team All-America honors and was first-team All-Big Ten that season with 11 wins. Klingenbeck had an ERA of 3.99 in 277 2/3 career innings with the Buckeyes, throwing 25 complete games over his three-year college career. He still ranks in the top five in career wins and had 28 wins in his 1991 season. Klingenbeck was drafted by the Baltimore Orioles in the 1992 draft in the fifth round. He played for the Orioles (1994), Minnesota Twins (1995-96) and Cincinnati Reds (1998) while being sent up and down between MLB and the minors. Klingenbeck remained in Cincinnati after his professional career and coached youth baseball and other sports.

Former Ohio State and Minnesota Vikings defensive lineman **Jim Marshall**, who died June 3, helped the Buckeyes win the United Press and Football Writers Association of America's versions of the 1957 national championship during his sophomore season and was named to the All-Big Ten first team the following year. He was also a track star at Ohio State, setting school records in both the discus and shot put. Marshall decided to forgo his final year of college eligibility and left school to play professional football with the Saskatchewan Roughriders of the Canadian Football League. Following his two varsity seasons at Ohio State and one season in Canada during which the Roughriders struggled to a 1-15 record, Marshall was selected by the Cleveland Browns in the fourth round

of the 1960 NFL draft and broke into the Browns' starting lineup that season at defensive end. Just before the 1961 season, however, he was traded to the expansion Minnesota Vikings. Marshall wound up playing 19 seasons for the Vikings, becoming one of the founding members of the team's feared "Purple People Eaters" defense. In addition to a pair of Pro Bowls and an appearance in Super Bowl IV, he started 270 consecutive regular-season games, an NFL record that stood for more than a quarter-century.

Ted Smith, a former All-America left guard for Ohio State, passed away on June 21. He was 71. Smith was a native of Gibsonburg, Ohio, and played for the Buckeyes from 1973-75. He began his OSU career as a linebacker before moving to offensive guard for his final two seasons. He was the starting left guard for running back Archie Griffin during his two Heisman Trophy-winning seasons in 1974 and 1975, a role that helped him earn a consensus All-America honor in 1975. Smith retired in 2007 after a career as a paving superintendent for the Shelly Company.

Forward **Nick Hodak**, age 56, passed away in Naples, Fla., on Aug. 9. Hodak was a 1986 graduate of Toledo St. John's, and his free-throw percentage of 92.6 as a senior is still the school high-water mark. It remains among the top 20 seasons in the state. He played basketball at Ohio State under Randy Ayers from 1989-1991, where he contributed to the Buckeyes' first Big Ten championship in 20 years during the 1990-91 season.

Former Ohio State men's track & field coach and student-athlete **Frank Zubovich** died on Aug. 14 at the age of 94. Zubovich was the head coach for the men's track and field team from 1976-88 after spending the 11 years prior to that as an assistant. He was born in Columbus and attended South High School, where he played basketball and ran track and field. Zubovich then competed at Ohio State, where he ran the 100-meter, 220-yard, and 440-yard sprints, participated in relays, and competed in the high jump. He graduated from Ohio State in 1955 and was inducted into the Ohio Coaches Hall of Fame by the Ohio Association of Track Coaches in 1968 when he was just 37 years old. Zubovich coached numerous standout athletes during his tenure with the Buckeyes, including 15 All-Americans. Among them was Harry "Butch" Reynolds, who went on to win a silver medal in the 400-meter and a gold medal in the 4x400-meter relay for the United States at the 1988 Seoul Olympics.

Allan Hornyak, who died at age 74 on Aug. 25, played for the Ohio State basketball team from 1971-73. The 6-1 left-handed shooting guard was inducted into Ohio State's Hall of Fame in 1992 and was selected for the Ohio Basketball Hall of Fame in 2008, joining the likes of John Havlicek, Bobby Knight and Jerry Lucas. Known as the "Bellaire Bomber," Hornyak had a legendary prep career at Bellaire (Ohio) St. John Central, where he scored 2,385 points and led the nation in scoring his junior and senior seasons, averaging more than 42 points per game each of those seasons. On Jan. 10, 1969, he scored 86 points

without the aid of the three-point line in a 123-83 win over Tiltonsville (Ohio) Warren Consolidated. As a Buckeye, his 1,572 points in three seasons still rank 14th in program history despite the fact that freshmen were ineligible until the 1972-73 season. He earned first-team All-Big Ten honors in each of his three seasons and was an All-American in 1972 (second team) and 1973 (third team). He averaged 22.8 points in 69 career games. As a senior in 1973, Hornyak captained the Buckeyes, and after his career ended, he was drafted in the second round (26th overall) of the NBA draft by the Cleveland Cavaliers, although he never played professionally.

Ohio State lost another former player when **Daryl Sanders** died of a heart attack on Oct. 5 at the age of 84. Sanders played under former head coach Woody Hayes and was coached by future Michigan head coach Bo Schembechler, who was the offensive line coach in Columbus at the time. Sanders played right tackle for the Buckeyes in 1961 when the team finished the year ranked No. 1 by the Football Writers Association of America. That team led the Big Ten in rushing (279.3 yards per game), total offense (371.5 yards per game) and scoring (29.8 points per game). Sanders was selected in the first round of the 1963 NFL draft by the Detroit Lions as the No. 12 overall pick and started at left tackle for the Lions from 1963-66.

Bob Maggs, who died unexpectedly Oct. 23 at the age of 61, was twice named to the All-Big Ten first-team offense as the Buckeyes' starting center in 1985 and '86. He earned All-America honorable mention while helping lead the Buckeyes to a league co-championship in 1986 and an upset of eighth-ranked Texas A&M in the 1987 Cotton Bowl. As a prep All-American at Youngstown (Ohio) Cardinal Mooney, he helped win a state championship as a senior, and he was the father of Mason Maggs, a walk-on quarterback for the Buckeyes from 2022-25.

On Oct. 25, former Buckeye center **Nick Mangold** lost a lengthy battle with kidney disease. The married father of four was just 41 years old. Mangold was a three-sport star at Kettering (Ohio) Alter and earned All-Ohio honors in football as a senior. He joined Ohio State in the fall of 2002 and was the backup to starting center Alex Stepanovich on the national championship team that season. Mangold stepped into a starting role the following year and went on to earn first-team All-America honors in 2005 before becoming a first-round selection by the New York Jets in 2006. That same year, Mangold was diagnosed with kidney disease due to a genetic defect. Despite that affliction, he played 11 NFL seasons with the Jets, earning two All-Pro honors and making seven trips to the Pro Bowl. Mangold started each of the 164 games in which he played in the league and was penalized only 11 times for holding over 4,462 snaps – a career average of just one holding call every 405.6 snaps. In 2022, Mangold was inducted into the Jets Ring of Honor, and he is currently one of 52 modern-era players under consideration for enshrinement into the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

Mixed Bag For Offense After Poor Postseason

By BOBBY GORBETT

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

It was a tale of two seasons for Ohio State's offense in 2025. In the regular season, the Buckeyes were a productive unit that ranked in the top 15 nationally in both yards per play and points per game, but in the postseason, the Buckeye offense was a liability.

In two games against eventual national championship participants Indiana and Miami (Fla.), Ohio State combined to score just 24 points in the Big Ten Championship Game and Cotton Bowl, respectively.

The Buckeyes totaled over 300 yards in each of their final two losses, but mistakes in the red zone and special teams woes prevented them from putting more points on the board.

The biggest problem for the Buckeyes in the postseason was in pass protection. After giving up just six sacks in 12 regular-season games, Ohio State allowed redshirt-freshman quarterback Julian Sayin to be sacked five times in each of their final two games. The Buckeyes dealt with injuries to starting offensive linemen Austin Siereveld and Tegra Tshabola in their season-ending 24-14 loss to Miami, but it was clear they were outmatched by the Hurricanes' loaded defensive line.

"Early on, I felt like we had a hard time," said Ohio State head coach Ryan Day of his offensive line immediately after his team's loss to Miami. "Gabe (VanSickle) was struggling a little bit early on with his first big spot there, and we were scrambling a little bit. We lost Austin, and they have an excellent front. I thought the guys battled and got back into a rhythm, but they – and I thought we had a good plan going in on how to get the ball out of our hands quick, but that obviously didn't work."

In addition to struggling with injuries, Ohio State also dealt with a coaching shuffle. Offensive coordinator Brian Hartline, who had done a solid job in his first year as the team's play-caller, accepted South Florida's head-coaching position just three days before Ohio State's 13-10 loss to Indiana in the Big Ten Championship Game. Hartline remained the play-caller for the Buckeyes' game against Indiana, but Day ultimately took over that responsibility for the Cotton Bowl.

With all of the obstacles Ohio State's offense faced down the stretch of the season in mind, here are Buckeye Sports Bulletin's offensive grades for the second half of the season and the season as a whole.

Quarterbacks

Considering he entered the season with just five career completions and 84 passing yards at the collegiate level, Sayin exceeded even the high expectations bestowed upon an Ohio State starting quarterback.

On the way to becoming a Heisman Trophy finalist, Sayin threw for 3,610 passing yards, 32 touchdowns and eight interceptions. Most impressive was that he completed 77.0 percent of his passes, by far the best mark in the FBS. His 89.6 QBR was the second-best mark in the FBS.

After proving himself in the first half of the season in games against nonconference



SONNY BROCKWAY

GOOD, NOT GREAT — The Ohio State offense rolled through the regular season with proficiency and ease but encountered stiffer competition in the Big Ten Championship Game against Indiana and the College Football Playoff vs. Miami when the Buckeyes, with quarterback Julian Sayin (10), scored a combined 24 points.

opponents and solid Big Ten foes Washington, Minnesota and Illinois, Sayin picked up right where he left off in the second half of the regular season. With his quick release and accuracy to all levels of the field, Sayin had a spectacular two-game stretch during the Buckeyes' two wins over Wisconsin and Penn State. Over the two midseason games, Sayin threw for 709 yards and eight touchdowns, and he completed 86.2 percent of his passes.

However, after that stretch, star receiver Carnell Tate began to deal with a lower-body injury, and one week later, fellow star receiver Jeremiah Smith had a serious quad strain injury that caused him to miss time in Ohio State's 48-10 win over UCLA on Nov. 15.

With his two favorite weapons often on the sideline, Sayin wasn't quite as effective. In Ohio State's win over UCLA and its 42-9 win over Rutgers the next week, Sayin failed to throw for 200 yards in both contests. But Tate and Smith eventually came back for Ohio State's regular-season finale against Michigan, and Sayin was back to his usual effective self.

Leading the Buckeyes to their first win over Michigan since 2019, Sayin threw for 233 yards and three touchdowns and one interception while completing 19 of 26 passes.

Three days after Ohio State defeated Michigan, Day was asked to evaluate Sayin's growth throughout the season. According to Day, Sayin made huge improvements from his first regular-season start to his last.

"Maybe he doesn't look different to you, but the guy who played against Texas and the guy who came off that field on Saturday (in Ann Arbor) looked like two different people to me," Day said. "From that game to where

he is now, he's more experienced, he's more mature. He just has a different look in his eye. He has a different walk, the way he talks, the way he moves. Everything about it (has changed)."

Like every other part of the offense, Sayin struggled somewhat in the postseason. He had costly interceptions in each of the Buckeyes' two losses, and despite seeming to have opportunities to pick up yards with his legs, he often stayed in the pocket.

Still, Sayin proved to be an elite passer in his first year at Ohio State, and according to Day, the Carlsbad, Calif., native has a bright future in Columbus.

"Julian, this is somebody who hasn't played a lot of football. This is his first year of playing, and he competes," Day said. "He works at it in the meeting room, what he does in terms of preparation, what we put on his plate in getting us in and out of plays, protection checks. This guy here has a very, very bright future ahead of him. I think Julian has a chance to be as good as he wants to be."

BSB Midterm Grade: A-
BSB Second-Half Grade: B+
BSB Final Grade: A-

Running Backs

In 2024, Ohio State's running game hit a couple of roadblocks in the regular season before finding its stride at the perfect time in the College Football Playoff. This year, the Buckeye running game showed glimpses of progress but never seemed to find sustained success.

Although the offensive line didn't do them any favors, the drop-off in quality from Ohio State's 2024 running backs, TreVeyon Henderson and Quinshon Judkins, and this year's

Rating The Offense

Here is where the OSU offense ranked among the Big Ten and nationally (statistics through the Cotton Bowl).

Category	Stats	NCAA	Big Ten
Rushing Offense	154.4	72nd	9th
Passing Offense	268.2	21st	2nd
Total Offense	422.6	26th	4th
Scoring Offense	33.4	21st	5th
Turnovers Lost	11	T-9th	T-4th
Third-Down Conv.	.533	2nd	2nd

ball-carriers, including freshmen Bo Jackson and Isaiah West and senior CJ Donaldson Jr., became apparent at the end of the season.

In addition to struggling in pass protection, Ohio State running backs failed to break off big runs against stronger opponents.

While Ohio State's national-championship-winning tandem of Judkins and Henderson combined for over 100 rushing yards in three of the team's four playoff games, this year's running back group didn't reach the 90-yard threshold in either two postseason games.

Jackson was the closest thing Ohio State had to a bell-cow. The four-star finished the season with 1,090 yards and six rushing touchdowns on 179 carries.

Projected as Ohio State's third-string running back heading into the season, Jackson surprised everyone when he became not only the team's leading rusher, but the fifth true freshman in program history to run for 1,000 yards or more.

Although he was held under 100 yards in each of Ohio State's final two games and didn't have a run longer than 20 yards in the postseason, Jackson had one of his better games of the season against Michigan.

He ran for 117 yards on 22 carries in that game, as Ohio State outgained Michigan on the ground for the first time since 2019. In that game, he had one of his best runs of the season when he made multiple Michigan defenders miss with a hesitation move during a 36-yard run.

"I think Bo just keeps getting better each and every week," Sayin said days after the Michigan game. "It's exciting to see true freshmen like that just keep getting better and keep growing and keep making plays for our offense. The sky's the limit for him."

Ohio State's second-leading rusher on the season was Donaldson, who had a slightly disappointing campaign after transferring in from West Virginia. He still carved out a role in short-yardage situations. Donaldson finished the season with 361 rushing yards and a team-high 10 rushing touchdowns on 96 carries. He wasn't a huge factor for the Buckeyes in the postseason with 31 rushing yards total.

West also established himself as a reliable ball-carrier during the second half of the season. During Ohio State's last seven games, West had 48 rushing yards or more in four games. However, he had just 4 yards on three carries in the postseason. He never rushed for over 100 yards in a single game, but during his team's 34-0 win over Wisconsin, he led the Buckeyes with 55 rushing yards on nine carries.

BSB Midterm Grade: B-
BSB Second-Half Grade: C
BSB Final Grade: C+

FINAL GRADES: OFFENSE

Wide Receivers

Not surprisingly, Ohio State's wide receivers were once again the strength of the offense in 2025.

When fully healthy, Smith and Tate were not just two of the best on the team, but two of the best players in the country. On the way to earning unanimous All-America honors, Smith had 87 receptions for 1,243 yards and 12 receiving touchdowns, each of which was a team high.

Unlike many of his other teammates on the offensive side of the ball, Smith was not held in check during the end of the year. After going for 40 yards and a crucial receiving touchdown during Ohio State's win over Michigan, Smith found a different gear against Indiana and Miami.

During the Buckeyes' first loss of the season, Smith had eight catches for 144 yards, and he was even better against the Hurricanes. In the Cotton Bowl, Smith kept Ohio State in the game with seven catches for 157 yards and a crucial touchdown catch that came on fourth-and-2 early in the fourth quarter.

Tate, meanwhile, had more difficulties bouncing back from his late-season injury. He finished the season with 875 receiving yards and nine touchdowns on 51 catches despite missing three games with his injury, but he was held under 50 yards receiving in each of the Buckeyes' final two games.

Tate's slight decrease in production aside, Hartline was impressed with the way his room continued to get on the field despite obstacles.

"It was a fine balance, and I think that they definitely battled," Hartline said before the Cotton Bowl. "Jeremiah battled. You saw him playing the first half and then coming out (in the UCLA game). Carnell battled. Frankly, Brandon Inniss was battling some shoulder stuff, but they have all been pros about it. Even the guys you weren't reading about were still battling to be available. Guys were getting sick, guys were getting hurt, but everyone was available for the most part."

Despite the injuries, it's hard to say Ohio State's starting outside receivers were anything but sensational in 2025. Where the Buckeyes had inconsistency was with Inniss, the starting slot receiver, and some of the depth players, who tried their best to fill in for Tate and Smith while they dealt with injuries.

In his first year as a starter, Inniss finished the season with 36 catches for 271 yards and three touchdowns. He had a catch in 13 of Ohio State's 14 games this season, but he was often not much of a threat down the field. Inniss had only one catch all season that went for more than 15 yards, and he failed to reach 50 receiving yards in a single game all season.

Although many receivers would struggle to get the ball when sharing the field with the likes of Smith and Tate, Inniss didn't seize his opportunity when each player missed time with injury.

When both receivers were missing from Ohio State's win over Rutgers, Inniss went for just 10 receiving yards on two catches.

Inniss wasn't the only one who struggled to make a name for himself when Smith and Tate weren't on the field.

Against the Scarlet Knights, senior receiver David Adolph had two catches for 23 receiving yards, but no other Buckeye receiver had a catch in the game.

Adolph finished the season with three

catches for 31 yards, and outside of Smith, Tate and Inniss, no Buckeye receiver had over 100 yards on the season. At the wide receiver position, Mylan Graham, who has since transferred to Notre Dame along with fellow receiver Quincy Porter, was the next closest to the 100-yard threshold. Graham had 93 receiving yards on six catches, making catches in four games.

BSB Midterm Grade: A
BSB Second-Half Grade: A
BSB Final Grade: A

Tight Ends

Throughout its program history, Ohio State hasn't often been known for its tight end room, but with the help of co-offensive coordinator and tight ends coach Keenan Bailey, the Buckeyes are working to change that.

The 2025 season was a step in the right direction for the room. Transfer Max Klare didn't quite match the production he had in 2024 at Purdue, but he still had 448 receiving yards and two touchdowns on 43 catches.

Klare got out to somewhat of a slow start to the season, after transferring in from Purdue, but seemed to settle in during the second half of the season. He also helped the Buckeyes deal with the injuries of Tate and Smith. Against his old team, Klare went for five catches and 59 yards.

"It was good to see Max make some really nice plays," Day said of Klare's performance against the Boilers. "He probably played his best game. He blocked really well. I thought he played well without the ball but certainly was productive with the ball in his hands. He ran some really nice routes. I think his confidence is growing, and he's peaking at the right time."

Two weeks later, Klare improved on that performance. With Tate and Smith sidelined, Klare caught seven passes for 105 yards and a touchdown during Ohio State's win over Rutgers.

With Smith and Tate back in the lineup, Klare wasn't as big a threat as a pass-catcher, but he had three receptions in the game against Michigan and two catches against the Hoosiers.

With Ohio State using multiple tight ends this year, much more than it had in years past, backup tight ends such as Ohio transfer Will Kacmarek, earned plenty of playing time down the stretch of the season.

Although he's known as one of the best blocking tight ends in the country, Kacmarek also posted solid receiving numbers for the Buckeyes, with 168 receiving yards and two touchdowns on 15 catches.

Before the Cotton Bowl, Day made sure to give the former Bobcat his due.

"Will Kacmarek is somebody who does a lot of dirty work for us," Day said ahead of Ohio State's Cotton Bowl matchup when asked to name an unsung hero of the offense. "He has been a really good player for us."

BSB Midterm Grade: B
BSB Second-Half Grade: B
BSB Final Grade: B

Offensive Line

The Buckeyes' offensive line may have gotten out to a promising start in 2025, but by the end of the season, that group was a huge weakness.

At the end of the regular season, the starting group, which included left tackle Austin Siereveld, left guard Luke Montgomery, center Carson Hinzman, right guard Tegra Tshabola and right tackle Phillip Daniels, continued their strong start against weaker competition.

The Buckeyes' front opened enough holes for the offense to pick up over 150 rushing yards in wins over Penn State and Purdue. Then, against Rutgers and UCLA, Ohio State easily eclipsed 200 yards on the ground in each of those games.

They appeared to be in a great spot for the postseason when they helped Ohio State gain 186 yards on the ground against Michigan. Equally impressive was that the offensive line allowed Sayin to be sacked only one time over the last three games of the regular season.

All of that, though, came before the disastrous postseason. When Ohio State's front had to go against both Indiana's and Miami's fearsome defensive lines, it was simply outmatched. In addition to giving up five sacks

in each postseason game, the offensive line struggled to create push in short-yardage situations and often failed to create holes for Ohio State's running backs.

The Buckeyes gave up only a few sacks in the regular season, but the right side of the offensive line always had its flaws. Both Daniels and Tshabola struggled with inconsistency in pass protection, and Tshabola, specifically, was often rotated out of games with other offensive linemen, VanSickle and Josh Padilla getting time. Tshabola's problems persisted in the Big Ten Championship Game, and after giving up a sack in the third quarter of that game, he was replaced by VanSickle.

Siereveld was viewed by many as the best starting offensive lineman on the team, but he suffered a lower-body injury in the first half of the Cotton Bowl. That injury plagued him against a Hurricane front that practically lived in the backfield against the Buckeyes.

VanSickle, who had fared well in the second half against the Hoosiers, didn't have nearly as much success against the Hurricanes. In just 18 snaps, he allowed a sack and two quarterback pressures, and he was ultimately benched for Padilla.

After the Cotton Bowl, Day had a hard time pinpointing why his offensive line struggled so much to protect Sayin after a stellar regular season.

"It's hard to just say one thing," Day said when asked what happened to Ohio State's pass-protection. "We tried to help out. (Miami) has a very good front, and we felt like it was a little bit of a different scheme than what we dealt with the week before against Indiana.

"Indiana was a lot of pressure, a lot of movement, a lot of twisting and things. This was a bigger group of guys who are a hard-charging front. So, we went in with a certain plan, and you could tell right from that first third down that we had a hard time."

BSB Midterm Grade: B
BSB Second-Half Grade: C
BSB Final Grade: C

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Defense The Strength Of Ohio State In 2025

By SAM CIPRIANI

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

Early in the 2025 season, Ohio State's defense established itself as the nation's most dominant unit.

Week after week, the Buckeyes overwhelmed opponents with their elite talent and discipline, while defensive coordinator Matt Patricia orchestrated the unit with disguised coverages and exotic pressures working to baffle opponents.

Patricia's impact quickly became one of the season's defining storylines, as many expected Ohio State's defense to regress after losing eight starters to the NFL following the 2024 season.

Instead, the unit thrived under his guidance. Several players, including senior linebacker Sonny Styles, credited Patricia's calm presence and teaching style as a key reason for the defense's consistency and confidence all year.

"It's like a sense of ease," Styles said. "He brings poise to the sideline. I've always said, Coach Patricia, the best thing about him is that he's a teacher, and the way he's able to articulate his thoughts and help all of us understand what's going on and what we're thinking next – we're staying on our toes when he's out there."

Ohio State's defense featured two unanimous All-Americans in safety Caleb Downs and defensive tackle Kayden McDonald, a consensus All-American in linebacker Arvell Reese, and Styles, who also earned a tree in Buckeye Grove.

When Buckeye Sports Bulletin graded the defense midway through the regular season, the Buckeyes were allowing an FBS-best mark of 6.8 points per game and were tied for fourth in total defense, allowing just 229.0 yards per contest.

That dominance never faded down the stretch of the season. Ohio State's defense helped the Buckeyes earn at least three-score victories in their last 11 regular-season games, and they allowed just 93 points in the regular season.

Even as the offense sputtered in the post-season, the defense remained steady, finishing the season surrendering only 9.3 points per game and 219.1 yards, ranking first in the nation in both categories.

In Ohio State's 13-10 loss to Indiana in the Big Ten Championship Game, the Buckeye defense allowed just one touchdown and came up with several key stops, including an interception and two red-zone stands that held the Hoosiers to field goals.

While Ohio State gave up its highest point total of the season in its 24-14 loss to Miami (Fla.) in the Cotton Bowl, the defense still remained dominant. One of the Hurricanes' three touchdowns came on a Keionte Scott 72-yard pick-six thrown by Buckeye quarterback Julian Sayin. Ohio State even held Miami to just 291 yards of total offense compared to the Buckeyes' 332.

Despite a disappointing finish to the season, Ohio State's defense consistently gave the Buckeyes a chance to win, cementing itself as the team's clear strength in 2025.

With that being said, BSB broke down and rated each of Ohio State's four position units on defense.

Rating The Defense

Here is where the OSU defense ranked among the Big Ten and nationally (statistics through the Cotton Bowl).

Category	Stats	NCAA	Big Ten
Rushing Defense	89.4	7th	2nd
Passing Defense	129.7	1st	1st
Total Defense	219.1	1st	1st
Scoring Defense	9.3	1st	1st
Sacks/Game	2.5	31st	4th
Third-Down Def.	.307	10th	2nd

Defensive Line

Questioned for its inexperience heading into 2025, Ohio State's defensive line finished as BSB's weakest-ranked unit on a dominant defense, though its struggles were relative, as other position groups simply set the bar high.

Entering the season, the Buckeyes faced the challenge of replacing all four of their starting defensive linemen, each of whom was selected in the 2025 NFL draft. While multiple members of Ohio State's 2025 defensive front – including defensive ends Kenyatta Jackson Jr. and Caden Curry, as well as McDonald – played meaningful roles during the Buckeyes' championship run, the unit still included four first-time starters.

Regardless, Ohio State's front four managed to provide above-average marks in both rush defense and the pass rush.

Led by defensive ends Jackson and Curry along with defensive tackles McDonald, Eddrick Houston and Tywone Malone Jr., Ohio State boasted one of the best rush defenses in the nation. Its front four surrendered just 89.4 yards on the ground per game, the seventh-best mark in the nation, while Buckeye defensive linemen earned 25½ of Ohio State's 35 total sacks this season.

McDonald was all over the field in 2025, recording 65 total tackles, nine tackles for loss, three sacks, two forced fumbles, a fumble recovery and a pass breakup. He also became the first Ohio State nose tackle since Johnathan Hankins in 2012 to record eight tackles in a game, though McDonald didn't just do it once; the 6-3, 326-pound lineman accomplished the feat three times (Texas, Penn State, Miami).

Jackson stressed McDonald's impact on the middle of the defense, adding that he has developed into a complete and reliable presence.

"He's increased his IQ for the game, his technique got better, and he's a complete player now," Jackson said. "He holds down the middle of our defense, and he has done a pretty good job at it."

Next to McDonald, Houston and Malone shared time at defensive tackle, logging 323 and 298 snaps, respectively, and forming a one-two punch that helped keep both players fresh throughout games.

Houston struggled early in the season, particularly against Grambling State in Week 2, when he was called twice for offside penalties. Malone quickly stepped in as the starter for the next contest against Ohio University and remained there for most of the season.

Since Malone's emergence, the two shared similar playing time throughout the season. Over 13 games (each missed one



SONNY BROCKWAY

AIR FORCE – Defense was the strength of Ohio State, and the secondary led by two-time All-America safety Caleb Downs (2) was downright stingy, allowing just 129.7 passing yards per game to lead the nation.

game with injury), Malone and Houston tallied 26 and 21 tackles, respectively, ranking tied for 11th and 13th on the team. Malone also added a quarterback hurry and two pass breakups, while Houston recorded four TFLs, three sacks, and a forced fumble.

Despite their ongoing competition, the pair each enjoyed solid individual seasons. Malone emphasized the importance of unity over personal accolades.

"We want to play as one unit and play together, never as an individual," Malone said. "A lot of people can get lost. Sometimes their production is not good, and they want to get out of whack or out of the scheme. But with us, we just feel like we play hard for each other. The production will come after."

Like Houston and Malone, backup defensive tackle Will Smith Jr. also had a solid year with 20 total tackles.

Curry seemed ever present in 2025, leading Ohio State's defensive line with 66 tackles, 16½ tackles for loss, 11 sacks, eight hurries and two fumble recoveries. His 11 sacks tied for 14th nationally.

The senior defensive end was consistently the Buckeyes' most dominant edge rusher, highlighted by standout performances such as 11 tackles, five TFLs and three sacks at Washington on Sept. 27 and seven tackles, three TFLs and two sacks against Indiana in the Big Ten Championship Game. The Greenwood, Ind., native totaled four games with at least four tackles and two TFLs. Curry had at least three tackles in all but two

games.

While some expected the 6-6, 265-pound Jackson to outproduce Curry prior to the season, he fell short statistically, finishing with 28 total tackles, 11 TFLs, 6½ sacks and two pass breakups and two hurries. Jackson's performances were inconsistent, with one or fewer tackles in five games, including Ohio State's loss to Miami in the Cotton Bowl.

Behind the Buckeyes' starting group, North Carolina transfer Beau Atkinson, who registered 7½ sacks last season, had a rather disappointing season with just 11 tackles, 2½ TFLs and one sack. He had just five snaps of action total over Ohio State's last three games.

Freshman Zion Grady is among the few returners in Ohio State's defensive end room going into next season. In 104 snaps, the rookie had 13 tackles, two TFLs and one sack.

