

# BUCKEYE SPORTS BULLETIN

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Vol. 45, No. 19

"For The Buckeye Fan Who Needs To Know More"

April 4, 2026

## New Beginnings



*Incoming Transfers, Freshmen  
Learning The Ropes In Spring*

SAM CIPRIANI

**MIX AND MATCH** — With 46 new scholarship players and holes to fill on the offense and defense, coach Ryan Day and his staff have their work cut out trying to put the right players in the right spots. He hopes freshman running back Legend Bey (2) and defensive tackle James Smith (3), an Alabama transfer, will be among the newcomers to be impactful.

**By GREG WILSON**  
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Editor

Transferring to a new school can come with a lot of difficulties for a football player.

Not only are you getting to know an entirely new city, but you are going to be given a brand-new playbook and be expected to learn it by the fall, and you don't know any of the people when you walk into the locker room for the first time.

That is the reality for 46 incoming scholarship players on Ohio State's 2026 roster as they go through spring practices. With 29 incoming freshmen and 17 transfer portal additions, the Buckeyes are bringing in nearly

half of their entire roster.

Turnover is not a new phenomenon in college football. For the entirety of the sport's existence, seniors have graduated and moved on, and freshmen have come in to take their place. Then the transfer portal era of the sport began, and turnover started to affect programs throughout the roster, with more than upperclassmen leaving.

Since the beginning of the portal era, this amount of turnover in one season is something that Ohio State has not yet dealt with.

Head coach Ryan Day constantly talks about how important "the brotherhood" is to the Ohio State culture and how it makes the team better. This team is not only facing the challenge of learning a new playbook but also

getting to know so many new people.

He said in his first spring press conference that the work of his team getting to know each other and becoming closer was happening since they got on campus and got into the weight room with strength and conditioning coach Mick Marotti.

"With half the team being new, there's a camaraderie being built right now that's important," Day said. "True love and brotherhood is when your brother makes a play and you're just as happy for him as if you made the play yourself. So much of that happens in the weight room."

Day acknowledges the differences in building a team today in college football, but he also understands that it's the reality of the game, and his goal of building a national championship team is still the same as it was when he started in this role in 2019, before so many of the recent changes in the game took place.

"Usually, you would grow up with these guys, and you've been with them for two, three, four and sometimes five years," Day said. "That's not the case anymore because of the structure of everything. I really like this team. I like the guys, I like their energy, I like their competitiveness, their seriousness

and it's a mature group. But we haven't been together very long, so we have work to do."

The roster turnover is affecting one side of the ball much more than the other. On the offensive side, the Buckeyes are returning eight regulars, with just wide receiver Carnell Tate, tight ends Will Kacmarek and Max Klare, and right guard Tegra Tshabola no longer with the team.

The defense lost eight starters after being the No. 1-rated unit in both total and scoring defense last year. It's the second straight season that defensive coordinator Matt Patricia will be trying to rebuild a defense — Ohio State also lost eight starters from the 2024 national championship team's defense — but this time it's a little different since many of the potential replacements are coming from other schools out of the portal.

"We had to replace a lot of guys last year, but at least the guys were in-house," Patricia said. "They waited their opportunity and stepped up. Now, with as many new guys coming into the program for the first time, not only are you trying to catch them up on all the football scheme and the rest of it, but you're also trying to catch them up with every-

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## From The Message Board

***Now that both the men's and women's basketball teams are out of the NCAA tournaments, the season is officially done for both programs. With the men's team losing to TCU in the first round and the women's team falling to Notre Dame in the second round, we asked subscribers on the BuckeyeSports.com Fan Forum whether they considered the seasons both teams had to be a success. We also asked what the men's team needs to do in order to take another step next year, and whether they believe the women's team will be able to get through the second round after having lost three years in a row in the round of 32.***

"Given that the men's team was uncertain about making the NCAA Tournament, I would say it was somewhat successful. In order to take the next step, all returners need to improve in large or small ways, and they need a point guard, unless Taison Chatman is able to fill the bill.

"Given the youth of the women's team and the strength of the conference, I am less sure they were successful, and they certainly need to get past the second-round hump next year."

— **Terrier Buck**

"I enjoyed watching both teams this year. The women should be able to win two home games in the NCAA tournament. They didn't. They need a bigger presence in the paint to reach the next level, both in rebounding and ball handling. I love the Buckeye press, but Notre Dame 'out Buckeye'd' the Bucks with their press and stealing capability. They had a good year, but not a great one.

"I thought the men's team made progress this year. It will be hard to replace Bruce Thornton, but they have to. With the exception of the Iowa game, I thought they played with more focus and intensity in the last half of the season, but they are getting outmuscled in the paint. Amare Bynum could develop into something special. I think it was a successful season for them. Both teams need to vastly improve their benches."

— **R1TBDBITL**

"The Big Ten had four teams in the men's Elite Eight: Michigan, Purdue, Illinois and

Iowa. The Big Ten has UCLA and Michigan in the women's Elite Eight. One of the men's teams is guaranteed a Final Four spot (Illinois after beating Iowa), and it was possible there could have been three of the four, but unlikely. UCLA may have the best shot at making the women's Final Four, while the talented sophomore class for Michigan is playing well and could earn a ticket.

"The point is, the Buckeyes competed against some very good conference teams this season.

"Both teams need player development this offseason, and both need to add two to three high-level starters and need to add quality bench depth.

"The elite programs have substantially higher roster budgets. Asking Coaches Jake Diebler and Kevin McGuff to win championships with mid-level roster budgets probably isn't going to happen. If Coach Ryan Day was ordered to cut his \$70 million coaches/players budget in half, the football prospects for 2026 probably wouldn't look as good."

— **BYRON MCNUTT**

"It was a definite improvement, especially in the second half of the season. Making the Big Dance was the minimum. Expecting the team to take a step up next season with retained, returning players, new freshmen and portal additions, which were better this season than Diebler's first season."

— **Bob Cody**

"The women's basketball team has too

much talent to stall out. I am not a coach, so I don't know where to point a finger. There is certainly enough material to sculpt some success. I remain, however, forever optimistic."

— **PeyoteBuck**

"The Buckeyes made the NCAA Tournament, so yes, I consider it a successful season, given the past several years. Now, next year, it would be nice to win a game."

— **Michael Bauer**

"The men's team reached its floor, which was to make the NCAA Tournament. They need to have a higher ceiling next season by making better player acquisitions in the next few months, but Diebler can also do more to maximize what he's got, too. Put up or shut up time next season, but then again, finishing fifth or sixth in the Big Ten and making the second round would be progress. That should be very attainable if they just get a veteran PG and a real center.

"The women's team had a good season, finishing fifth in a good Big Ten, but it's a little more complicated. They were young and did well to earn the right to host the NCAA tournament, but then losing at home again was worse for perception than if they had gone to Notre Dame and were beat. Iowa also lost on its home floor in the second round, and they were a 2 seed. West Virginia also lost on their home floor as a 4 seed, so it's not like this is unheard of, but three years in a row is not ideal."

— **Marcus Hartman, BSB**

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# Why Isn't OSU A Basketball School?

Fun fact. Six Big Ten teams – Illinois, Iowa, Michigan, Michigan State, Nebraska and Purdue – advanced past the first weekend of this year's NCAA Tournament, representing more than one-third of the entire Sweet 16. The Fighting Illini and Wolverines combined to make up half of the Final Four.

Ohio State, of course, was not among those advancing, bowing out with a two-point, opening-round loss to a TCU team that got run off the court two days later by Duke.

Much was made of the Buckeyes ending a three-year drought by making the field of 68, but it has now been an unlucky 13 years since Ohio State advanced past the first weekend of the tournament. In case your memory has faded, the Buckeyes made the Elite Eight in 2013, marking the fourth straight year they had made at least the Sweet 16.

About this time of year, I often tell the tale of a 30-something sportswriter telling a 40-something coach his opinion as to why Ohio State basketball wasn't on the same level as Ohio State football.

My very first interview with former OSU basketball coach Gary Williams came in the fall of 1988. I was in my first year with BSB, and Williams was set to begin his third year as head coach of the Buckeyes. The team was still headquartered in St. John Arena, and the interview took place in Williams' second-story office, which overlooked Woody Hayes Drive and the rotunda entrance of Ohio Stadium.

Somewhere near the end of the interview, Williams arose from the seat behind his desk, walked to the window and said something to the effect of "I don't understand why Ohio State basketball has to take a back seat to football."

For better or worse, flippancy has always been a character trait of mine, and I quickly said, "Look out that window for the answer to your question. Woody Hayes Drive cuts through the heart of the campus, and Fred Taylor Drive is a back alley that leads to parking lots for football games."

The coach turned and I saw for the first time the Williams scowl that drew scores of technical fouls over an eventual 33-year coaching career that earned nine trips to the Sweet 16 – none at Ohio State – as well as the 2002 NCAA Tournament championship. As we all learned later, Williams was already looking for greener pastures when we had that first chat, and he wound up much happier at his alma mater Maryland, where he spent 22 seasons, won 461 games and hoisted that national title trophy.

What I said to Williams that day was perhaps a bit too glib by half, but I continue to contend that I wasn't wrong.

Football has been the engine that drives the train at Ohio State and was long before Gary Williams ever got to Columbus. Ohio State football has been equated to a religion, and it's hard to argue that point with Ohio Stadium serving as the cathedral and "Across the Field" and "Carmen Ohio" among the hymns. It's Brutus and Sloopy. The Horseshoe and The Best Damn Band In The Land. It's Gold Pants and Senior Tackle. It's Chic and Hopalong, the Super Sophs, Woody, Archie, Eddie and a thousand more names that make Ohio State football what it is.

Not to be disrespectful, but Ohio State basketball has Fred Taylor, Jerry Lucas and a long-ago championship won when the NCAA Tournament field contained only 25 teams.

To be sure, OSU basketball has its devoted fans, and I'm sure some of you are seething just reading this. But for whatever reason, the basketball team flirts with greatness for a period of time and then fades back into the shadows.

Since Taylor guided Lucas, John Havlicek and his own group of Super Sophs to the 1960

national championship, there have been glimmers of glory. That group made three straight title games only to lose the 1961 and 1962 championship games to the University of Cincinnati.

## EDITOR'S NOTEBOOK Mark Rea

Taylor's teams made only one more Final Four (1968) in his final 14 seasons with the Buckeyes, and he retired disenchanted by what he thought was an indifferent response by the Big Ten and Ohio State officials to a 1972 brawl incited by Minnesota players that left several OSU players injured, including center Luke Witte, who was hospitalized and required 29 stitches in his face.

### Hit-And-Miss Success

To be brutally honest, successors to Taylor over the past 50 years have been hit-and-miss hires.

Eldon Miller was a veteran coach who had success at Wittenberg before a six-year stint at Western Michigan included guiding the Broncos to a trip to the 1976 Sweet 16, a program milestone never achieved before or since. But eight of Miller's nine seasons with the Buckeyes featured double-digit losses, and he made only four trips to the NCAA Tournament.

Miller gave way to Williams, who produced a pedestrian 59-41 record in three seasons before the university chose expediency by giving the job to Randy Ayers, the assistant credited with recruiting such talent as Mark Baker, Jamaal Brown, Chris Jent and Jim Jackson.

Ayers had a majestic run to begin his head coaching career at OSU, going 70-23 with two Big Ten titles, a Sweet 16 and an Elite Eight appearance over his first three seasons. But things came apart after Jackson departed for the NBA. The program received a one-year NCAA probation in 1994 for recruiting violations, and Ayers was fired in 1997 after his final three teams cratered with a combined conference record of 10-44.

As it did with Williams a decade before, Ohio State thought chasing Eastern basketball talent was what the basketball program needed when it hired New York native Jim O'Brien as Ayers' successor. O'Brien was fresh off 15 years at St. Bonaventure and Boston College, earning three NCAA Tournament trips during his final four seasons at BC.

In just his second year with the Buckeyes, O'Brien guided the team to a magical season that included 27 victories, a second-place finish in the Big Ten, and a trip to the Final Four. Five years later, athletic director Andy Geiger fired O'Brien for improprieties involving a pair of foreign-born players.

That resulted in a mess that included three years of probation for the basketball program as well as being forced to vacate 129 games including the Final Four appearance, a five-year show-cause penalty from the NCAA for O'Brien, and a wrongful termination lawsuit filed by the coach against Geiger and the university.

Meanwhile, Geiger became the proverbial man who fell in the sewer and came out with a pocketful of fish. Agreeing to pick up the pieces of the program was 37-year-old Thad Matta, who was fresh off four straight trips to the NCAA Tournament – one with Butler and three with Xavier.

Matta managed to breathe new life into the program, and the Buckeyes went to the tourna-

ment nine times in the coach's first 11 seasons in Columbus. But the seemingly blissful relationship between Matta and Ohio State began to crumble when the coach experienced serious health problems that robbed him of his youthful exuberance. Opposing coaches began to use Matta's condition against him on the recruiting trail, and despite a program-record 337 wins, Matta stepped down following the 2016-17 season.

What has transpired over the past nine seasons has been a grab bag.

### What's The Answer?

Chris Holtmann led Butler to three NCAA Tournament appearances in his three seasons there, and he got the Buckeyes to the tournament in four of his first five seasons in Columbus. (He'd likely have made it five in a row, but COVID wiped out the 2020 tournament.) But the prevailing thought was that Holtmann's program had plateaued, and after his team lost nine of 11 games early in 2024, he was let go in mid-February.

Top assistant Jake Diebler took over the team on an interim basis and guided the Buckeyes to five wins in their final six regular-season games and then to the NIT quarterfinals, where they lost a narrow 79-77 decision to a 16-loss Georgia team.

Despite bigger names being available, that late-season run convinced new OSU athletic director Ross Bjork to drop the interim tag and make Diebler head coach, signing him to a five-year contract worth an estimated \$11.5 million.

The program seemed listless for the first year and half under Diebler's guidance until turning on a switch in March with three straight victories to end the regular season and another in the Big Ten tournament to cement a spot in the NCAA field. Two of those four wins came against Purdue and Iowa, teams that made this year's Elite Eight.

But in bowing out in the first round to TCU, the Buckeyes were exposed as the team they have largely become with Diebler as head coach – one that struggles against athletic big men, one that runs a largely vanilla offense usually through one player (Bruce Thornton) and one that suffers through long bouts of streaky shooting.

I don't know if Diebler is the coach who can build the Ohio State basketball program into a sustainable force. Most of the same big names that were available at the end of the 2024 season remain available – ex-Villanova coach Jay Wright and former Virginia coach Tony Bennett, who have three national championships between them, come readily to mind – if Bjork decides to make a change.

However, changing coaches during this era of college athletics means you had better prepare for an exodus through the transfer portal with no guarantee that prized recruits such as five-star prospect Anthony Thompson will want to stay. Indiana head coach Darrien DeVries managed to squeeze an 18-14 finish out of his first team in Bloomington this past year after beginning it with no scholarship players remaining on the roster after Mike Woodson and IU came to a mutual parting of the ways.

Lack of commitment on the part of the university to the product? Coaching missteps and recruiting failures? Just bad luck? Maybe it's a combination of those factors as to why the Ohio State basketball program can't seem to find its way to sustained success like its football counterpart.

Perhaps it's just one of those questions that doesn't have an answer.

# OHIO STATE INSIDER

## Hankton Says Coaching Smith Is 'A Blessing'

Ohio State wide receivers coach Cortez Hankton has already been impressed by the talent in the Buckeye receiver unit.

Tasked with maintaining the program's tradition of elite wideout play, the former LSU co-offensive coordinator and wide receivers coach has taken an immediate liking to Ohio State star receiver Jeremiah Smith.

When asked what it's like to coach Smith, Hankton called the opportunity a blessing, adding that the wideout possesses a strong desire to learn and improve.

"It's a blessing. I'm grateful and I'm thankful," Hankton said. "He's a generational talent. But more importantly, he's a fine young man. He's a great kid, and he yearns to learn football. He yearns to be coached, and he's like that every single day. He's been a sponge. We've put a lot on his plate, but he's handled it well."

Smith has been one of the best receivers in college football over the past two seasons, recording at least 75 receptions, 1,200 yards and 12 touchdowns in his two campaigns with the Buckeyes.

For Hankton, what sets Smith apart from any wide receiver he's coached is his raw athletic ability, combined with his 6-3, 233-pound frame.

"I've been around guys who work at a high level, who are extremely competitive, but what makes him different is he's probably the most physically blessed guy that I've coached," Hankton said. "To have his length and size, I mean, he's 230 pounds. One day I was doing a drill with him, and just kind of bumped into

him. He damn near ran me over. You've got a guy that's just a physical freak, and he's just skilled. I'll say this plenty of times, it's truly a blessing to coach him."

Smith said he has already begun to see growth in his game under Hankton.

"He brings a lot of juice to this program, especially in the receiver room," Smith said. "He's been a big help for all of us coming in, all the young guys and me as well, all the veterans. He's a guy that fits our culture and fits everything that we ask for the receiver coach, and we are blessed to have him on our team."

## Mathews Returns For 'Unfinished Business'

Junior cornerback Jermaine Mathews Jr. and the rest of Ohio State's secondary didn't have much go wrong for them during the 2025 season. As an essential part of what was, statistically speaking, the No. 1 defense in the country, the Buckeye secondary more than held up its end of the bargain. Ohio State easily ranked No. 1 nationally, conceding only 129.5 passing yards per game.

However, although it wasn't necessarily the secondary's fault, Ohio State fell short of winning its second straight national championship.

The Buckeyes' sour finish is partially why Mathews decided to return for his fourth season at Ohio State, despite having a chance to enter the NFL draft.

"It was like 50-50," Mathews said when asked how close he was to entering the draft. "I didn't end the season the way I wanted to end it last year, so I felt there was some unfinished business."

After being the strength of the team in the regular season, the secondary wasn't quite as strong in the postseason.

Mathews gave up a couple of lengthy completions in Ohio State's 13-10 loss to eventual national champion Indiana in the Big Ten Championship Game. Hoosier quarterback Fernando Mendoza threw for 222 yards in that game, with his lone touchdown pass going to Elijah Sarratt, who was covered by Mathews on the play.

Mathews said some of those plays have stuck with him over the offseason.

"A couple of the plays I want back, but that's

## 2026 Ohio State Football Schedule

Date	Opponent	Result/Time (ET)	TV	2025 Record, Bowl Result
Sept. 5	BALL STATE	TBA	TBA	4-8, not bowl eligible
Sept. 12	at Texas	TBA	TBA	10-3, 41-27 win over Michigan
Sept. 19	KENT STATE	TBA	TBA	5-7, not bowl eligible
Sept. 26	ILLINOIS	TBA	TBA	9-4, 30-28 win over Tennessee
Oct. 3	at Iowa	TBA	TBA	9-4, 34-27 win over Vanderbilt
Oct. 10	MARYLAND	TBA	TBA	4-8, not bowl eligible
Oct. 17	at Indiana	TBA	TBA	16-0, 27-21 win over Miami (Fla.)
Oct. 31	at USC	TBA	TBA	9-4, 30-27 loss to TCU
Nov. 7	OREGON	TBA	TBA	13-2, 56-22 loss to Indiana
Nov. 14	NORTHWESTERN	TBA	TBA	7-6, 34-7 win over Central Michigan
Nov. 21	at Nebraska	TBA	TBA	7-6, 44-22 loss to Utah
Nov. 28	MICHIGAN	TBA	TBA	9-4, 41-27 loss to Texas
Dec. 5	Big Ten Championship	TBA	TBA	

just the business of playing corner," Mathews said. "I really faced my first type of adversity toward the end of the season last year since I've been here. So I'm just really coping with that and keep going every day."

Mathews said he aims to improve his physicality in the running game this year and also wants to get better at pressing. He said he has lofty goals for himself and the team but wants to focus on the little things in the spring.

"I definitely have a lot of personal goals and team goals for this year, but I think it's more of just focusing on the little things, some of the small things that I can control. There are a lot of things that just go on in this business you really can't control. Controlling all the little things I can control is going to help me in the long run."

## Inniss Aims To Become First-Round Pick

Over the offseason, Brandon Inniss had a simple goal: to become an Iron Buckeye for the first time in his career. Although he had already proved his leadership to some extent last season when he was named a team captain, Inniss wanted to prove his work ethic to his newer teammates.

"It means everything," Inniss said about what it meant to be named an Iron Buckeye. "I was solely focused on being an Iron Buckeye, being one of the hardest workers on the team, and I'm glad that I was able to hit that goal."

With that accomplishment behind him, Inniss now has his sights set on becoming the latest Buckeye receiver to be selected in the first round of next year's NFL draft.

The Buckeyes have had five wide receivers selected in the first round of the last four NFL drafts dating back to 2022, and former Ohio State receiver Carnell Tate is poised to join that group. After a spectacular junior season, Tate is projected to be selected early in the 2026 NFL draft, and Inniss hopes his Ohio State story ends in a similar fashion.

"I'm focused this year," Inniss said. "I have one year left, and I'm going to do everything I can to be a first-round pick."

It won't be easy for Inniss to solidify himself as a first-round pick. He had a solid season last year but didn't have the numbers of a first-round caliber receiver. Inniss finished the season with 271 receiving yards and three touchdowns on 36 catches.

Still, Inniss knows what he has to do to be one of 32 players selected in the first round of next year's draft.

"I need to be more explosive. After the catch, I need to be more explosive. I have to have all the production I can when I have the ball in my hands," Inniss said. "I have to catch everything. I have to create a lot of separation

and be dominant on the perimeter."

## OL Hungry For Growth

After a fairly impressive regular season, Ohio State's offensive line had a nightmarish postseason. In the pair of losses to Indiana and Miami (Fla.), the Buckeyes allowed then-red-shirt-freshman quarterback Julian Sayin to be sacked a combined 10 times and struggled to formulate a consistent run game.

The Buckeyes' offensive line faced plenty of criticism for its play down the stretch of the season, and according to rising senior guard Luke Montgomery, that scrutiny was deserved.

"It was justified, 100 percent," Montgomery said of the criticism the offensive line faced after the postseason. "We understand that. We took that, and we're going to implement it now. We're pretty pissed off."

Featuring a line that is largely the same as it was last year, with four starters returning and only starting right guard Tegra Tshabola departing via the transfer portal, Ohio State's offensive line will have the opportunity to show they've grown.

Senior center Carson Hinzman echoed Montgomery's sentiment that the Buckeyes are motivated by their issues in last year's postseason.

"I think this season is going to be a great opportunity to right some of our wrongs we had last year," Hinzman said. "But we have more experience, more skill work, and I think our guys have only gotten better."

Hinzman said the offensive line hopes to improve its fundamentals in the spring to help protect its quarterback better this year.

"Obviously, we have something to prove, but we can't let that be the main driving force. (Sayin) is a great guy. We don't want to see him get hit. Together, if we just nail down the fundamentals, which is exactly what we're doing this spring, we're going to be a pretty solid group."

## Stover Emerging In Spring Practices

Ohio State junior Garrett Stover entered the Buckeyes' spring camp with minimal expectations of emerging as a key contributor within the linebacker unit, but that has proved far from the case.

In his freshman campaign on Ohio State's national championship team in the 2024 season, Stover played just a single snap. Although he improved that mark to 22 reps as a sophomore a season ago, totaling five tackles, Stover was still buried in an ever-talented linebacker corps featuring two potential first-round picks in Sonny Styles and Arvell Reese.

Stover, a native of Sunbury, Ohio, turned heads as one of four Ohio State players to earn



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winter Iron Buckeye honors, and he is hoping to keep that momentum going into a breakout 2026 season.

Stover earned the Iron Buckeye honors along with safety Jaylen McClain and wide receivers Smith and Inniss.

"It means everything," Stover said. "It's been a big goal of mine ever since I got here. I understand what it means to be an Iron Buckeye. I think it's just a testament to my teammates, the strength staff and what they've seen in me. I'm so grateful for it."

Ohio State defensive coordinator Matt Patricia said that Stover's growth in all areas has been evident throughout the offseason.

"Give him all the credit in the world. He came and blew the doors off the offseason program," Patricia said. "It was awesome to watch him be able to do that. He worked really hard, changed his body, and changed all the work that he put into himself. Then he built the confidence behind it. So that's the biggest part of it for me, is he has the momentum of his confidence right now."

Still, the 6-1, 228-pound Stover must earn his spot in a deep linebacker room featuring Payton Pierce, Christian Alliegro, Riley Pettijohn, TJ Alford and Cincere Johnson.

However, Stover isn't deterred, stating that regardless of where Patricia puts him, he's willing to play in any spot, expressing confidence that his skill set fits any situation.

"I'm a guy that can come into any situation," Stover said. "I bring physicality, will do any dirty work, and just anything asked of me, I'm willing to do it."

### OSU Self-Reports 3 NCAA Violations

The Ohio State football program self-re-

## Beat The Increase To Upgrade To First-Class Mail

The next print edition of Buckeye Sports Bulletin, the April 18 issue, is scheduled to be mailed on April 14. With spring football practice in full swing and many recruits visiting, there is bound to be plenty of Buckeye news between now and the next issue.

There is no reason to miss any of the latest news. The Buckeye Sports Bulletin staff will be reporting on all the breaking news, including any action with the portal, in real time at the electronic BuckeyeSports.com, free to all BSB print subscribers.

The discussion should also be hot and heavy on the BuckeyeSports.com Forum, where subscribers and staff members interact, with all this activity.

BuckeyeSports.com also offers plenty of additional content not found in your paper. The BSB staff reports on the breaking stories plus posts additional features.

Along with daily posts, we offer reprints from the Buckeye Sports Bulletin archives as part of our popular Reprint Thursdays.

We want to remind readers that the complete edition of each BSB is posted at BuckeyeSports.com immediately upon completion of the paper, making the site a must for readers having continuing mail problems. This electronic

service, while not a substitute for your print edition, is a stopgap as your paper winds its way through the postal system and is also free to subscribers.

If you are having delivery problems, now would be a great time to upgrade your subscription to first-class mail for football season because we are still honoring last year's price. Upgrade from the Football Preview issued through the Michigan game for \$35 or through the playoffs and the Football Recruiting Wrap-Up for \$45. Give us a call at (614) 486-2202 to order by credit card, or to pay by mail write P.O. Box 12453, Columbus, Ohio, 43212. If paying with a credit card, don't forget your three- or four-digit security code.

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ported three minor violations to the NCAA, including the use of a student manager who was no longer enrolled, a player participating in strength and conditioning activities before receiving medical clearance, and an issue related to a social media post, according to a document obtained by The Columbus Dispatch on March 23.

The first infringement occurred in the summer of 2025, when a student manager who was no longer enrolled at the university performed duties such as managing clock operation responsibilities, after staff believed he would be re-enrolling on the main campus.

"The (equipment) staff believed the individual involved would be enrolling at the main campus for the fall 2025 term and permitted him to commence performing traditional managerial duties," the report read.

The manager was removed from the staff and Ohio State has since implemented improved enrollment tracking for its managers.

The second violation occurred in January 2025 and was caused by a player participating in strength and conditioning activities before he was medically cleared.