BSB Midterm Grade: B+

BSB Second-Half Grade: B

BSB Final Grade: B

Linebackers

The success of Ohio State's linebacker corps can largely be traced to the rise of Reese, though that outcome was far from a guarantee entering the season.

Reese had not yet emerged as a top-five NFL draft pick candidate after spending the previous year primarily as a backup behind Cody Simon and Styles.

FINAL GRADES: DEFENSE

While he showed promise in 2024 with 43 tackles and 3½ tackles for loss, he hadn't fully broken out.

However, it was clear from the moment Reese stepped on the field against Texas on Aug. 30 that he would be a difference maker for Ohio State. Reese totaled nine tackles with a sack against the Longhorns, then followed that effort with seven consecutive games of at least four tackles, recording a TFL in five of those performances.

Despite a dominant first eight weeks, during which he totaled 54 of his 69 tackles on the season and all of his 6½ sacks, Reese was unable to maintain that elite level of play over Ohio State's final six games. He was held to just one tackle in three of those contests, including against Indiana, and failed to record a tackle for loss over the final five games. Even so, Reese still earned consensus All-America honors and first-team All-Big Ten recognition alongside Styles.

Reese was one of the most versatile players on Ohio State's defense in 2025, and Patricia said the staff made a concerted effort to deploy him in spots that maximized his strengths.

"You (want to) make sure your good players are doing things that they do well," Patricia said. "You try to find different ways to do that, and we certainly use the pieces that we have up front as many ways as we can."

While Reese's meteoric rise made headlines, Styles quietly had an All-America season as Ohio State's starting Will linebacker.

Styles raised his level of play in his second season at linebacker after moving from safety, finishing the season with a team-high 82 tackles to go along with 6½ TFLs and one sack. He also had an interception, three pass breakups, four QB hurries and a forced fumble. His season was highlighted by a 12-tackle outing against Indiana in the conference championship game. Styles proved to be Ohio State's most reliable tackler, missing just one open-field tackle all season, against Miami in the quarterfinal.

Styles highlighted the difference in his feel for the linebacker position after his second full year in his new role.

"Last year, I was just kind of figuring it out," Styles said. "I wasn't really trusting myself. Now I more so understand the defense so that I can kind of just focus on the offense. You have to know it like the back of your hand, so you can just look at the offense and see what's happening on their side of the ball and be able to anticipate rather than reacting to every play and having no idea what's coming."

Behind Ohio State's elite starting duo, sophomore Payton Pierce emerged as the Buckeyes' primary reserve, seeing action in 4-3 scheme packages, which should excite Ohio State fans for next season as he becomes a likely starter with the loss of Styles and Reese.

Pierce had a promising campaign with 43 tackles, good for eighth on the team, and 1½ TFLs, as well as an interception against Illinois and a strip and fumble recovery against Miami in the Cotton Bowl loss.

BSB Midterm Grade: A+

BSB Second-Half Grade: A

BSB Final Grade: A

Cornerbacks

Just one year after leading the nation with 16 penalties, cornerback Davison Igbi-

nosun turned in a far cleaner 2025 season.

The senior finished tied for seventh on Ohio State with 53 total tackles and led the Buckeyes with eight pass breakups, while no other player on the team recorded more than three.

Jermaine Mathews Jr., on the other hand, had a stellar start to the season with a crucial interception and three tackles against Texas.

However, while Mathews started the season strong, he faltered when it mattered most. Against Indiana and Miami in the postseason, quarterbacks Fernando Mendoza and Carson Beck routinely went after Mathews. The junior gave up a combined eight receptions for 108 yards against Indiana and Miami. The 5-11, 190-pound corner did tally six tackles against the Hurricanes.

Mathews was credited with 26 tackles, two interceptions, three breakups, 1½ TFLs and one sack in 2025.

Ohio State head coach Ryan Day credited both Mathews and Igbinosun for changing the culture of the Buckeye defense, adding that the duo always brought him and the team energy.

"Not every (defensive back) has to be that way," Day said. "But when you think of the DBs that you want on your team, they're gritty, edgy, competitive and they have a short memory. At times, you can't tell them anything, and that's the way you want it. I tell those guys all the time 'You bring me up every day because you bring juice. It's our job to work together.' Davison, when he came in, I don't think the room was exactly like that."

Nickel back Lorenzo Styles Jr. endured an up-and-down season with Ohio State in 2025. Limited by injuries that sidelined him for two full games, the graduate still produced the most productive defensive campaign of his career, totaling 30 tackles, 1½ tackles for loss and three pass breakups from the slot.

Despite enjoying the best season of his career, the converted wide receiver was frequently the defensive back opponents tested in a secondary with Igbinosun and Mathews, and his open-field tackling remained inconsistent at times.

Freshman Devin Sanchez emerged as Ohio State's top cornerback off the bench, frequently filling in for the injured Styles. Those adjustments pushed Sanchez to outside cornerback while Mathews shifted inside to the slot.

Despite being challenged regularly as a rookie, the five-star recruit held his own, finishing with 15 tackles, two pass breakups and a fumble recovery.

As a unit, Ohio State's secondary allowed just 129.7 passing yards per game, leading the nation by nearly a 25-yard margin. The Buckeyes gave up more than 175 passing yards only twice all season – 248 to Illinois and 222 to Indiana.

BSB Midterm Grade: A-

BSB Second-Half Grade: B+

BSB Final Grade: A-

Safeties

With Downs taking home the Thorpe Award as the best defensive back in college football and Jaylen McClain having a breakout sophomore campaign, Ohio State's safety tandem was among the best in the nation in 2025.

Downs returned to Ohio State for his fi-

nal season after an All-America campaign in 2024, doing much of the same this season. Regarded by many as the best safety in college football, Downs once again served as the cornerstone of the Buckeye secondary.

The projected top-10 NFL draft pick ranked third on the team with 68 tackles, and he had five TFLs, two interceptions, two pass breakups and two forced fumbles.

Reese highlighted the impact Downs had on the defense, serving as a field general and frequently reading opposing offenses.

"He helps us a lot. Caleb is so smart," Reese said. "Sometimes Caleb will be out there calling out plays. So it helps a lot, having somebody that smart behind you."

McClain beat out junior Malik Hartford for the second safety spot alongside Downs and didn't look back.

McClain opened the season with eight tackles against Texas and recorded at least two stops in all but one game (UCLA). He totaled 53 tackles, which tied for sixth on the Buckeyes, and added three pass breakups.

When asked about McClain, Day praised the sophomore's physicality and growing impact, highlighting his communication and

versatility, and emergence as a key piece of the Buckeye defense.

"He's physical," Day said. "You can feel his presence when he's out there. We say it all the time. You've got to be felt when you're on the field with your physicality and the way you play. That's the way he is. I think he feeds off of Caleb, and he's watched him. They work together, and they communicate well. He's a smart player. He has good ball skills, all of the above. He's a major part of our defense, and somebody that maybe wasn't a household name coming into the season but is now."

Freshman Faheem Delane, who transferred to LSU after the end of the season, and redshirt freshman Leroy Roker III rounded out the safeties, and each logged 81 snaps in 2025. Delane finished with 12 tackles, including one tackle for loss, while Roker recorded nine tackles and a pass breakup.

BSB Midterm Grade: A-

BSB Second-Half Grade: A-

BSB Final Grade: A-

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Special Teams Improve But Missed FG Looms Large

By CRAIG MERZ

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

Ohio State improved in most special teams categories in the second portion of the season, but those numbers were overshadowed by a pair of plays – one positive and one definitely negative.

Unfortunately for the Buckeyes, a rare kickoff return for a touchdown by Lorenzo Styles Jr. against UCLA pales in significance to the missed 27-yard field goal by senior Jayden Fielding that helped send OSU to a 13-10 loss to Indiana in the Big Ten Championship Game.

His flub was emblematic of the weak link in the program under coach Ryan Day, who prefers a coach-by-committee approach to handling the collective unit. Sometimes it works, but for a program intent on not only competing for but winning national championships, critical mistakes have been costly in big games.

Day said earlier in the season that he likes the way most of the staff is involved in handling the special teams.

"We have multiple coaches up in front of the group, which is good for our team," he said. "It's a different voice. It's a different attack. But it's also accountability for everybody."

On one hand, it seems like it is working as progress was made as the season went along, but in several instances, the final numbers were nothing special.

The Buckeyes post-midterm improved their performances and rankings in net punting, kickoff return and kickoff return defense; had the same average but better rankings for punt return defense and were worse in punt return.

Here are Buckeye Sports Bulletin's grades for the season, combining the midterm marks covering the first six games with the final eight that included the conference title game and the 24-14 loss to Miami in the College Football Playoff.

Kicking Game

Fielding did many good things in his career and even kicked a career-long field goal in the second half of the season, but he will ultimately be remembered for two things: hitting one field goal and missing from 34 and 38 yards in the 13-10 loss to Michigan in 2024 and his failure to connect vs. Indiana in the defeat by the same score.

Against IU, his try from the right hash with 2:48 to play would have tied it 13-13, but he shanked it to the left and the Hoosiers were able to consume most of the remaining time for the upset.

Going into the kick, Fielding was 15 of 17 for the season, including 6 of 6 from less than 29 yards.

Fielding received threats on social media afterward from "fans," but junior offensive lineman Luke Montgomery said the loss did not come down to one play or player in defense of his kicker.

"We're a team, so we've got to pick him up," Montgomery said after the game. "It wasn't all on him. I think we could have played a lot better as an offensive line today. It is just what it is, but it wasn't just on him. I know that he was out there on an island,

Rating The Specialists

Here is where the OSU specialists ranked among the Big Ten and nationally (statistics through the Cotton Bowl).

Category	Stats	NCAA	Big Ten
Net Punting	40.8	36th	4th
Punt Return Avg.	10.6	40th	9th
KO Return Avg.	25.3	12th	2nd
Punt Return Def.	3.0	5th	1st
KO Return Def.	16.6	16th	5th

but we're all there for him, and we could have done a lot of things better for him so we wouldn't be in that moment."

Senior defensive end Caden Curry agreed.

"It's a team sport," Curry said. "It's not individualistic. That's why we all play it. We're not just going to dog him for that. There are more plays the defense could have made. There are more plays the offense could have made. There are more plays that special teams could make. I mean, it's not just one person that defines the game. So nothing's wrong with Jayden. I'm not going to put it all on him."

Fielding had one opportunity for a field goal against Miami in the CFP semifinal, but he missed from 49 yards (which would have tied his career best) with one second left in the first half and OSU trailing 14-0.

Through the first six games, Fielding made 6 of 7 field goals with the only miss a 53-yarder vs. Minnesota when Day wanted to see if he could break his best of 47 yards set in 2023.

Ohio State has still not had a successful 50-yard-plus field goal since Blake Haubeil nailed a 55-yarder against Northwestern in 2019.

Fielding finished the season making 16 of 20 with his 80.0 percent success rate ranking 50th in the NCAA and 10th in the Big Ten. His 1.1 field goals made per game ranked 71st nationally and 12th in the conference.

His other miss besides those vs. Minnesota, Indiana and Miami was an attempt from 38 yards against Wisconsin, a game in which he also made tries of 38 and 37 yards.

He got into a rhythm after that game and hit a 22-yarder vs. Penn State, followed by two vs. Purdue – a career-long 49-yarder followed by a 45-yard boot.

Fielding was spot-on from 41 and 33 yards vs. UCLA and had some redemption against the Wolverines with kicks of 24 and 23 yards. He also made a 30-yarder vs. Indiana to put OSU up 10-3 in the first half before the epic miss.

He made all 56 extra points to extend his streak to 156, with the only miss in his career coming on Oct. 14, 2023.

Transfer Jackson Courville did not attempt a field goal and was 4 of 4 on PATs.

The Buckeyes' kickoff return defense was better over the final eight games, dropping the season average return from 19.1 yards to 16.6 on 16 returns and going from 62nd nationally to 16th and ninth to fourth

in the Big Ten. OSU had 65 touchbacks on 90 kickoffs.

Overall, the statistics show the kicking game was consistently good despite the lack of a strong leg by Fielding, but his failure at a critical moment of the season overtook everything else.

BSB Midterm Grade: B+

BSB Second-Half Grade: C

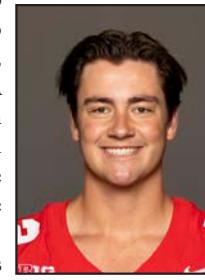
BSB Final Grade: B-

Punting

Joe McGuire punted 29 times for a 42.4 average with a long of 55 among his five punts of 50 or more yards for the season. There were two touchbacks and 15 fair catches, with 12 of his punts dropping inside the 20.

Nick McLarty's lone kick went for 45 yards and a fair catch against Grambling in the second game on Sept. 6.

The Buckeyes' final net punting average of 40.8 yards was up slightly from 39.6 through six games, jumping in the NCAA rankings to 36th from being tied for 66th while moving up five spots to fourth in the Big Ten.



Joe McGuire

Inconsistent has been a word thrown around a lot when discussing special teams, and that applies to McGuire. He fell to a low point against Illinois when he averaged 37.8 yards for four punts, which led to Day being questioned the following week whether he would stick with the second-year starter. Obviously, he did.

In the game No. 11 against Rutgers, McGuire had two punts for a 43.0 average with one downed at the 1-yard line.

Of course, it can be hard to be consistent when opportunities are lacking. In the four games prior to Rutgers, he punted once in each with the boots going 42, 43, 44 and 51 yards, respectively.

Against Michigan, McGuire's first punt went for 45 yards into the end zone. His second traveled 29 yards but was late in the game when the outcome was not in doubt.

All three of his punts vs. Indiana, including a 50-yarder, landed inside the 20, and two were fair catches while averaging 45.3 yards. Against Miami, he had another punt of 50 yards and averaged 44.2 yards on four punts with two inside the 20 and one return of 2 yards.

The punt return defense average of 3.0 yards for the season matched the midterm number, but the Buckeyes finished fifth in the NCAA and first in the Big Ten, improving from a tie for 24th nationally and fifth in the conference after six games.

BSB Midterm Grade: C

BSB Second-Half Grade: B+

BSB Final Grade: B-

Return Game

Day promised before the 2024 season that the Buckeyes would return a kickoff for a touchdown for the first time since the Jim Tressel era. It took until the 10th game of the 2025 season, vs. UCLA, but Styles made the prediction come true. In the third

quarter, he raced 100 yards for a TD for the Buckeyes' first kickoff return score since Jordan Hall went 85 yards against Michigan on Nov. 27, 2010.

It was also the first 100-yard kickoff TD since Ted Ginn Jr. in 2005 vs. Minnesota.

"It feels great," Styles said. "A lot of credit to my coaches and my teammates for putting in the install. That's a lot of work and a lot of preparation. My teammates did their job. So, it was great to put that out on the field."

UCLA interim coach Tim Skipper was philosophical.

"They returned it back to the field, and our guys got pinned over there in the corner," he said. "And it was just free racing. I think it was a no-DNA touchdown. I don't think anybody touched him. So we just had to get it corrected on the sideline. We have to recognize the blocks and counter. We didn't do a good job of that, and it was 88 out the gate."

It was redemption for Styles, who felt he should have scored against Minnesota on a gadget play when Brandon Inniss fielded a punt and threw it across the field to Styles, who ran for 36 yards.

"I should have scored on that punt return, too," Styles said. "So, I knew if I had another opportunity, I had to take it to the house and represent the university, my teammates, and all the work we put in."

That wasn't the only big play on special teams that game. Bruins punter Will Carroll shanked a kick off his leg, allowing defensive end Caden Curry to get a hand on it to create a loss of 8 yards to the UCLA 14 with 10 seconds left in the first half. OSU kicked a field goal for a 27-0 lead.

There were also negative plays in the latter part of the season. A poorly struck Wisconsin punt ended up rolling for a 55-yarder, and later the Badgers faced a fourth-and-19 when punter Sean West ran for 20 yards.

The kickoff return average of 25.3 for the season was up from 19.0 through six games and was boosted by Styles' TD. That allowed OSU to leap from a tie for 84th to 12th nationally and second in the Big Ten from the previous ranking of 12th.

For punt returns, the Buckeyes dropped to 10.6 for the season after averaging 13.0 in the first six games, and likewise, they fell from 23rd to 40th nationally and to ninth from eighth in the conference.

Inniss was 22nd in the NCAA and fourth in the Big Ten with a 10.6 average for 17 punt returns. Styles had that one return for 36 yards. Curry was credited with no yards on his block, and Jeremiah Smith's only return went for minus-6.

Inniss had five kickoff returns for a 13.2 average. Styles averaged 58.0 on two run backs, and James Peoples gained 20 yards on a kickoff return.

BSB Midterm Grade: C+

BSB Second-Half Grade: A-

BSB Final Grade: B

Football's Title Top Buckeye Story Of 2025

By BOBBY GORBETT

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

Highlighted by the football team's first national championship win in a decade, 2025 was another exciting calendar year for Ohio State sports. In football, the Buckeyes not only reclaimed their place atop the sport but dominated during the 2025 regular season to capture their first 12-0 regular season since 2019.

As part of their dominant regular season, the Buckeyes defeated preseason No. 1 Texas and snapped a four-game losing streak to Michigan. The Buckeyes accomplished all of this despite some reshuffling of the defensive coaching staff, with former defensive coordinator Jim Knowles leaving Columbus for the same position at Penn State. Knowles was replaced by longtime NFL coach Matt Patricia, who in some ways made the Silver Bullets even better.

On the offensive end, the Buckeyes were led by redshirt-freshman quarterback Julian Sayin, who became a Heisman Trophy finalist in his first year as the team's starting quarterback.

After offensive coordinator and play-caller Brian Hartline announced he had accepted the head coaching position at South Florida, Ohio State struggled in the postseason. The Buckeyes capped 2025 with losses to Indiana in the Big Ten Championship Game and to Miami in the Cotton Bowl.

In basketball, the men's team struggled down the stretch of the 2024-25 season and failed to make the NCAA Tournament for the third straight season. Ohio State's season ended after it declined a bid to the Crown tournament.

The women's team, meanwhile, dealt with some chaos in the offseason, when head coach Kevin McGuff was arrested for a DUI charge.

Here are the top 10 stories from 2025, as voted on by the Buckeye Sports Bulletin staff.

1. Ohio State Wins National Championship

After suffering a stunning 13-10 loss to Michigan to end the 2024 regular season, Ohio State's loaded 2021 recruiting class, which included star edge rushers Jack Sawyer and JT Tuimoloau, running back TreVeyon Henderson, wide receiver Emeka Egwu, and many others, was on the brink of leaving Columbus with very little hardware to show for it.

At the end of the 2024 calendar year, the Buckeyes picked themselves off the mat with a dominant 42-17 win over Tennessee in the first round of the College Football Playoff, but they still had a long way to go to become national champions.

In a rematch against Oregon, a team that had defeated them in the regular season, Ohio State dominated in the Rose Bowl 41-21. In the semifinal, Sawyer played the hero at the end of Ohio State's 28-14 win over Texas with an 83-yard game-sealing scoop-and-score to send his team to its first national championship game since 2020.

Behind an impressive effort from junior running back Quinshon Judkins, who ended the game with 100 rushing yards and two



SONNY BROCKWAY

BACK ON TOP — Winning a national title for the first time since 2014, Ohio State rebounded from a stunning loss to Michigan to plow through Tennessee, Oregon, Texas and Notre Dame to claim the College Football Playoff trophy and earn the top story of 2025 distinction from the BSB staff.

touchdowns, Ohio State stormed out to a 31-7 lead over Notre Dame in the national championship game.

The Fighting Irish managed to get back in the game with 16 unanswered points, but a 56-yard reception from then-freshman receiver Jeremiah Smith and a 33-yard field goal by Jayden Fielding sealed the game.

The win represented a huge moment of redemption for head coach Ryan Day, who had been under fire, to say the least, following the loss to the Wolverines, but he was more focused on the legacies of his players after the national championship.

"I just can't say enough about our guys and what they've overcome to get to this point," Day said after the game. "Now they have something to show for it. Now the stories of these guys will be told because they've cemented themselves in Ohio State history — the ninth (overall) national championship and the third in the last 50-some years at Ohio State. Great teams, great players. Only three have been national champs, and these guys are one of them."

2. Ohio State Snaps Losing Streak Against U-M

Picking up where it left off at the end of the 2024 season, Ohio State still had yet to lose in the 2025 calendar year heading into its rivalry matchup. Perhaps the national championship win during the previous season and 11-game winning streak to start the 2025 season worked to take some pressure off the Buckeyes in the 2025 edition of The Game, but there was still plenty at stake for a group of players who had never defeated the Wolverines.

Unlike the previous year, Michigan still

straight drives to lead 17-9 at halftime.

The Buckeyes used an explosive 50-yard TD pass from Sayin to Carnell Tate in the second half, along with a dominant defensive performance, to win the game 27-9, giving Day a much-needed second win over the Wolverines.

"It was, as you can imagine, a great memory of mine being in (the locker room) with those guys, enjoying the win and seeing them smile and knowing what they just did on the field," Day said after the game. "I'll leave what we said in the locker room. I was just happy for our guys, just to see the smiles on their faces and see the sense of accomplishment, the fact that we were going to play in this game really hard, for the love of our brother, not for the hatred of our opponent."

3. Buckeyes Struggle In Postseason

The win over the Wolverines meant the Buckeyes had accomplished two of their three main goals in the calendar year, leaving only the conference championship as an unchecked box. As one of the most dominant teams in the country in the regular season, Ohio State was a favorite headed into its matchup with No. 2 Indiana. However, in their first appearance in the Big Ten title game since 2020, the Buckeyes were not as sharp as they had been all season. Sayin threw an early pick against the Hoosiers in the first quarter that led to points, and the offense, as a whole, struggled to capitalize on drives in the red zone.

The Buckeye defense was strong but allowed Indiana, which won the game 13-10, to convert on 6 of 13 third downs.

Still, the Buckeyes had the chance to capture their second straight national title for the first time in program history with another run in the College Football Playoff. With a bye in the first round, Ohio State

Continued On Page 18

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Men's Basketball Missed NCAA Tournament

Continued From Page 17

was positioned to make that run, but going against Miami's elite defensive line in the Cotton Bowl, Ohio State was outmatched. As they had in the Big Ten Championship Game, the Buckeyes allowed Sayin to be sacked five times. Sayin threw a pick-six in the first half, and Miami jumped out to a 14-0 lead. The Buckeyes cut that deficit to three points but ultimately suffered a season-ending 24-14 loss.

After the game, Ohio State's Heisman Trophy finalist quarterback took ownership of the loss.

"We started executing better in the second half," Sayin said. "But ultimately, it wasn't good enough. We didn't put up enough points. It starts with me, and we've got to be better on offense from an execution standpoint."

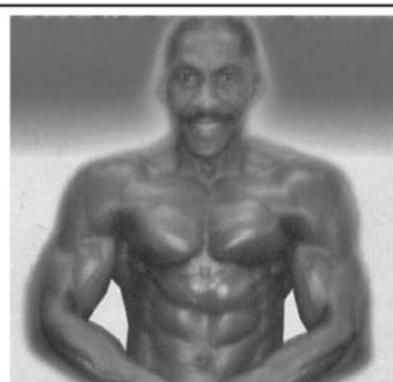
4. Hartline Takes USF Job On Signing Day

The Buckeyes' offense, which struggled mightily in the postseason, certainly wasn't helped by the timing of Hartline accepting his new position at South Florida.

Hartline, who had done an impressive job in his first year as Ohio State's play-caller, accepted USF's head-coaching position on Dec. 3, just three days before the Big Ten Championship Game. After the Buckeyes had issues offensively against the Hoosiers, Day reclaimed play-calling duties.

In some ways, though, the biggest headache for Ohio State was in recruiting. Not only did the timing of Hartline's move complicate preparation for the Big Ten Championship Game, but it also was on the first day of the early signing period, when many recruits officially signed with their respective schools.

With Hartline, a highly respected recruiter of the receiver position, headed to Tampa Bay, Ohio State's receiver recruiting went into a state of flux. Four-star receiver



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Kayden Dixon-Wyatt flipped his commitment to USC, and top-150 recruits Jerquaden Guilford and Chris Henry Jr. delayed their signing before ultimately remaining with the Buckeyes.

"Frankly, I would say last week was the hardest week with just the amount of things that were moving and being pulled away and all these things," Hartline said in his introductory press conference at USF. "Once we get through this week, we have a little bit of time to get back to take a breath, get organized, and then be able to operate a little bit from afar and also be cleaner there. I'm going to feel a lot better moving forward than it was last week."

5. Patricia Hired, OSU Repeats As No. 1 Defense

When Knowles left to take the Penn State job late in January, Ohio State was in a somewhat difficult position in attempting to replace him because many of the potential candidates had already accepted other positions.

Patricia was available, but many fans weren't high on him, in part due to a less-than-stellar tenure as the head coach of the Detroit Lions from 2018-20.

Regardless, Patricia was hired as Ohio State's defensive coordinator on Feb. 20, and that move proved to be the right one. The Buckeye defense was perhaps even better than the 2024 unit that helped win a national championship.

Ohio State finished the 2025 season No. 1 nationally in scoring defense, having allowed only 9.3 points per game. The Buckeyes were also No. 1 in the country in total defense, giving up only 219.1 yards per contest.

The Buckeye defense was littered with star players, including safety Caleb Downs, linebacker Arvell Reese and defensive tackle Kayden McDonald, and Patricia used them masterfully throughout the season.

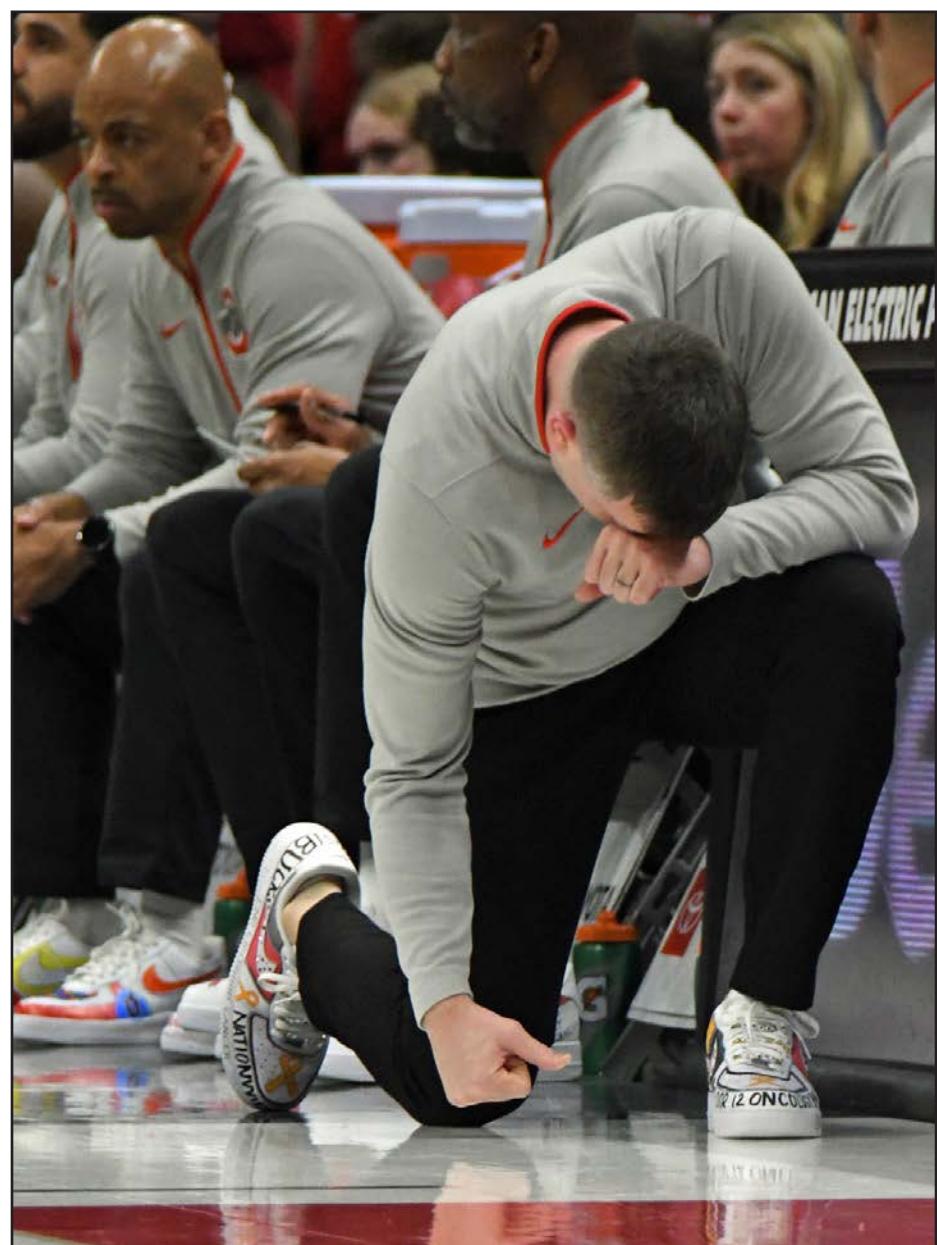
The Silver Bullets' magnum opus may have come in the season opener, when Patricia used disguised coverages to confuse Texas quarterback Arch Manning throughout the game.

Manning finished that game completing just 56.7 percent of his passes with an interception, and Ohio State won 14-7. Afterward, Texas head coach Steve Sarkisian said he was blown away by the defense's disguises.

"They have a very good secondary, and I thought their ability to disguise coverages in the first half was at an elite level – I wouldn't say a good level, on the elite level," Sarkisian said. "That starts with Caleb Downs. He's very savvy. He's very smart. They're able to hold coverages."

6. Knowles Leaves For Penn State

After the 2024 season, it would have been hard to believe the Buckeyes could upgrade at defensive coordinator. Knowles' defense had just allowed an average of 12.9 points per game in 2024, the best mark in the country, and held opposing offenses to just 254.6 yards per game, also the best mark in the country. And against the best teams in the country in the playoffs, Ohio



FILE PHOTO

DOWN AND OUT — There were high expectations for Jake Diebler in his first full season as coach of the men's basketball program, but the Buckeyes struggled to a 17-15 record and failed to make the NCAA Tournament for a third straight season.

State's defense was just as good. The Buckeyes held all four of their playoff opponents to 23 points or fewer.

However, trouble was rumored to be brewing behind the scenes between Knowles and some of the other coaches on staff, and shortly after Ohio State won the national championship, he looked elsewhere for an opportunity.

The native of Philadelphia did not attend Ohio State's national championship celebration in Ohio Stadium on Jan. 26, and on that day, it was reported that he had accepted the same position at Penn State.

"I was asked not to go to the parade, and I respect that," Knowles told ESPN during an April interview. "I'm not trying to be a secretive guy. Here's this offer. There were a couple others that were every bit as much money, and then there was Ohio State's offer, which was still great money, but not as much, so then you have to sit with it."

Knowles did not have nearly the same success at Penn State that he had with the Buckeyes. Penn State finished the season just 7-6, while the defense finished the season No. 25 in total defense. Knowles' unit

certainly didn't live up to expectations, considering Knowles was the highest-paid defensive coordinator in college football.

7. OSU Defeats Texas In Season Opener

As a team ranked No. 3 in the Associated Press' top 25, it's hard to say Ohio State was much of an underdog to open the season, but having to replace 14 NFL draftees, not many predicted it would be as dominant as it ended up being in the regular season.

Many viewed the preseason No. 1-ranked Longhorns as the safer bet to win the season-opening clash in Columbus.

However, pretty early on in their first game, the Buckeyes made it clear that they were a force to be reckoned with.

In his first start, Ohio State kept Sayin on a pretty tight leash. He attempted only 20 passes for a season-low total of 126 yards, but he avoided mistakes, which was important in the low-scoring affair.

The five-star recruit also made the biggest throw of the game when he found Tate for a 40-yard touchdown in the second half.

Still, the defense carried the day in the

THE YEAR IN REVIEW

win. In addition to forcing Manning into a crucial second-half interception, Ohio State made four stops on fourth down. The Longhorns finished the game with 336 yards but couldn't break the Buckeye defense to win the game.

"The story of the game was the defense," Day said immediately after the game. "Matt (Patricia) put a good game plan together, the coaches put a good game plan together. There's a lot that we can build on here. A lot to improve on. The team you see right now will not be the one you see halfway through the season or at the end of the year. But it certainly makes the corrections a lot easier to make after a win like this."

8. Men's Basketball Misses NCAA Tourney

After firing former head coach Chris Holtmann midway through the 2023-24 season, Ohio State athletic director Ross Bjork made it clear that he had high expectations for the basketball program.

Although Holtmann struggled toward the end of his tenure at Ohio State, he still finished his time in Columbus with a solid 137-86 record.

Bjork elevated a former Holtmann assistant, Jake Diebler, to the head coaching position after he led the Buckeyes to an 8-3 finish to the 2023-24 season.

With momentum coming off a strong finish to the previous season and an impressive transfer class that included such talented players as former South Carolina guard Meechie Johnson, former Kentucky

forward Aaron Bradshaw, former Duke forward Sean Stewart and former San Diego State guard Micah Parrish, the Buckeyes were expected by many to make the NCAA Tournament.

However, that didn't happen. Johnson played in just 10 games, leaving the team late in 2024 after dealing with mental health issues, and Bradshaw averaged just 6.0 points per game and Stewart 5.7.

The Buckeyes had a pair of three-game losing streaks during Big Ten play and needed a run in the Big Ten tournament to qualify for March Madness. Instead of winning multiple games in Indianapolis, Ohio State lost to Iowa 77-70 in its first game to finish 17-15 overall and 9-11 in the Big Ten.

After the game, Ohio State's team captain, Bruce Thornton, who scored 24 points on 8-of-13 shooting, felt as though the Buckeyes were simply not connected enough to win the game.

"It definitely hurts. I'm not going to fake my emotions," Thornton said. "But the more connected team won. Iowa had a great game plan. When they made a mistake, they got it right back, so all credit to them. On certain plays, we just could have been better. We just lost to the better team today."

As one of the first four teams to miss the NCAA Tournament, Ohio State had the opportunity to play in the inaugural Crown Tournament, but it declined the bid.

9. Sayin Breaks Out As Heisman Finalist

Ohio State's perfect regular season likely

wouldn't have been possible without Sayin becoming one of the best players in the country in his first year as a starter.

Heading into the season, there was some doubt that Sayin would even win the starting job as he competed with redshirt-sophomore Lincoln Kienholz. The Carlsbad, Calif., native ultimately won the job, and after managing the game against the Longhorns, he broke out as one of the more efficient passers in the country.

Sayin threw three combined interceptions in Ohio State's wins over Grambling State and Ohio, but he established himself as a Heisman candidate with an impressive stretch during the middle of the season.

Over his first five Big Ten games, Sayin completed 81.6 percent of his passes for 1,409 yards, 15 touchdowns and no interceptions.

When star receivers Tate and Jeremiah Smith missed time due to injuries, Sayin's production cooled off slightly, which may have cost him the Heisman Trophy. Still, Sayin went to New York City as one of four finalists for the award and ultimately finished fourth in the voting.

"Julian is a first-year starter in a time where the guys who get invited to New York are multiple-year players, guys who have played a lot of football," Day said of Sayin at the Heisman Trophy ceremony. "This is Julian's first year playing football, and to see the way he's taken this first year, with everything that comes with being the quarterback at Ohio State, and handled it with humility, he's got a lot of football ahead of him. I'm

really proud of him."

10. McGuff Arrested For DUI

It was a chaotic offseason for Ohio State women's basketball, to say the least, in 2025. After a disappointing end to their 2024-25 season, the Buckeyes lost star forward Cotie McMahon to the transfer portal.

But nothing was more surprising than when Ohio State head coach Kevin McGuff was arrested in May and charged with DUI.

The longtime head coach served a suspension, but in an interview with BSB, athletic director Ross Bjork said they didn't consider firing him.

"We spent a lot of time with Coach McGuff making sure that one, he's OK personally, how that's affected the job. Kevin has dealt with it, and we dealt with it head-on. We feel like we're in a good spot with Coach McGuff. He's done a lot of things to work on himself, but also worked with the team. He's back out on the road recruiting.

"There are some accountability measures with everything, but we've dealt with that head-on as well. Coach McGuff has responded really well. He's taken ownership, he's taken accountability, and we just need to move forward and continue the support."

In court, McGuff ultimately pleaded guilty in December to a first-degree misdemeanor charge of physical control of a vehicle while under the influence. His license was suspended for 180 days, and he was sentenced to a fine of \$563.



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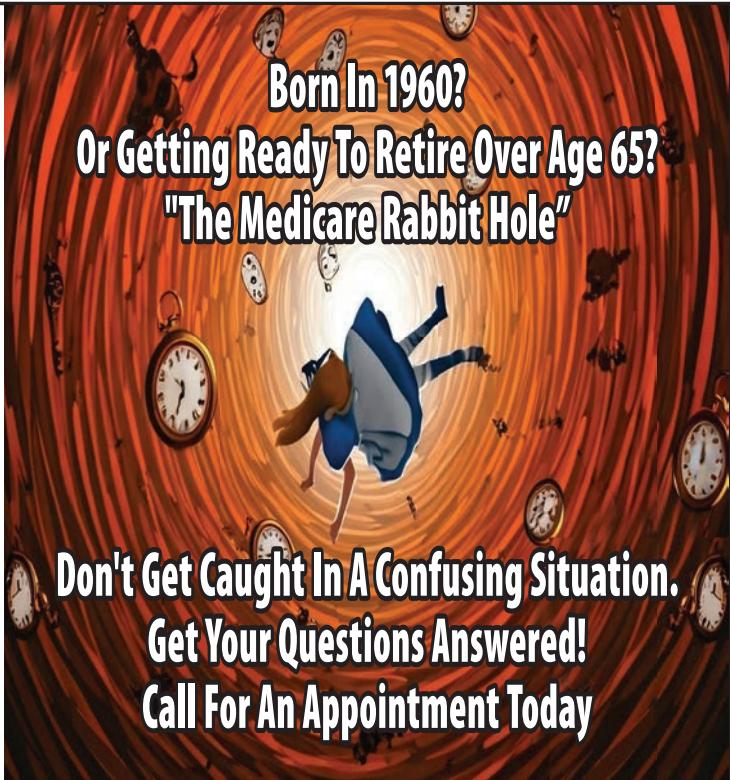
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'01 Outback Bowl Final Blow In Cooper Firing

By SAM CIPRIANI

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

Former Ohio State head coach John Cooper's firing 25 years ago was not the result of a single loss or season, but the culmination of years of rising frustration in Columbus.

Despite 13 years of fielding solid and talented teams, while keeping Ohio State nationally relevant with a 111-43-4 overall record, Cooper always struggled to clear the Buckeyes' two biggest hurdles: beating Michigan and winning a national championship.

At Ohio State, where championships and rivalry wins are a must, patience eventually ran out.

Following an 8-4 season marred by late-season scandals, Cooper's 10th loss to Michigan in 13 years, and a humiliating 24-7 defeat to a middling South Carolina team in the Outback Bowl, Ohio State made the decision to fire its head coach on Jan. 2, 2001, bringing an end to Cooper's 13-year tenure.

Just two years prior to Cooper's firing, in 1998, Ohio State entered the season as the Associated Press' preseason No. 1 team. A single 28-24 upset loss at Ohio Stadium to a 6-6 Michigan State squad, led by legendary coach Nick Saban, ultimately kept the Buckeyes out of the national championship game.

Despite that blemish, Ohio State finished 11-1, defeating No. 11 Michigan and securing a Sugar Bowl victory over No. 8 Texas A&M, which earned Cooper a five-year contract extension that paid him \$1.1 million per year.

While the 1998 season still showcased Cooper's ability to field a top-tier team, it also once again highlighted cracks in his program that, over time, would contribute to mounting criticism of his leadership.

Longtime Columbus Dispatch columnist Rob Oller said the Buckeyes' 1998 loss to the Spartans was a defining moment that led to Cooper's firing, seeing it as a reflection of the head coach's struggles to win both marquee and routine games.

"That 1998 Michigan State loss was an all-timer, maybe one of the more painful losses for Ohio State," Oller said. "I don't know if that was a shock to the system and that did enough to kind of derail things. It sure didn't help."

With the loss to the Spartans and another season that narrowly fell short of championship expectations, Ohio State endured back-to-back disappointing years, posting a 6-6 finish in 1999 followed by an 8-4 record in Cooper's final season.

Longtime Ohio State beat writer Steve Helwagen of 247Sports pointed to roster turnover as a major factor in the program's slide.

"They lost a ton of great players from the 1998 team. It was really a mass exodus of that 1998 team, and they had recruited really well," Helwagen said. "They had the No. 1 class in 1996 and recruited pretty well in '97 and '98. They're thinking the success is just going to continue, and they turned the program over to some younger players. Guys like David Boston and Andy Katzenmoyer left after three seasons. In 1998,

those guys were complete mainstays. That made it a difficult situation."

Ohio State opened the 2000 season 5-0 before a devastating upset in the 'Shoe at the hands of a Minnesota team that finished just 6-6.

Helwagen described the loss as an early signal that Cooper's tenure at Ohio State was beginning to unravel, noting that the defeat was made even more bitter by the fact that it came at the hands of a former Buckeye.

"They played Minnesota for their homecoming game and Glen Mason, who was a former player at Ohio State and coached for Earle Bruce and Woody Hayes," Helwagen said. "He brought his Minnesota team in, and they beat Ohio State pretty handily, 29-17. That was the day that things turned on a dime."

Following the loss to Minnesota, Ohio State limped to the finish line of its season. The Buckeyes went just 3-2 to end the regular season, failing to beat either of the remaining ranked opponents on their schedule (No. 16 Purdue and No. 19 Michigan).

Despite coming into The Game ranked No. 12, Ohio State suffered a 38-26 loss to the Wolverines on Nov. 18, dropping Cooper to 2-10-1 all-time against his archrival, and Ohio State was placed in the Outback Bowl against a 7-4 South Carolina squad led by legendary head coach and one-time Buckeye assistant Lou Holtz.

Even after Ohio State faced yet another defeat to Michigan, Helwagen said athletic director Andy Geiger still showed support for Cooper, adding that it felt as if the program was being propped up by optimism and denial rather than confronting the deeper issues beginning to surface.

"They had a team banquet after they lost to Michigan, and Andy Geiger got up there at the banquet, and he said how happy he was with the culture around the program at that time, sung everybody's praises, and kind of gave everybody the 'This is OK. We know next year, after winning eight games this year, it will be much better,'" Helwagen said. "Well, three weeks later, he's firing the coach because the Outback Bowl and everything around it was just a total disaster."

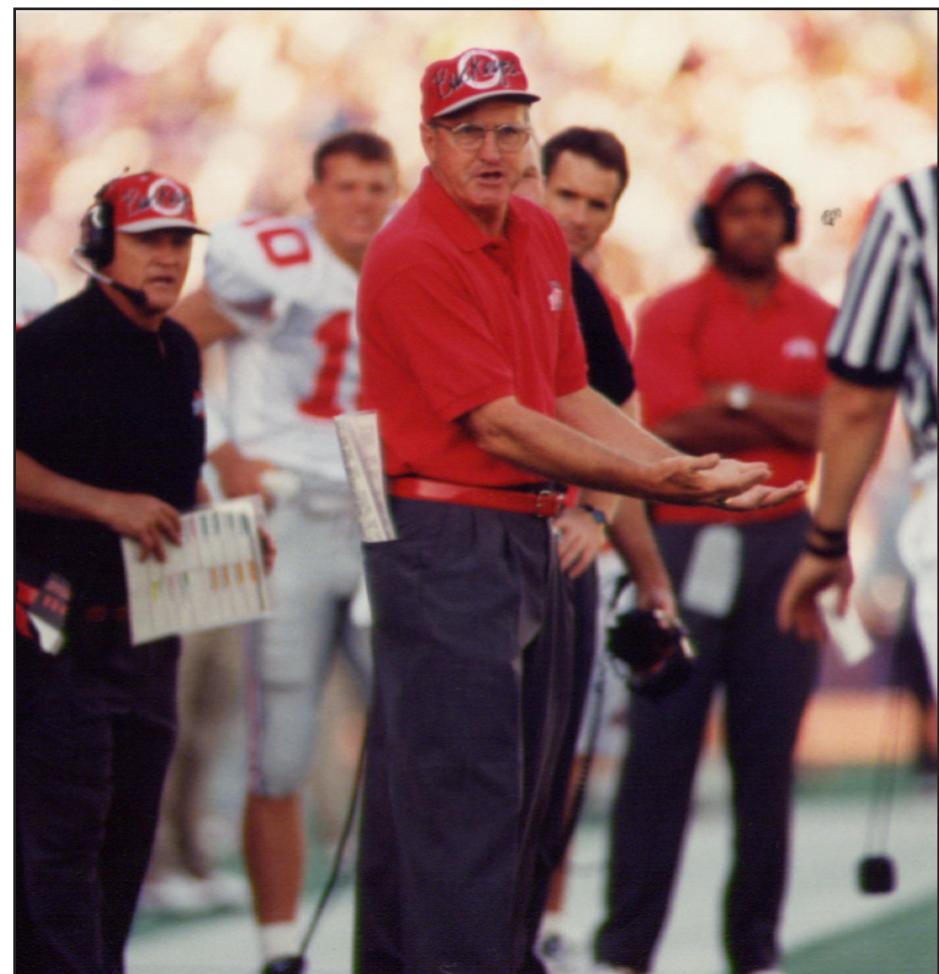
As Helwagen alluded to, in the six weeks leading up to the Outback Bowl, the Buckeyes faced an unprecedented number of off-field distractions.

First, it was announced on Dec. 19 that Ohio State had a whopping 23 players in danger of losing their eligibility in the quarter, including wide receiver Reggie Germany, who infamously earned a 0.0 GPA during the fall academic term and was ultimately suspended by Cooper. The Buckeye football team also had just a 28 percent graduation rate in the 2000 season, which ranked worst in the Big Ten by 13 percent and was just half of the national average.

Matt McCoy of WTVN radio, said the academics controversy signaled a troubling shift for the program.

"The Reggie Germany thing was a big deal," McCoy said. "I can recall on WTVN talk shows at the time that George Lanier was the sports director, and everybody was talking about it. I look at that, though, as the last straw."

To add fuel to the fire, senior wide re-



FILE PHOTO

END OF THE LINE — A humbling 24-7 loss to South Carolina in the 2001 Outback Bowl wasn't the main reason John Cooper was fired, but it was likely the final straw among a series of scandals and poor performances, including a 2-10-1 record against Michigan, which led to his dismissal.

ceiver Ken-Yon Rambo injured his hand playfully roughhousing with teammate and running back Sam Maldonado in the locker room, leading to senior linebacker Matt Wilhelm publicly calling out the captain for his actions.

Finally, the day before the Outback Bowl on Dec. 31, it was revealed that Ohio State offensive linemen LeCharles Bentley and Tyson Walter had been involved in an altercation on Feb. 17, 2000. Following a conditioning workout, Bentley punched Walter in the face, breaking his nose. Walter later sued his teammate, seeking up to \$50,000 in damages stemming from the injury.

"Punches were thrown, and Walter sued LeCharles Bentley," Oller said. "It was settled for \$6,000, but that's not good when that's coming out right ahead of the bowl. Those kinds of things were happening here and there. That one was probably at the top of the list in terms of embarrassment and (Cooper) losing control of the program."

Despite mounting frustration with the direction of the program, many on the Buckeye beat still believed Cooper entered the Outback Bowl with his job intact, even as pressure grew amid off-the-field issues.

Helwagen said he felt Cooper stood on relatively solid footing among those within the program before the various off-field issues leading up to the loss against South Carolina.

"I thought he was safe going into the game," Helwagen said. "Then, as soon as the lawsuit was reported prior to the game,

I thought they'd better go out here and do something positive in this game, or it could get ugly very quickly. Then, they most certainly did not."

McCoy echoed that view, noting that while the off-field scandals ultimately prompted Geiger to fire Cooper, years of on-field struggles, particularly against Michigan and in the postseason, had already eroded his standing at Ohio State.

"I do believe that the icing on the cake was what went on from the end of the season to the bowl game and what happened at the bowl game," McCoy said. "I don't think he was in great standing, even after the regular season, despite what Andy Geiger may have said at the podium at the banquet."

The Outback Bowl itself was just as much of a trainwreck for Ohio State. After a scoreless first quarter, South Carolina scored 10 unanswered points, featuring a touchdown by running back Ryan Brewer.

The Buckeyes looked like they might have shifted momentum with just under four minutes remaining in the third quarter after quarterback Steve Bellisari's 65-yard pass to Rambo set up Ohio State's first and only score. Shortly after, guard Mike Gurr recovered a fumble by Jonathan Wells in the end zone for a touchdown.

However, Brewer quickly ended those hopes and sealed the Gamecock victory with two more scores – a 28-yard pass from quarterback Phil Petty and a 2-yard touchdown rush.

Brewer, who had been Ohio's Mr. Foot-

OHIO STATE FOOTBALL

ball at Troy High School in 1998 and the state's all-time leading rusher in a single season, torched Ohio State with 19 carries for 109 yards as well as three receptions for 92 yards.

In his postgame press conference, Brewer, who won the Outback Bowl's Most Outstanding Player Award, called out Ohio State and Cooper for their failure to recruit him, despite being in-state, spurring further controversy among Buckeye faithful.

Helwagen recalled the loss being so bad that one of Cooper's former players, quarterback Greg Frey (1987-90), openly questioned on a broadcast whether Cooper was truly fit for the job.

"I could remember coming back up to the press box after the game, and Greg Frey, who had played for Cooper from 1987-1990 and was on the postgame show from the press box, and he's saying, 'I think Ohio State has to seriously consider getting rid of him,'" Helwagen said. "That's his college coach. Earle Bruce, the one John Cooper replaced, was sitting right next to him and arguing in Cooper's favor, saying that you can't say that about the coach."

Less than 24 hours later, Geiger officially informed Cooper that Ohio State would be buying out the remaining three years and \$1.8 million dollars on his contract, officially ending his 13-year tenure with the Buckeyes.

In hindsight, Oller felt that while Ohio State didn't need a win for Cooper to keep his job, he couldn't have survived such a devastating loss and remained in the position.

"I don't think he needed a win, but he couldn't have a loss the way it happened.

They just got outplayed. It was a bad loss. Any loss, obviously, is a bad loss, but I think the way it went down just was too much," Oller said. "He'd already shown he really couldn't beat SEC teams in bowl games. Here's another SEC team, a lower-tier squad, that rises up to beat the Buckeyes, and I think that was the final straw."

While the 2000 season marked the end of John Cooper's tenure at Ohio State, it also stood as a reminder and somewhat of an encapsulation of the legacy he left behind.

By that year, Cooper had already built a reputation for struggling against Michigan, and his 38-26 loss that season only added to that narrative – marking his 10th defeat to the Wolverines, second only to Woody Hayes' 11. Hayes was with the Buckeyes for 29 seasons compared to Cooper's 13.

Though Cooper struggled against Michigan throughout his time at Ohio State, Oller noted the Wolverines typically posed a formidable challenge.

"Even Cooper will say 'My record was terrible against Michigan, but we never played a bad Michigan team,' which is entirely true," Oller said. "In 1993, they were beaten 28-0 against an unranked Michigan team. He's right in that (most of) those Michigan teams were ranked. Michigan was ranked in nine of those losses, and three were in the top five."

The Outback Bowl also brought Cooper's postseason record at Ohio State to 3-8.

Although Cooper finished his Ohio State tenure with a 71.5 career winning percentage and was fired at 63, McCoy believes that his struggles against Michigan and in the postseason – despite consistently hav-

ing top-tier talent – as well as the team's late-season off-field problems, likely limited his opportunities to land another head coaching job after leaving the Buckeyes.

"I don't know if it was because he was looked upon as 'Well, you've got all that talent, and can't get over the hump,' or if it was the stuff at the end of the year," McCoy said. "I don't know if there were opportunities for him that he just didn't want to do, but he was certainly young enough to keep it going."

Though his time in Columbus was often overshadowed by high-profile losses and unmet championship expectations, Cooper's impact on the program extended far beyond his record.

Helwagen emphasized many of Cooper's career accomplishments, adding that he played a pivotal role in pushing for Ohio State to increase its recruiting efforts at the national level.

"He was a great recruiter," Helwagen said. "He had some really good teams. He won some really big games. He won a Rose Bowl, beat Notre Dame twice, and beat Texas A&M in the Sugar Bowl," Helwagen said. "It just never turned into a national championship for him, and that's unfortunate because he had national championship-caliber talent, particularly in 1998."

Oller offered a similar perspective, acknowledging the common criticisms against Cooper while emphasizing the head coach's broader contributions to the program.

"His legacy (is he) couldn't beat Michigan and couldn't win the big games," Oller said. "But if you dig a little deeper, if you want to be accurate, he modernized Ohio State football to a certain extent. He fought

for his assistants' pay. He just couldn't believe it when he came in that they had almost the lowest-paid assistants in the Big Ten. If you scratch beneath the surface a little bit, he deserves more credit. Of course, wins and losses and national titles are what it's all about, even more today than probably then, but that would be the credit that he deserves."

When McCoy was asked to describe Cooper's legacy, he summed it up with a single word: "but." While Cooper was generally a successful coach, McCoy felt he would always be remembered for the "buts" or the missed chances that defined his tenure at Ohio State.

"'He's a great coach, but,' is kind of the way that I think of him, because he did a great job, but there's always that end of it," McCoy said. "Even taking away what happened at the end, he's a Hall of Fame coach."

"I am very happy for him that I feel like time has healed wounds with the Ohio State fan base. He stayed in Columbus and loves Columbus, and he is really well accepted and appreciated now, the way he wasn't while he was here, because of what was happening against Michigan. So he's a successful coach who ran a good program, despite what happened at the end and the struggles against Michigan. Unfortunately, they are a big part of his legacy, and that's the way it is at Ohio State. Fans want to know what your record is against Michigan, and his was not good. Everything else was very good, though."

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Hoosiers Win First National Championship

Indiana capped one of the most improbable seasons in modern college football history with a 27-21 win over Miami (Fla.) in the College Football Playoff national championship game at Hard Rock Stadium, in Miami Gardens, Fla., on Jan. 19, delivering the Hoosiers their first-ever national title and completing a perfect 16-0 campaign.

BIG TEN NOTES

Sam Cipriani

Indiana opened the season ranked 20th in the Associated Press top-25 poll but ultimately became the first team since 1996-97 Florida to win its first national championship. The Hoosiers were also the first team in modern college football history to achieve a 16-0 season.

Quarterback Fernando Mendoza, the first Heisman winner in Indiana history, sealed the Hoosiers' championship in his hometown with a decisive touchdown with just over nine minutes left in the game. On the play, he ran for a first down and was hit, spinning free and fully extending across the goal line as he took a shot from the back on a 12-yard run, pushing Indiana ahead 24-14.

In his postgame press conference, Indiana head coach Curt Cignetti framed the moment as a "paradigm shift" in the landscape of college football.

"People can cling to an old way of thinking, categorizing teams as this or that or conferences as this or that, or they can adjust to the new world, the shift in the power dynamic in college football today," Cignetti said.

Since he was hired by Indiana on Nov. 30, 2023, Cignetti has made his mark on college football with an emphasis on the transfer portal and has compiled a whopping 27-2 record over his two seasons with the Hoosiers, the best in the FBS in that span.

The scope of Cignetti's dominance becomes clearer with context.

Indiana managed only 28 wins in the six seasons before he was hired, and in more than a century of football, the Hoosiers have achieved 16 wins over a two-year stretch just twice.

For Hoosier center Pat Coogan, Indiana's title run was fueled by what he called an "irrational" belief, one that united a roster determined to redefine the program.

"There's got to be a lot of like-minded individuals who come together for a common purpose, and sometimes that belief has to be a little bit irrational," Coogan said. "Especially in a place that hasn't had success like Indiana. I've seen it, and I've seen the way this place has been characterized, and when Coach Cig got here, he believed, and he got people to believe. Sometimes people laughed at him and thought he was crazy – but that's an irrational belief. You've got to get people to buy in and believe in the mission."



SONNY BROCKWAY

HOOSIER CHAMPION? – Indiana is the national champion after a mind-boggling rise from the bottom of the college football world to the CFP title with a 27-21 victory over Miami on Jan. 19, capping a 27-2 run under coach Curt Cignetti since his arrival in Bloomington two years ago. The Hoosiers were led this season by Heisman Trophy winner Fernando Mendoza (above).

The win over Miami was the last of a three-game run to win the title after Indiana beat Alabama 38-3 in the Rose Bowl and topped Oregon 56-22 in the Peach Bowl semifinal.

Oregon Makes Major Transfer Moves

Oregon has received commitments from a pair of top transfers in former Minnesota safety Koi Perich and Nebraska quarterback Dylan Raiola.

Perich was the top-ranked safety and No. 11 overall player in the portal according to 247Sports' transfer rankings. During his sophomore season at Minnesota, Perich totaled 82 tackles, one sack, an interception and a forced fumble while also delivering a pivotal moment with a game-winning 27-yard pick-six in the Golden Gophers' 27-20 win over Purdue.

Perich's addition helps offset the loss of defensive back Dillon Thieneman, who is departing for the NFL draft after a standout 2025 campaign that had the junior amass 96 tackles, two interceptions and five pass breakups.

Former five-star quarterback Raiola transferred to Oregon on Jan. 12 after spending two seasons at Nebraska, entering the portal as the No. 15 overall prospect and the No. 5 quarterback in the transfer class.

Just two days later, Ducks starting quarterback Dante Moore, who was viewed by many as a projected top-five NFL draft pick, announced he would return for his third season in Eugene, Ore.

Overall, Oregon added 12 transfers, highlighted by Raiola, Perich and former Ohio State cornerback Aaron Scott Jr., and had the nation's 25th-best portal class as BSB went to press. The Ducks lost 28 players to the portal, including four-star transfer defensive linemen Terrance Green,

Blake Purchase and Tionne Gray.

Oregon's modest portal ranking largely reflects a smaller class size. Big Ten programs are averaging just over 19 portal additions in 2026. Still, the Ducks prioritized quality over quantity, landing two top-15 transfer prospects.

CFP Remains At 12 Teams

The Big Ten and the SEC were unable to come to an agreement about the format of next year's College Football Playoff, and now that the deadline has been reached, the CFP will consist of 12 teams for the 2026 season.