The third incident stemmed from an assistant coach posting on social media about a transfer portal commitment before it was finalized. The post was later deleted.

According to the report, Ohio State conducted rules education for its staff following each of the three incidents.

It marked the first time since 2024 that the Buckeye football program had multiple infractions during an academic year, when the athletic department self-reported four minor violations.

### OSU No. 1 In SP+ Rankings

Heading into the 2026 season, Ohio State claimed the top spot in the first release of the SP+ rankings, formulated by ESPN's Bill Connelly.

According to the rankings, the Buckeyes feature the No. 1 defense (8.8 defensive SP+), the No. 2 offense (40.6) and the No. 67 special teams (0.1) nationally. Ohio State trails only Oregon offensively (40.7). The Ducks finished second overall in the initial rankings.

Following Ohio State and Oregon, the rest of the top 10 includes No. 3 Notre Dame, No. 4 Georgia, No. 5 Indiana, No. 6 Texas, No. 7 Texas Tech, No. 8 Miami (Fla.), No. 9 Texas A&M and No. 10 LSU.

Georgia, with the No. 5 offense (38.2) and defense (13.3), as well as the No. 3 special teams (0.6) was the only team to rank in the top 10 in all three categories.

SP+ is a tempo- and opponent-adjusted metric that measures efficiency among college football teams.

Prior to the start of the season, the rankings are determined using four weighted factors: returning production, recent performance, recruiting success and coaching changes.

### Kim Hired As Defensive Asst.

Ohio State has bolstered its defensive staff with the addition of veteran NFL assis-

tant and pass-rush specialist Joe Kim, who brings more than 30 years of college and NFL experience to the Buckeyes as their new defensive analyst.

According to a report from Letterman Row on March 24, Kim will work with the Buckeyes' defensive line.

Kim has worked for 11 total NFL teams throughout his career, primarily as a pass rush consultant and skill development coach. He also served as a pass rush consultant for Penn State in 2009-10.

He most recently served as Illinois' skill development coordinator in 2025, marking the second Illini staffer to join the Buckeyes this offseason, along with Ohio State special teams coach Robby Discher.

Kim previously worked with Patricia at New England, serving as the team's direc-

**Continued On Page 6**



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Continued From Page 5

tor of skill development from 2019-24 after holding the role of pass rush consultant for the Patriots in 2018.

“He brings a level of expertise, not only to the line, but a lot of combat drills like hand-to-hand work,” Patricia said. “He’s evolved his entire career over the last 30 years in the NFL of taking his background and then applying it to what that looks like with the violence of the game. To be able to get that

here in college is great. It gives our guys a head start.”

In addition to his football coaching background, Kim is also a highly accomplished taekwondo instructor. He has produced more than 250 black belts and several national and international champions.

Former Alabama head coach Nick Saban said that Kim “teaches players how to attack a source, how to use and read a body position for weakness and strength,” referring to the longtime defensive assistant as “the pass-rush guru.”

**Little, Parker Have Black Stripes Removed**

Two Buckeyes had their black stripes removed following Ohio State’s practice on March 28. Senior defensive back Earl Little Jr. and junior receiver Kyle Parker were the first new additions to the team to become “official” members of the squad.

Parker, who had already made some plays in practice open to the media, was praised by Hankton, who also led the receiv-

er room at LSU when Parker was with the Tigers.

“(Parker) brings a mindset of physicality,” Hankton said. “He’s really tough with the football, has a high football IQ, and is very versatile.”

The 5-10, 195-pound receiver caught 31 passes for 330 yards and four touchdowns in his sophomore campaign with the Tigers. In 2024, Parker hauled in three passes for 55 yards and a score in his redshirt-freshman campaign before going down with a season-ending injury.

Like Parker, Little is supposed to immediately play a significant role in Columbus. Little had the best season of his collegiate career last year for Florida State. Playing in 12 games, Little recorded 76 total tackles, including two for loss, four interceptions and two pass deflections.

Smith has liked what he’s seen from Little so far in the spring.

“He’s going to hit,” Smith said. “He’s going to make plays. He’s going to be very special for us.”

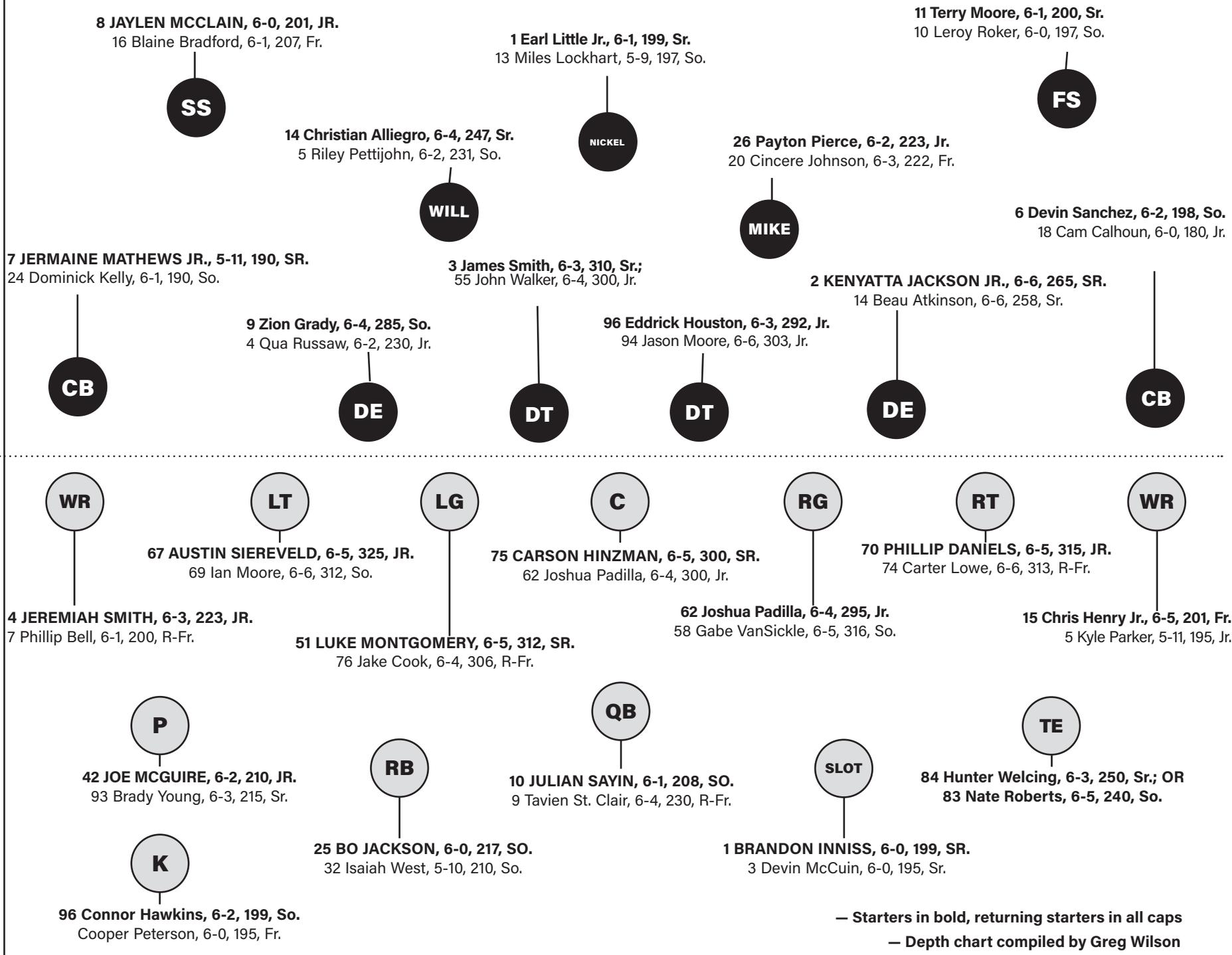
**Titus: OSU MBB Has ‘Worst Fans’**

Following Ohio State’s 66-64 loss to TCU in the first round of the NCAA Tournament, former Ohio State basketball player and current Barstool Sports personality Mark Titus called out Buckeye Nation.

“We have the worst fans in the world, Ohio State. Ohio State basketball fans are the worst fans in the world,” Titus said in an episode of his “Mostly Hoops” podcast. “They watch football all year. They don’t even pay attention to the basketball program. They parachute in around late January, early February. They look up the rankings, and if we’re not ranked in the top 10, they’re just like, ‘Everything sucks, fire everybody. This is terrible.’ They have no idea what they’re talking about.”

Titus’ fiery rant came shortly after many Ohio State fans criticized head coach Jake Diebler and Ohio State for the final play of the game against the Horned Frogs. The Buckeyes trailed by two points with the ball with just over four seconds left. Despite coming out of a timeout, Ohio State had to settle

**OHIO STATE SPRING DEPTH CHART**



Ohio State Spring Football Roster

No.	Name	Pos.	Ht.	Wt.	Yr.	Hometown/Previous School
1	Brandon Inniss	WR	6-0	199	Sr.	Hollywood, Fla./American Heritage
1	Earl Little Jr.	CB	6-0	198	Sr.	Fort Lauderdale, Fla./American Heritage
2	Legend Bay	RB	5-10	177	Fr.	Forney, Texas/North Forney
2	Kenyatta Jackson Jr.	DE	6-6	265	Gr.	Miami Gardens, Fla./Chaminade-Madonna Prep
3	Devin McCuin	WR	6-0	189	Sr.	Jacksonville, Texas/UT San Antonio
3	James Smith	DT	6-2	314	Sr.	Montgomery, Ala./Alabama
4	Qua Russaw	DE	6-2	240	Sr.	Montgomery, Ala./Alabama
4	Jeremiah Smith	WR	6-3	223	Jr.	Miami Gardens, Fla./Chaminade-Madonna Prep
5	Kyle Parker	WR	5-10	195	Sr.	Allen, Texas/LSU
5	Riley Pettijohn	LB	6-2	231	So.	McKinney, Texas/McKinney
6	Jerquaden Guilford	WR	6-3	185	Fr.	Fort Wayne, Ind./Northrop
6	Devin Sanchez	CB	6-2	198	So.	Houston/North Shore
7	Phillip Bell	WR	6-1	200	So.	Mission Viejo, Calif./Mission Viejo
7	Jermaine Mathews Jr.	CB	5-11	190	Sr.	Cincinnati/Winton Woods
8	De'Zie Jones	WR	5-10	187	So.	Wayne, N.J./DePaul Catholic
8	Jaylen McClain	SAF	6-0	201	Jr.	Rahway, N.J./Seton Hall Prep
9	Zion Grady	DL	6-4	258	So.	Enterprise, Ala./Enterprise
9	Tavien St. Clair	QB	6-4	230	So.	Bellefontaine, Ohio/Bellefontaine
10	Leroy Roker III	SAF	6-0	197	Jr.	Fort Myers, Fla./Bishop Verot
10	Julian Sayin	QB	6-1	208	Jr.	Carlsbad, Calif./Alabama
11	Brock Boyd	WR	6-1	184	Fr.	Southlake, Texas/Southlake Carroll
11	Terry Moore	SAF	6-0	200	Sr.	Washington, N.C./Duke
12	Beau Atkinson	DL	6-6	258	Gr.	Raleigh, N.C./North Carolina
13	Luke Fahey	QB	5-11	206	Fr.	Mission Viejo, Calif./Mission Viejo
13	Miles Lockhart	CB	5-9	197	Jr.	Chandler, Ariz./Basha
14	Christian Alliegro	LB	6-4	241	Sr.	Darien, Conn./Wisconsin
15	Chris Henry Jr.	WR	6-5	195	Fr.	Santa Ana, Calif./Mater Dei
15	Jordan Thomas	CB	6-1	189	Fr.	Oradell, N.J./Bergen Catholic
16	Blaine Bradford	SAF	6-1	209	Fr.	Baton Rouge, La./Baton Rouge Catholic
16	Justyn Martin	QB	6-4	230	Sr.	Inglewood, Calif./Maryland
17	Tarvos TJ Alford	LB	6-1	233	So.	Port Saint Lucie, Fla./Vero Beach
18	Cam Calhoun	CB	6-0	176	Sr.	Cincinnati/Alabama
18	Kolton Stover	QB	6-4	198	So.	Centerburg, Ohio/Highland
19	Brady Geibel	QB	6-4	207	So.	Sugarcreek, Ohio/Furman
19	Jordyn Woods	CB	6-4	193	So.	Cartersville, Ga./Cartersville
20	Cincere Johnson	LB	6-3	228	Fr.	Cleveland/Glenville
21	Brenten Inky Jones	LB	6-2	210	Gr.	Steubenville, Ohio/Steubenville
21	Anthony 'Turbo' Rogers	RB	5-8	198	So.	Montgomery, Ala./Carver
23	Nolan Baudo	WR	5-10	180	Sr.	Chicago/Marist
23	Garrett Stover	LB	6-1	228	Jr.	Sunbury, Ohio/Big Walnut
24	Ja'Kobi Jackson	RB	5-11	217	Sr.	Pensacola, Fla./Florida
24	Dominick Kelly	CB	6-2	190	So.	St. Petersburg, Fla./Georgia
25	Bo Jackson	RB	6-0	217	So.	Cleveland/Villa Angela-St. Joseph
25	Jay Timmons	CB	5-11	180	Fr.	Gibsonia, Pa./Pine-Richland
26	Payton Pierce	LB	6-2	223	Jr.	Lucas, Texas/Lovejoy
28	Simeon Caldwell	SAF	6-2	195	Fr.	Jacksonville, Fla./The Bolles School
28	Stanley Jackson Jr.	RB	5-11	218	Jr.	Westerville, Ohio/Marshall
29	Favour Akih	RB	5-11	184	Fr.	Delaware, Ohio/Rutherford B. Hayes
29	Deshawn Stewart	SAF	6-0	199	So.	Wayne, N.J./DePaul Catholic
30	Khari Bing	SAF	5-11	182	Fr.	Baltimore/St. Francis Academy
30	Amari Valerio-Hudson	WR	5-9	160	Fr.	Dublin, Ohio/Coffman
32	Kaden Gebhardt	SAF	6-1	200	Fr.	Lewis Center, Ohio/Olentangy
32	Isaiah West	RB	5-10	210	So.	Philadelphia/St. Joseph's Prep
33	Eli Lee	LB	6-3	227	So.	Akron/Archbishop Hoban
34	Brennen Schramm	WR	6-0	190	Sr.	Medina, Ohio/Medina
34	Khary Wilder	DE	6-4	248	Fr.	Gardena, Calif./Junipero Serra
35	Jaystin Gwinn	SAF	5-10	206	So.	Westerville, Ohio/Westerville Central
36	CJ Sanna	LB	6-2	230	Fr.	Lewis Center, Ohio/Olentangy
37	Zach Hayes	LB	6-2	222	Jr.	LaGrange Park, Ill./Nazareth Academy
38	Eli Riggs	LB	6-3	229	Jr.	Cincinnati/Indian Hill
39	Glorien Gough	DB	5-10	197	Sr.	Palos Verdes Estates, Calif./Mater Dei
41	Braxton Rembert	LB	6-5	195	Fr.	Hoschton, Ga./Mill Creek
42	Joe McGuire	P	6-2	210	Sr.	Melbourne, Australia/Prokick Australia

**Coaching staff** – Ryan Day, head coach; Matt Patricia, defensive coordinator; Arthur Smith, offensive coordinator; Tim Walton, assistant head coach/co-defensive coordinator/secondary/cornerbacks coach; Keenan Bailey, co-offensive coordinator & tight ends coach; Matt Guerrieri, safeties coach/pass game coordinator; Tyler Bowen, offensive line coach & run game coordinator; Larry Johnson, associate head coach/defensive line coach; James Laurinaitis, linebackers coach; Carlos Locklyn, running backs coach; Billy Fessler, quarterback coach; Mickey Marotti, associate AD, director of football sport performance; Rob Keys, special teams coordinator; Sam McGrath, assistant linebackers coach; Gunner Daniel, program assistant – special teams; Devin Jordan, program assistant – wide receivers; Joshua Chorba, program assistant – linebackers; Tony Johnson, analyst – running backs; Charlie Dicke, program assistant – offensive line; Austin Fields, football QC – offense; Tim Hinton, executive director for football relations / special assistant to the head coach; Billy Yates, football QC – defense; Taver Johnson, analyst – defensive backs; Miguel Patrick, football QC – defense; Colin Keanu, program assistant – quarterbacks; Tyler Walton, program assistant – cornerbacks; Josh Boyer, football QC – defense; Cortez Hankton, wide receivers coach; Robby Discher, special teams coordinator.

for a half-court shot from star point guard Bruce Thornton.

Titus said Diebler wasn't free of blame but also added the last play drawn up by the head coach clearly didn't go according to plan.

He said the Buckeyes don't have the financial or fan support of many other top-tier basketball programs.

"They don't even know the names of the players," Titus said of Ohio State's basketball fans. "And they b—h like they want us to be a top-10 program, which I do too, but the reason the top-10 programs are the top-10 programs is because they carry themselves like top-10 programs 365 days a year. Fans are invested in the program, and people are coming to the games, and the people are studying the recruits, and they pour their passion into this. They don't just pop in and say, 'Oh, we're in the tournament? OK, I'll watch that. I'll sit down and watch this game.' And then we lose the game. And you're like, 'Fire the coach.' It's absurd."

**George Hires Styles Sr. As Analyst**

Former Ohio State running back and

Bowling Green head coach Eddie George has added former Buckeye linebacker Lorenzo Styles Sr. to the Falcons' staff as a senior analyst for the defensive line.

Styles played with George at Ohio State from 1992-94, earning first-team All-Big Ten honors in each of his last two seasons with the Buckeyes.

"I'm grateful for the opportunity to join such a respected defensive staff," Styles said in a Bowling Green press release. "Being able to work alongside coaches like Clyde Simmons, Joe Bowden, Richard McNutt and the rest of the Falcons' defensive coaches is truly exciting. I approach this role with a lot of humility and appreciation for the game, and I'm looking forward to collaborating, developing young men and helping build a physical, disciplined Falcons defense."

Styles led Ohio State with 117 tackles in 1993 before following that mark up with an impressive 132 takedowns as a junior in 1994. He then spent six years in the NFL with the Atlanta Falcons (1995-96) and St. Louis Rams (1997-2000). Styles helped the Rams capture Super Bowl XXXIV along with fellow Buckeye offensive tackle Orlando Pace.

After his playing days, Styles began his coaching career serving as the linebackers coach for Ohio Dominican from 2010 to 2011. Styles also coached in the Continental Indoor Football League (CIFL), serving as the Marion Mayhem's defensive line coach in 2010 and Dayton Silverbacks' defensive coordinator/defensive backs coach in 2011, before becoming head coach of the Marion Blue Racers in 2012.

Styles then spent over a decade coaching linebackers and safeties at Pickerington (Ohio) Central High School from 2012 to 2022, helping the Tigers win state titles in 2017 and 2019.

Styles' sons, defensive back Lorenzo Jr. and linebacker Sonny, both were members of Ohio State's 2024 national championship team and are each projected to be selected in the 2026 NFL draft.

**JSN Signs Extension**

The Seattle Seahawks are locking down their franchise wide receiver, extending Jaxon Smith-Njigba on a record-setting four-year, \$168.6 million deal on March 23 to make the

former Buckeye the highest-paid receiver in NFL history.

After Seattle exercised Smith-Njigba's fifth-year option for the 2027 season, which is worth approximately \$23.9 million, on March 13, the receiver's new contract will extend him through the 2031 season.

The contract's average annual value is listed at \$42.15 million, with the Seahawks wideout having \$120 million guaranteed in the deal.

The two-time Pro Bowl wide receiver and 2025 first-team All-Pro is coming off a career-best season in which he led the NFL with 119 catches for 1,793 receiving yards and 10 touchdowns and helped Seattle to a 29-13 victory over the New England Patriots to claim Super Bowl LX.

Coming out of Ohio State, Smith-Njigba was the 20th selection in the first round of the 2023 NFL draft by the Seattle Seahawks and has played in all 51 regular-season games for the team since, catching 282 passes for 3,551 yards and 20 touchdowns in his three-year career.

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# OHIO STATE INSIDER

Continued From Page 7

Prior to his NFL career, Smith-Njigba spent three seasons with the Buckeyes from 2020 to 2022, where he hauled in 110 receptions for 1,698 yards and 10 touchdowns. In his 2021 campaign at Ohio State, Smith-Njigba set two single-season school records with 95 catches for 1,606 yards to go along with nine receiving touchdowns.

In the Buckeyes' Rose Bowl victory over Utah on Jan. 1, 2022, Smith-Njigba also became Ohio State's single-game yardage and receptions leader with a 15-catch, 347-yard, three-touchdown performance in the 48-45 victory over the Utes.

## Muzerall Receives Five-Year Extension

Ohio State women's hockey head coach

Nadine Muzerall has signed a five-year contract extension to remain with the Buckeyes through the 2033-34 season, athletic director Ross Bjork announced on March 19.

"There is one person to lead Ohio State women's hockey," Bjork said in a Twitter post. "I'm happy to announce Nadine Muzerall will be in Columbus for a long time to come with a new five-year contract. She hasn't just coached a team; she's built a powerhouse on and off the ice."

The extension came just a day before the Buckeyes returned to their sixth straight Frozen Four and just two days after Minnesota dismissed longtime women's ice hockey coach Brad Frost.

Muzerall played for the Golden Gophers from 1998-2001, finishing her career as Minnesota's all-time leader in career goals with 139, a record that still stands today. She also served under Frost as an assistant coach for Minnesota from 2011-16, winning four national titles with the Golden Gophers during that span.

Since Muzerall took the reins of the Ohio State program at the beginning of the 2016-17 season, the Buckeyes have been routinely among the top of women's college ice hockey.

Muzerall has led Ohio State to seven Frozen Four appearances, three WCHA Final Faceoff titles and two national championship victories in 2022 and 2024.

Ohio State finished the 2025-26 season

36-5-0, defeating Wisconsin 2-1 in the WCHA Final Faceoff on March 7, though the Badgers returned the favor in the NCAA championship game with a 3-2 victory over the Buckeyes to claim the national title on March 22.

## Fencer Botello Wins National Title

Ohio State junior fencer Natalia Botello claimed the 2026 NCAA sabre title at the NCAA fencing championships hosted at Notre Dame in South Bend, Ind., on March 20.

Botello is now just the fourth Buckeye in Ohio State women's fencing history to claim an individual national title, joining Yelena Kalkina (épée, 1997), Katarzyna Dabrowa (épée, 2012) and Eleanor Harvey (foil, 2016). She is the first to claim a championship in sabre.

Botello, the tournament's No. 1 seed in sabre, claimed the NCAA championship by beating Notre Dame's No. 3 Siobhan Sullivan 15-11 in the semifinals and the Irish's No. 2 Magda Skarbonkiewicz 15-5 in the final.

She also claimed first-team All-America honors for the second time with the victory.

A season ago in 2025, Botello was a first-team All-American and was named the United States Fencing Coaches Association Sabre Newcomer of the Year, while claiming the Central Collegiate Fencing Conference sabre championship.

Ohio State finished in seventh place in the team standings, while Notre Dame claimed

the women's national title at its home gym.

## Former OL Barton To Serve Five Years

Former Ohio State offensive lineman Kirk Barton was sentenced to at least five years in prison on March 25 after pleading guilty to a charge of aggravated vehicular homicide.

Barton was arrested after being involved in a car accident that killed Ethan Perry, a 24-year-old man in June 2025.

According to a release from Dublin (Ohio) Police, Barton was driving his pickup truck at a high speed when he hit another vehicle on West Bridge Street in Dublin. Perry was the driver of the other vehicle and was pronounced dead at the scene.

10TV reported that initial court documents indicated Barton's blood alcohol content was .17, but it was revealed in court that his BAC was .242 on the night of the crash.

As part of his plea deal, a second count of aggravated vehicular homicide and two counts of operating a vehicle while impaired were dropped.

The judge ordered a permanent suspension of Barton's license.

Barton played for Ohio State from 2003 to 2007.

# 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 44 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](http://BuckeyeSports.com/vip-memberships) to pay by credit card, or call us at (614) 486-2202 during regular business hours. If readers have questions about this program, they can call the same number.

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

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# Buckeye PROgram Has Its DAY In The Sun

By **CRAIG MERZ**

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

Ohio State's annual Pro Day is as much about promoting the football program as it is hyping the players in front of the legions of draft personnel from the 32 NFL teams in attendance at the Woody Hayes Athletic Center on March 25.

What the scouts, coaches and executives get is a well-organized event that can't help but highlight first-round draft picks year after year. The most recent one was no exception, with the likes of safety Caleb Downs, linebacker Sonny Styles, linebacker/edge rusher Arvell Reese, and wide receiver Carnell Tate present.

"This place has been producing guys that are really high level," New Orleans coach Kellen Moore told neworleanssaints.com. "What's really impressive is you get to know these players. They're excellent people, high character. They're really good football players, and they're really prepared to go into the NFL."

The Saints would know because they made it a habit of drafting Buckeyes or signing them as free agents in the past 10 years, starting with safety Vonn Bell and receiver Michael Thomas in 2016 and including cornerback Marshon Lattimore, linebacker Pete Werner and receiver Chris Olave, while signing defensive end Chase Young (free agent).

Going further back, defensive end Will Smith was drafted in 2004, and defensive back Malcolm Jenkins was chosen five years later. All the draftees were in the first or second rounds.

The Saints hold the No. 8 pick this year.

Saints executive vice president/general manager Mickey Loomis said Ohio State does a great job of evaluating talent.

"Their players are really talented," he said. "And then, they do a great job coaching them. A lot of schools do that. I think it's a coincidence that we've had so many Ohio State guys here over the years, but a lot of Ohio State guys have been drafted in our league. So a lot of teams can say they've had a large contingent of Buckeyes, just like a lot of teams can say they've had a large contingent of Alabama players, and LSU players, and some of the other schools as well."

In a nod to the wealth of talent, five teams sent both their head coach and general managers to Columbus. The New York Jets coach, Aaron Glenn, was fixated on Reese as a possible pick at No. 2.

"At the (NFL) combine, I did linebacker (drills). Today I just wanted to knock out the edge drill," Reese said afterward. "Just make sure I did both of them because that was my role last year. Both of them."

He did enough in his drills to leave a favorable impression.

ESPN analyst Louis Riddick posted on Twitter: "If you were in Columbus today, in person, watching Arvell Reese work out, and didn't come away thinking that this is a premium level athlete with unlimited upside, you should quit talking about athletes. Forever. Don't even bother watching his tape, actually playing the game."

Those are the type of comments Ohio State coach Ryan Day likes to see about Pro



COURTESY OF OHIO STATE ATHLETICS

**IN THE SPOTLIGHT — More than 100 NFL personnel representing all 32 teams were on hand for Ohio State's Pro Day on March 25 to see numerous potential first-round picks, including safety Caleb Downs (center) and wide receiver Carnell Tate (right), here talking to ESPN's Louis Riddick.**

Day.