It will be the third year of the 12-team format, the first of which Ohio State made a historic four-game run to win the national championship as the No. 8 seed.

"After ongoing discussion about the 12-team playoff format, the decision was made to continue with the current structure," said CFP executive director Rich Clark on Jan. 23. "This will give the management committee additional time to review the 12-team format, so they can better assess the need for potential change. While they all agree the current format has brought more excitement to college football and has given more schools a real shot in the postseason, another year of evaluation will be helpful."

The two conferences both wanted to expand the playoff but had different ideas of how much. SEC commissioner Greg Sankey wanted the playoff to expand to 16 teams, while it was reported that Big Ten commissioner Tony Petitti was pushing for an expansion to a 24-team playoff after three years of a 16-team playoff, Pete Thamel of ESPN reported.

There are also differences in the way each conference wants automatic bids to the playoff to be distributed. Sankey and the SEC are in favor of five conference champion-

ons being guaranteed bids and the other 11 spots going to at-large selections.

The Big Ten has been pushing to give automatic bids to teams in every Power Four conference, with the Big Ten and SEC getting more automatic bids than the ACC and Big 12.

The two conferences will continue to attempt to come to an agreement moving forward, but any agreement reached would not affect the upcoming college football season. At this point, the earliest expansion would be for the 2027 College Football Playoff.

Although the Big Ten and SEC failed to reach an agreement on playoff expansion, the CFP governing committee implemented multiple changes to the 12-team format. Under the new rules, each Power Four conference champion is guaranteed a spot in the playoff field regardless of its final ranking. Notre Dame is also assured an at-large berth if it finishes inside the top 12 of the final CFP rankings.

The changes come after Duke won the ACC championship with an 8-5 record in 2025 but was excluded from the playoff after failing to crack the top 25, while Notre Dame narrowly missed the field as the first team out at No. 11.

USC Hires Patterson as DC

Former TCU head coach Gary Patterson is returning to the sidelines in 2026 as USC's defensive coordinator, head coach Lincoln Riley announced on Jan. 23.

"We are excited to welcome Gary and his family to USC," said Riley. "As a Hall of Fame coach, who is one of the game's most highly regarded defensive minds, he brings a wealth of success and experience to our program. His impact will be immediate, elevating our defense and strengthening the culture we've built. We're proud to welcome him to the Trojan Family."

Patterson served as TCU's head coach for 21 seasons from 2000-21, finishing his tenure as the program's all-time winningest coach with a 181-79 record. In his time with the Horned Frogs, Patterson helped TCU claim six conference championships in three different conferences – one Conference USA (2002), four Mountain West (2005, 2009-11) and one Big 12 (2014). Prior to his firing from TCU in the middle of the 2021 season, Patterson was the FBS' second-longest tenured active head coach, trailing only Iowa's Kirk Ferentz.

In 2009 and 2014, Patterson was named the Associated Press' Coach of the Year and won the Woody Hayes Trophy, while earning 12-1 records in both seasons.

Patterson guided TCU to five seasons with the nation's top total defense in 2000, 2002 and in three straight seasons from 2008-10.

Most recently, Patterson served as Texas' special assistant to the head coach in 2022 and as a consultant for Baylor in 2024.

Patterson will replace former USC defensive coordinator D'Anton Lynn, who returned to his alma mater, Penn State, to take the same role.

Cronin Criticizes Big Scheduling

Despite UCLA's 69-67 victory over No. 4 Purdue on Jan. 20, Bruins men's basketball head coach Mick Cronin heavily criticized the Big Ten conference for its scheduling in his postgame press conference.

UCLA opened conference play with a challenging slate that featured five of its first seven games on the road, followed by a home matchup against a 17-1 Boilermakers squad.

"I want to thank the Big Ten for giving us five of our first seven on the road, bringing Purdue here on (Jan. 20) when we don't get back in L.A. until (the night of Jan. 17) and giving us the team picked to win the league on two days' rest after five of our first seven on the road," Cronin said. "Really, I want to thank the Big Ten for that."

He continued, suggesting that the conference doesn't prioritize basketball and adding that the scheduling puts West Coast

teams at a disadvantage, forcing them to play multiple early road games and then face top opponents on minimal rest.

"It couldn't be much worse," Cronin said. "A, I don't think they care about basketball – that's just my opinion. B, look, they're not moving the city of Los Angeles, I don't want them to, and they damn sure are not going to move UCLA, and I don't want them to. We're in a league in the Midwest, but you don't have to play five of your first seven on the road and then come home and get the team picked to win the league on two days' rest."

The Bruins ended Purdue's nine-game winning streak on forward Tyler Bilodeau's three-pointer with eight seconds remaining. Bilodeau finished with 14 points on the night. Guard Donovan Dent led UCLA with 23 points, 13 assists and three blocks.

Despite the complaints from Cronin, UCLA has gotten off to a strong start in 2025, particularly in conference play, post-

ing a 13-6 record on the season and a 5-3 record in a tough Big Ten conference featuring four of the nation's top nine teams.

Illini's Boswell Out For A Month

The Illinois basketball team will face a significant setback with senior guard Kylan Boswell expected to miss at least a month due to a right-hand injury sustained during practice on Jan. 19. Illini coach Brad Underwood announced Jan. 20.

Boswell has been a major contributor for the ninth-ranked Illini this season, ranking second on Illinois, averaging 14.3 points, 4.2 rebounds and 3.4 assists in 18 games this season.

The timing of Boswell's absence couldn't be worse for Illinois. After beating No. 4 Purdue without Boswell (88-82) on Jan. 24, the team will face Washington (Jan. 29), Nebraska (Feb. 1), and No. 10 Michigan State (Feb. 7), with all three contests on the road.

Illinois forward David Mirkovic highlighted the impact of Boswell's absence, especially on the team's defense, but added that the Illini view it as a chance to rise together and take on greater responsibility.

"First, obviously, he's our best defensive player," Mirkovic said. "We've got to have better team defense, better team communication and play harder. It's really hard to replace him. He's our most important player. We're going to give our best. We're going to try. Everyone is going to talk more, fight more and that's it."

Underwood noted that replacing Boswell will require more than a single player, suggesting the Illini may rely on multiple contributors to fill the gap left by the 6-2, 205-pound guard. Junior Jake Davis, who is averaging 4.6 points and 1.7 rebounds this season, stepped into Boswell's role during Illinois' 89-70 win over Maryland on Jan. 21, posting 12 points on 4-of-6 shooting from three-point range.

From The Pages Of BSB

40 Years Ago — 1986

A donation of \$1 million was received by Ohio State from Alex and Betty Schoenbaum of Charleston, W.Va.

The couple asked that the money be applied toward the \$45 million athletic department fundraising campaign. Some of the money was to be used to build a \$10.6 million multisports indoor practice facility.

Mr. Schoenbaum was the national chairman for the athletic fundraising campaign. He felt the school had fallen behind and lacked modern facilities.

"I think that maybe Ohio State has gotten behind a little, so maybe we're playing catch-up," said Schoenbaum. "I have seen the facilities of other schools, and I've looked at the facilities at Ohio State. I think they are antiquated."

35 Years Ago — 1991

Sitting in the pilot's seat on a team that was ranked third in the nation by CNN/USA Today and fourth by The Associated Press on the strength of 14 wins without a loss might make some people begin to sweat.

Not Ohio State second-year head coach Randy Ayers.

"Do I feel pressure?" Ayers asked rhetorically. "I felt pressure on that July day I took this job. Seriously, though, I don't think there's any pressure on us."

"It's something we never really talk about as a team. We don't sit back and think about being ranked high or being undefeated. That's not really what this team is all about."

Senior forward Treg Lee agreed.

"Sure, it's nice being undefeated and seeing that we're getting some recognition around the country," he said. "But our goal is to win the Big Ten championship. Ohio State hasn't won a Big Ten championship in basketball for 20 years, and we want to be the ones to do it again."

30 Years Ago — 1996

John Cooper was in no hurry to replace defensive coordinator Bill Young, who had recently taken a similar position at Oklahoma, but the OSU head coach did tip his hand a bit when contacted by BSB.

"If I promote somebody, it would be Fred," Cooper said on Jan. 12, referring to longtime linebackers coach Fred Pagac.

"I'll look at people in the program and those outside it, but I'm not in any urgency to do anything."

Pagac, 43, was unavailable for comment, but it was no secret that he would have liked to be elevated to defensive coordinator. He easily led all OSU coaches in tenure at the school, having logged 18 full years on the Buckeye staff.

When asked if he planned to interview any of his current assistants for the post, Cooper replied, "Don't need to. I know what they can do."

25 Years Ago — 2001

As BSB went to press on the evening of Jan. 15, Ohio State was about to enter its third week without a head football coach.

At that time, there was no indication that an announcement regarding a new coach was imminent. In fact, Ohio State athletic director Andy Geiger told The Associated Press on Jan. 14 that the search for a successor to John Cooper could "last a few more days."

Cooper was fired on Jan. 2, one day after OSU's 24-7 loss to South Carolina in the Outback Bowl.

Since that time, Geiger and associate athletic director Archie Griffin had interviewed at least four candidates – Minnesota head

coach Glen Mason, OSU assistant head coach Fred Pagac, former Buckeye star Chris Spielman and Youngstown State head coach Jim Tressel.

However, as BSB was going to press, it seemed that Oregon head coach Mike Bellotti had surfaced as a serious candidate. Broadcast reports on Jan. 15 had Bellotti touring the OSU campus and the Woody Hayes Athletic Center earlier that day before returning home to Oregon.

20 Years Ago — 2006

After Michigan State's hard-fought 62-59 double-overtime win over Ohio State on Jan. 15, the Spartans talked about toughness and the Buckeyes lamented too many errant shots and possessions that got away.

Where it would leave OSU both in the final Big Ten standings and psychologically, of course, remained to be seen, considering there were 12 league games to go, but it was safe to say that the Buckeyes were going to need to recover pretty quickly.

OSU head coach Thad Matta was charged with picking up the pieces – and in a hurry.

"Just like any win and any loss, you've got to look at it quickly and improve," he said with obvious dejection in his voice. "As I've told these guys all along, we've got to be a better basketball team than we were (against MSU). This isn't a game that makes or breaks our season. We've got to find a way to get back and pick up the spirits."

"You're playing in the best conference in college basketball, so you better get yourself ready to go. In this league, if you dwell on a loss, you're going to get your ass kicked the next night."

15 Years Ago — 2011

His rotation might have been only seven deep, but Matta was using his bench more than he had the season before.

A year prior, Matta's group was nicknamed "The Iron Five" because he seldom removed his starters from games. That group made it to the Sweet 16 before falling to Tennessee.

As the Buckeyes had ascended to the top of the national polls with a 20-0 record in the 2010-11 season, Matta was deploying a different way to utilize his bench that did not necessarily result in a deeper rotation.

Following a Jan. 22 contest at Illinois, the Buckeyes had only two players in the top 15 in the Big Ten in average minutes played per contest. Senior guard Jon Diebler was leading the way at 33.8 minutes per game, which was good for eighth in the Big Ten.

In other words, it was not that Matta was not using his bench. He was simply using it differently.

"We've got a lot of guys who can play a lot of different positions," he said. "That's important to get those guys a little blow in the first half then early on in the second half."

10 Years Ago — 2016

Matta's 12th season in Columbus had been full of firsts.

Ohio State's four-game nonconference losing streak, one that featured home losses to the likes of UT-Arlington and Louisiana Tech, was the longest of Matta's tenure and the program's worst since the 1957-58 season.

Although the Buckeyes rebounded with a win over No. 4 Kentucky, they went on to lose 100-65 to Maryland on the road Jan. 16, the first time an Ohio State team had been beaten that badly in the Matta era.

Perhaps not coincidentally, the 2015-16 Buckeyes – a roster that featured just one scholarship junior, four sophomores and six freshmen – were the youngest team ever fielded by Matta at OSU.

Now the head coach was looking to avoid a second in his career, not wanting to replicate the 2007-08 season – the only time at Ohio State that he had an eligible team fail to make the NCAA Tournament.

"I haven't," Matta said Jan. 20 when asked if he had talked to his team about the postseason. "It's been more just in terms of us and what we have to do better to play better. That's really been the entire focus with this team, just trying to find and point out and teach and coach, all those things that allow these guys to understand the process a little bit better and understand what it takes mentally to play at this level."

Five Years Ago — 2021

When the Ohio State men's basketball team dropped a 77-60 loss at Minnesota on Jan. 3, many doubters became vocal about the team's inefficiencies despite early-season wins over Notre Dame, UCLA and Rutgers.

Chris Holtmann's squad responded with three straight impressive Big Ten wins, an 11-point win at Rutgers, a 10-point victory over Northwestern and a six-point win at Illinois – all without starting point guard C.J. Walker.

After beating the Wildcats by double digits Jan. 13 to avenge a crushing 71-70 loss on Dec. 26, Holtmann was asked if he had expected so much early success for his group.

"I try to stay away from big-picture view in the middle of the season," Holtmann said. "The biggest reason is I don't ever want to fall prey to being a prisoner of the moment. And I think after games, we can be emotional one way or another and make statements that are too emotional."

"The reality is we've improved, we've grown, we've gotten better," Holtmann continued. "As I've said from the very beginning, I really enjoy coaching this group. But we've got a lot of progress that we need to make to play in the best league in the country. That's all our focus is on is how can we – as simple as it sounds – how can we take from this, work on film tomorrow."

One Year Ago — 2025

The story could be told now.

For nearly two months since the inexplicable 13-10 loss to Michigan on Nov. 30, the narrative for Ohio State had been one of redemption, and for three College Football Playoff games in the newly expanded field of 12, the Buckeyes did their job by routing Tennessee, racing past Oregon and overpowering Texas.

But it would have all been for naught without one more victory.

Consider the job (well) done.

Quinshon Judkins had two rushing touchdowns and one receiving score when No. 8 Ohio State held off No. 7 Notre Dame 34-23 in the CFP Championship Game at Mercedes-Benz Stadium in Atlanta on Jan. 20 for the Buckeyes' seventh national title and first since the inaugural CFP 10 years prior.

Notre Dame (14-2) used 18 plays on the first possession of the game for a 7-0 lead, but the Buckeyes (14-2) got touchdown catches from Jeremiah Smith and Judkins and a Judkins run for a 21-7 halftime lead before another Judkins TD on the ground and a 46-yard field goal by Jayden Fielding helped OSU to a 31-7 lead.

It was 31-23 when Smith made a 56-yard, third-down catch with 2:29 left to set up a Fielding field goal with 26 seconds left to seal the win to the delight of the Buckeye faithful among 77,660 in attendance.

Ohio State Adds Defenders Through Portal

Ohio State continued its active offseason in the transfer portal since BSB last went to press, adding four more players on the defensive side of the ball.

RECRUITING OUTLOOK

Greg Wilson

Three of the transfer commits come to Ohio State from the Alabama roster that finished No. 9 in the final College Football Playoff rankings and made it to the Rose Bowl, where it lost to Indiana.

Defensive tackle James Smith and edge rusher Qua Russaw were the first two to commit to the Buckeyes, doing so on the same day.

Smith joins as the No. 1 defensive tackle in the transfer portal. He brings just one more year of eligibility to Columbus, a trend among the many transfers the Buckeyes brought into the program.

Smith and Russaw visited the Ohio State campus together before they pledged and seemed to come as a package. With the Buckeyes losing Caden Curry, Kayden McDonald, Tywone Malone, and a few depth pieces in the front four, they were very willing to take both in.

With McDonald gone, Smith will likely be a major competitor to fill his role at nose guard, but he could also compete for the starting three-tech spot with Edrick Houston.

In his three-year career with Alabama, Smith played in 37 games, 12 of which he started. He totaled 50 tackles, 10 tackles for loss, 3½ sacks, three passes broken up and a fumble recovery. In his junior season with the Crimson Tide, he had his best year yet with 28 tackles, 6½ for loss and 2½ sacks.

Russaw comes to Columbus with two seasons of eligibility remaining. He was rated by 247Sports as a four-star prospect in the portal, the No. 48 player overall and the No. 9 defensive end when he

committed to the Buckeyes.

Russaw didn't play as much in the 2025 season with the Crimson Tide as he did the year before due to a foot injury he suffered in the fourth game of the year that forced him to sit out seven weeks. He finished the year with 14 tackles and one sack.

But the year before is when he made a name for himself on the Alabama defense. He had 36 tackles, 2½ tackles for loss, one sack and two interceptions while playing a hybrid defensive end/linebacker position.

It is possible that Russaw, a former five-star prospect, has not yet reached his potential at the collegiate level, and he has the chance to do so with the Buckeyes under defensive coordinator Matt Patricia now that Russaw will be healthy again.

He joins Kenyatta Jackson Jr., Zion Grady, Beau Atkinson and Epi Sitanilei on the edge, as well as incoming freshmen Khary Wilder, Dre Quinn and Darryus McKinley.

The Buckeyes also added former Alabama cornerback Cam Calhoun through the transfer portal. Alabama wasn't the first stop for Calhoun, however. Out of high school in the 2023 class, Calhoun committed to Michigan. He pledged to the Wolverines on Nov. 26, 2022, the day that they beat Ohio State in Ohio Stadium, when he was on a visit to Columbus.

But Calhoun lasted just one season with Michigan and transferred to Utah for 2024, where he had his best season in 11 games. He had 21 tackles that year, one for loss, an interception and nine pass breakups, which was a team high.

But that production fell off with the Crimson Tide in the 2025 season when he failed to get into a consistent rotation in the secondary, with much of his time coming on special teams.

With Jermaine Mathews Jr. and Devin Sanchez returning next season for the Buckeyes, it's unlikely that Calhoun will be able to take one of the starting spots with Ohio State, but he will be a candidate to rotate in at those spots.

OSU Football 2026 Commitments

Player(s) in the class of 2026 who have signed letters of intent to play football at Ohio State.

Player	Pos.	Ht.	Wt.	Stars	High School
Favour Akih	RB	6-0	190	★★★★	Delaware (Ohio) Rutherford B. Hayes
Legend Bey	ATH	5-10	175	★★★★	North Forney, Texas
Khmari Bing	S	6-0	190	★★★	Baltimore St. Frances Academy
Brock Boyd	WR	6-2	183	★★★	Southlake (Texas) Carroll
Blaine Bradford	S	6-1	207	★★★★	Baton Rouge (La.) Catholic
Landry Brede	OT	6-5	280	★★★	Mentor, Ohio
Simeon Caldwell	S	6-3	185	★★★★	Jacksonville (Fla.) The Bolles School
Luke Fahey	QB	6-0	185	★★★	Mission Viejo, Calif
Kaden Gebhardt	S	6-2	200	★★★★	Lewis Center (Ohio) Olentangy
Sam Greer	OT	6-7	310	★★★★	Akron Hoban
Jerquaden Guilford	WR	6-3	190	★★★★	Fort Wayne (Ind.) Northrop
Chris Henry Jr.	WR	6-5	205	★★★★★	Santa Ana (Calif.) Mater Dei
Cincere Johnson	LB	6-3	225	★★★★	Cleveland Glenville
Nick Lautar	TE	6-5	230	★★★	Lebanon, Ohio
Darryus McKinley	DL	6-3	270	★★★	Lafayette (La.) Acadiana
Jamir Perez	DL	6-4	360	★★★	Cleveland Glenville
Cooper Peterson	K	6-0	195	NA	Charlotte (N.C.) Corvian Community School
Dre Quinn	DL	6-4	228	★★★★	Buford, Ga
Braxton Rembert	LB	6-5	200	★★★★	Hoschton (Ga.) Mill Creek
Jaeden Ricketts	WR	6-0	187	★★★★	Pataskala (Ohio) Watkins Memorial
Maxwell Riley	OT	6-5	280	★★★★	Avon Lake, Ohio
Emanuel Ruffin	DL	6-4	295	★★★★	Bessemer (Ala.) City
CJ Sanna	LB	6-3	225	★★★★	Lewis Center (Ohio) Olentangy
Damari Simeon	DL	6-3	275	★★★★	Richland (N.J.) St. Augustine Prep
Tucker Smith	OL	6-5	280	★★★	Glendale (Ariz.) Sandra Day O'Connor
Jordan Thomas	CB	6-1	185	★★★★	Oradell (N.J.) Bergen Catholic
Jay Timmons	CB	5-11	185	★★★★	Gibsonia (Pa.) Pine-Richland
Khary Wilder	DE	6-4	260	★★★★	Gardena (Calif.) Junipero Serra
Mason Wilhelm	OL	6-4	285	★★★	Lakewood (Ohio) St. Edward

This will actually be a reunion for Mathews and Calhoun, who were teammates at Winton Woods High School in Cincinnati.

Ohio State also added another cornerback through the portal shortly after Calhoun committed. Former Georgia CB Dominick Kelly pledged to the Buckeyes hours after Calhoun did so. Kelly is the youngest transfer the Buckeyes brought in this offseason so far as a member of the 2025 recruiting class, and he brings three more years of eligibility to Columbus.

With the Bulldogs as a freshman, Kelly recorded three tackles and three pass breakups in just 61 defensive snaps. He also allowed three catches for 73 yards and a touchdown on seven targets.

The new defensive additions join for-

mer Florida State safety Early Little Jr., former Duke safety Terry Moore, former Wisconsin linebacker Christian Alliegro and former UCF defensive tackle John Walker, who also signed with the Buckeyes through the portal this offseason.

Bucks Add To Offense

Ohio State also made additions on the other side of the ball since BSB last went to press, the first of which was former Northwestern tight end Hunter Welcing, who comes to Ohio State with just one year of eligibility remaining after having spent six seasons with the Wildcats.

He didn't play much for Northwestern in his first five seasons due to multiple injuries, but he was able to turn in an All-Big Ten season in 2025, catching

ASK AN ANALYST

With Allen Trieu of 247Sports

Brian Hartline was considered one of the best position coaches in the country when it came to recruiting. How do you think Cortez Hankton will do in his place as the new WR coach at Ohio State?

"Brian Hartline is obviously very hard to replace, but Cortez Hankton is a very good recruiter. That is a position where Ohio State had to aim high for the next coach, and I see Hankton as an ideal choice. He has recruited the best in the country, and recruits have spoken highly of him. He inherits a lot of tradition and recent success, and I think he has the personality and recruiting prowess to capitalize on that. I expect Ohio State wide receiver recruiting to continue to be competitive for the best in the country."

Ohio State has been more active in the portal this offseason. Do you believe this is a one-year thing, or is it the

start of a trend?

"Everyone has to be more active in the portal. To be honest, I was surprised Ohio State suffered some of the defections they did, so it led to them having to fill some of those spots. A lot of schools run into this, though, where they are filling out depth through the portal. It is probably a trend in all of college football, and Ohio State is not immune to it. I think ideally you'd keep guys in the program and develop them, but I don't know how realistic that is anymore. It is not limited to Ohio State."

What do you make of the portal class the Buckeyes have been able to bring in?

"The portal class was a good mix of guys who I think can come in and be impact players. The defense got a nice boost, especially up front with guys like James Smith and Qua Russaw, and in the secondary with Earl Little Jr. and Terry Moore."

It is a nice influx of talented, experienced players at positions of need."

As Ohio State transitions to the 2027 class, which prospects do you believe they should prioritize most heavily this cycle?

"At Ohio State, I think now with as much talent as they bring in yearly and the portal, there are rarely glaring needs you need high school kids for. They already have nine commits, too. I think you want as many big guys on both fronts as you can get, especially the defensive line. The first class with Cortez Hankton as receivers coach, you want to have a good class there just to prove that nothing's changed. I also see running back as a position that they would need to try to get a top national guy."

OSU Football 2027 Commitments

Player(s) in the class of 2027 who have issued a verbal commitment to play football at Ohio State.

Player	Pos.	Ht.	Wt.	Stars	High School
Jamier Brown	WR	5-11	170	★★★★★	Huber Heights (Ohio) Wayne
Quinton Cypher	LB	6-2	220	★★★★	Raleigh (N.C.) Millbrook
Brady Edmunds	QB	6-5	215	★★★★	Huntington Beach, Calif.
DJ Jacobs	DL	6-5	225	★★★★★	Roswell (Ga.) Blessed Trinity
Eli Johnson	S	6-3	200	★★★★	Cibolo (Texas) Steele
Brody McNeel	OT	6-5	285	★★★★	Richmond (Va.) Godwin
Angelo Smith	S	5-10	170	★★★	Hollywood (Fla.) Chaminade-Madonna
Mason Wilt	OT	6-5	265	★★★	St. Clairsville, Ohio
Kellen Wymer	OT	6-5	265	★★★★	Liberty Center, Ohio

OSU Football 2028 Commitments

Player(s) in the class of 2028 who have issued a verbal commitment to play football at Ohio State.

Player	Pos.	Ht.	Wt.	Stars	High School
Elijah Newman-Hall	RB	5-11	195	★★★★	Tampa (Fla.) Blake
Jameer Whyce	DL	6-4	270	★★★★★	Trotwood (Ohio) Trotwood-Madison

28 passes for 296 yards and two touchdowns. That season earned him all-conference honorable mention.

He's the second tight end who signed with Ohio State through the portal, joining former Ohio tight end Mason Williams. With Will Kacmarek out of eligibility, Max Klare declaring for the draft and Jelani Thurman entering the transfer portal, the Buckeyes needed to replenish their depth at the position and seem to have been successful in doing so.

Ohio State also added depth at the quarterback position after Lincoln Kienholz entered the transfer portal and com-

mitted to Louisville. Former Maryland quarterback Justyn Martin signed with the Buckeyes. He spent three seasons at UCLA first, making just one start with the Bruins in that time and throwing for 167 yards and one touchdown in the game.

Martin was in a quarterback battle with the Terrapins last season, but he was injured in the first game of the season and didn't get to play again for the rest of the year. While Julian Sayin will still be the starter for the Buckeyes, Martin joins Tavien St. Clair and incoming freshman Luke Fahey in the room to provide depth behind the Heisman Trophy

candidate.

Martin currently has just one year of eligibility remaining, but when he committed to Ohio State, he told Eleven Warriors that he expected to receive an extra year since he is eligible to apply for a medical hardship waiver after last season.

The Buckeyes added to their depth in the backfield with another seventh-year player in running back Ja'Kobi Jackson, who transferred from Florida.

A member of the 2020 recruiting class like Welcing, Jackson started his college career at Coahoma Community College and ran for 1,390 yards and 14 touchdowns over three seasons before he joined the Gators. He redshirted his first season with Florida, and in the 2024 season, he ran for 509 yards and seven touchdowns. In 2025, he had only 27 carries before suffering a season-ending upper-body injury.

Jackson joins Bo Jackson and Isaiah West in the backfield, both of whom contributed last season and return to Ohio State. CJ Donaldson Jr. ran out of eligibility and James Peoples transferred to Penn State, so the Buckeyes adding to their depth in the running back room with an experienced player is no surprise. They also add incoming freshmen Favour Akih and Legend Bey to the room.

Ohio State added another skill position player, with former LSU wide receiver Kyle Parker joining the Buckeyes through the portal. Parker comes to Ohio

State following his wide receivers coach, Cortez Hankton, who was with the Tigers last season on Brian Kelly's staff and was hired by the Buckeyes after Brian Hartline accepted the head coach position at South Florida.

Parker has two years of eligibility remaining after redshirting as a freshman in 2023 and tearing a tendon in his arm the next year after playing in just four games. He broke out in 2025 when he was finally able to remain healthy and finished the year with 31 catches for 330 yards and four touchdowns.

Ohio State returns Jeremiah Smith and Brandon Inniss from last year's contributors, but Bryson Rodgers, Mylan Graham and Quincy Porter all transferred out of Columbus this offseason and Carnell Tate declared for the draft, so the Buckeyes needed to add to the depth in the room.

The new additions join Williams and former UTSA wide receiver Devin McCuin as transfers who have joined the Buckeyes on the offensive side of the ball in January.

OSU Gets Special Teams Reinforcements

The Buckeyes were also active when it came to replenishing special teams as well.

Jayden Fielding had no more eligibility remaining, and Jackson Courville, who

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OHIO STATE FOOTBALL RECRUITING

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transferred to Ohio State from Ball State last season, transferred away from the Buckeyes and joined Tulane in January.

Because of that, the Buckeyes had nobody to take the role of placekicker until they went into the portal and got a commitment from former Baylor kicker Connor Hawkins.

Hawkins will be a sophomore for the 2026 season after going 18 for 22 on field goals with the Bears last year. His longest made kick was from 54 yards, which is 5 yards longer than Fielding's long of 49 that he made during the 2025 season.

But Hawkins has also shown the ability to make long kicks consistently, going 3 of 4 on kicks from 50 yards or longer last year with Baylor and 5 of 8 on kicks from 40 yards or further.

The last Buckeye kicker to make a field goal from 50 yards out or more was Blake Haubiel, who did so against Northwestern during the 2019 season.

Ohio State added a punter to the roster as well, with former Houston Christian punter Brady Young pledging to the

Buckeyes for his sixth year of college football, bringing one year of eligibility.

Young started his college career with Cincinnati in 2021 and redshirted that year. He had four seasons with the Bearcats but never got into a game, transferring to Houston Christian for his fifth year.