"It's a great way to showcase the program," he said. "The feedback that we're getting from so much of the NFL personnel is, one, the type of guys that we have, that you guys get a chance to see. But then, just overall, how we run everything today and how our guys are doing once they get together."

He is proud of Reese and how he developed from being a part-time player to first-round status heading into the draft that is April 23-25 in Pittsburgh.

"Arvell, his first year playing on the scout team," Day said, "he was a defensive lineman, a defensive end, then in year two, a linebacker. Obviously, we saw what happened in year three, but because of his mindset, he was at Glenville and (coached by Ted) Ginn Sr., and he understood what it meant to be a Buckeye and that he didn't panic after one year and say, 'I'm going to transfer.'"

## Doing What's Needed

There were other storylines as well. Styles and his brother, Lorenzo Styles Jr., made a splash at the NFL combine in Indianapolis from Feb. 26 to March 1, but neither worked out at Pro Day.

Sonny had no reason to after his performance in Indy, and Lorenzo had a surgical procedure on his left shoulder. Sonny had a vertical leap of 43.5 inches, second highest in NFL combine history for a linebacker, a broad jump of 11-2, and a 40-yard dash time of 4.46 seconds.

"I had high expectations for myself," Sonny said. "I think what you put on the film and then the person you are in the meeting room, that's what's more important. And I thought (what I did in the) meetings and my film was a lot better than the testing was."

Lorenzo ran a 4.27-second 40-yard dash for the fastest time in a combine for a safety since at least 2003 and the best time ever for a Buckeye.

He had surgery in March and expects a four-month recovery, which should have

him healthy for the start of training camp.

Speaking of speed, Tate's 4.53 in the 40 at the combine drew negative attention from some who were surprised he was not faster. He did not run at Pro Day but did passing drills with quarterback Julian Sayin.

"Just showcasing my route-running ability," Tate said. "That's what I do best. I'm fluid in any of my routes. I'm a smooth route runner, so that's what I came to do. Play football, put the football into the field."

Tate isn't worried. He compared his times to two of the top receivers in the game.

Former Buckeye Jaxon Smith-Njigba had 119 receptions for 1,793 yards and 10 touchdowns for the Super Bowl champion Seattle Seahawks and was voted AP 2025 Offensive Player of the Year. The Los Angeles Rams' Puka Nacua made 129 catches for 1,713 yards and 10 touchdowns.

Their combine 40-yard times were 4.52 and 4.57 seconds, respectively.

"I definitely think it can be overvalued," Tate said. "A couple of the great NFL receivers right now, like Puka and Jaxon, they didn't run the fastest of times, but they're the two best receivers in the league right now. So it just depends on who's looking at it and how you all want to take it."

He added that he has nothing to prove to doubters at this stage. "I think I checked all the boxes in my film. Getting open, running past defenders. Also, I'm a willing blocker."

Day wasn't concerned either.

"It was easy to see he's got himself in great shape and how fast he's moving," the coach said. "How fluid he is and effortless he is, moving in and out of breaks, catching the ball, and that was on film. So, he's a guy who is going to be a No. 1 wide receiver for some organization and somebody that has done it at a high level. And he's smooth, he's physical, and he's going to be a guy that certainly can have an impact day one walking into a team."

## On The Defense

Meanwhile, Downs had to do some de-

fending on and off the field. He did defensive back workouts at Pro Day after not participating in any drills at the combine.

The lack of drills in Indianapolis led to stories that teams were worried about a possible knee injury. Then, ESPN's Pat McAfee said several NFL executives told him those reports were false.

Downs addressed the issue at Pro Day.

"Really, they already answered it," Downs said. "Pat McAfee put out a statement about it. That's not what my medical says. But it is what it is. I can't control what people say."

Downs has never lacked confidence.

"At the end of the day, it's about affecting the game. Whoever affects the games, that's who needs to be picked the highest. I feel like I do it at the highest level. So that's really all I have to say about that."

"Getting in the NFL, getting drafted, that's not the dream. So just another step and just continue to stay on the path that I'm on."

## One Last Time

Pro Day was invented for players like tight end Will Kacmarek, who had an opportunity to improve his stock in a comfortable setting after a so-so combine.

"I thought it was great," he said of Pro Day. "I displayed when I needed to. There were some boxes I didn't check at the combine. I did that today. I'm more than a blocking tight end, and I think I did that today."

That's because the majority of his talks with NFL personnel have been about his blocking.

"Blocking the point of attack, just taking that wide tight end look. That's something I want to continue to do at the next level," he said.

He was happy to have one final workout to close out his Buckeye career.

"It's a special day," he said. "I mean, Pro Days are a big deal here. All of our current players are here supporting us, all the coaches. It's really cool to be here."

# Patricia, New OC Smith Bring NFL Mindset

Continued From Page 1

thing else. 'This is how we work. This is how we do things. This is the standard that we're looking for.' "

Last spring, when so many players were vying for starting spots, all of them who ended up playing major roles on the top-rated defense had been in Columbus for at least a season already. They had to learn a new scheme with Patricia joining the Buckeyes for his first season back at the college level, but the OSU coaches who were in place before that had already familiarized those players with the fundamentals expected at Ohio State.

For multiple reasons this spring, Patricia is spending time making sure the players who transferred in have those down before focusing too much on his scheme. He wants to have his players ready to perform, but he also needs to figure out what the new guys are good at to see if they can flex positions the way that Caleb Downs and Arvell Reese did last season, which gave OSU so much flexibility on that side of the ball in 2025.

"You have that conversation with yourself," Patricia said. "Do you work scheme or do you work fundamentals? We try to do both, but the reality is that we only have so much time in pads. For us right now, it's really heavily focused on fundamentals."

At the same time, Patricia does understand what he had with Downs and Reese, both of whom are projected to go in the top 10 of this year's NFL draft, and he knows how unlikely it is that another player like that will be available to him immediately after those two leave the program.

"I don't think you ever replace a Caleb Downs," he said. "But what you try to do is (understand), 'OK, what do we have? What can we carry over and what maybe isn't going to work for us this year?'"

One of the fundamentals that Day and Patricia have been trying to instill in their defense this spring has been creating turnovers. Last season, despite the defensive success

## PLAYERS ON THE SPOT

**Junior defensive lineman Jason Moore:** Moore came to Ohio State in the 2023 class as a top-70 prospect, but as he enters his fourth year in Columbus, he hasn't been able to earn a consistent role on the defensive line.

In Moore's defense, it hasn't been an easy group to compete against for playing time. He was behind Ty Hamilton and Tyleik Williams for two seasons before potential first-round draft pick Kayden McDonald slotted in last season, along with the combination of Tywone Malone Jr. and former five-star Eddrick Houston. Houston returns this season and will likely earn time along with a few talented transfers.

James Smith projects to earn a starting role at either nose guard or three-tech, and UCF transfer John Walker is also vying for a role. Moore seems unlikely to earn a starting spot, but defensive line coach Larry Johnson is very willing to rotate anyone in who has earned a role, and Moore has the chance to prove himself.

**Junior wide receiver Kyle Parker:** Ohio State's wide receiver room is as deep as ever despite multiple talented players deciding to transfer away over the offseason. The Buckeyes made up for that by going into the transfer portal for receivers for the first time since the transfer portal era started. Parker and Devin McCuin were both added to an already solid room that included returning starters Jeremiah Smith and Brandon Inniss.

But for Parker to earn a role in the OSU offense this season, he is going to have to beat out McCuin and a few highly rated freshmen, which includes five-star Chris Henry Jr., who has already impressed in the spring.

Smith himself called Henry "the next one up" when he spoke to the media on March 28, and many favor Henry to be the starter opposite Smith when the season opens. However, Parker has experience playing a high level of college football, catching 31 passes for 330 yards and four touchdowns with LSU last season.

**Sophomore linebacker Garrett Stover:** After losing Sonny Styles and Arvell Reese to the NFL draft, the Buckeyes went into the transfer portal and added a veteran backer in Christian Alliegro, who many think will be a starter in his last season of eligibility. The Buckeyes also return talented rising sophomores Riley Pettijohn and TJ Alford, who are pushing hard for playing time.

If Stover is going to prove himself and earn a role on the Ohio State defense, his third season with the program is the perfect time to make that jump. He is off to a strong start in the offseason, earn-

ing one of four winter Iron Buckeye honors, but now he will have to show that hard work pays off on the field.

Stover came to Ohio State as the No. 142 prospect in the 2024 class but has earned just five tackles in his two seasons with the program, all of those last season when he was a mainstay on special teams.

**Junior cornerback Cam Calhoun:** Calhoun is on his fourth stop in four years after starting his career with Michigan before transferring to Utah then going to Alabama and finally ending up with the Buckeyes for the 2026 season. He had a strong 2024 campaign with the Utes before joining the Crimson Tide, where he struggled to earn a major role on the defense.

With Ohio State, it seems unlikely that Calhoun will be able to earn a starting role with Jermaine Mathews Jr. returning and Devin Sanchez seemingly ready to take the spot that Davison Igbinosun is leaving open. But Calhoun could slot in behind those two depending on how his spring and fall camps go.

The 2026 freshmen cornerbacks are strong, and Mathews had some high praise for both Jay Timmons and Jordan Thomas when he spoke to the media, so, like any other year, there is going to be some competition to be the backup. Calhoun will need to prove himself this spring, or he may find himself wanting to enter the portal after the 2026 season to find a fifth team for his fifth year.

**Sophomore guard Gabe VanSickle:** With Tegra Tshabola injured for the Cotton Bowl and Josh Padilla having just recovered from an injury he suffered during the regular season, VanSickle earned the start against Miami (Fla.). That didn't go according to plan, and the OSU offensive line gave up five sacks to the Hurricanes' talented defensive line. In the middle of the game, VanSickle was replaced by Padilla, and the line fixed some of the issues it had early in the contest.

The other four starters on the offensive line are returning, so if anyone is looking at the offensive line, all eyes will be on who will be taking Tshabola's spot.

VanSickle had proved himself enough to earn the start in the Cotton Bowl, partly because of a strong performance in the second half of the Big Ten Championship Game. However, he will need to prove himself all over again after his Cotton Bowl performance if he wants to earn the starting right guard position.

—Greg Wilson

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Ohio State had, it was outside of the top 50 when it came to turning other teams over, with just 15 in the 14 games the Buckeyes played.

Day said he isn't quite sure how aggressive the unit will be in terms of trying to turn the ball over, but he and the defensive staff will take a look at what they have in their new players to figure out their strengths and decide from there.

"We spent a lot of time on ball disruption and creating turnovers," Day said. "I think we would all say that we'd like to create more turnovers. It's something that Matt and our whole defensive staff believe in. There's always give and take when it comes to how aggressive you want to get to force the action. There's also just the idea of punching at the ball and creating PBUs, tipped balls, sacking the quarterback, those types of things.

"That is all part of the discussion with this group because we have lost some pieces from the defense. We'll have to look to see if our percentages change on how much we pressure or not pressure. You also put your-

self at risk of explosive plays the more aggressive you get. But I can tell you there's a huge emphasis to create turnovers."

The offense, as previously mentioned, doesn't have to deal with that same player turnover, and the coaches already know the strengths of what that side of the ball can do.

But that doesn't mean there aren't changes on the offensive side. After former offensive coordinator Brian Hartline left for the head coaching job at South Florida, Day went out to get another former NFL coordinator/head coach to fill that role, bringing in Arthur Smith, who most recently led the Pittsburgh Steelers offense.

So while the players aren't new offensively, they will have to learn somewhat of a new system with Smith bringing his expertise to Columbus.

Having NFL minds leading both the offense and defense is something that Day thinks will pay off in a multitude of ways, especially when it comes to preparing for what has become a much longer college football season than it used to be.

"When you have somebody like Arthur who's been through it before – he's been through playoff games and played a long season in the NFL – you have to build toward the end of the season. That's the goal for us," Day said.

"Now, next year, with some of the games that we play, you've got to start prepping to jump on it, too, and you have to play throughout the length of the season. It's an opportunity for us to continue to get stronger throughout the season and get challenged in certain areas so that when it comes time to play in December and January, we're going to be salty because we've been through the fire. Having some experienced guys like that running the offense and the defense is going to be something we count on paying dividends in the end."

But another thing that Day had in mind when making those hires was recruiting. Patricia is one of the 10 assistant coaches who can go on the road to recruit, and Arthur Smith isn't, but Day still thinks that Smith's presence will help draw potential prospects.



GREG WILSON

**SECOND GO-AROUND** — Matt Patricia enters year two as defensive coordinator with the same challenge as the first - replacing eight starters. Improving on the No. 1-ranked defense will be difficult, but his goal is to create more turnovers.

"If I'm a recruit and I come in and I have Arthur Smith on offense and Matt Patricia on defense, I know I'm going to get coached like an NFL team," Day said. "If you come and watch practice, you get a chance to see, that's an NFL practice. Guys know they're going to have an opportunity to develop and be ready to step into these roles."

It undoubtedly is an advantage to have NFL-caliber minds in the building. As Day mentioned, it can help both on the field and when it comes to the recruitment of players who want to get a leg up when trying to advance to the pros.

However, when Patricia was hired before spring practices in 2025, many assumed it would go down like the Chip Kelly era at Ohio State. Kelly came in for the 2024 season, won a national championship with a strong offense, and parlayed that success into a major raise at the NFL level, where he was hired to be the offensive coordinator for the Las Vegas Raiders.

Then, when Patricia and the Buckeye defense were as successful as they were in 2025 and it was revealed that Patricia planned to return for the 2026 season, it came as at least a slight surprise to some.

There were many reports that NFL teams, for which there were many different openings to fill this offseason, wanted Patricia on their staffs, but the former Super Bowl champion instead decided he wanted to remain in Columbus, which he credited to how he was received by Buckeye fans in his first season and wanting to keep his family in the same place.

"Ohio State is such a special place. Not only the history and the tradition, but the

people that are here, the kids that are here and Coach Day," Patricia said on March 26. "Having a chance to have a little stability with my family ... and we've had an unbelievable experience settling in Columbus. It feels like home."

While those were pluses when it came to Patricia's decision to stay in Columbus, athletic director Ross Bjork also gave the defensive coordinator over a million more reasons to stick around when he was given a \$1.25 million raise after his successful first year.

Whatever the biggest motivator was for Patricia, he makes it so the defensive turnover isn't as tough to deal with since he will be the one leading the unit for the second straight year.

**Golden Hour**

With the team back together for spring practices, the Buckeyes were gifted with their gold pants from last season that they earned for beating archrival Michigan for the first time since the 2019 season, ending a four-game losing streak to the Wolverines.

It didn't take long for the players still with

the team to start talking about getting another pair.

"I need another one. I love it. I need another one," said rising senior cornerback Jermaine Mathews Jr., who — like every other player in their fourth year with Ohio State — is 1-2 against Michigan.

Rising senior left guard Luke Montgomery is looking to even the score after having suffered a couple of losses to the Wolverines.

"I need to get to (a 2-2 record against Michigan) because my girlfriend's dad played at Michigan and he's 2-2 against Ohio State," Montgomery said. "So for the arguments that will be had in the future, I need to win this next one."

Players who were back for Ohio State's Pro Day also got their gold pants. While they won't have the chance to earn another pair, it still meant a lot to be able to get theirs.

"That was my first pair of gold pants," said cornerback Davison Igbinosun. "When you come to Ohio State, the standard is to beat the team up north. It meant everything to me."

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Times have changed. Our values have not.

# Arthur Smith Looks To Improve Loaded Offense

By **BOBBY GORBETT**

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

Newly hired Ohio State offensive coordinator Arthur Smith didn't expect to be in Columbus or any other college town to speak to reporters a couple of months ago when he was in charge of the Pittsburgh Steelers' offense.

The Steelers averaged a modest 305.6 yards per game last year, the 25th-best mark in the NFL under Smith's leadership, but he helped them make the playoffs. It was only the retirement of then-head coach Mike Tomlin that put Smith in a position to look for a new job.

"Not really, I was just trying to weigh my options," Smith said when asked if he had been looking to return to the college game. "The way the season (in Pittsburgh) ended abruptly, and obviously Coach Tomlin stepped away, and we had just been in the playoffs. So it hits you fast in these cycles, but Coach (Ryan) Day was awesome. I took a couple of days and weighed everything, talked to people, and I was really just excited to get an opportunity."

Ultimately, it was the presence of Day at Ohio State that led Smith, the head coach of the NFL's Atlanta Falcons from 2021-23, to end up in Columbus.

"Well, there are several factors," Smith said when asked why he chose Ohio State. "First and most importantly was the respect I have for Coach Day. He reached out, and



GREG WILSON

**FRESH IDEAS — Despite Arthur Smith (pictured) having spent his previous coaching career in the NFL, Ohio State head coach Ryan Day had no qualms hiring him as the offensive coordinator to replace Brian Hartline because he expects the former Atlanta Falcons head coach to bring a new perspective.**

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we had a good conversation. I came down here and spent some time with him and weighed my options.

"I had such a good experience with some of the players that have come through here that I've gotten the privilege to coach. So I was intrigued. I weighed my options and talked to a lot of people, including Mike Vrabel, who's a great Buckeye and a great friend of mine, and it just made sense."

Now that he's in Columbus, Smith will have the tall task of improving an Ohio State offense that wasn't without its flaws but finished in the top 30 nationally in scoring offense and yards per game. He said he will evaluate every part of the Buckeye offense to see what can be improved upon.

"Even if you've had a great year statistically in certain categories, you've got to look for constant improvement," Smith said. "There's an evolution, and you don't want to get stale."

"So you're evaluating everything and things that you want to implement, things that you want to keep that they've done really well. That's what's great about the college calendar, is we've got a lot of time to work with the players, and you get these opportunities in spring ball and a lot of time to prepare."

Unlike Ohio State's past offensive coordinators, including Brian Hartline and Chip Kelly, Smith has virtually no prior experience at the collegiate level. While Hartline and Kelly were workign their ways up with college programs, Smith was earning his stripes as an offensive coordinator with the Tennessee Titans and as the head coach of the Falcons.

But in no way did Smith's lack of college

experience dissuade Day from pursuing him. Day actually said during a press conference earlier in March that Smith's NFL experience should only bolster Ohio State's program.

"We always say you learn so much when you take on a new role," Day said. "The management of their staff on their side of the ball is critically important. You've seen (Patricia) do that now with some of the staff hires and changes that we've made on his side of the ball. Then, as Arthur starts to install some of the things that he has done in the past, there's a system in place for it."

"It's not the NFL, but it's pretty close. The hash marks are different, but there are a lot of things to carry over here. Ultimately, it allows me an opportunity to step away and really dive into everything else and be more present in the building with players, with staff, certainly with NIL stuff, in terms of raising money, asking questions. It's just a different mindset."

Smith took his first step in transitioning to his new position in the film room, where he watched all of Ohio State's games from last year. Smith undoubtedly noticed that the Buckeyes' biggest weakness, especially down the stretch of the season, was in the trenches. In postseason losses to Indiana and Miami (Fla.), Ohio State gave up 10 combined sacks and failed to find any consistency on the ground.

Smith said the Buckeyes' offensive line room is a different unit from the one that struggled mightily in the postseason last year, but that won't prevent the coaching staff from looking at the group, or any other part of the offense, with scrutiny.

"We have great depth in the O-line



BOBBY GORBETT

**CARRYING THE LOAD** — Florida transfer running back Ja’Kobi Jackson should get plenty of opportunities to showcase himself in the spring with returning ball carriers Bo Jackson and Isaiah West unavailable due to shoulder surgeries.

room,” Smith said. “A lot of things you look at after the action. Even when you win big games, you need to go back and look at it with a critical eye, because there are times when you got away with something, where a player makes a play off schedule.

“So you look at everything. You just want to be fundamentally sound. That’s across the board. We’re always looking to improve. We have a lot of work ahead of us before we kick off the season. There’s a constant evaluation. Whether you win or lose, you really need to objectively look at yourself. That’s the nature of the job, if you want to do it right.”

Smith said he didn’t just look at the Buckeyes’ film to critique the performance of the offense last year, but also to see what the returning players are comfortable with.

“You’re looking for the personality of the players who are coming back and getting a feel for it,” Smith said. “What have they been running? What do you think their skill sets are? Some of it’s obvious. You know the talent level from afar, but you’re looking at it comparatively to your top competition. There’s a lot going on, and you try to be objective and not rush to judgment. That’s easy to sit back (and judge because) I wasn’t here. To be cynical or to get too critical,

that’s the easy thing to do. The purpose was to get a feel for what they know, the talent we have coming back, their personalities and their characteristics.”

Smith will undoubtedly be tasked with improving an Ohio State running game that was mediocre, at best, last season. The Buckeyes averaged just 154.4 rushing yards per game, the 72nd-best mark in the country.

The good news for the Buckeyes, and perhaps why Day hired Smith in the first place, is that their new offensive coordinator made a name for himself revamping running games in Tennessee and Atlanta.

With the Titans, Smith helped turn current Baltimore Ravens running back Derrick Henry into the dominant workhorse many NFL fans know him as now.

But it will be somewhat difficult for Smith to bolster Ohio State’s running game in the spring. Not only is it difficult to replicate the physicality of the regular season in the spring period, but Ohio State is also missing its top two running backs, Bo Jackson and Isaiah West, while both players recover from shoulder surgeries.

So far through a few spring practices, Smith has liked what he’s seen from the Buckeyes’ backup running backs.

“Great competition,” Smith said of the running backs room. “Obviously, (former Florida running back Ja’Kobi Jackson) is a guy who got here through the transfer portal, played a lot of quality football. (Red-shirt-freshman running back Anthony Rogers), I know he missed some snaps last year. It’s fun watching him. He had a great off-season. (Freshman running back Legend Bey) was a quarterback in high school. There are so many things he can do.”

As much as he’s known for his expertise with the running game, Smith believes he can help the Buckeye passing game get better as well. At least for outstanding Buckeyes, including redshirt-freshman quarterback Julian Sayin and star receiver Jeremiah Smith, there wasn’t much to improve upon from last year.

Sayin ended up as a Heisman finalist last year, and Smith was a unanimous All-American who went for well over 1,000 receiving yards for the second year in a row.

Arthur Smith said the sky is the limit for Jeremiah Smith in 2026.

“I saw him on film, and heard a lot about him, but getting to know him, I’m just really impressed with his mindset,” Arthur Smith said. “He doesn’t feel like you’re dealing with a college player. He feels like a veteran. He’s got great humility for somebody who is that talented and has had the success he’s had. You understand that he’s a unique weapon, but he’s a great person. I enjoyed my conversation with him, and I’m just trying to help him expand his game, because I think his potential is limitless.”

Arthur Smith has also appreciated what he’s seen from Sayin, whom he described as an especially mature quarterback. Smith said the next step for his signal caller may be at the line of scrimmage, where he could take on some added responsibility from last season.

“I would like (the quarterbacks to have more responsibility at the line of scrimmage), absolutely, because it allows you a lot more flexibility,” Smith said. “You’re trying to take advantage of what the defense is giving you.”

For Smith, someone who hasn’t had a full-time coaching position at the collegiate level prior to being at Ohio State, there is also a bit of a learning curve. In addition to having to adjust to nuances and differences within player acquisition, Smith will also have to get used to much wider hash marks at the collegiate level. For that, he will hope to lean on some of the other coaches on the Buckeye staff and grow as a coach, while attempting to improve the Buckeye offense.

“You’re always talking to players about growing and having that growth mindset, and getting out of your comfort zone,” Smith said. “And for me, it was a good challenge of where I’m at in my career. The nuances, the rules are a little bit different. The spacing of the hashes is wider. There’s a lot of film evaluation. It helps to have guys who have been here on the staff, and you’re picking their brain and watching a lot of tape. You figure it out and adapt to certain things.”

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# Jackson Targets Statement Senior Season

By **SAM CIPRIANI**

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

For defensive end Kenyatta Jackson Jr., the decision to return to Ohio State for his senior season was about more than rewriting a disappointing end to the 2025 season when the Buckeyes lost their only two post-season games.

Instead, the rising senior sees it as a chance to continue building his game – adding strength, refining his pass-rushing skills and stepping into a larger leadership role.

Jackson, who is now one of three Buckeyes remaining from Ohio State's 2022 recruiting class along with Carson Hinzman and Bennett Christian, said his goal is to grow in all areas on and off the field as he enters what he hopes will be a career-defining season.

"I came back just to be a more complete football player, not just on the field, but off the field with my IQ and things of that nature," Jackson said. "I have taken a leadership role, and we have new guys in the room. I'm taking them in and just showing them the ropes of the standard of what Ohio State football is."

The Hollywood, Fla., native began his career with Ohio State in 2022, ultimately redshirting as a true freshman after totaling two tackles in just three games played for the Buckeyes.

Jackson steadily earned a larger role over the next two seasons. He appeared in 12 games in 2023 and then played in 15 of 16 games for Ohio State's national championship team in 2024, recording then-career highs with 16 tackles, three tackles for loss, and 1½ sacks.

As a junior in 2025, Jackson secured the starting defensive end spot for the Buckeyes for the first time in his career, delivering the best season of his tenure. In 14 games last season, Jackson totaled 28 tackles, 11 TFLs and 6½ sacks. His tackles for loss and sack totals both ranked second for Ohio State in 2025.

Ohio State head coach Ryan Day noted Jackson's growth in confidence as the 2025 season progressed, particularly after he battled injuries for much of the early slate.

"He's more confident," Day said on Nov. 5, 2025. "I think in his heart, he has always known that he can do it, but for him to actually physically do it, you can just see him grow more and more in his confidence in himself and his belief in himself. Everyone has their own journey along the way, and when they take that next step, you've seen him do that. You're seeing him producing on the field. Once you start seeing yourself make plays, you feel that."

Jackson shared a similar perspective, adding that his confidence grew with both health and experience.

"Late in the season, I just trusted myself," he said. "In the beginning of the year, with all the injuries, I was doubting myself, but I became healthy, stayed healthy and that confidence kept growing. Coming into this new season, I'm just trying to take it day by day. I'm not worrying about the future, staying where my feet are and worrying about the present."



SONNY BROCKWAY

**TAKE A NUMBER — Take a look at Kenyatta Jackson Jr. in a No. 97 jersey because he won't be wearing it this season, opting for the 2 he wore in high school. That isn't the only change for the rising senior defensive end, who has added muscle and is expected to be a more vocal leader.**

Jackson is hoping to put together his best season yet and raise his draft stock further after a strong 2025 campaign.

Jackson said the process began in the weight room, where he's added substantial muscle to improve his explosiveness as an edge rusher.

"I've been focusing on my body. I've probably gained like 8½ pounds of lean mass and dropped a percentage of fat," Jackson said. "I've been focusing on my body, just trying to get stronger and more explosive."

Beyond the physical changes, Jackson said he has also spent significant time working on the technical side of his game, particularly his ability to win one-on-one matchups as a pass rusher.

Even after posting career highs in sacks and tackles for loss in 2025, Jackson emphasized that pass rushing remains a key aspect of his position, and his development in the area could shape his impact in his final season.