With the FCS Huskies, Young finally got his opportunity to start and averaged 41.8 yards per punt on 69 tries, with 17 of those downed inside the 20-yard line. He also has 12 boots that traveled 50 yards or more and even had one punt that went 66 yards, doing so on Sept. 20 in a game against Northern Colorado.

Young will be able to compete with returning starter Joe McGuire for the position after Nick McLarty transferred away from Ohio State. McGuire averaged 42.4 yards per punt this year and had a long of 55 yards.

Hawkins and Young join former UCF long snapper Dalton Riggs as special teams additions to the Buckeye roster through the portal this offseason.

'26 Kicker Commits To Ohio State

The additions to the special teams didn't end with Hawkins and Young, however. The Buckeyes earned a commitment from Charlotte (N.C.) Corvian Community School kicker Cooper Peterson on Jan. 23.

Peterson is unranked by 247Sports but had a strong senior season in high school, making 8 of 9 kicks with a long of 49 yards. On kickoffs, he had 57 touchbacks in 68 tries and also punted for his team, averaging 47.3 yards per boot.

He visited for the Buckeyes' Week 3 win over Ohio University during the 2025 season and told 247Sports at the time that if Ohio State offered him, it would be a tough offer to turn down.

According to 247Sports, Peterson had just one more Division I offer that came from Michigan State.

OSU Makes More Offers

• **Alabaster (Ala.) Thompson safety Junior James (6-3, 192)** – The Buckeyes

extended an offer to James, an unranked 2027 prospect, since BSB last went to press. James holds 18 Division I offers, a list that includes Alabama, Auburn, Florida, Georgia, Ole Miss, Oregon, Texas, Texas A&M and Vanderbilt. Many of his offers from Power Four schools have come early in 2026, so while James is currently unranked, he could be making a rise soon.

• **Winder (Ga.) Winder-Barrow five-star safety Giovanni Tuggle (6-0, 175)**

– A 2028 prospect, Tuggle is the No. 10 player in his class and the top-rated safety, according to 247Sports composite rankings. He is also considered the top player in the state of Georgia. He holds 17 Division I offers, a list that includes Alabama, Auburn, Georgia, Oklahoma, Oregon, Texas and Texas A&M, among others. As a freshman in 2024, Tuggle had 39 tackles and six interceptions in eight games at the varsity level, according to 247Sports. Tuggle also plays basketball and competes in track and field.

A Look Back At Recruiting From The Pages Of BSB

40 Years Ago — 1986

"I just always loved Ohio State."

With that, Matt Closson, a 6-2, 220-pound senior at Delphos (Ohio) Jefferson High School, announced that he had made a verbal commitment to Ohio State University to continue both his education and football career.

The announcement ended the recruiting derby for Closson, the Associated Press Ohio Class A Lineman of the Year, who would finalize the commitment when he signed a national letter of intent on Feb. 12.

"I thought it would be great to play there," said Closson, a linebacker/fullback in high school. "When I went down there, that made up my mind."

Ohio State recruited Closson to play either of his prep positions. He said he didn't have a preference for offense or defense but wanted to take the route that would get him into the starting lineup the fastest.

35 Years Ago — 1991

Ohio State's 1991 recruiting class continued to grow when the Buckeyes grabbed commitments from four more prep stars. And the class was set to increase by leaps and bounds in the coming weeks as the Feb. 6 national signing date edged closer.

Issuing verbal commitments to the Buckeyes were quarterback Bob Hoying of St. Henry, Ohio, offensive lineman Greg Kuszmaul of Warren (Ohio) Kennedy, linebacker Craig Powell of Youngstown (Ohio) Rayen, and defensive back Marlon Kerner of Columbus Brookhaven.

That brought the total number of OSU recruits in the class to five. Tight end Kevin Niekamp of St. Henry, Ohio, had committed to the Buckeyes the month before.

30 Years Ago — 1996

Two of central Ohio's most sought-after recruiting prospects were featured on a special edition of Kirk Herbstreit's "Sports Line" radio show on Jan. 10.

Dublin (Ohio) Scioto tailback Nick Goings and Columbus DeSales tailback/safety Gary Berry joined the former OSU quarterback for about 1½ hours, fielding calls on a wide range of topics.

Naturally, the main topic of conversation was where the two stars would be headed to play college football.

Goings told listeners that Ohio State was in the lead. He went to visit Michigan State on Jan. 12 and had a trip to Florida set up for the weekend of Jan. 19.

"I liked Michigan State a lot, but Ohio State is still in front," Goings told BSB after returning from MSU.

Meanwhile, Berry said OSU held a slight lead over Penn State. That was prior to his Jan. 12 visit to Michigan. He did not commit to Michigan during that visit. He still had a trip to Florida set for Jan. 19 and was thinking about a trip to USC.

25 Years Ago — 2001

The delay in hiring a successor for OSU head football coach John Cooper was crippling the school's recruiting effort for 2001.

As of Jan. 2, the day Cooper was fired, OSU had 13 verbal commitments. The Buckeyes added a 14th over the weekend of Jan.

5, when Cincinnati Moeller tight end Ryan Hamby, who had been favoring OSU, committed.

But the class had since dropped to 12 after it was discovered that OSU would not be able to enroll Dayton Chaminade-Julienne defensive lineman Brandon McKinney due to academic deficiencies and Ypsilanti, Mich., defensive back Jacob Stewart had de-committed and instead opted to verbal to nearby Michigan.

Despite the firing, OSU hosted 11 players for visits over the weekend of Jan. 5-7. The school had several others scheduled for the weekend of Jan. 12-14, but all of those players canceled when a new coach was not hired in time to greet them.

20 Years Ago — 2006

Upon returning from his official visit to OSU the first weekend in January, Walter Dublin initially expressed his intentions to take one more visit before reaching a final decision.

But a day's worth of contemplation led him to the realization that no further searching was necessary. On Jan. 10, the defensive end from Sarasota, Fla., called Jim Tressel and let the head coach know that he wanted to be a Buckeye.

It was fitting that Tressel was the one who accepted Dublin's commitment since the head coach was the primary reason the defensive prospect wanted to wear scarlet and gray.

"The big factor in my decision was Coach Tressel," Dublin told BSB. "Meeting with Coach Tressel – he is by far the most knowledgeable and most respectable head coach I've met so far. He puts the players first before anything. Aside from winning championships, he wants what's in the best interest of the players on and off the field, and I really like that."

15 Years Ago — 2011

When it came time for Tressel to send out thank you cards to those who helped assemble his 2011 recruiting class, he might have wanted to include Urban Meyer.

With a little more than a week remaining until the Feb. 2 National Signing Day, the Ohio State head coach found himself putting the finishing touches on a class that was set to finish among the top five in the nation. As Tressel had done so, he had been among the top beneficiaries of Meyer's sudden resignation from the head position at Florida.

The Buckeyes had already landed one former Gator verbal commitment in four-star linebacker Ryan Shazier from Plantation, Fla., and they were in the running for another Gator commitment as well as a third player who was considering Florida.

The Buckeyes were considered the odds-on favorites to land the nation's top outside linebacker prospect in Curtis Grant from Richmond (Va.) Heritage. They also had just completed hosting Florida commit JaJuan Story for an official visit the weekend of Jan. 21, and the four-star wide receiver from Brooksville (Fla.) Nature Coast Tech was set to make his decision between either Ohio State or Florida.

10 Years Ago — 2016

Ohio State once again landed SouthComm's top-ranked player in the state, but for the first time since 2009, the Buckeye State's best came from somewhere other than the southwest corner of

the state.

At No. 35 overall, Gahanna Lincoln four-star defensive end Jonathon Cooper was Ohio's most highly rated prospect. It ended a streak of six southwest Ohioans who had finished atop the list, a group that included Cincinnati Anderson offensive tackle Andrew Norwell (2010), Huber Heights Wayne quarterback Braxton Miller (2011), Cincinnati Taft defensive end Adolphus Washington (2012), Middletown wide receiver Jalin Marshall (2013), Cincinnati Moeller linebacker Sam Hubbard (2014) and Cincinnati St. Xavier linebacker Justin Hilliard (2015).

It was nearly seven in a row for southwest Ohio, but Cooper edged out Cincinnati Elder four-star offensive tackle Tommy Kramer, a Notre Dame commit, by two spots in the national rankings.

Five Years Ago — 2021

Although USC was believed to be the favorite in his recruitment, the odds that the Buckeyes landed a commitment from Santa Ana (Calif.) Mater Dei four-star linebacker Raesjon Davis had gone up considerably after he took an unofficial visit to Ohio State over the weekend of Jan. 22-24.

Davis – who was considered the fourth-best outside linebacker and No. 45 prospect overall in the class of 2021 – made the trip with his parents and uncle. It was his second time on campus, although his first visit was just a quick two-hour look around the facilities as part of a nationwide bus tour with his 7-on-7 team back in March.

Although Davis and his family were unable to meet with Ohio State's coaching staff due to the ongoing recruiting dead period, head coach Ryan Day and linebackers coach Al Washington gave them an itinerary of things to do and see around Columbus. They also got to spend time with some of the early enrollees, thanks to a well-timed move-in, and Jaylen Johnson, whom Day once referred to as the glue that kept the 2021 class together, made the trip up from Cincinnati just to hang out with Davis.

One Year Ago — 2025

The 2026 offensive line class in the state of Ohio was a good one, with the Buckeyes in on at least four prospects in-state. One of those was Avon Lake four-star offensive tackle Maxwell Riley, who had played both left and right tackle at his high school, although he made the switch to mainly stay on the left side during the 2024 season.

Riley announced his top seven in June of 2024, with Ohio State, Alabama, Clemson, Florida State, Michigan State, Missouri and Oklahoma being included. Ohio State and Clemson seemed to be the top two choices at the time.

"It's still those seven," Riley said in early January. "I've been to all of them. I might get back to Ohio State and Clemson, but that's about it. I'm leaning towards (picking) one of those two schools."

He said that he would like to make his decision in January or February, although he didn't give an exact date. But he did say that he was getting along with Ohio State offensive line coach Justin Frye and that the Buckeyes' offensive line improvement in the College Football Playoff had improved their chances of landing his commitment.

Several Buckeyes Will Have Super Game

By CRAIG MERZ

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

There were 23 former Ohio State players (three were inactive) on the rosters of playoff-bound NFL teams, so chances were good that the Buckeyes would be represented in Super Bowl LX in Santa Clara, Calif., on Feb. 8.

As teams were eliminated and matchups were formed, it became a reality as each of the participants in the conference championship games on Jan. 25 had at least one Buckeye player (nine in total), not to mention first-year New England Patriots coach Mike Vrabel.

In the AFC, the Denver Broncos, with linebacker Jonathon Cooper playing a prominent role, hosted the Patriots with rookie running back TreVeyon Henderson and offensive linemen Thayer Munford Jr.

The Broncos also had safety Tanner McCalister on the practice squad and injured starting running back J.K. Dobbins, who suffered a foot injury in November and missed the final seven games of the regular season and the divisional win over the Buffalo Bills. He participated in three "limited practices" leading up to the conference final, but he was ruled out on Jan. 23.

In 10 games, Dobbins ran for 772 yards with four touchdowns.

In the NFC, the Los Angeles Rams played at Seattle with defensive lineman Ty Hamilton, long snapper Jake McQuaide and tight end Nick Vannett, who was signed off the Minnesota Vikings' practice squad roster in November.

The Seahawks featured third-year Jaxon Smith-Njigba, a finalist for the league's top offensive player.

Hawks vs. Pats

Smith-Njigba showed why with a monster game to help the Seahawks down the Rams 31-27 to reach the Super Bowl.

He made 10 catches off 12 targets for 153 yards with a long of 42, with a 14-yard touchdown reception for a 17-13 halftime lead.

In the first half, he made seven catches for 115 yards.

In the AFC, the Patriots defeated the Broncos 10-7 with Henderson rushing three times for 5 yards with a long of 4.

Getting There

A quick recap of how the teams advanced with their Buckeyes.

The Broncos defeated the Bills 33-30 in overtime on Jan. 17 with Cooper recording two tackles and one quarterback hit.

Among the ex-Buckeyes for the Bills, defensive end Joey Bosa had three total tackles, safety Jordan Hancock had 18 snaps on special teams with no stats, and wide receiver Curtis Samuel came off the injured list to make three catches for 2 yards.

New England downed the Houston Texans 28-16 the next day as Henderson rushed 12 times for 25 yards and made one catch for minus-2 yards.

On the other side, it was a continuing nightmare for Texans quarterback C.J. Stroud (more on him later). The former



SONNY BROCKWAY

PROBLEM IN HOUSTON? — Everything went smoothly for former Ohio State quarterback C.J. Stroud in his rookie season of 2023 when he led the surprising Houston Texans into the playoffs. He hasn't lived up to those lofty expectations since, and his postseason performances in 2025 — five fumbles against Pittsburgh and four first-half interceptions vs. New England — leave some wondering if he is a franchise quarterback.

Buckeye struggled in the playoffs for a second straight game, including four first-half interceptions vs. the Patriots.

Tight end Cade Stover was on the field for 50 offensive snaps and nine more on special teams. He caught a pass for 2 yards and ran twice for 6 yards before sustaining a knee injury.

Also, defensive tackle Tommy Togiai played 47 snaps on defense, a career high with eight tackles, one for loss and a forced fumble. He lined up as a fullback at the Patriots' 1-yard line, but his illegal-shift penalty cost the Texans a touchdown and they settled for a field goal.

Smith-Njigba had a quiet game Jan. 17, but the Seahawks didn't need him as much in a 41-6 romp over the San Francisco 49ers.

The Seahawks got off to a dream start in front of their fans when Rashid Shaheed returned the opening kickoff for a 95-yard touchdown, and Smith-Njigba snared a 4-yard TD catch from Sam Darnold later in the first quarter to make it 17-0. Smith-Njigba had had three catches on four targets for a season-low 19 yards.

For the 49ers, former Buckeye tight end Luke Farrell had 50 total snaps, 16 of them on special teams and made one catch for a yard. Defensive end Nick Bosa sustained a season-ending ACL tear in Week 3, and cornerback Eli Apple was on the practice squad.

Finally, the Rams needed an overtime field goal to defeat the Chicago Bears 20-17 on Jan. 18. Hamilton had one tackle, McQuaide played all 12 snaps on special teams, and Vannett did not play.

Offensive lineman Jonah Jackson was the lone OSU representative for the Bears. He played all 81 offensive snaps.

Tex Mess

Stroud's stock has fallen faster than the foot-plus of snow that blanketed the Ohio

and really just capitalizing on the opportunities that we got, and we didn't do that tonight as an offense."

Added wide receiver Christian Kirk: "When you look at the all-time greats, everybody has games they wish they could have back. Especially at the quarterback position, they take the brunt of why the team lost."

"At the end of the day, it's a team game. Everybody had a hand in why we didn't walk out of there with a W, and it's not all on him."

Texans coach DeMeco Ryans said he never considered replacing Stroud with Davis Mills, who went 3-0 this season while Stroud recovered from a concussion.

"C.J. is our guy. I believed that he could come back out in the second half and flip it," Ryans explained. "I believed that he could play better, and he did that in the second half. He did play better. We had some positive drives there in the second half. I believed that he would do that, and he did that."

"As I always tell our guys, 'At halftime, it really doesn't matter what happened in the first half. You have to flush it, remove it, and you just have to go out and finish the right way.' We've been there before. We've been in situations much more dire than this, and we were able to bounce back. So there was no doubt in my mind."

Stroud received a lot of criticism from the media in the aftermath of the defeat, but ESPN analyst Dan Orlovsky admitted he went too far in his comments.

Speaking on ESPN's "Get Up" on Jan. 22, he apologized to Stroud.

"On Monday morning after the Patriots-Texans game, I went on and said, 'Houston wins that game with 31 other quarterbacks.' I want to publicly apologize to C.J. Stroud," Orlovsky said. "I crossed the line. I don't ever want to do that. When I started eight years ago, I made the commitment to never go on TV and say 'They won because the quarterback played good,' or 'They lost because the quarterback played bad.' I've been called out on it. Accountability, full stop. Shouldn't have done it."

"There's ways for me to say... 'C.J. Stroud did the one thing he couldn't do and that's why they lose the game.' I don't want to take away from New England's defense as well. Full stop. That wasn't cool of me. That was wrong of me."

Still, there are key decisions to make about the No. 2 pick in the 2023 NFL draft.

Stroud, for the first time, is eligible for an extension that could make him one of the highest-paid QBs. The team has until May 1 to decide whether to exercise the fifth-year option on his rookie contract, guaranteeing him around \$26.5 million for the 2027 season.

Of the 13 quarterbacks drafted first or second since 2011, 10 had their fifth-year options picked up and seven signed long-term deals.

Texans general manager Nick Caserio was not revealing his intentions when he spoke to the media on Jan. 21.

"There are some things business-wise we'll look at and discuss," he said. "That's what the offseason is about. There is a timing element that's involved in some of that. We'll work through it here, I'm sure."

Johnson Gets Immediate Eligibility, Joins OSU

Ohio State gained a player on Jan. 16 when former Penn State forward Puff Johnson was granted a temporary restraining order and gained immediate eligibility.

COURT REPORT

Greg Wilson

"We're excited for Puff to join our program," said head coach Jake Diebler in a statement. "This has been a long process for he and his family. We're happy for them and are looking forward to him getting on the court."

Johnson was granted the TRO by Judge Sheryl Munson after having already played five seasons in college basketball, three with North Carolina and two with Penn State.

Johnson argued in his original lawsuit to try to gain eligibility that in his 2024-25 season, he had a wrist injury misdiagnosed, and he shouldn't have been cleared to play in the middle of the season last year. Had he not been cleared to play, he wouldn't have appeared in enough games to burn his red-shirt.

When Johnson committed to the Buckeyes in the spring, Ohio State filed for a medical hardship waiver on his behalf, but the NCAA denied it, prompting Johnson to sue. He was initially denied and, one month later, was denied an evidentiary hearing.

That led to him refiling in state court with new representation, and Munson granted him immediate eligibility.

Diebler said after the Buckeyes beat UCLA on Jan. 17 that the process of getting Johnson to join the team in the middle of the season was completely foreign to him, so he had no idea how long it would take them to get him on the court.

Part of that is because Johnson hasn't played a college basketball game since Jan. 15, 2025, and Diebler needs to make sure he is in game shape.

But another part of it is that Johnson wasn't able to participate in team activities until Jan. 16, when he was granted the TRO. Because of that, he isn't familiar with how the Buckeyes' offense or defense works, and he needs to quickly get integrated into the system.

Diebler has said that he doesn't like to run a lot of set plays, though they do still have them if they need them. However, the way the Buckeye offense works often has to do with the chemistry of the players on the court and knowing where to be on the floor at all times.

The head coach said that might be tougher for Johnson to pick up on.

"After you run a set, a lot of our sets are quicker actions, and sometimes you get a great look off the action," Diebler said. "When you don't, we go to our play after



Puff Johnson

2025-26 Ohio State Men's Basketball Statistics

13-6 Overall (5-4 Big Ten) Statistics through games of Jan. 23

Player	G-GS	Min.-Avg.	FG-FGA	Pct.	3P-3PA	Pct.	FT-FTA	Pct.	O-D	T-Avg.	PF-FO	A	TO	BS	ST	Pts.-Avg.
THORNTON, Bruce	19-19	693-36.5	134-243	.551	37-92	.402	77-90	.856	15-92	107-5.6	33-0	69	25	5	24	382-20.1
MOBLEY JR., John	19-19	581-30.6	93-213	.437	57-137	.416	54-63	.857	8-39	47-2.5	34-0	51	30	1	14	297-15.6
ROYAL, Devin	18-18	577-32.1	88-179	.492	22-62	.355	53-67	.791	32-73	105-5.8	47-2	34	38	2	11	251-13.9
TILLY, Christoph	19-19	511-26.9	73-154	.474	7-43	.163	80-105	.762	31-68	99-5.2	60-2	49	33	10	10	233-12.3
BYNUM, Amare	19-9	493-25.9	66-140	.471	11-45	.244	24-33	.727	28-63	91-4.8	48-2	20	22	18	8	167-8.8
NOEL, Brandon	14-10	288-20.5	45-70	.643	3-14	.214	11-15	.733	17-40	57-4.1	20-0	14	16	3	4	104-7.4
NJEGOVAN, Ivan	15-0	161-10.7	17-29	.586	1-2	.500	6-11	.545	14-34	48-3.2	28-0	12	12	6	2	41-2.7
CHATMAN, Taison	14-0	80-5.7	8-16	.500	6-12	.500	5-7	.714	1-5	6-0.4	13-0	7	6	0	4	27-1.9
CUPPS, Gabe	19-0	278-14.7	10-29	.345	4-17	.235	11-13	.846	5-24	29-1.5	34-0	25	13	1	10	35-1.8
GRUJICIC, Mathieu	6-0	33-5.6	1-8	.125	1-7	.143	3-7	.429	1-4	5-0.8	2-0	2	1	0	1	6-1.0
WHITE, Colin	19-1	171-9.0	8-20	.400	0-11	.000	1-3	.333	8-14	22-1.2	17-0	10	1	2	7	17-0.9
JOHNSON, Puff	1-0	05-4.7	0-0	.000	0-0	.000	0-0	.000	0-0	0-0.0	1-0	0	0	0	0	0-0.0
NASH, Braylen	3-0	04-1.2	0-0	.000	0-0	.000	0-0	.000	0-0	0-0.0	0-0	1	0	0	0	0-0.0
Team									41-34	75					11	
Total	19	3875	543-1101	.493	149-442	.337	325-414	.785	201-490	691-36.4	337-6	294	208	48	95	1560-82.1
Opponents	19	3875	478-1135	.421	138-467	.296	279-380	.734	211-388	599-31.5	371-7	249	206	56	111	1373-72.3

the play, our flow offense. In that moment, there's a lot of reading and reacting that occurs.

"That part is, quite honestly, very easy for him. He can go in and execute a play. It's what happens after that when the feel and the basketball IQ becomes important. The play after the play will be the hardest part to pick up."

Still, whenever Johnson is able to get on the court with the Buckeyes, he will add some much-needed experience and production off the bench, which Diebler has said multiple times throughout the season needs a lot of improvement.

Mobley Making Recent Surge

Head to the Schottenstein Center before the sun comes up in the morning, and you might think you're the only person there.

More than likely, John Mobley Jr. beat you in and has already been there for a while.

After the win over UCLA on Jan. 17, in which Mobley scored a career-high 28 points, he said that he had been getting into the gym at 5 a.m. every day to get some extra work in on his own.

He didn't say when that habit began, but after a slow start to the season and a rough game against Washington, that work has started to pay off for the sophomore guard.

"I let my teammates down," Mobley said about his performance against the Huskies on Jan. 11, when he scored three points. "I wasn't aggressive like I was (against UCLA). I was shying away and I was getting face-guarded, so that affected me a little bit. I had a conversation with (Diebler) and said that wasn't going to happen again. I'm going to stay aggressive, always be aggressive and just do what I do best."

Diebler also saw that Mobley had a tough outing in Seattle, noting that he let the defense control his tendencies.

"I thought he played too fast," Diebler said. "He played sped up when the ball was in his hands. Their defense was designed to do that, and he let them do it."

But the work that Mobley has put in has given Diebler trust in Mobley this season. He said after Mobley's career night that he told the rest of his coaching staff that Mobley's bad game would be a blip on the radar because of how hard he had been working.

"It's why I have such trust and belief in him, because I know the work he puts in," Diebler said. "I'm cut from the same cloth. That's how I was brought up. If you're shooting it well, get in the gym. If you're not shooting it well, get in the gym. If you're playing great, get in the gym. Maybe you struggled, get in the gym. He's been raised that same way."

Mobley nearly tied that career high the next time out when the Buckeyes topped Minnesota in overtime, 82-74, on Jan. 20. He scored 26 points in the game on 9-of-19 shooting.

Part of the difference has been that Mobley's shot has started falling more often, which he said toward the beginning of the year that he knew would happen at some point.

"I feel good. My shot wasn't falling in the beginning (of the season), but I knew it was going to come," he said. "I stayed in the gym."

In the first nine games of the season, Mobley made 39 of 94 field goals (41.5 percent), which included 20 of 57 from beyond the three-point line (35.1 percent) and scoring 13.7 points per game. His numbers have improved since then, especially his three-point percentage. In the 10 games since that stretch, he has made 54 of 119 shots (45.4 percent) and has put up an impressive 46.3 percentage on three-pointers, making 37 of 80. In those 10 games, he is scoring 17.4 points per contest and has been a reliable weapon for the Buckeyes.

Overall this season, he is averaging 15.6 points, 2.7 assists and 2.5 rebounds per game.

White Gaining Momentum

Looking at the box score for the win over Minnesota, most of the players who made a major impact on the game are obvious.

With big numbers in the points column for Mobley, Bruce Thornton and Devin Royal, there's no question that what they did in the game helped lead the Buckeyes to the win.

But much of what can make a role player great isn't listed on the stat sheet, and the impact that forward Colin White had in the win can only be seen in the plus-minus category, where the sophomore was plus-13,

second to only Royal (plus-18) in the game.

Diebler gave White a lot of credit in his postgame press conference.

"It started with maximum effort and toughness," Diebler said. "He was flying around on the offensive glass. He probably should have gotten credit for four or five offensive rebounds the way he was tipping balls and keeping them alive."

"Collectively, we've talked about attacking, being aggressive. We certainly didn't have that for the full game, but we had it for a good stretch. Our bench has gotten better with that, making more plays and being more aggressive."

White had just two points in the game with one assist and two rebounds, but as his plus-minus indicates, the team was much better when he was on the floor. Even though those stats don't jump off the page, each of them came in big moments.

Both of White's rebounds were on the offensive glass and gave the Buckeyes a shot at second-chance points. He also tipped two other offensive rebounds off a Minnesota player and out of bounds, making the play go in the box score as a team rebound.

His only two points came in overtime when the Buckeyes were struggling to extend their lead past one possession. After OSU went up by three points on a jumper from Thornton, White came up with a huge steal and went on an all-out sprint with the ball on a fast break for a layup to go up five points with less than two minutes left, and the crowd of 8,750 let the sophomore feel the frenzy he sent them into.

"Coach talked about it all game," White said. "When they drove in the lane, they were cutting, so I took the cutter away and jumped the passing lane. It was what we had been talking about in the previous huddle."

White said the excitement got to him after the layup since he realized the impact it had on the game.

"Most of my teammates told me to chill out a little bit (during the timeout)," White joked. "But Coach told me to go in there and be aggressive. I went in there, stole the ball and made a layup. It was a big momentum swing."

White is well aware that the bench production hasn't been great for the Buckeyes this season, and he said that Diebler has



HELPING HAND — Forward Colin White has provided much needed support coming off the bench for Ohio State. He doesn't mind making the under-the-radar plays such as offensive rebounds and defensive stops that can lead to a victory.

been on them to be more aggressive when they get into games so that the starters can get more breathers when needed.

"It's just keeping the same thing rolling," White said. "We built a 10-0 lead early. It's just coming in and not having any drop-off. (Diebler has) been on me, Taison (Chatman) and Gabe (Cupps) these last couple of weeks."

"Making the dirty plays, getting offensive rebounds and getting assists, those are the little things the bench can do to help the starters out and give them a breather."

White tried to play through an injury much of last season when he was a freshman, and he needed surgery over the off-season to fix the lower-body ailment.

Because of that, White hasn't had much time to develop, not being able to participate fully in basketball activities over the off-season. But now that he has been able to put a healthy stretch together, the former Ohio Mr. Basketball could be starting to reach his potential.

Basketball Portal Window Changed

While college football searches for a way to make its calendar make sense for all teams, college basketball seems to have

come to a solution much faster, at least when it comes to the transfer portal.

Basketball had a similar issue before this season as football does. The portal would open for players to enter in the middle of the NCAA Tournament, giving some teams a head start at recruiting those players while teams still competing for a title didn't have time to do so.

But on Jan. 14, the window was changed to a 15-day window and will now open the day after the national championship game for both the men and women. The men's title game this season is on April 6, so the portal will be open from April 7 to 21.

Diebler said the change makes a lot of sense and he's glad it was made, but what he is still looking for is more clarity on name, image and likeness rules.

"The portal has played a major role in roster management and construction, but nothing's played a bigger role in the changes than NIL," Diebler said. "It's such a major factor. Stars or front-of-the-rotation guys get a lot of the attention with NIL, but how NIL impacts the entire team is important. Clarity will help everybody in college basketball, and we're taking steps toward some of that."

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Buckeyes Win Two Before Falling To Michigan

By GREG WILSON

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Editor

Since BSB last went to press, Ohio State returned home after its West Coast trip and had a 12-point win over UCLA and an overtime victory over Minnesota to get two games over .500 in the Big Ten for the first time this season.

That didn't last long, however, when the Buckeyes went into Ann Arbor, Mich., and, although they put up a fight against No. 3 Michigan, couldn't hold on late and lost to the Wolverines.

Buckeyes Pull Away In Second Half

Ohio State (12-5, 4-3 Big Ten) earned its biggest win of the season on Jan. 17, topping Big Ten foe UCLA (12-6, 4-3), 86-74, behind strong performances on both sides of the ball at the Schottenstein Center in front of a season-high home crowd of 12,937 fans.