"No. 2 is I'm taking that next step in my development with my pass rush," Jackson said. "They put me in situations where I can win, and I'm taking advantage of that."

Jackson will lead an Ohio State defensive line that blends veteran experience with an influx of youth and transfers.

The 6-6, 265-pound edge rusher is joined by fellow senior Beau Atkinson and junior Eddrick Houston as returning veterans up front, while the Buckeyes also bring back sophomore Zion Grady.

The group is further bolstered by key additions through the transfer portal, includ-

ing Alabama transfers junior defensive end Qua Russaw and senior defensive tackle James Smith, along with junior defensive tackle John Walker from UCF.

With a mix of experienced returners and new faces arriving in the room, Jackson said stepping into a stronger leadership role has become a priority this offseason. A recent conversation with defensive coordinator Matt Patricia helped clarify what that responsibility should look like as the defensive end prepares for his final season with the Buckeyes.

"(Patricia said to) take the weight room seriously and become a more in-depth leader on the team," Jackson said.

With both returning players and newcomers competing for roles, Jackson said helping establish the defensive line's culture has become one of his primary responsibilities this offseason. He feels more comfortable than ever stepping into a leadership role, though he is still working to become more vocal after spending much of his career as a naturally quiet player.

"I'm just taking on a new role," Jackson said. "I wouldn't say I don't like it. I just don't like talking, but I'm used to it."

That mindset of adaptability extends to his approach on the field. Jackson has experience playing on the interior defensive line on pass-rush downs, which he took on before the 2025 season, but his natural position is coming off the edge.

No matter where Patricia has the senior lining up along the defensive front, Jackson's focus is on executing whatever the coaching

staff asks of him.

"Wherever Coach Patricia puts me in, whatever he tells me to do, I'm going to do it to the best that I can," Jackson said. "Whether that's playing 3-tech again or staying on the edge, it doesn't really matter to me. I'm a team player."

During his radio show on 97.1 The Fan on Jan. 30, Day highlighted Jackson among the Buckeyes' 2026 defensive line group, saying he believes the senior is ready to take the next step.

"Having Kenyatta decide to come back was important," Day said. "So I think it's going to be a good group."

Another small but notable change this season is Jackson's uniform number.

Beginning in 2026, the defensive end will wear No. 2 instead of No. 97, the number he has worn since arriving in Columbus.

The change pays homage to Jackson's high school days at Chaminade-Madonna, now that the number is finally available to him. Jackson said that he had hoped to claim No. 2 all along but joked that he couldn't because of the arrival of star safety Caleb Downs in the 2024 transfer class.

"That's my high school number. I've wanted my number since junior year," Jackson said. "But then Caleb Downs came here."

While the change in jersey number is a nod to his past, Jackson's focus is firmly on the team's future.

As one of Ohio State's most experienced athletes, he has taken on a prominent role in helping a massive wave of freshmen and transfers adapt to the Ohio State standard.

When asked about carrying the lessons from the Buckeyes' late struggles a season ago into this year, Jackson noted that the newcomers haven't yet experienced what he and the returning players have. The senior said he's focused on helping Ohio State's fresh faces embrace the team's work ethic and intensity throughout spring camp.

"We say it around the Woody, but we just had 51 new players come in a couple of weeks ago. We had to really show them the ropes of the game because they don't understand it," Jackson said. "So the people that have been here have an edge, but we are trying to get those 51 new guys to tap into what we are trying to do."

Ultimately, Jackson said his goal for the 2026 season is to establish the identity of the defensive line and show the nation what Ohio State's defensive front is capable of, as the senior believes the Buckeyes have the potential to develop into one of the toughest units in the country as it builds chemistry throughout the spring and summer.

"I want the world to see that we're the hardest, toughest defensive line in the country. That's what I want people to say about the D-line," Jackson said. "I want the team to look well-polished, even though it's still early in the spring. They know what they're doing. We have high IQ guys, and they're ready for football. They're ready for the season to come."

# James Smith Quickly Fitting Into OSU's Defense

By **BOBBY GORBETT**

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

When Ohio State defensive tackle James Smith first visited Ohio State as a transfer considering joining the program, it brought back memories of his high school recruitment. The five-star high school prospect was recruited by none other than legendary Alabama head coach Nick Saban.

Saban ultimately won over Smith with pure honesty, and that strategy was replicated by Ohio State defensive line coach Larry Johnson.

"When I came here, they didn't lie to me, not one time," Smith said. "Coach Larry Johnson told me it's going to be hard. I appreciated the honesty a lot."

In the recruitment of Smith, Johnson was given an assist by another former Alabama transfer. Smith said his former teammate Caleb Downs, who played with Smith and the Crimson Tide during the 2023 season, played a significant role in his decision to sign with Ohio State.

"Really, it was just me talking to Caleb," Smith said when asked what made him commit to Ohio State. "He's like my brother. He would never lie to me. He was saying this is a really good place and that I would fit here."

Although plenty of others have transferred from Alabama to Ohio State, including Downs, former center Seth McLaughlin and current starting quarterback Julian Sayin, Smith's recruitment couldn't have been an easy one for the Buckeye coaching staff.

In addition to being listed as a five-star out of high school, Smith had an outstanding season last year for the Crimson Tide. The Montgomery, Ala., native had 28 total tackles, 2½ sacks and a pass deflection and was ultimately viewed as one of the best prospects in the transfer portal.

Considering how productive Smith was at Alabama last year, it's easy to imagine he had plenty of suitors in the transfer portal.

It wasn't just Downs and Johnson who were selling him on the Buckeyes, but also Ohio State head coach Ryan Day, who emphasized the family feel within the program.

"He said, 'If you came here to go to the NFL draft and be a first-round pick and all of that, it's probably not the place for you.' But you have to be a family here, because it's a family-oriented program," Smith said. "You have to come here, be willing to learn new people, be around new people, and just really embrace the program."

Smith was only a few practices into his Ohio State career when he spoke to reporters on March 26, but he said he felt like he was fitting in nicely with the program.

"I feel great," Smith said. "I feel like my ability to learn is very high. It's coming out and being open to new things. That's really why I came here anyway, was just learning and having open ears."

Perhaps the biggest adjustment for Smith has been what he described as a heightened intensity level and a different level of speed at Ohio State practices. Smith said Alabama is like Ohio State, with both programs operating at a high level, but he has already taken notice of the coaching



GREG WILSON

**TIDE TURNED — Defensive tackle James Smith joined the list of Alabama transfers including Caleb Downs, Seth McLaughlin and Julian Sayin. The former five-star recruit is new to the program but feels he fits in well and expects to be a major contributor as he was for the Crimson Tide.**

staff's organization as it pertains to practice.

"I feel like the intensity is different. Everything is so intentional," Smith said when asked about the difference in practice between the two programs. "They came in with a new coaching staff there, so everybody was still trying to learn stuff. Here, everything is already stable."

Smith has already formed a relationship with Ohio State defensive coordinator Matt Patricia. He said that if there's something that Johnson may not initially see, Patricia is also there to help Ohio State's defensive linemen.

"I feel like Patricia can coach any position on the field," Smith said. "If you go ask him, he'd probably feel the same way. He knows what every position is supposed to look like, what they're supposed to do. He knows everything. And even Coach Johnson is going to talk to you, but if there's stuff that Coach Johnson doesn't see at that time, Coach Patricia is right there to see it, and he's seen it all."

Patricia returned the praise to Smith. He said that he loves being around the Alabama transfer and, despite his tough exterior,

Smith has one of the biggest personalities on the team.

"James is amazing," Patricia said. "He's a great player, a bright young kid, and he just gravitates to the football. I love to teach the game, and he wants to learn. So I'm like, 'Come on, let's go and just be around each other. He wants to be great. He wants to improve. And I think just his thirst for that knowledge is — I love it. It's great."

"He came into the program having that energy and having a standard of he knows things need to be done and holding everybody accountable. He's a confident guy who can come into a new building and say, 'No, no, this is how we said we're going to do it. This is how we're going to do it, and we're going to hold each other accountable.'"

Smith said he hopes to play like Kayden McDonald, who is off to the NFL draft as a projected first-round selection, this year. Like McDonald, the 315-pound Smith said he's gotten playing time at nose tackle. Smith said he prides himself on his disruptiveness.

"Just being violent," Smith said when asked to describe himself as a player. "Just

getting off the ball, trying to be disruptive, and just doing my job for the team."

Smith hasn't been in Columbus for a long time, but he said he's already learned to be more disciplined as a tackler and has been coached to avoid reaching for ball carriers.

"One thing we're working on now is (not reaching)," Smith said. "If he's 3 yards in the backfield, just keep running at him, because you're going to eventually find the ball."

"You just disrupted the whole play. You're never reaching if you're being violent and getting up the field, attacking."

Off the field, Smith's adjustment has been made easier by the fact that he's far from the only new addition to the program. Smith is one of over 50 new additions to the team who either came out of the portal or straight from high school.

Smith said he wasn't expecting there to be so many newcomers in Columbus.

"It was so crazy. I didn't even know we had (over 50 newcomers)," Smith said. "I came in here, I was like, 'So we don't know any of these people. You all don't know each other. We don't know each other.' They're trying so hard to mesh us together because you can't really be a team without knowing other men, because if I know him, it's going to make me want to play for him even harder."

Even before factoring in time spent together off the field, Smith feels that the Buckeyes will mesh simply by spending so much time practicing together and earning each other's respect.

"We're always here," he said. "We won't even have to do anything outside of this. We're always here every day. I have to see my teammates every day. They have to see me every day. We have to earn each other's respect, like, 'I see you working hard, OK, I know what you are, I know what you do.' We just need to earn each other's respect, knowing that nobody is a fraud. We are real like everybody else. We all can play some ball, so we just have to mesh together and get it done."

One newcomer whom Smith won't need to get to know is fellow Alabama transfer and defensive end Qua Russaw. Not only did Smith and Russaw play together with the Crimson Tide, but they were also high school teammates at Carver (Ala.) High School.

Considering they have played together for several years, Smith and Russaw were viewed by some as a package deal out of the transfer portal. Smith told reporters that wasn't necessarily the case, but the duo ending up at the same school was more indicative of the fact that each player has similar values.

"It's not like we were trying to just follow each other," Smith said. "It's almost like, every place we go to, we have the same interests, and we like the same stuff. So it almost ends up like that."

Regardless of Russaw's influence on his decision, Smith is now in Columbus, and through two weeks of practice and his first meeting with reporters, all signs indicate he has the talent and, perhaps more importantly, the enthusiasm to make a splash for Ohio State.

# Two Big Ten Teams Make Men's Final Four

The Big Ten has been consistently dominant throughout the 2026 men's NCAA Tournament, and after the conclusion of the Elite Eight matchups, the league had two squads advance to the Final Four, marking the first time since 2015 that the conference has done so.

## BIG TEN NOTES Sam Cipriani

Both No. 1-seeded Michigan and No. 3 Illinois ended up in the Final Four, coming out of the Midwest and South regions, respectively.

After Michigan handled No. 16 Howard and No. 9 Saint Louis in the tournament's opening weekend, the Wolverines breezed past No. 4 Alabama, 90-77, in the Sweet 16.

The Wolverines then moved out of the Midwest region and onto the Final Four with a 95-62 thrashing of No. 6 Tennessee on March 29. It marked the first appearance in the national semifinals for Michigan since 2018, when former head coach John Beilein led the Wolverines to the national title game, where they lost, 79-62, to Villanova.

Illinois opened its tournament run with a victory over No. 14 Penn and former Iowa head coach Fran McCaffery before defeating No. 11 VCU in the second round. In the Sweet 16, Illinois defeated No. 2 Houston, 65-55.

In the South region's Elite Eight matchup, Illinois defeated No. 9 Iowa, 71-59, on March 28 to advance to the Final Four for the first time since 2004-05.

The Big Ten had success throughout the entire NCAA Tournament, leading up to the Final Four.

A conference-record six Big Ten teams – Michigan, No. 2 Purdue, No. 3 Michigan

State, Illinois, No. 4 Nebraska and Iowa – advanced to the Sweet 16 this year. The conference fell just one team shy of the all-time record of seven, set by the SEC in 2025. The Big Ten also became the fourth conference to advance four teams to the Elite Eight in a single tournament.

Nebraska opened its tournament with wins over No. 13 Troy and No. 5 Vanderbilt, while Iowa took down No. 8 Clemson before pulling off a major upset over No. 1 Florida, 73-72.

The pair of Big Ten foes then faced off in the Sweet 16 of the South region, with the Hawkeyes ousting the Cornhuskers 77-71 on March 26.

Purdue, which opened its tournament with wins over No. 15 Queens and No. 7 Miami (Fla.), also advanced to the Elite Eight on March 26 after a tight 79-77 victory over No. 11 Texas, fueled by a tip-in from forward Trey Kaufman-Renn with 0.7 seconds left in the game.

The Boilermakers, however, came up short against No. 1 Arizona, falling to the Wildcats 79-64 on March 28 to end their tournament run in the Elite Eight.

Michigan's in-state rival, Michigan State, beat No. 14 North Dakota State and No. 6 Louisville in the first two rounds of the tournament before falling to No. 2 UConn, 67-63, ending the Spartans' tournament run.

Michigan's Final Four matchup is against Arizona, set to take place on April 4 at 6:09 p.m. Illinois will match up against the No. 2 seed UConn on the same day at 8:49 p.m. The Final Four will be played at Lucas Oil Stadium in Indianapolis.

### U-M, UCLA Make Women's Elite Eight

After the Sweet 16 of the NCAA women's basketball tournament wrapped up, both No. 1-seeded UCLA and No. 2-seeded Michigan punched their tickets to the Elite Eight.