The Buckeyes finished the game shooting 52.8 percent from the field (28 of 53) while the Bruins shot 40.3 percent (25 of 62). Ohio State had three 20-point scorers in the win, with sophomore guard John Mobley Jr. (28), junior forward Devin Royal (22) and senior guard Bruce Thornton (21) each surpassing the mark.

Head coach Jake Diebler was happy to see Mobley come back after he had a rough game in the loss to Washington on Jan. 11.

"John's response coming out of the Washington game was impressive," Diebler said. "He had been playing so much better. I knew, and I told our staff, (that game) was going to be a blip on the radar because I know how he approaches practice."

Mobley had three points, four rebounds and three turnovers against the Huskies in 29 minutes of action.

Ohio State started strong in the game against UCLA, going up 7-2 on a three-pointer from Mobley at 17:01. The Bruins were able to make it 9-7 at 16:02 with a three of their own by Tyler Bilodeau, and after a jumper from Thornton, the game remained scoreless for over two minutes.

That streak was ended by a midrange jumper from Bilodeau, and Thornton ended the Buckeyes' drought with a jumper for a 13-9 lead with 12:40 left in the half. That was the start of a 7-0 run for OSU that included five points from Royal.

The teams traded baskets for the next few possessions, and Royal made a jumper, a layup and a free throw to make it 10 points for him at 9:08, giving the Buckeyes a 26-17 lead. A Bilodeau three cut the lead to 26-23 with 7:46 before intermission.

The Bruins remained hot and were able to cut the Buckeye lead to 26-25 with just over six minutes to go in the half. That became a five-point lead, 33-28, for OSU after a three from Mobley at 4:35.

UCLA brought it within one point, 33-32, but the Buckeyes were able to pull away again to make it 42-36 at the half, thanks to a last-second three from Mobley.

It quickly became a 12-point lead for Ohio State in the second half on three-pointers from Mobley and Royal. Senior center Christoph Tilly made it 14 points, 50-36, when Mobley found him cutting through the middle of the paint for a layup. Two Royal free throws made it a 52-36 game, and two more from Thornton put OSU up by 18 at 16:35. UCLA didn't score its first points of the second half until Eric Dailey Jr. hit a jumper 3:44 into the half.

The Bruins got within 11 before Royal hit a three-pointer at 14:01, and Thornton converted a three-point play to make it 60-43 with 13:22 to play. Ohio State was able to keep the lead at least at 14, and a dunk from freshman forward Amare Bynum on a fast break gave the Buckeyes an 18-point lead, 71-53, with 8:20 left. The Bruins cut the deficit to as little as 12 points, 77-65, with just under four minutes to go in the game, scoring on seven straight possessions.

They inched closer with 2:33 left in the game, making the score 80-70 on two free throws by Donovan Dent, but that was as close as they would get.

Royal had a game-high nine rebounds to go along with his 22 points, while Thornton added eight. UCLA was led by Bilodeau, who had 30 points while shooting 9 of 19 from the field, which included going 8 of 8 from the free-throw line. He also led the Bruins in rebounds with eight. Ohio State had a 37-27 edge on the glass.

OSU Gets OT Win Over Minn

Ohio State (13-5, 5-3 Big Ten) gave up two double-digit leads in the game but was



SONNY BROCKWAY

JUMPING TO THE FOREFRONT — After scoring just three points in an 81-74 loss to Washington on Jan. 11, sophomore guard John Mobley Jr. upped his game by leading the Buckeyes in scoring in three consecutive games, going for 28, 26, and 22 points against UCLA, Minnesota and Michigan, respectively.

able to hold on for an 82-74 overtime win over Minnesota (10-9, 3-5) at the Schottenstein Center in front of 8,750 fans on Jan. 20.

The Buckeyes took 10-point or more leads early in both halves but gave up those leads quickly due to multiple long scoring droughts.

"Offensively, we got a little stagnant in stretches, particularly against their zone," Diebler said after the win. "I'm proud of the way our guys responded out of timeouts, executed our plays and ultimately got the job done. That's life in the Big Ten."

Ohio State started the game strong on the defensive side of the ball, forcing Minnesota to miss its first six shots while the Buckeyes took a 10-0 lead. After a Golden Gopher timeout, Minnesota missed two more shots but got both offensive rebounds and scored its first two points at the line nearly five minutes in.

The Buckeyes went on a scoring drought of their own that lasted until a pair of Royal free throws at 13:43, and after scoring their first six points on free throws, the Gophers

made their first field goal of the game at 13:25 to make it 12-9.

Two more foul shots and a three-pointer put Minnesota up 14-12, and Jaylen Crockier-Johnson made it a four-point deficit with a layup before Mobley drained a three-pointer.

Mobley took the lead again for the Buckeyes with a layup, but Minnesota snatched it right back at 9:48 with a layup of its own, 18-17. OSU was able to go up by four points, 22-18, on a layup from sophomore guard Gabe Cupps, but the Gophers tied it back up at 24 with 6:14 left in the half on a jumper by Isaac Asumu.

OSU held a 29-28 lead when Thornton made a layup with 15 seconds left, and the Buckeyes went into the locker room with a 31-28 lead.

Ohio State stretched its lead back to 10, 38-28, early in the second half with a converted three-point play by Tilly capping the run. Thornton made it an 11-point lead with a layup at 16:54, but Minnesota brought it back within four points soon with a trio of three-pointers for a 43-39 score.

Langston Reynolds made it a two-point

OHIO STATE MEN'S BASKETBALL

Ohio State 82, Minnesota 74									
Jan. 20, 2026									
Value City Arena • Columbus									
	1	2	OT	F					
Minnesota (10-9, 3-5)	28	39	7	74					
Ohio State (13-5, 5-3)	31	36	15	82					
Minnesota	Total	FG	FT	Reb.					
	Min	M-A	M-A	O-D	A	PF	Pts.		
Durkin	43	2-9	0-0	2-2	1	3	6		
Crocker-Johnson	39	11-19	3-4	2-6	0	3	26		
Tyson	33	3-6	7-8	1-4	1	5	15		
Asuma	43	3-12	3-4	2-6	5	4	12		
Reynolds	41	3-8	6-7	0-2	5	2	12		
Grove	17	1-2	1-2	1-2	0	1	3		
Shinholster	9	0-2	0-0	0-0	1	1	0		
Totals	225	23-58	20-25	9-22	13	19	74		
Percentages: FG: 39.7%. FT: 80.0%. Three-point field goals: 8-28 (Asuma 3-9, Durkin 2-7, Crocker-Johnson 1-7, Tyson 2-4, Grove 0-1). Team rebounds: 1. Blocked shots: 4 (Asuma 2, Crocker-Johnson, Shinholster). Turnovers: 9 (Reynolds 3, Asuma 2, Team 2, Durkin, Crocker-Johnson). Steals: 6 (Asuma 3, Reynolds 2, Crocker-Johnson).									
Ohio State									
	Total	FG	FT	Reb.					
	Min	M-A	M-A	O-D	A	PF	Pts.		
Bynum	22	0-1	0-0	0-5	0	2	0		
Royal	41	6-14	3-5	3-2	2	2	16		
Tilly	28	5-10	1-2	0-5	1	5	11		
Mobley Jr.	43	9-19	3-3	1-2	2	4	26		
Thornton	42	9-16	4-6	1-6	3	2	23		
Njegovan	16	0-3	2-2	3-6	0	3	2		
Cupps	14	1-1	0-0	0-1	1	1	2		
White	19	1-1	0-0	2-0	1	1	2		
Totals	225	31-65	13-18	13-29	10	20	82		
Percentages: FG: 47.7%. FT: 72.2%. Three-point field goals: 7-24 (Mobley 5-11, Thornton 1-6, Royal 1-5, Bynum 0-1, Tilly 0-1). Team rebounds: 5. Blocked shots: 2 (Mobley, Njegovan). Turnovers: 10 (Royal 4, Mobley 2, Tilly, Thornton, Njegovan, Cupps). Steals: 6 (Thornton 4, Tilly, White).									
Officials: Harris, Richardson, Szelc. Attendance: 8,750.									

game with a layup, and Cade Tyson tied it at 43 on two free throws with 11:26 left.

Mobley scored Ohio State's first points in 6:09 with a three-pointer to go back up by three, 46-43. But after two free throws, a fastbreak layup and a three-pointer by Asuma, Minnesota tied its biggest lead of the game with 8:04 left, 50-46.

Mobley tied the game back up at 51 on a three for the Buckeyes, and after a Gopher layup, Thornton again tied it and Royal took the lead back with a layup of his own with 4:16 left.

The two teams traded the lead back and forth for the next few minutes before Mobley drained a three-pointer with 1:34 left to make it 64-62 Buckeyes. Tilly fouled Tyson, who made the layup through the foul and the Gophers took a 65-64 lead with the free throw.

Thornton followed with his own three-point play, but Crocker-Johnson made a layup with 40 seconds remaining in regulation to tie it up, and the game went to overtime tied at 67 after Mobley missed a shot with 13 seconds on the clock and Tyson missed a three at the buzzer.

Royal scored OSU's first five points in overtime, and the Bucks took a 72-69 lead. The Gophers had a tip-in, but Thornton scored to go back up by three. Sophomore forward Colin White followed that with a steal and a fastbreak layup for a five-point lead with 1:49 to go in overtime.

Crocker-Johnson answered with a layup, but a Thornton jumper made it a five-point deficit again. After Minnesota made a free throw, Thornton made two of his own to lead 80-74 with 25 seconds remaining. OSU was able to put the game away from there.

Ohio State was led by Mobley for the sec-

Michigan 74, Ohio State 62									
Jan. 23, 2026									
Crisler Center • Ann Arbor, Mich.									
	1	2	F						
Ohio State (13-6, 5-4)	30	32	62						
Michigan (18-1, 8-1)	33	41	74						
Ohio State	Total	FG	FT	Reb.					
	Min	M-A	M-A	O-D	A	PF	Pts.		
Bynum	29	2-5	1-3	0-2	0	4	5		
Royal	36	2-8	0-0	0-1	1	4	4		
Tilly	30	6-12	3-5	3-1	2	3	17		
Mobley Jr.	34	9-16	0-0	0-1	2	1	22		
Thornton	34	3-11	3-4	2-7	2	3	10		
White	9	1-2	0-0	1-1	1	2	2		
Njegovan	10	1-2	0-0	0-1	0	2	2		
Cupps	7	0-1	0-0	0-0	1	0	0		
Chatman	6	0-2	0-0	0-0	0	0	0		
Johnson	5	0-0	0-0	0-0	0	1	0		
Totals	200	24-59	6-9	12-15	9	20	62		
Percentages: FG: 40.7%. FT: 66.7%. Three-point field goals: 8-27 (Mobley 4-9, Thornton 1-5, Tilly 2-4, Royal 0-2, Bynum 1-3, White 0-1, Chatman 0-1). Team rebounds: 7. Blocked shots: 1 (Njegovan). Turnovers: 13 (Mobley 4, Tilly 3, Thornton 2, Bynum, Royal, Cupps, Team). Steals: 6 (Tilly 2, Mobley 2, Thornton, Njegovan).									
Michigan									
	Total	FG	FT	Reb.					
	Min	M-A	M-A	O-D	A	PF	Pts.		
Johnson Jr.	27	6-6	0-0	0-7	1	4	12		
Lendeborg	31	7-13	3-7	6-3	4	3	18		
Mara	29	3-4	5-7	2-4	1	3	11		
Cadeau	25	2-4	0-0	0-0	8	3	6		
Burnett	14	1-6	1-2	0-1	2	0	4		
Gayle Jr.	21	2-6	1-2	2-2	0	0	5		
Cason	18	3-6	0-1	0-1	0	1	6		
McKenney	21	3-5	5-6	0-4	0	1	12		
Tschetter	14	0-2	0-0	2-1	0	1	0		
Totals	200	27-52	15-25	12-24	16	16	74		
Percentages: FG: 51.9%. FT: 60.0%. Three-point field goals: 5-23 (Lendeborg 1-5, Cadeau 2-4, Burnett 1-4, McKenney 1-3, Cason 0-3, Gayle 0-2, Tschetter 0-2). Team rebounds: 1. Blocked shots: 6 (Mara 4, Johnson, Gayle). Turnovers: 14 (Lendeborg 4, Mara 4, Cadeau 4, Johnson, Tschetter). Steals: 10 (Lendeborg 3, Mara 2, Cason 2, Johnson, Cadeau, Burnett).									
Officials: Carstensen, Kimble, Simrons. Attendance: 12,707.									

er at 12:04. From there, Ohio State went on a quick 6-1 run to take a 20-14 lead on two three-point jumpers from Mobley. The Wolverines brought the game back within one possession multiple times and tied the game back up at 26 on a layup from L.J. Cason, taking the lead again, 28-26, the next time down the floor on a fastbreak alley-oop at 3:17 by Morez Johnson Jr.

Thornton tied it back up with a layup, and U-M and OSU traded baskets again for a 30-30 score with 1:36 left. Aday Mara made the first of two free throws with 45 seconds until half, and when he missed the second, Michigan grabbed the rebound and capitalized with a layup. The Wolverines led 33-30 when the game went to halftime.

The Buckeyes tied the game up at 34 just over a minute into the second half on a reverse layup from Bynum. Then, with three-pointers from Mobley and Tilly, the Buckeyes took another six-point lead just 2:20 into the half.

But Michigan scored six straight points to tie the game back up at 40 points and added five more to take the lead on an old-fashioned three-point play by Trey McKenney. Then, OSU went on a 6-0 run of its own to take the lead back with three-pointers from Bynum and Tilly, making it the third time in his career that Tilly made multiple threes in a game.

After OSU took a 48-47 lead on a Njegovan bucket, Royal was called for a technical foul at 10:44 that gave U-M a free throw and possession for a layup by Cason to make it 50-48 for the hosts.

With 7:52 left, Michigan took a 55-51

lead on a three-pointer from Elliot Cadeau, and two free throws and another three by Cadeau gave the Wolverines a nine-point lead, the biggest for either team in the game.

That was until, with 4:52 left in the game, Yaxel Lendeborg made a fastbreak layup to go up 66-56, and the deficit soon stretched to 15 on two free throws by Mara with just 3:17 to play. Tilly ended an OSU scoring drought that lasted nearly three minutes with a layup, but with 2:51 remaining, it was far too late for the Buckeyes to stage a comeback.

Ohio State was led by Mobley, who had 22 points on 9-of-16 shooting. Tilly scored 17 for the Buckeyes on 6-of-12 shooting while Thornton had 10 points, making just 3 of 11 field goals, including 1 of 5 from distance. Thornton did have a team-high nine rebounds in the game.

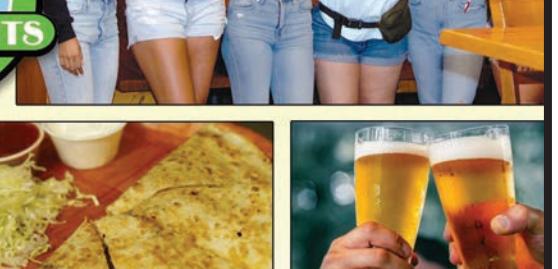
Michigan had four players reach double figures and was led by Lendeborg, who had 18 points on 7-of-13 shooting and nine rebounds. Michigan held a 36-27 edge on the glass.

The Wolverines shot 51.9 percent from the field (27 of 52), while holding OSU to 40.7 percent (24 of 59).

Before BSB next goes to press, Ohio State is slated to play four games. First, it is back home to take on Penn State at home on Jan. 26 (7 p.m., FS1) before heading on the road for two more contests against Wisconsin on Jan. 31 (2 p.m., FOX) and Maryland on Feb. 5 (8:30 p.m., FS1). The Buckeyes will finish that stretch with another chance against Michigan on Feb. 8 at home (1 p.m., CBS Sports).







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OHIO STATE WOMEN'S BASKETBALL

Ohio State 81, Indiana 67							
Jan. 22, 2026							
Value City Arena • Columbus							
	1	2	3	4	F		
Indiana (11-9, 0-8)	21	21	13	12	67		
Ohio State (18-2, 7-1)	17	15	27	22	81		
Indiana	Total	FT	Reb.				
	Min	M-A	M-A	O-D	A	PF	Pts.
Makalusky	33	2-5	2-2	0-2	0	3	8
Socka-Nguemen	32	3-5	5-6	1-9	1	2	11
Caffey	39	1-4	2-2	0-8	4	4	4
Beaumont	34	8-12	1-1	0-3	2	4	20
Ciezki	35	7-11	0-0	0-1	1	5	19
Noyan	8	0-0	0-0	1-2	1	2	0
Kiaku	17	1-1	2-2	0-1	0	2	5
Stotijn	2	0-1	0-0	0-0	0	0	0
Totals	200	22-39	12-13	2-28	9	22	67
Percentages:	FG: 56.4% FT: 92.3% Three-point field goals: 11-17 (Ciezki 5-6, Makalusky 2-5, Beaumont 3-4, Kiaku 1-1, Stotijn 0-1). Team rebounds: 2. Blocked shots: 1 (Ciezki). Turnovers: 24 (Beaumont 5, Ciezki 5, Socka-Nguemen 4, Caffey 4, Team 3, Makalusky 2, Noyan 2, Kiaku). Steals: 3 (Ciezki 2, Caffey).						
Ohio State	Total	FT	Reb.				
	Min	M-A	M-A	O-D	A	PF	Pts.
Lemmilä	29	5-12	0-1	1-5	2	4	10
Gray	38	5-14	1-1	1-2	1	2	13
K. Cambridge	33	5-11	3-5	0-3	1	3	13
Watson	38	5-6	0-0	1-0	2	3	12
J. Cambridge	35	7-14	6-8	1-1	5	3	22
Martin	17	4-7	2-2	1-1	1	1	11
Todd	6	0-0	0-0	0-0	0	0	0
Hobbs	4	0-0	0-0	0-0	0	1	0
Totals	200	31-64	12-17	9-28	12	17	81
Percentages:	FG: 48.4% FT: 70.6% Three-point field goals: 7-18 (Gray 2-6, J. Cambridge 2-4, K. Cambridge 0-3, Watson 2-2, Martin 1-2, Lemmilä 0-1). Team rebounds: 4. Blocked shots: 2 (Lemmilä, Hobbs). Turnovers: 7 (Lemmilä 2, Gray 2, J. Cambridge 2, K. Cambridge). Steals: 16 (K. Cambridge 6, Watson 6, Martin 2, Gray, J. Cambridge).						
Officials:	Maj. Forsberg, Doug Knight, Nykesha Thompson. Attendance: 5,242						

rebounds, while Jaloni Cambridge had a game-high eight assists.

TCU, which outrebounded Ohio State 43-33, was led by Miles, who grabbed 11 off the boards in the loss. She had a game-high 24 points on 6-of-16 shooting. She was 11 of 12 from the stripe, the only free throws for her team. Ohio State also did well from the free-throw line, connecting on 12 of 15 (80.0 percent).

OSU Uses Second-Half Comeback To Beat IU

Behind 22 points from Jaloni Cambridge and a tenacious defensive effort, No. 12 Ohio State (18-2, 7-1) overcame a 15-point first-half deficit to defeat Indiana (11-9, 0-8) 81-67.

Although Indiana was extremely efficient from beyond the arc, making 11 of 17 three-pointers (64.7 percent), Ohio State forced 26 turnovers and committed only seven.

"They outplayed us in the first half, and we weren't good enough," McGuff said after the game. "To our credit, we came out of halftime, our press was terrific in the second half, and our offensive execution was significantly better."

The Buckeyes have had plenty of slow starts this season, but against the Hoosiers, the first 5:28 was especially ugly. After getting out to an early 5-4 lead, Indiana scored 14 straight to build a quick 19-4 lead. On the run, Indiana made four three-pointers.

The Buckeye defense improved in the last four minutes of the quarter. They held the Hoosiers scoreless for over three minutes to respond with their own 13-0 run.

Iowa 91, Ohio State 70							
Jan. 25 2026							
Carver-Hawkeye Arena • Iowa City, Iowa							
	1	2	3	4	F		
Ohio State (18-3, 7-2)	14	18	19	19	70		
Iowa (18-2, 9-0)	24	24	23	20	91		
Ohio State	Total	FT	Reb.				
	Min	M-A	M-A	O-D	A	PF	Pts.
Lemmilä	29	3-7	0-1	1-3	1	3	6
Gray	34	5-13	2-2	0-1	1	0	16
K. Cambridge	28	2-9	4-6	2-3	2	3	9
Watson	36	4-11	0-0	1-2	2	2	10
J. Cambridge	38	9-19	2-2	2-8	4	2	26
Martin	14	0-2	0-0	0-0	0	2	0
Todd	8	0-5	0-0	0-2	0	1	0
Hobbs	11	1-2	0-0	1-2	2	1	3
Biriuk	2	0-1	0-0	0-0	0	0	0
Totals	200	24-69	8-11	8-22	12	14	70
Percentages:	FG: 34.8% FT: 72.7% Three-point field goals: 14-34 (J. Cambridge 6-9, Gray 4-9, Watson 2-5, K. Cambridge 1-4, Todd 0-4, Watson 1-1, Martin 0-1, Biriuk 0-1). Team rebounds: 2. Blocked shots: 8 (Lemmilä 5, K. Cambridge 2, Hobbs). Turnovers: 11 (Lemmilä 4, J. Cambridge 3, K. Cambridge 2, Gray 2, Watson). Steals: 9 (J. Cambridge 3, Lemmilä 2, Gray, K. Cambridge, Martin, Hobbs).						
Iowa	Total	FT	Reb.				
	Min	M-A	M-A	O-D	A	PF	Pts.
Stuelke	30	8-13	2-3	3-12	1	2	18
Heiden	27	9-11	0-0	1-7	0	0	18
McCabe	1	0-0	0-0	0-0	0	0	0
Feuerbach	32	3-6	0-0	0-1	9	2	8
Wright	37	5-8	0-0	1-4	4	0	14
Deal	32	8-17	3-3	0-3	5	2	20
Stremlow	16	2-5	2-2	0-4	3	2	8
Hays	10	1-2	0-2	1-2	2	0	2
Houston	13	1-2	1-2	0-4	2	1	3
Mallegni	2	0-0	0-0	0-0	2	1	0
Totals	200	37-64	8-12	8-40	28	10	91
Percentages:	FG: 57.8% FT: 66.7% Three-point field goals: 9-22 (Deal 1-7, Wright 4-6, Stremlow 2-5, Feuerbach 2-4). Team rebounds: 5. Blocked shots: 5 (Heiden 3, Stuelke, Feuerbach, Deal). Turnovers: 15 (Heiden 3, Feuerbach 3, Deal 2, Stremlow 2, Stuelke, Wright, Hays, Houston, Mallegni). Steals: 8 (Heiden 4, Stuelke, Wright, Deal, Mallegni).						
Officials:	Felicia Grinter, Julie Krommenhoek, Michael McConnell. Attendance: 14,998.						

Making the first start in her career, Watson led the Buckeyes on the run with five points.

Indiana sophomore forward Zania Socka-Nguemen ended her team's drought with a layup, and after the nightmarish start, Ohio State trailed only 21-17 headed into the second quarter.

Jaloni Cambridge helped pull Ohio State within one with a midrange jumper with 6:35 left before halftime, but the Hoosiers scored five unanswered points to make it 29-23. Cambridge made a three-pointer to cut Indiana's lead in half, but the road team then scored seven straight points to bump the lead back to 10 with 2:09 showing.

Lemmilä got the Buckeyes back on the board with a layup, but that didn't stop Indiana's momentum.

Indiana senior guard Shay Ciezki drained a three-pointer, and after a make from Jaloni Cambridge, the Hoosiers went up 12 with an and-one layup.

Kennedy Cambridge had a steal and layup in the final 30 seconds of the first half, but the Hoosiers still led 42-32 at the break.

Indiana grew its lead back to 12 after the first 2:11 of the second half, but Watson made a three-pointer as part of a 7-0 scoring run for Ohio State. The Hoosiers broke a scoring drought that lasted over 3:00 with a free throw by Socka-Nguemen, but the Buckeyes took their first lead of the game with a 9-0 scoring run that made the score 50-47 at 3:34.

The Buckeyes' run was fueled by a se-

quence where Kennedy Cambridge came up with a steal before her sister made a free throw and then tied the game at 47 with a three-point jumper. Then, after Bryn Martin had a steal, she made a triple to create the three-point edge.

Socka-Nguemen made a pair of free throws to end the run, but Ohio State led by four after an and-one layup by Gray, 53-49, with 2:21 left in the third.

Indiana scored four straight to tie the game at 53, but Ohio State ended the quarter with its own 4-0 spurt on two field goals by Jaloni Cambridge to lead 59-55 entering the fourth quarter.

The Buckeyes picked up right where they left off in the fourth quarter, scoring the first four points on baskets by Jaloni Cambridge and Watson to make it 63-55. Ciezki helped Indiana cut Ohio State's lead to 65-60 with a triple at the 6:37 mark, but Martin provided an answer with an and-one layup, and Watson made it 70-60 seconds later with a steal and layup.

Ohio State created a 12-point lead at 3:17 when Gray made a triple and Jaloni Cambridge split a pair at the free-throw line to make it 77-65.

From there, Indiana would get only as close as 10 points before Ohio State cemented the 14-point win.

Jaloni Cambridge was Ohio State's leading scorer in the win, but it was a balanced offensive approach, with Kennedy Cambridge (13), Gray (13), Watson (12), Martin (11) and Lemmilä (10) all reaching double figures.

Ohio State was outrebounded 30-21 on the night. Lemmilä grabbed a team-high six rebounds. Jaloni Cambridge had a team-high five assists in the win.

Indiana was led by redshirt-sophomore guard Lennée Beaumont (20 points) and Ciezki (19), who combined for 39 of the team's 67 points. Socka-Nguemen had 10 rebounds to go with her 11 points.

OSU's Win Streak Snapped By Iowa

No. 12 Ohio State (18-3, 7-2) had its seven-game winning streak ended on Jan. 25 when it was defeated, 91-70, by No. 10 Iowa (18-2, 9-0) in front of 14,998 fans at Carver-Hawkeye Arena in Iowa City, Iowa. In its second game without Kitts, who was out with a shoulder injury, Ohio State struggled to deal with the Hawkeyes' elite frontcourt. In addition to being outscored in the paint 42-14, Ohio State was outrebounded 48-30 by the Hawkeyes.

"We would love to have her, but I'm not so sure it would have mattered," said McGuff when asked about how much his team missed Kitts. "Iowa played way better than we did. They executed at a high level. They were gritty, and we didn't have it. As I told the team, it's got to be everything you've got to win in a place like Iowa against a great team like that, and we didn't have it. I don't feel like I coached my best game. I don't think our players played their best game, and a lot of that had to do with Iowa."

Despite the loss, it was a fairly fast start for the Buckeyes. They started the game on an 8-2 scoring run with help from three-point jumpers from Watson and Gray.

However, the Buckeyes' lead was short-lived. Iowa scored six straight points to tie the game at eight, but a three-pointer from Watson made it 11-8 at 6:12 to go in the

first frame.

Any momentum the Buckeyes had after their hot shooting start was quickly erased by a 12-0 run from Iowa.

The Buckeyes didn't score again until Jaloni Cambridge finally ended Ohio State's drought with a three-pointer at 1:13, but the Hawkeyes scored the last four points of the first quarter on a layup and two free throws by Hannah Stuelke to lead 24-14 heading into the second.

Ohio State tried to get back in the game by scoring the first five points of the second frame, capped by a Gray three, but Iowa guard Kylie Feuerbach made two three-pointers in a span of 26 seconds to lead 30-21.

The Buckeyes got back within seven points of Iowa's lead, 32-25 at 6:28 before the break, after back-to-back makes from Jaloni and Kennedy Cambridge, but Iowa went on a 9-2 scoring run to lead 41-27.

Sophomore Watson Fills In For Injured Kitts

Since BSB last went to press, Ohio State dealt with an injury to redshirt-freshman forward Kylee Kitts. In her team's 71-69 win over TCU on Jan. 19, Kitts injured her shoulder. She missed the next two games, and Ohio State head coach Kevin McGuff listed her as day-to-day immediately after the Buckeyes defeated Indiana 81-67 on Jan. 22.

DOUBLE DRIBBLE Bobby Gorbett

"She sustained a shoulder injury vs. TCU and couldn't play tonight and probably will be day-to-day for a while, so we'll see," McGuff said.

After a tough start to the season, in which she made just 16 of 45 (35.6 percent) field-goal attempts over her first six games with Ohio State, Kitts stepped up to become one of the team's most reliable contributors.

In Ohio State's road wins over Illinois and Maryland earlier in January, Kitts reached double figures in scoring in each game. She was at her best during the Buckeyes' 89-76 upset win over the Terrapins. In that game, Kitts scored 18 points on 7-of-13 shooting, including 3 of 5 from three-point range. She



SONNY BROCKWAY

LOOKING UP — Redshirt-freshman Kylee Kitts had a slow start to the season, but her game took off in early January until being sidelined because of a shoulder injury on Jan. 19 vs. TCU. She was averaging 9.3 points and 7.1 rebounds through Jan. 25.

2025-26 Ohio State Women's Basketball Statistics

18-3 Overall (7-2 Big Ten) Statistics through games of Jan. 25

Player	G-GS	Min.-Avg.	FG-FGA	Pct.	3P-3PA	Pct.	FT-FTA	Pct.	Rebounds	O-D	T-Avg.	PF-FO	A	TO	BS	ST	Pts.-Avg.
CAMBRIDGE, J.	21-21	652-31.1	177-352	.503	26-84	.310	79-96	.823	21-96	117-5.6	58-2	95	65	7	48	459-21.9	
GRAY, Chance	21-21	612-29.1	108-242	.446	42-119	.353	32-40	.800	6-52	58-2.8	17-0	59	38	0	14	290-13.8	
KITTS, Kylee	19-19	436-22.9	66-149	.443	10-30	.333	35-45	.778	58-76	134-7.1	48-3	24	32	17	17	177-9.3	
CAMBRIDGE, K.	21-21	563-26.8	64-152	.421	14-54	.259	41-67	.612	41-50	91-4.3	57-1	74	26	17	85	183-8.7	
LEMMILÄ, Elsa	20-12	472-23.6	70-128	.547	1-9	.111	24-40	.600	37-81	118-5.9	39-0	38	35	42	20	165-8.3	
WATSON, Ava	21-2	452-21.5	50-108	.463	20-51	.392	27-30	.900	18-23	41-2.0	35-0	46	27	3	43	147-7.0	
TODD, T'yana	21-9	318-15.1	40-114	.351	17-58	.293	15-18	.833	11-19	30-1.4	30-0	12	15	1	12	112-5.3	
MARTIN, Bryn	21-0	311-14.8	38-90	.422	16-50	.320	4-4	1.000	6-31	37-1.8	30-1	25	12	6	21	96-4.6	
BIRIUK, Dasha	14-0	132-9.4	21-45	.467	11-30	.367	8-9	.889	5-17	22-1.6	13-0	7	10	3	7	61-4.4	
HOBBS, Ella	19-0	155-8.2	20-38	.526	7-13	.538	4-5	.800	13-35	48-2.5	11-0	8	5	3	4	51-2.7	
HENRY, Seini	13-0	98-7.5	11-30	.367	1-10	.100	9-14	.643	12-22	34-2.6	14-0	4	7	3	4	32-2.5	
Total	21	4200	665-1448	.459	165-508	.325	278-368	.755	258-547	805-38.3	352-7	392	281	102	275	1773-84.4	
Opponents	21	4200	498-1253	.397	135-422	.320	225-323	.697	244-548	792-37.7	361-4	295	483	63	129	1356-64.6	

also had eight rebounds and three assists.

For the season, the 6-4 forward was averaging 9.3 points and 7.1 rebounds per game and was shooting 44.3 percent from the field.

In their first game without Kitts, the Buckeyes turned to sophomore guard Ava Watson to make her first start of the season.

Watson, a 5-8 sophomore, played very well in her first start. She scored 12 points on 5-of-6 shooting from the field, including 2 of 2 from three-point range. She also had six steals and two assists in the Buckeyes' win.

After the game, McGuff said Watson's defensive abilities in the Buckeyes' full-court press were a big reason that she filled in for Kitts in the starting lineup.

"Ava was coming off a really good performance against TCU, and so that was kind of fresh in my mind," McGuff said when asked why he chose to put Watson in the lineup. "The next part is if we have to play a little smaller, our press needs to be a part of that. Ava's really good at that. You can see tonight, she had six steals. She had a really good performance."

Junior guard Kennedy Cambridge also praised her fellow backcourt mate after the game, specifically pointing out the energy she brings to each game.

"Regardless of her starting or not, she brings the same energy," Cambridge said. "She had six steals. She brought the same (energy) as if she had come off the bench. So she's very important to our team, whether she starts, whether she comes off the bench when Kylie returns. She's still important, and without her, we probably wouldn't have won."

As well as Watson played, the Buckeyes still missed Kitts' size. Against the Hoosiers, Ohio State grabbed a season-low 21 rebounds, which was, in part, due to the fact that it forced only 17 misses by Indiana.

After the game, McGuff said Ohio State's press and spacing need to be a strength of the team going forward if it wants to survive without Kitts.

"Kylie's been playing well," McGuff said. "She's been a big part of us getting better as a team. Unfortunately, it's sometimes a part of it, and so we'll have to adjust and see how she responds to the injury and when we can get her back. If we're going to be good with her out, it has to be based on offensive spacing, and our press has to be part of that, which was really good in the second half, and we have to have that for longer stretches, to play

a little smaller and be effective."

OSU Picks Up Second Top-10 Win

Right as BSB went to press with the previous issue, Ohio State picked up its biggest win of the season on Jan. 11, when it went to College Park, Md., and defeated then-No. 8 Maryland. It was one of Ohio State's best offensive performances of the season. McGuff's group shot exactly 50.0 percent from both two-point range and three-point range in the win.

The Buckeyes had an encore one week later when they travelled to Newark, N.J., to take on then-No. 9 TCU, as part of the Coretta Scott King Classic. Despite getting out to an ugly start and trailing 18-8 after the first quarter, Ohio State emerged victorious.

In the game, guard Jaloni Cambridge shot just 7 of 22 from the field, but senior guard Chance Gray scored 22 points, draining six three-pointers.

"We wouldn't have won this game a month ago," McGuff said after the Buckeyes beat the Horned Frogs. "We've gotten significantly better, and we are on a good path. We still have a long way to go, but we've improved quite a bit this year."

When asked how the Buckeyes have made their improvements, McGuff found it difficult to pinpoint one thing, but he said his team's progress was reflected in the wins over Maryland and Illinois.

"Our defense and our rebounding," McGuff said when asked where Ohio State has grown the most. "If you went back and watched our games at Illinois and at Maryland and even today, we had to get some really big stops and some big rebounds to win, and that's where we've probably made the most growth."

"I would also add to that our execution on offense has continued to get better. We've won lately, against good opponents on the road and on a neutral court, with defensive rebounding and offensive execution, which led to a lot of great shots down the stretch. Those are the areas where we've gotten better."

Considering Ohio State had only one top-10 win all of last season, it's hard to ignore what the Buckeyes have accomplished so far in the regular season, especially because they entered the year unranked, having lost star forward Cotie McMahon to the transfer

portal.

Early on in the season, the Buckeyes weren't always up to the task against the best teams in the country. In their first game against a top-10 foe, Ohio State was destroyed 100-68 by UConn in November.

When asked if she ever saw Ohio State's improvements coming, Watson reflected on a speech delivered by Kennedy Cambridge around the time of the loss to UConn that helped turn the worm.

"I remember when we were in the locker room, and Kennedy made this little speech, and she was like, 'No one wants us to be where we are right now.' And she was like, 'This just brings extra motivation. People don't think we can do it, so we're going to stay together, and we're going to go out there and show them that we can do it.'

Although the Buckeyes have plenty of accomplishments already under their belt, McGuff knows they can still improve as the regular season winds down.

"We weren't quite good enough at the beginning of the year," McGuff said after Ohio State's win over TCU. "We have a lot of newcomers, about half of our team, so it's a little bit of a reflection of that. And we have a fairly young team, but to their credit, they've committed to the concept of getting better. I still think there's a higher ceiling for us, if we just stay with that process."

Big Wins Have Bucks Well-Positioned

Following their top-10 wins over TCU and Maryland, Ohio State vaulted up the latest Bracketology projections. According to ESPN's Charlie Creme, Ohio State is projected to be a No. 3 seed, meaning it would host the first two rounds of the NCAA tournament.

The Buckeyes also moved up in the Associated Press' top-25 rankings since BSB last went to press. Heading into its matchup with Maryland, Ohio State was ranked No. 19, but after the win over the Terrapins, it was ranked No. 14.

The Buckeyes moved up two spots after defeating Penn State by 24. In the latest edition of the rankings, which came out only one day after its 91-70 loss to No. 10 Iowa, Ohio State was ranked No. 11 in the Associated Press' top 25 rankings. It was Ohio State's highest placement in the rankings of the season.

LOOKING UP — Redshirt-freshman Kylee Kitts had a slow start to the season, but her game took off in early January until being sidelined because of a shoulder injury on Jan. 19 vs. TCU. She was averaging 9.3 points and 7.1 rebounds through Jan. 25.

Where In The H-E-Double Hockey Stick Is Pinckney?

Kristoffer Eberly didn't know he was following the advice of Winston Churchill when he was traveling to hockey practices in Michigan.

IN THE CREASE

Craig Merz

Those words? "When you're going through Hell, keep going."

And that's what Eberly, the junior goalie for Ohio State, did from his home in Pinckney.

"Actually, when I drive to a rink in a town called Chelsea, I always drive through Hell," he said.

That would be Hell, Mich., an unincorporated community 3.4 miles southwest of Pinckney with a population of 72 that attracts about 125,000 visitors annually for obvious reasons.

"There's a big sign in Pinckney that says Hell, and it has an arrow pointing that way," Eberly said. "When my family comes from Sweden, we've taken them there a couple times to show them. They've got a fun area, like a Putt-Putt, and they've got a bunch of devil decorations and stuff like that. So, it's funny."

"It's a super small town, and so is mine (population 2,415)."

Hell doesn't freeze over, so to speak.

"They don't have a rink," he said.

Neither does Pinckney. "The closest rink is probably 30 minutes away. It's not that far, but when I was growing up in Livonia, Mich., there was a rink, probably seven, 10 minutes away from our place so it was definitely a change when we moved."

Livonia, on the outskirts of Detroit, is a hotbed, while Pinckney and the surrounding areas aren't, so Eberly would hit the highways to play junior hockey in the Detroit area for the Honeybaked Hockey Club (Farmington Hills) and Compuware (Plymouth Township).

"I started driving about an hour away to play, but as I got older, I wanted to play with my friends in high school," he said. "High school hockey, it wasn't the best hockey, but it was at the point where I was having my most fun playing with my buddies, and we're getting a crowd at the rink. I'm definitely fortunate to grow up in such a big hockey state."

After Dexter High School, he would eventually play in the United States Hockey League, the top tier in this country, for Sioux City and Green Bay before coming to Ohio State.

Despite living 20 miles from Ann Arbor, he didn't go to many Michigan hockey games.

"When I was younger, I was a big fan of Connor Hellebuyck," Eberly said of the Winnipeg Jets goaltender from Commerce Township, Mich., 45 miles east of Pinckney. "When he was playing for UMass Lowell, they were playing Michigan one season, so I made it out to that game. That's

kind of the only game I remembered. That and when my brother swam for Michigan, he took me to a game."

Eberly played 14 games as a freshman for OSU in 2023-24, backing up Logan Terness, and was 3-8-1 with a 2.98 goals-against average and a .911 save percentage.

He made his debut in relief at Wisconsin on Dec. 2 and stopped all 10 shots in the third period. The following weekend, he saved 10 of 12 shots in the final two periods against Minnesota, and the next night he made his first start and allowed one goal on 24 shots in a 1-1 overtime tie and then saved three of three shootout attempts as the Buckeyes won the extra point.

Eberly, as a sophomore, was again the understudy to the senior Terness last season but posted some impressive numbers in 17 games, going 12-4-1 with his 73.5 winning percentage the second best in the Big Ten and ninth nationally. He had a 2.28 GAA and a .915 save percentage with his first two career shutouts.

He was also the December 2024 national goaltender of the month (4-0-0, 0.99 GAA, .953 save percentage).

This season, with Terness exhausting his eligibility, Eberly took over the top spot while acting as a mentor for freshmen goalies Sam Hillebrandt and Dawson Labre.

"I'm giving them any pointers I can," Eberly said. "I've also been trying to do my best to show them some stuff to do off the ice. I don't think many people realize how much different it is from junior hockey to college hockey."

"As a goalie, shots are a lot quicker. The speed's a lot quicker. So I think just making sure your hand-eye coordination is always on point is important. I always try to not only talk to them about pushing themselves but being a good example of pushing myself when I'm out there, and hopefully they fall under my wings."

Stepping up

Labre underwent knee surgery late in 2024 while in his last season of junior hockey. Although he is healthy now, he has not appeared in a game for Ohio State.

Eberly played the majority of games through the first half of this season, but Hillebrandt has been pushing him and achieved a breakthrough in his sixth game (fourth start) against No. 2 Michigan State on Jan. 10 in Value City Arena when he stopped 26 of 27 shots for the 2-1 win, his first as a Buckeye.

His performance earned him the Big Ten's third star of the week.

It was special to not only beat the Spartans because they have 15 NHL draft picks, but it came against All-America goalie Trey Augustine, a second-round pick by the Detroit Red Wings in 2023.

Hillebrandt was the backup to Au-

gustine when the U.S. won World Junior Championship gold medals in 2024 and 2025. The Michiganders have been friends for years, but they did not communicate before the Spartans-Buckeyes series.

"We left each other alone, but after the weekend we ended up speaking for a little bit and catching up," Hillebrandt said. "It was pretty cool getting the win, obviously being against Michigan State as well, one of the top teams in the country. He was happy for me. My family was here, so they were able to see it as well. It was cool how everything worked out. It's a pretty big milestone. I've been working really hard for it, but it was a great team win."

Ohio State coach Steve Rohlik was pleased as well.

"Anytime you go out there, get your first collegiate win, and especially against a team like that against the other goalie that he knows very well, it's a big deal," he said. "Most importantly for our team and even for our three goalies in general, I think they've got a great competition with each other every day. They support each other every day, and things like that can only boost and push the other guys, especially our team."

Forward Riley Thompson said the team has confidence in whichever goalie plays.

"Our goalies are doing great," he said. "They're both phenomenal goalies. We trust either goalie when they're in the net and trust them to make big saves when we need them to."

Hillebrandt appreciates the support.

"I'm working really hard in practice, so showing them I can do the job," he said.

He's had to adjust to the college where there are two games a weekend and about 40 games in a season, depending on the postseason. He played 37 games, about half the schedule, for the Barrie Colts of the Ontario Hockey League last season.

"You've just got to take every game like it's a playoff game," Hillebrandt said. "Especially in college, you don't get too many opportunities, so every time you get your number called, just go and do a job for your team and do it to the best of your ability."

Finally

Former Ohio State forward Stephen Halliday was featured in the previous *In the Crease* because he was held out of the Ottawa Senators' lineup ("scratched" in hockey vernacular) on Dec. 11 when they played the Columbus Blue Jackets at Nationwide Arena in what would have been the rookie's first game back in the city.

He missed another opportunity on Jan. 20 when the Senators came to town for the second and final time this season because he was on loan to Belleville of the American Hockey League.

Well, wouldn't you know, two days later, he was recalled to the Senators after the team announced that forward David Perron would be out five to seven weeks because of a sports hernia that would require surgery.

"He's played well," Senators coach Travis Green said of Halliday. "I think his game, he's still a young player, he's growing almost game to game. We're getting to that

point in the year where we need players to be sharp, and this is going to be a good opportunity for him to get another look."

Halliday couldn't wait to return to the NHL.

"Yeah, I'm pretty excited just to get back up here and show what I've been working on the past few weeks down in Belleville," he said. "I'm kind of just trying to grow my game. There's stuff that I needed to work on when I was up here, and I thought that I went down there, got to take a lot more draws, a couple different situations that I got to play in too, and I thought I just tried to make the most of it and get better."

The work paid off when Halliday, playing the night of his call-up, scored his first goal in his 19th NHL game at the Nashville Predators when he jammed in the rebound of a shot by Lars Eller.

"It was really fun," Halliday said. "I thought me, (Eller) and (Dylan Cozens) made a couple of good plays that shift to generate it to the front of the net. It's always a pleasure to be in the NHL, and I'm super grateful."

Playing on Jan. 25 in his third game since his recall, Halliday had two goals and an assist and was plus-3 while playing just 7:39. Unfortunately, he was checked into a curved stanchion by the Vegas Golden Knights bench and had to be helped off the ice in the third period.

He has three goals and seven assists for 10 points in 21 games for the Senators.

Slip Up

The Buckeyes (8-13-1, 4-8-0 Big Ten) had a disappointing split at Notre Dame on Jan. 23 and 24, winning the opener 4-2 before losing 6-1 to the worst team in the conference.

Jake Karabela broke a 2-2 tie on a power-play goal with 1:57 left in regulation off a feed by Felix Caron. Max Montes added an empty-net goal 20 seconds later.

Thompson and Adam Eisele scored, Chris Able had two assists and Hillebrandt made 31 saves.

In the rematch, the Fighting Irish (5-18-1, 1-13-0) won their first Big Ten game of the season by scoring the first three goals before Thompson converted on the power play at 4:26 of the second period. Notre Dame then scored three times in less than six minutes to carry a 5-1 lead into the third period.

Eberle made 24 saves. He is 6-10-1 with a 3.34 GAA and a .883 save percentage while Hillebrandt is 2-3-0, 3.42, .898.

Next

The Buckeyes host top-ranked Michigan on Jan. 30 (6:30 p.m.) and 31 (5 p.m.).

They play at Minnesota on Feb. 6 (8 p.m.) and 9 (9 p.m., BTN) before Wisconsin visits Value City Arena on Feb. 13 (6:30 p.m.) and 14 (7:30 p.m., BTN).

For a complete recap of the Notre Dame series go to the BuckeyeSports.com website, free to all Buckeye Sports Bulletin subscribers.

BUCKEYE SCOREBOARD

FOOTBALL (12-2, 9-0)

Aug. 30 TEXAS, W 14-7.
Sept. 6 GRAMBLING STATE, W 70-0; **13** OHIO, W 37-9; **27** at Washington, W 24-6.
Oct. 4 MINNESOTA, W 42-3; **11** at Illinois, W 34-16; **18** at Wisconsin, W 34-0.
Nov. 1 PENN STATE, W 38-14; **8** at Purdue, W 34-10; **15** UCLA, W 48-10; **22** RUTGERS, W 42-9; **29** at Michigan, W 27-9.

Dec. 6 Big Ten Championship Game at Indianapolis vs. Indiana, L 13-10; **31** CFP Quarterfinal at Cotton Bowl in Arlington, Texas, vs. Miami (Fla.), L 24-14.

MEN'S BASKETBALL (13-6, 5-4)

Oct. 26 Ohio (Exh.), W 103-74.
Nov. 3 IU-INDY, W 118-102; **7** PURDUE-FORT WAYNE, W 94-68; **11** APPALACHIAN STATE, W 75-53; **16** NOTRE DAME, W 64-63; **20** WESTERN MICHIGAN, W 91-58; **25** MOUNT ST. MARY'S, W 113-60; **28** at Pittsburgh, L 67-66.
Dec. 6 at Northwestern, W 86-82; **9** ILLINOIS, L 88-80; **13** at Cleveland Hoops Showdown in Cleveland vs. West Virginia, W 89-88; **20** at CBS Sports Classic in Atlanta vs. North Carolina, L 71-70; **23** GRAMBLING STATE, W 89-63.
Jan. 2 at Rutgers, W 80-73; **5** NEBRASKA, L 72-69; **8** at Oregon, W 72-62; **11** at Washington, L 81-74; **17** UCLA, W 86-74; **20** MINNESOTA, W 82-74 (OT); **23** at Michigan, L 74-62; **26** PENN STATE; **31** at Wisconsin.

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Feb. 5 at Maryland; **8** MICHIGAN; **11** USC; **14** at Nashville Hoops Showdown in Nashville, Tenn., vs. Virginia; **17** WISCONSIN; **22** at Michigan State; **25** at Iowa.

March 1 PURDUE, **4** at Penn State; **7** INDIANA; **10-15** Big Ten Tournament in Chicago.

WOMEN'S BASKETBALL (18-3, 7-2)

Nov. 9 COPPIN STATE, W 88-59; **13** BELLARMINE, W 90-33; **16** at UConn, L 100-68; **19** KENT STATE, W 88-68; **24** at Pink Flamingo Championship in the Bahamas vs. Belmont, W 68-56; **26** at Pink Flamingo Championship in the Bahamas vs. West Virginia, W 83-81; **30** NIAGARA W, 130-32.

Dec. 7 at Northwestern, W 79-70; **11** NORTHERN KENTUCKY, W 94-62; **14** TOLEDO, W 85-60; **18** NORFOLK STATE, W 79-45; **22** WESTERN MICHIGAN, W 95-47; **28** UCLA, L 82-75; **31** at Purdue, W 83-56.

Jan. 4 RUTGERS, W 71-49; **7** at Illinois, W 78-69; **11** at Maryland, W 89-76; **14** PENN STATE, W 108-84; **19** at Coretta Scott King Classic in Newark, N.J., vs. TCU, W 71-69; **22** INDIANA, W 81-67; **25** at Iowa, L 91-70; **29** Wisconsin.

Feb. 1 NEBRASKA; **5** at Washington; **8** at Oregon; **15** MARYLAND; **18** at Minnesota; **22** USC; **25** MICHIGAN.

March 1 at Michigan State.

FENCING

Oct. 11 OSU OPEN, NTS; **12** OSU DUALS, Men 4-0, Women 4-0.

Nov. 8-9 OSU ELITE INVITATIONAL, Men 3-2, Women 4-1; **22-23** Western Invitational at USAF Academy, Colo., Men 5-1; Women 6-1

Jan. 17 St. John's Invitational in Queens, N.Y., Men 1-4, Women 0-5; **18** Dave Micahnik Penn Invitational in Philadelphia, Men 3-2, Women 5-0; **31** Schiller Duals in Evanston, Ill.

Feb. 1 Schiller Duals in Evanston, Ill.; **21-22** CCFC Championships in Granville, Ohio.

March 8 NCAA Midwest Regionals in Cleveland; **19-22** NCAA Championships in South Bend, Ind.

MEN'S ICE HOCKEY (8-13-1, 4-8-0)

Oct. 10-11 NORTHERN MICHIGAN, W 5-2; W 3-1; **17-18** at UConn, L 3-2; W 4-2; **24-25** SACRED HEART, L 2-1 (OT); W 3-0; **30-31** PENN STATE, L 3-2; L 4-3.

Nov. 14-15 at Wisconsin, W 5-1; L 6-5 (OT); **21-22** at Michigan, L 5-2; L 8-1; **28-29** at Arizona State, L 3-2 (OT); L 4-3 (OT).

Dec. 4-5 MINNESOTA, L 6-3; W 6-5 (OT).

Jan. 2 BOWLING GREEN, T 2-2 OT (SW); **3** at Bowling Green, L 5-3; **9-10** MICHIGAN STATE, L 6-2; W 2-1; **23-24** at Notre Dame, W 4-2; L 6-1; **30-31** MICHIGAN.

Feb. 6-7 at Minnesota; **13-14** WISCONSIN; **20-21** at Penn State; **27-28** at Michigan State.

March 5-6 NOTRE DAME; **11-21** Big Ten Tournament.

WOMEN'S ICE HOCKEY (23-3-0, 17-3-0)

Oct. 3-4 at Colgate, W 5-3; W 9-4; **10-11** BEMIDJI STATE, W 6-0; W 2-1; **18-19** at Minnesota W 4-1; L 6-3; **24-25** ST. CLOUD STATE, W 5-1; W 4-2; **31** at St. Thomas, W 3-2 (OT).

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Nov. 1 at St. Thomas, W 8-0; **14-15** MINNESOTA STATE, W 5-2; W 7-3; **21-22** at Minnesota-Duluth, W 3-1; W 4-1; **28** at D1 in DC Tournament in Washington, D.C., vs. Clarkson, W 8-0; **29** at D1 in DC Tournament in Washington, D.C., vs. Colgate, W 5-0.

Dec. 5-6 WISCONSIN, L 2-1; L 6-1.

Jan. 2-3 PENN STATE, W 5-1; W 4-1; **9-10** at St. Cloud State, W 4-0; W 5-1; **16-17** at Minnesota State, W 7-4; W 4-1; **23-24** ST. THOMAS, W 2-1 (OT); W 5-0; **30-31** MINNESOTA-DULUTH.

Feb. 7-8 at Wisconsin; **13-14** MINNESOTA; **20-21** at Bemidji State; **27-March 1** WCHA First Round.

MENS SWIM & DIVE (2-1)

Nov. 7-8 Raleigh Rumble in Raleigh, N.C., vs. NC State, L 790.0-485.5; vs. Virginia Tech, W 485.5-429.0; **18-21** OHIO STATE FALL INVITATIONAL, 3rd/1,745 pts.

Dec. 3-6 US Open at Austin, Texas, NTS.

Jan 17 MICHIGAN, W 167-133; **23-24** Texas Invitational at Austin, Texas, NTS; **31** PITTSBURGH.

Feb. 13-15 OHIO STATE WINTER INVITATIONAL; **25-28** Big Ten Championships at Madison, Wis.

March 8 LAST CHANCE MEET; **9-11** NCAA Zone Diving Championships, TBD; **13-15** CSCAA National Invitational Championship at Ocala, Fla.; **25-28** NCAA Championships at Atlanta.

WOMENS SWIM & DIVE (1-2)

Nov. 7-8 Raleigh Rumble in Raleigh, N.C., vs. NC State, L 790.0-546.0; vs. Virginia Tech, W 546.0-364.5; **18-21** OHIO STATE FALL INVITATIONAL, 1st/2,257 pts.

Dec. 3-6 US Open at Austin, Texas, NTS.

Jan 17 MICHIGAN, L 162-136; **23-24** Texas Invitational at Austin, Texas, NTS; **31** PITTSBURGH.

Feb. 13-15 OHIO STATE WINTER INVITATIONAL; **18-21** Big Ten Championships at Minneapolis.

March 8 LAST CHANCE MEET; **9-11** NCAA Zone Diving Championships, TBD; **13-15** CSCAA National Invitational Championship at Ocala, Fla.; **18-21** NCAA Championships at Atlanta.

WRESTLING (14-0, 3-0)

Nov. 2 Clarion Open at Clarion, Pa., NTS; **9** at Tennessee-Chattanooga, W 42-4; **15** National Duals Invitational at Tulsa vs. Wyoming, W 33-6; vs. Minnesota, W 29-6; **16** National Duals Invitational at Tulsa vs. Nebraska, W 33-3; vs. Iowa W 27-12; **20** KENT STATE, W 44-0.

Dec. 3 BELLARMINE, W 41-3; **12** NC STATE, W 26-10; **21** Collegiate Duals at Nashville, Tenn., vs. Little Rock, W 34-9; vs. Iowa State, W 21-13.

Jan. 4 at Oregon State, W 41-3; **11** INDIANA, W 45-0; **23** at Minnesota, W 29-9; **25** at Nebraska, W 17-16; **30** WISCONSIN.

Feb. 1 MICHIGAN; **6** IOWA; **13** at Penn State; **15** at Maryland.

March 7-8 Big Ten Championships at State College, Pa.; **19-21** NCAA Championships at Cleveland.

Ohio State Defeats Two Top-10 B1G Foes

Ohio State had another action-packed weekend as the Buckeyes beat No. 7 Minnesota 29-9 on Jan. 23 at the Maturi Pavilion in Minneapolis before defeating No. 6 Nebraska 17-16 on Jan. 25 at the Devaney Center in Lincoln, Neb.

ON THE MAT

Sam Cipriani

Prior to Ohio State's victories, head coach Tom Ryan said facing Nebraska and Minnesota would be a true test of the Buckeyes' ability to perform against familiar opponents.

Ryan noted that while the Buckeyes were successful in their last matchups with the Cornhuskers and Golden Gophers at the National Duals Invitational in November, facing an opponent for the second time in a season always presents new challenges.

"The last time we played them, we were aggressive, we were efficient, we pursued them at all times, at every match. We put lots of points on the board, and we were really tough when we needed to be," Ryan told BSB. "We came in on top of those duals, but the second time you wrestle somebody, they have a little bit of an edge. They're not happy. They probably wrote your name down and put it on the wall above their bed. Now, if you just do your job and wrestle the way you can, you'll be fine."

Ohio State delivered on that focus against Minnesota. The Buckeyes established early momentum with five straight wins in the lower and middle weights, including a 4-1 upset in the first match in the sudden victory period by 125-pounder Vinny Kilkeary over No. 9 Jore Volk and a 21-5 technical fall victory from No. 1 Jesse Mendez over No. 9 Vance VornBaur at 141 pounds.

However, the Golden Gophers bounced back when No. 11 Andrew Sparks claimed a 4-2 win by decision over No. 18 Paddy Gallagher at 165 pounds and Minnesota claimed two wins in the sudden victory period at 184 and 197 pounds. But the dual was already out of reach for the Gophers after, at the 174-pound weight class, Ohio State's No. 4 Carson Kharchla beat No. 24 Ethan Riddle by a 20-4 technical fall and took a 25-3 team lead. Heavyweight No. 3 Nick Feldman defeated the Golden Gophers' No. 11 Koy Hopke by an 11-2 major decision to claim the Buckeyes' 29-9 victory.

In Lincoln, the Buckeyes faced a formidable Nebraska squad and were tasked with their biggest challenge to date.

Ohio State appeared poised to cruise past the Cornhuskers after opening the dual with four straight wins, highlighted by Mendez's pivotal 14-3 major decision over third-ranked Brock Hardy at 141 pounds. However, Nebraska responded quickly to halt the momentum.

Nebraska's middle and upper weights flipped the dual by rattling off five straight victories, including one major decision and two upsets – No. 6 Christopher Minto over the fourth-ranked Kharchla and No. 7 Silas

Allred over No. 5 Dylan Fishback at 184 pounds – to put the Cornhuskers on top 16-14.

Ohio State entered the heavyweight bout down just two points, so the winner of the match would decide the dual.

Feldman answered the call, playing hero for the Buckeyes in extra time with a takedown in the sudden victory period, winning 4-1 and keeping Ohio State's dual record unblemished this season.

Before the weekend, Ryan said that he told the team to be ready for a hostile environment, reminding them to focus on what they could control rather than outside distractions.

"It's always just about being aware that you can't control what they're going to do," Ryan said. "You can't control the crowd. Last time we wrestled these guys, it was at a neutral site, so they didn't have 5,000 screaming fans. But all those things are outside noise. We focus on what we can control."

Birden Named B1G Fresh Of The Week

After a big win to help Ohio State earn a sweep of No. 25 Indiana, Buckeye 165-pound wrestler e'Than Birden earned Big Ten Freshman of the Week honors on Jan. 15.

Birden defeated 20th-ranked Tyler Lillard by a 2-1 decision to improve to 17-6 on the season for Ohio State.

Birden earned first place and a 5-0 record at the 2025 Midlands Championships on Dec. 29-30 before he earned his first dual victory of the season against the Hoosiers' Lillard.

Birden did not wrestle against Minnesota and most recently fell to No. 7 LJ Araujo of Nebraska by a 1-0 decision.

Cannon Earns No. 1 Rank

Ohio State redshirt-sophomore Brandon Cannon has climbed to No. 1 in the country at 157 pounds for the first time in his career, earning the top spot in both the InterMat and FloWrestling rankings.

Cannon began his season with a disappointing fourth-place finish in the 2025 Clarion Open in Ohio State's season-opening tournament on Nov. 2. The Denver, Colo., native won his first two matches before suffering a 7-5 defeat at the hands of Melvin Miller of Bishop McCort (Pa.) High School, who is committed to Virginia Tech.

Ryan chalked up the early-season loss to a brief lapse in focus for Cannon.

"I think there was just a little bit of relaxation in his matches here and there. The match he lost came down to one takedown," Ryan said. "He was the aggressor in the match. He had more opportunities to score one. He didn't finish and he got beat. He just got lazy for a second, and it cost him. I think that was a gift. It was a learning gift, and he watched the film, and he's corrected that."

Cannon has since been lights out, winning his last 11 duals, all of which came by

extra points. His marquee victory came in the Buckeyes' third match of the 2025 National Duals Invitational when Cannon upset No. 1 Antrell Taylor of Nebraska with a 16-4 major decision.

Ryan expressed his high expectations for Cannon and added that he feels the standout wrestler had the tools to contend for a national title a season ago.

"Honestly, I thought he was going to win the national championship last year," Ryan said. "That was probably lofty thinking, but he deeply loves what he does. He's athletic, he's talented, and he has a style of wrestling that's very difficult to manage. He's good in all positions, and he's a warrior. I mean, he's a fighter. He's an ultra-competitor, and those things over time usually bring success."

Cannon becomes the second Buckeye this season to hold the No. 1 ranking in his weight class, joining two-time national champion Mendez, who tops the 141-pound rankings.

Fielding, Shaw Win Red Raider Open

Ohio State sent 10 wrestlers to the Red Raider Open on Jan. 18 at Mount Union in Alliance, Ohio, with two Buckeyes capturing titles and six placing.

Freshmen Brogan Fielding and Maddox Shaw each went undefeated, with Fielding earning a 4-0 record at 141 pounds, while Shaw claimed a 5-0 mark at 149 pounds.

Shaw won his first three matches in the tournament by fall, while Fielding claimed technical fall victories in all four of his bouts.

Ryan said the event provided valuable opportunities for wrestlers who need more reps.

"As a coach, I want to see our guys wrestle that aren't starting or redshirting," Ryan said. "You build confidence by facing a number of different opponents that offer different styles. So it was really good for those two. We need a 141-pounder, and we're looking for 141 because Jesse (Mendez) is going to graduate. We're really happy with Fielding. It was a good weekend for him, and he's got to continue to progress. The same with Maddox. They're potential future stars here. So it was good to see them go out to wrestle like that."

Redshirt-freshman Dakota King went 3-1 to finish second at 133 pounds, and redshirt-freshman Daxton Chase went 5-2 to

place sixth at 149 pounds. Redshirt-freshman Landon Desselle posted a 2-2 record and finished sixth at 157 pounds, while redshirt-freshman Boede Campbell (0-2 record), sophomore T.J. Schierl (3-2) and redshirt-freshman Patrick Downing (0-2) all competed at 165 pounds. Freshman Carson Mize went 4-1 to place third at 184 pounds, and redshirt-freshman Xander Myers finished 1-2 at 197 pounds.

Ryan said the results mattered less than the progress his wrestlers showed on the mat, emphasizing that he and Ohio State's staff evaluate performance beyond wins and losses.

"What we're looking at, even more than winning, is the style of wrestling. How are you winning? That wasn't an elite tournament. It was a good tournament, but by no means is it a tournament you win that you know your crown is the next coming of a multiple-time national champion," Ryan said. "Just watching the way they wrestle, what's their attack rate? Are they scoring on both sides of the body? Are they getting out right away? What's their body language? Is it good? All those things factor into just the type of growth that we need them to undergo."

What's Next For OSU

Following Ohio State's road victories over Nebraska and Minnesota, the Buckeyes will return home on Jan. 30 to take on Wisconsin (10-2, 2-2) at 6 p.m. at the Covelli Center.

The Badgers have just two losses on the season, the first coming to No. 4 Iowa on Jan. 9 in a 23-12 defeat in Iowa City. Wisconsin is most recently coming off a 26-10 loss to Minnesota on Jan. 15 and back-to-back wins against Maryland (28-13) and Northwestern (28-12) prior to that.

Two days later on Feb. 1, Ohio State will host rival No. 13 Michigan (7-2, 3-0) at noon. Since opening the season 2-2, the Wolverines have won five straight, including an 18-14 win over No. 10 Illinois on Jan. 18.

On Feb. 6, Ohio State will take on Iowa (9-3, 2-1) at 8 p.m. in the Covelli Center in a rematch, following the Buckeyes' 27-12 victory over the Hawkeyes at the National Duals Invitational.

Iowa has lost three times all season, to No. 1 Penn State (32-3), No. 2 Ohio State, and No. 3 Iowa State (20-14).

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Season of Highs and Lows For Ohio State

For the third year in a row, a member of the Big Ten conference has won the national championship in football. The University of Indiana football program and coaching staff should be commended for winning the championship this season. They performed at a high level and deserved the title. The Indiana victory over the University of Miami proved that in this new era of college football with the portal system and NIL, even teams without a rich football tradition can compete for a national championship.

COACH'S CORNER Bill Conley

There were a lot of high points for the Ohio State Buckeyes this season despite not winning the Big Ten or national championship. Among the accomplishments of this year's team, a rookie quarterback played at a high level to the point of being on the verge of winning the Heisman Trophy, the Buckeye defense gave up fewer points than any other team in college football despite having a new defensive coordinator, and, of course, there was a great victory over the University of Michigan.

Once again, Ryan Day proved to be one

of the very best head coaches in all of college football and, despite the many changes in the game, he consistently puts together a highly competitive football team.

As successful as the 2025 campaign was for Ohio State, there is still disappointment about how the season ended. The Buckeyes simply didn't play their best quality of football in the last two games of the year. It is unfortunate, but a team is often judged not by how it starts but by how it finishes.

The Ohio State Buckeyes have the right to be extremely proud of their accomplishments this past season. At the same time, it is very understandable why they may have a sour taste in their mouth for how it all ended. Expectations are high for the Ohio State football program each and every year, and don't expect that to ever change.

Most Impressive

One of the most surprising things about the 2025 season was the play of our first-year quarterback, Julian Sayin. Not only did he put up fantastic numbers, but Sayin played with the poise and the confidence of a seasoned veteran. His ability to immediately lead and take command of the offense was inspirational to the entire unit.

Julian led all other quarterbacks in the nation in completion percentage and ended up second in the country in passing efficiency. He threw for over 300 yards in six

games this season and ended up with 32 touchdown strikes, very impressive for a rookie quarterback. Sayin was on the brink of winning the Heisman Trophy going into the Indiana game and is one of the heavy favorites for next season to win the coveted prize.

The second most impressive performance of the season was the play of the Buckeye defensive front. After losing Jack Sawyer, JT Tuimoloau, Ty Hamilton and Ty-leik Williams from last year's squad, there were major questions about how this season's group up front would fare in comparison. Could they be just as stout against the run and as dynamic rushing the passer?

The answer came quickly as defensive ends led by Caden Curry and Kenyatta Jackson Jr., along with defensive interior linemen Kayden McDonald and Tywone Malone, shut down the running attack of their opponents and pressured opposing quarterbacks on a weekly basis. For the season, opposing offenses averaged less than 3 yards per carry against the Buckeyes, who sacked enemy quarterbacks 35 times. The entire defensive unit played outstandingly, and the defensive front was exceptional in leading the charge.

Thirdly, the job of first-year defensive coordinator Matt Patricia was extremely impressive. He inherited some very good personnel from last year's national championship defense. At the same time, he had quite a few position players with limited experience. Patricia also had to introduce these players to his system of play, which can take some time to develop.

He put all the parts of his puzzle together, his defensive scheme, masterfully. He made his system fit the talents of his players, and they responded by playing fast, physical and inspired. The Buckeye defense led the nation in total defense, pass defense and red-zone defense. Matt Patricia proved to be a player's coach who consistently got the very best out of his guys. Job well done.

Most Disappointing

The inconsistency in the Buckeye running game reared its ugly head all season long. Even though the Buckeyes ended up fourth in the Big Ten in total yards, they were no better than middle of the pack in rushing. In half of the 14 games played, the Buckeye offense rushed for less than its 154.4-yard average. In four games, they didn't even crack the 100-yard mark.

Most disappointing was the Big Ten Championship Game against Indiana and the quarterfinal playoff loss to Miami, where the Buckeyes rushed for only 58 and 45 yards, respectively. All the blame cannot be put on the offensive line, however, in terms of the lack of consistency in the running game. Buckeye running backs did not display the ability to make explosive plays in the open field. We really missed the talents of TreVeyon Henderson and Quinshon Judkins in terms of running through arm tackles and making defenders miss in space.

Even the normally strong red-zone running attack was subpar for the Buckeye offense, especially in terms of touchdown

production. In 2024, the Buckeyes were successful in scoring touchdowns 75.8 percent of the time in the red zone, which dropped to just 66.7 percent this season. The Buckeye offense was unable to get the initial push up front too many times on early downs as they got closer to the end zone. The Indiana game was especially painful to watch as the Buckeyes recorded only one touchdown in four chances in the red zone.

Another area of disappointment for the Ohio State offense was the drop-off in pass protection late in the season. Opposing defenses sacked Julian Sayin only six times in the first 12 games of the season, but in the final two, Indiana and Miami got to our quarterback 10 times, five for each team. The offensive line of the Buckeyes, along with the backfield, was unable to protect Sayin against the more talented defensive fronts. Buckeye coaches were also unable to devise maximum protection or outlet schemes to answer the onslaught of a heavy rush.

Nothing was more obvious this season than the lack of both consistency and creativity in the Ohio State special teams. The one highlight of the season was Lorenzo Styles Jr.'s 100-yard kickoff return against UCLA. The Buckeye special teams' units went through the entire season with just one blocked kick, a punt block by Curry in that same UCLA game. Most discouraging were the untimely misses in field goals; most glaring was the 27-yarder against the Hoosiers in the Big Ten Championship Game, which came late in the fourth quarter. Unfortunately, Ohio State's special teams have been solid but not special for a long time.

Most Satisfying Performance

The early-season victory over Texas was huge for the Buckeyes. The Longhorns were loaded with talent and were led by preseason Heisman favorite Arch Manning. The Buckeye defense was terrific by holding Texas to just seven points and limiting Manning to 170 yards in the air, as well as picking him off once.

As good as the win over the Longhorns was in the season opener, it doesn't compare to the sweet revenge game against Michigan in Ann Arbor. Anytime you beat your archrival is special, but the domination shown by the Buckeyes made the win even sweeter.

The Buckeye offense rolled up 22 first downs to just nine for the Wolverines. Both units performed at a high level and outplayed Michigan in every facet of the game. Ohio State amassed 419 yards while giving up only 163. Michigan was able to convert only 1 of 9 third-down conversions and lost the time-of-possession battle by 20 minutes.

The Buckeyes shut the Wolverines out in the second half, and the 27-9 victory secured a coveted pair of gold pants for the players and a trip to the Big Ten Championship Game. It was a great victory for the Buckeyes but, unfortunately, the last victory of the 2025 season.

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College Football Not So Simple Anymore

Remember when football was played from September through November, plus a bowl game? When roster additions were made pretty much only on signing day in February?

EXNER POINT

Rich Exner

When spring football was for returning players, not mixing kids in who somehow graduated from high school early? When the new players didn't arrive on campus until freshmen reported to practice in August? And when the Big Ten stretched from Columbus to Minneapolis?

Simpler times for sure, not too long ago.

No one, I think, can keep up with what is going on now. Not the fans. Not the coaches. And judging by how the administrators have been handling things, not the folks in charge from the conference leaders to the school presidents who run the NCAA.

Thank goodness, it's still a great game between the lines on Saturdays, or whatever day the games happen to land on these days.

Long overdue was sharing some of the wealth with the players. Long overdue was allowing the players some degree of movement that rivaled the coaches chasing their next dollar. And way, way long overdue was the creation of a playoff.

But the haphazard fashion of the way things have swiftly changed resembles a three-ring circus trying to maintain some sense of clarity in a single ring.

We now have conferences too big to legitimately decide a champion on the field. We have kids having to decide whether to transfer days after the season, well before seeing how they fit in during spring practice, as Joe Burrow was able to do.

And we have playoff structure disagreements playing out between the Big Ten and SEC so much that the playoff will remain at 12 teams, despite the fact that both conferences agree it should be expanded – the Big Ten to 24 teams and the SEC to 16.

How, with all that is going on now, can any education leader say with a straight face that having a big-time football pro-

gram is part of the education mission of a university? They can't.

But I still like the game. I like the stadium experience. I like all the traditions from Ohio Stadium to dozens of places around the country. I like how so many styles of offenses and defenses are used from one team to the next. It beats the NFL on all those accounts.

Let's just hope the people in charge figure out a way to get a handle on things going forward.

Prep Or The Portal

That's going to be one of the great debates in coaching rooms across the country, given the success of transfer-heavy Indiana and Miami. What we're probably going to see are smaller recruiting classes to leave more room, and money, for veteran transfers.

The big boys like Ohio State will continue to get plenty of stars during the high school recruiting process.

But I bet we're going to see fewer stories like those of Arvell Reese, who played only on special teams as a freshman but became a likely first-round draft pick two years later. The same goes for "lowly" three-star recruits who emerge as surprise stars and become college football Hall-of-Famers like James Laurinaitis.

The future is probably smaller recruiting classes filled more with four- and five-star players. As for those three-star or lower-rated players who turn out to be really good, I bet more of those will come by way of the transfer portal after first getting their shot at lower-tier schools.

Talent Or Experience?

Would you rather have the very best players, even if it means losing them to the NFL after only three years? Or would you rather have solid, experienced veterans with perhaps not as much pure talent?

What the portal is showing us is that experience can win out come playoff time. It will be interesting to see if that continues to be the trend.

Common Thread With QBs

Two title games in the first two years of the 12-team playoff, and every quarterback was a transfer just stopping by for their final season of college football.

Last year, it was Will Howard (four years at Kansas State, then one at Ohio State) against Riley Leonard (three years

at Duke, then one year at Notre Dame).

This year, it was Fernando Mendoza (three years at California, then one year at Indiana) against the gray beard of this group, Carson Beck (five years at Georgia, then one year at Miami).

Julian Sayin's inexperience showed in the playoffs, but in looking at these other four, it's easy to see why.

To Fret Or Not To Fret

There were a lot of frazzled Buckeye fans watching the internet on the opening days of the portal window, as Buckeye after Buckeye entered the portal, some of whom had arrived in Columbus very highly regarded.

But a common thread was that these were players who rarely got on the field in Columbus. Could they later have emerged as stars, as Reese did in his third year? Sure. My guess is that at least one or two of them will become big-time talents elsewhere.

But here's the way I look at it. Ryan Day has only so much money to spend. He and his staff watched these guys in practice all year. He made judgments that they weren't ready to play in 2025.

And he very likely had to make money decisions based on what he saw in practice on how hard to go after keeping each of them. He has to build a winning roster with the money at his disposal. And he knows more about each of those players' potential than any of us not at practice.

I liken this to Progressive's long-running practice of offering a tool for potential customers to compare its auto insurance rates to the rates of its competitors. I once asked someone at Progressive why they would help someone find a better deal elsewhere. The response: "We're confident based on our risk formulas that we know what price is profitable for each driver, and if someone can get a better

price elsewhere, go ahead."

So far, Day's record is darn good, based on the production of transfers into Ohio State versus what transfers out have done elsewhere.

Pollsters Get It Wrong, Again

Few people pay attention to the final polls after the title game. But if you did, you were probably as puzzled as I was by some of the placements.

Indiana was first and Miami second, of course. No debate.

But here are a couple of examples of strange placements in the final AP poll.

Oregon finished fourth and Ohio State fifth. Both had two losses, with all those losses coming against Indiana or Miami. But Oregon lost to Indiana by 33 points in a game that didn't seem that close. Ohio State lost by three points to Indiana in a game that really was that close. In the final poll, Oregon moved up one spot, and Ohio State moved down three spots.

Alabama moved up two spots in the final rankings to ninth after a 35-point loss to Indiana, which followed a 21-point loss to Georgia. Alabama was the only four-loss team ranked in the top 16. And while 'Bama moved up two spots after its 35-point loss, Notre Dame fell one spot to 10th. Perhaps the voters didn't like the fact that Notre Dame skipped bowl play. But is someone honestly going to tell me that 11-4 Alabama was better than 10-2 Notre Dame, winners of 10 straight?

I'm glad these voters no longer have a say in deciding who plays for the national title. The committee does a much better job in the rankings that determine the playoff teams.



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Cooped Up By Snowstorm, A Look Back At Tressel Hiring

It's that time of year when football season is over (in Columbus is it ever *really* over?) and basketball season is beginning to really heat up, and I am in a position where I can write about a variety of things in this space.

But let me digress for a minute. As I write, we are in the middle of a major snow emergency. I can't help but wonder if all this snow – not to mention potential problems at the printer because of the same – is going to affect our delivery of this issue. Let me assure you, regardless of all this white stuff, the BSB staff is working diligently to meet our deadline.

To digress even more, have any of you thought about the famed Blizzard of '78 while watching the snow fall? Now that was some snow. Someday I will tell the story of how the mayor of Weston, Ohio, pressed me into the Weston Fire Department and official fireman's helmet, coat, boots and all, and I went and helped rescue a stranded elderly woman. People really think you are a fireman when you've got that helmet on.

Any BSB old-timers out there who were at the Snow Bowl?

To get back on point, it has been 25 years since John Cooper was fired as OSU football coach, and 15 days later, Jim Tressel was hired. I was looking at the BSBs of the day. My hats off to the BSB staff of 2001, which did a really comprehensive job of covering both stories.

"I would say that yesterday was a capstone of what we've seen of a deteriorating climate within the football program," OSU athletic director Andy Geiger said after the firing on Jan. 2, 2001, as reported in the Jan. 13, 2001, BSB. "There were concerns about discipline, competitiveness and academic pursuits – a whole series of things. I thought yesterday's performance (at the Outback Bowl game) was proportionally an exhibit of all those things."

For his part, Cooper was surprised at the decision.

"I was shocked," he said. "It was unexpected. I thought I would coach one more year, at least I hoped that."

For more on Cooper's career and what led to his firing, see page 20 of this issue.

The initial list of possible replacements that BSB compiled had Oklahoma coach and Youngstown, Ohio, native Bob Stoops at the top of the list, but his potential hire was complicated by the Sooners preparing to play Florida State for the national championship, which the Sooners won 13-2, and Stoops was never really in contention.

Oklahoma athletic director Joe Castiglione, angered by reports about Ohio State's interest, said he would deny OSU permission to speak to his coach.

"We're playing in a national championship game," Castiglione said. "What the hell are they thinking? Do they think he's going to go somewhere else? He just won the national championship."

"Ohio State is a great program, but it's not any better than Oklahoma. I almost get insulted when people think we're a steppingstone to another job."

Stoops left behind a list of other potential candidates that included Pitt coach Walt Harris, a former Buckeye assistant; Minnesota coach Glen Mason, who played and coached at Ohio State; former Buckeye player and then assistant head coach at Ohio State Fred Pacac; and Tressel. Former Buckeye star Chris Spielman was also lobbying heavily for the job. Other candidates whom BSB listed as "on the periphery" were Northwestern coach Randy Walker, Oklahoma's defensive coordinator Mike Stoops, Stanford coach Tyrone Willingham, and former Ohio State assistant Dom Capers.

One former coach who was not under consideration was Earle Bruce, whose firing in

THE VIEW FROM 15TH & HIGH

Frank Moskowitz, Publisher

1987 opened the way for Cooper to become coach. But Bruce had some interesting comments about Cooper's termination.

"God Bless John Cooper," Bruce said at the time. "He's lasted a long time, and he went 2-10-1 against Michigan. Before, if you lost three straight times to Michigan you were gone. That was even true of Woody (Hayes). If he had won his last three times against them, he probably could have killed that kid (Clemson linebacker Charlie Bauman in the 1978 Gator Bowl) and still been coach."

Skip ahead to the Jan. 27, 2001, issue of BSB.

Oregon coach Mike Bellotti, considered a favorite of Geiger for the job, had already taken his name out of contention after touring campus and interviewing on Jan. 15, leaving Tressel and Mason.

Mason got the final interview, but Tressel had already wowed school president William "Brit" Kirwan, athletic director Andy Geiger and an advisory committee in a Jan. 16 interview.

"I would say that (Jan. 16) was an extraordinary day on this campus," Geiger said of the interview with Tressel. "I think we had very high regard for him. I have to tell you the research we had done in the area of the game – his ability to adapt – I had absolutely no doubts about the football part."

"And the rest of it was so outstanding it put him over the top."

At his introductory press conference on Jan. 18, "(Tressel) wowed the media and viewing public with an unscripted acceptance speech then deftly fielded questions on all aspects of his background, experience and plans for the program," BSB reported.

"When you're at a place like Ohio State that is so visible as an outstanding institution, so visible as an outstanding football program, it gives us even more responsibility because it's not just to this state or this region, it's to this country and it's to this world," Tressel said.

No report on Tressel's hiring would be complete without his famous words while addressing the crowd at the basketball game that evening, ironically against Michigan.

"I'm so proud, so excited and so humble to be your football coach at Ohio State," Tressel told those in attendance. "I can assure you, you will be proud of our young people in the classroom, in the community and, most especially, in 310 days in Ann Arbor, Michigan, on the football field."

BSB did a reaction to the hiring story, reaching out to former players, media types and the like, and not all of those contacted were totally sold on Tressel's hire, including some who would have preferred Mason.

"He bleeds scarlet and gray, there's no doubt about it," Dan Beatty, who played for the Buckeyes from 1987-90, said of Mason, "and you hate to do that to one of your own. He's the man who recruited me to Ohio State, and I still have fond memories of that."

Former Buckeye quarterback Greg Frey of WTVN Radio had positive things to say about Tressel but was not wild about the way Mason was treated.

"I feel really badly for Glen Mason," Frey said. "I think they really strung him out for a long time."

Mark "Munch" Bishop, also of WTVN Radio, had praise for Tressel but clearly favored Mason.

"The problem I have is not so much with Jim Tressel," Munch said. "The problem I have is I feel Glen Mason was wronged horribly by the

university.

Glen Mason was more than qualified for that job. He played and coached under Woody Hayes, and he coached for Earle Bruce. He has spent 15 years as a head coach at Kent, Kansas and Minnesota. Like Coach Bruce said, if that didn't earn him his spurs, I don't know what will."

Bruce Hooley of The (Cleveland) Plain Dealer was just against the hire.

"Around the nation today – believe me, I've talked to a lot of guys who work at big papers and national online services – when the news went out yesterday, I got a lot of instant messages, and the message was one word: 'Tressel?'

"All you people who think Cooper did a lousy job at Ohio State, let's remember that when Earle was fired here, they wanted a guy who could win big. They got a guy who won less than Earle. There is a distinct possibility this guy will win less than Cooper."

A year later, all of us were celebrating Ohio State's first national championship in 34 years.

Idol Idolizes Idol

I looked back at an item from the last issue of BSB.

Given that she was averaging 21.9 points per game as Buckeye Sports Bulletin went to press, Jaloni Cambridge is probably idolized by thousands of fans of the Ohio State women's basketball team. Because of that, I found the note about Cambridge meeting her idol endearing.

When the Buckeyes defeated Illinois on Jan. 7 in Champaign, not only did Cambridge score 41 points in the 78-69 Buckeye victory, but she also got to meet her favorite WNBA player, four-time league MVP Aja Wilson of the Las Vegas Aces, who was in attendance.

"I didn't even know she was there until half-time," Cambridge said. "Kennedy (Cambridge) and I were literally geeking, and I was just so excited because that's literally a dream come true."

Wilson was impressed enough with Cambridge's performance to visit with her after the game. Cambridge said she was starstruck when she had the chance to meet Wilson.

"There are really no thoughts that can go through your mind when you see your favorite player standing in front of you," Cambridge said. "I think I was embarrassing myself. I hope I wasn't embarrassing myself in front of her, but it's just exciting to see someone that you look up to, right in front of your face."

Wilson was complimentary of the Buckeyes' young guard after the game.

"She told me I had a good game, so I think I'm going to take that and run with it for the rest of my life," Cambridge said. "No matter how bad I play, she told me I had a good game. That's all that matters."

We all have our idols.

In this space in that same last issue, I mentioned Navy quarterback Blake Horvath, the son of Alan Horvath, a good friend of BSB.

When I was 12-years-old and growing up in Washington, D.C., my idol was Navy quarterback Roger Staubach, who was the idol of most guys my age in the area. I was so enamored with Staubach, I sent away for an admission application package for the Naval Academy, a pretty industrious thing for this 12-year-old to do. Staubach was my idol until the Washington Redskins (that was their name) traded for quarterback Sonny Jurgensen. That was probably for the better, because I'm not sure I was suited for military academy life. I never looked good in a buzz cut, among other things.

Publisher Loses A Mentor

In 45 years captaining Buckeye Sports Bulletin, I've had only a few mentors – people whom I could go to who would listen, were interested in what we were doing here or in issues that I had personally, and had the knowledge and experience to offer sage advice. I lost one of those mentors on Dec. 9 when Jim Walton passed away at age 89. I know many of you here in Columbus and in the ex-pat community in Naples, Fla., knew Jim. He knew everyone and enjoyed shooting the breeze at lunch or on the golf course with anyone who would listen, and he had an opinion on pretty much everything.

We were neighbors at the old BSB World Headquarters on W. Fifth Avenue in the Grandview area, and we would frequently chat in the parking lot. Somewhere along the way, I can't remember how long ago, we went out to lunch and then we started to go out to lunch regularly. Even though he was a very loyal Purdue grad, he took an interest in Buckeye Sports Bulletin, and as a successful businessman at Ketchum and Walton, a company that specializes in sales and specification of acoustics, air filtration, air cleaning and industrial air control products, he would offer advice to me in a positive, low-pressure way.

His advice was generally helpful. I then just started going to him with my questions or problems, buying him lunch, listening, and we would enjoy a little idle chit-chat along the way.

And long before we had a VIP program, Jim was a benefactor of Buckeye Sports Bulletin. Though a Boilermaker fan, he liked the content in BSB, and he understood the difficulties of the newspaper business in today's Internet world. After a nice lunch at Cap City Diner in Grandview, where he charmed all of the help, he would pull out his checkbook and just say he wanted to help. We put him in the highest level of VIP on our own because he would never have asked for such recognition. I'm going to keep his name on the VIP list for the time being because I will take comfort in knowing he remains a part of Buckeye Sports Bulletin.

If ever there was a friend and mentor to me and BSB, it was Jim Walton.

Reaching Out To Loyal Readers

Please see my publisher's note on page 4 of this issue. We are reaching out to readers to help us keep Buckeye Sports Bulletin vibrant and informative. While we always make an effort to find a subscription price that works for loyal subscribers, we are reaching out to those who can afford a little more to help underwrite those readers on a fixed income or a little less fortunate.

There are ways that even those of lesser means who enjoy that paper can help, and I will be suggesting some of them as we go along. Try sending a subscription to your local library or barber shop for \$32.95. The exposure this purchase offers super-charges your donation. And don't forget you can become a BSB VIP for as little as \$50 a year.

On a different note, we are also encouraging more readers to upgrade to first-class mail in an envelope, even if only for football season. Act now and you can upgrade at last year's rate, \$35 through the Michigan game or \$45 through the Football Recruiting Wrap-up in February. Those rates will be going up. To help you enjoy the paper in a timelier fashion, we have also temporarily lowered the annual first-class rate to \$199.95.

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