The Bruins rolled through the opening weekend, beginning with a 96-43 win over No. 16 California Baptist in the Round of 64

before taking down No. 8 Oklahoma State, 87-68, in the Round of 32.

UCLA then secured its place in the regional semifinals with an 80-56 Sweet 16 victory over fellow Big Ten team and No. 4 Minnesota on March 27.

UCLA has clinched a berth to the Sweet 16 in each of the last four seasons under head coach Cori Close, with the Bruins advancing all the way to the Final Four in 2025 before suffering an 85-51 loss to UConn.

In addition to the Bruins, No. 2 Michigan also advanced to the tournament's Elite Eight with a 71-52 victory over No. 3 Louisville in the Sweet 16.

Michigan had opened the tournament with an 83-48 victory over No. 15 Holy Cross in the first round before the Wolverines defeated No. 7 NC State 92-63 in the second round.

Michigan's victory over the Cardinals marks the first time the Wolverines have advanced to the regional finals since the 2022 tournament.

Coverage of the Final Four and NCAA championship for both men's and women's basketball will appear in the next issue of BSB if any Big Ten teams advance that far.

### Izzo Lauds BIG's All-Around Success

In the midst of the 2026 NCAA Tournament, with the Big Ten featuring a conference-record six teams in the Sweet 16, Michigan State men's basketball head coach Tom Izzo lauded the conference's overall success in the new year.

Izzo not only referenced the conference's surge in men's basketball but also pointed to football, women's basketball and hockey as examples of the Big Ten's dominance across the collegiate landscape.

"I think it speaks volumes about our conference when you look at it in general for the winter, for this whole year," Izzo said on March 23. "I'd say the Big Ten is flexing its muscles in that respect, and I'm a Big Ten fan for all the teams that are playing right now."

To Izzo's point, the Big Ten conference has been dominant across most major sports throughout the 2025-26 academic year. Indiana began 2026 by claiming the College Football Playoff championship on Jan. 19. The Big Ten also advanced a quarter of teams to the NCAA men's ice hockey championships, with four out of the 16 teams in the bracket.

Izzo acknowledged the evolving landscape of college athletics, crediting the conference's leadership under Tony Petitti for helping guide the league through the rise of NIL opportunities and the transfer portal.

"It'll take all these great minds that have figured out everything else that's wrong with college sports to figure out now because of the NIL landscape," Izzo said. "Is it because of the transfer portal? Is it because of this? Is it because of that? I think our commissioner should feel good about where his conference is in all sports right now if you really look at what's going on. Is that a tribute to everybody in the league? I hope so."

Izzo continued, stating that despite his deep ties to Michigan State, the conference's success carries a personal significance beyond his own program.

"I've always been a Michigan State guy first, but I am a Big Ten guy too. That's important to me," he said.

Izzo has been at the helm of Michigan State's men's basketball program since the 1995-96 season, totaling a 764-310 record in 31 years as the team's head coach.

### Nebraska Wins First NCAA Tourney Game

For the first time in program history, the Nebraska men's basketball team won a game in the NCAA Tournament, but the breakthrough didn't end there.

Under the guidance of head coach Fred Hoiberg, the Cornhuskers pushed on to the Sweet 16, capping off the most successful season in the school's history.

No. 4-seeded Nebraska opened the tournament with a dominant 76-47 victory over Troy in the first round, a victory that set a program single-season record with 27 wins.

Following the victory over the Trojans, Nebraska senior guard Sam Hoiberg, the son of Fred Hoiberg, said the milestone win felt like the final piece in elevating the program to new heights.

"It's almost like a storybook ending to get this tournament win," Sam Hoiberg said. "I've been saying all week it kind of felt like the last thing that we needed to do to get this program on top."

In the second round, Nebraska ousted Vanderbilt, 74-72, on the heels of a game-winning layup from freshman forward Braden Frager, the Big Ten's Sixth Man of the Year, with two seconds remaining.

Nebraska's tournament run came to an end against Iowa in the Sweet 16.

In the game's waning moments, Nebraska had only four players on the floor, and Iowa's Kael Combs threw a full-court inbound pass to a wide-open Alvaro Folgueiras for a key layup and a three-point play to extend the lead to six with just under a minute remaining in the game.

After the game, Fred Hoiberg took responsibility for the late-game miscue that played a



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crucial role in the Cornhuskers' defeat.

"Put that one on me. It was a miscommunication, and I'm the head coach," he said.

Despite the abrupt ending, the loss didn't overshadow Nebraska's rise as a contender, with Hoiberg, who is in his seventh season leading the Cornhuskers, crediting the team's discipline and leadership as keys to the Cornhuskers' record-setting season.

"They've just done all the little things really well, and to me, it makes our job as coaches a lot easier when you have a group that does all those things," Hoiberg said. "They hold each other accountable. We've got great leadership with this group, and they are as good as any that I've coached."

**Gophers Hire Shula As Offensive Assistant**

Minnesota is adding veteran offensive coach Mike Shula to its staff as an offensive assistant under head coach P.J. Fleck.

The 60-year-old Shula most recently

served as the offensive coordinator and quarterbacks coach for South Carolina for the 2025 season and was a senior offensive assistant in 2024 and 2025.

Shula brings more than 25 years of NFL experience to Minnesota, with stops in Tampa Bay, Miami, Chicago, Jacksonville, Carolina, Denver and Buffalo. His most notable tenure came as the Carolina Panthers' offensive coordinator from 2013 to 2017.

Shula also served as Alabama's head coach from 2003 to 2006, before legendary head coach Nick Saban took over the following season. During his four-year tenure with the Crimson Tide, Shula posted a 26-23 record, though victories from his final two seasons were later vacated due to improper textbook distribution, reducing his official record to 10-23.

Shula is the son of the NFL's all-time winningest head coach, Don Shula, who claimed two Super Bowls with the Miami Dolphins in 1972 and 1973, with the 1972 Dolphins'

14-0 finish still standing as the only perfect season in NFL history.

Minnesota has been led by Fleck since the beginning of the 2017 season, and the Golden Gophers have earned a 66-44 record in that span, including an 8-5 mark in each of the past two seasons.

**Four B1G Finalists For Hodge Trophy**

Four Big Ten wrestlers are finalists for the Dan Hodge Trophy, which is awarded annually to the best college wrestler in the United States.

All four of the conference's nominations for the award hail from Penn State. In the running for the award for the Nittany Lions are 125-pounder Luke Lilledahl (25-0), 165-pounder Mitchell Mesenbrink (27-0), 174-pounder Levi Haines (26-0) and 197-pounder Josh Barr (24-0).

Each of the four Penn State wrestlers who were named finalists claimed titles at

both the Big Ten championships and NCAA championships at their respective weights. Both Mesenbrink and Haines are now two-time national champions.

Ohio State's 141-pounder, senior Jesse Mendez, entered both the regular season and the Big Ten tournament as a leading contender for the award but was ultimately upset by Oklahoma State freshman Sergio Vega in the NCAA title match. With the win, Vega became the first undefeated true freshman to capture a national title since 1947.

Now, Mesenbrink – nicknamed "The Missile" – sits at the top of the field of finalists, boasting a 96.3 percent bonus rate in his matches. He was considered the favorite to win the award, which was set to be announced on March 31 at 1 p.m. EST.

Also nominated for the award are Oklahoma State national champions Vega and Jax Forrest (133-pound weight class), as well as heavyweight title winner Isaac Trumble of NC State.

**From The Pages Of BSB**

**40 Years Ago — 1986**

Ohio State football coach Earle Bruce headed into spring practice with the knowledge that he had to replace only six starters. But my goodness! He didn't expect it to be so complicated.

Before the first whistle blew, Bruce knew that another eight players had been ruled out of spring practice. Couple that with trying to replace those six outstanding players and Bruce had his work cut out for him.

"First off," said Bruce, "we've got to replace the personnel we lost, work hard at that."

Bruce rattled off the names of the departed players, left tackle Rory Graves, right guard Jim Gilmore and flanker Mike Lanese on offense and linebackers Pepper Johnson and Byron Lee and nose guard Larry Kolic on defense.

"We're going to work on the fundamentals of football," continued Bruce, who was set to begin his eighth season at the Buckeye helm after leading the team to its sixth straight 9-3 campaign the year before.

**35 Years Ago — 1991**

The Sweet 16 left a sour taste for Ohio State, but not so sour that members of the Buckeyes weren't looking forward to another taste next season.

Less than half an hour after Ohio State's dream season ended with a nightmarish 91-74 loss to St. John's, many of the team members were already talking about next year.

"We've had an excellent season," said junior point guard Mark Baker. "I'm really proud of what we've done, but I was always told you're only as good as your last game, and this is something we'll have to think about for the rest of spring and summer. I'd just like to say that I know we'll be back next year."

Three starters were set to return, along with a supporting cast that continued to mature by leaps and bounds.

"This loss hurts a great deal," admitted sophomore forward Jim Jackson. "This was a very frustrating game, especially considering how hard we worked and how much we really wanted it."

The Buckeyes finished their season 27-4 and won a share of the Big Ten championship.

**30 Years Ago — 1996**

For the first time in several years, a number of the most prominent positions on the Ohio State football team were up for grabs. At the forefront of the talent search in the spring would be the competitions at four key spots on offense – quarterback, tailback, tight end and flanker.

The Buckeyes entered spring practice, which began April 2 and would run through the April 27 spring game at Ohio Stadium, without a number of the big names who had fueled the previous year's 11-2 team.

Gone were Heisman Trophy-winning tailback Eddie George, standout quarterback Bobby Hoying, Fred Biletnikoff Award-winning flanker Terry Glenn and monster tight end Rickey Dudley, but as OSU coach John Cooper began his ninth spring practice with the Buckeyes, the staff was certain new faces would step up to accept these roles beginning in the spring.

**25 Years Ago — 2001**

After two months of recruiting trips, banquet speeches and early-morning conditioning sessions, Jim Tressel would finally get a chance to do one of the things he liked to do best – coach football.

Tressel, the new sensation in Columbus as Ohio State's freshly minted head football coach, would open his first spring practice with the Buckeyes on March 31. That would mark one of 15 days

of spring ball, culminating in the Scarlet and Gray Game set for April 28 at Columbus Crew Stadium.

The importance of this spring was not lost on Tressel, the longtime Youngstown State head coach who had been tapped to replace the fired Cooper in mid-January.

"A wise man once told me you can't win the national championship in spring practice, but you can lose it," Tressel said. "If you don't make those steps of finding out who you are, building those relationships, learning those terminologies and systems, learning more about your expectations, then we can't progress quickly enough by the fall to win the national championship."

**20 Years Ago — 2006**

Spring may have sprung in many parts of the country, signaling the beginning of another baseball season, but in Columbus and many other parts of the Midwest, spring was also the time to open the book on another season of college football.

Ohio State kicked off its spring football schedule on March 30 with a markedly different approach from any of the previous five under Tressel.

The transformation of the OSU program from defense first, special teams second and a conservative brand of offense a distant third had been brought on by necessity. The Buckeyes had lost nine regulars from a unit that had finished fifth in the nation the year before in total defense and among the top 10 units nationally two of the previous three seasons.

Unfortunately, Ohio State was losing the bulk of that defense, including three potential NFL first-round draft choices in A.J. Hawk, Ashton Youboty and Bobby Carpenter.

Any other program would have been facing a rebuilding year, but as much talent as the Buckeyes were losing on the defensive side of the ball, they welcomed back an almost unbelievable array of talent on offense.

**15 Years Ago — 2011**

One day before a Sweet 16 tip-off against Kentucky, Ohio State's locker room had resembled a grade-school classroom on the last day before summer break. With the top-seeded Buckeyes preparing for a March 25 showdown against the fourth-seeded Wildcats at the Prudential Center in Newark, N.J., the team showed no outward signs of feeling pressure.

At one end of the locker room was a dry-erase board featuring a perspective drawing in red marker. Flanking a street drawn down the middle were a few buildings, along with a tree or two added for good measure by freshman Aaron Craft after Dallas Lauderdale had started the drawing. The burst of creativity came as the Buckeyes were forced to pass about 45 minutes before they could take the court for practice.

About 30 hours later, the jovial atmosphere was gone. In its place was a tomb-like silence as OSU's players realized they had played their final game together. A legitimate shot for a national championship had just been waylaid by the Wildcats, who held on for a 62-60 victory that bounced the Buckeyes from the NCAA Tournament.

**10 Years Ago — 2016**

When Urban Meyer met with the media in Columbus for the first time following the 2015 football season, the coach gave an uncharacteristically long opening statement. It made sense. There was a lot to talk about.

Before taking a single question, Meyer reflected on his team's Fiesta Bowl win over Notre Dame and the early departure of nine underclassmen for the NFL draft. Before he wrapped up his seven-minute opening statement, however, Meyer made sure to touch

on the challenges that loomed in spring practice and beyond.

The Buckeyes were replacing all but six starters from last year's team. When Ohio State opened spring practice on March 8, it did so without last year's leading rusher. The team's top four receivers – players who had caught 71.1 percent of the team's passes – were also gone. Four of the five leading tacklers from the 2015 season were nowhere to be found this spring.

No one was more aware of the departing stars than Meyer, but the coach was able to find a positive in all the uncertainty. In the absence of the players who carried the Buckeyes in 2015, new stars needed to emerge, and while that was a tall order, it was similar to the mandate issued just two years ago, the coach said, and that worked out pretty well with a national championship.

"I compare it, as I discussed with our staff, very similar to the 2014 team," Meyer said. "That was the team with development. That was the team where Eli Apple, Vonn Bell, Darron Lee, guys that we redshirted or didn't play much, didn't have a big input into the 2013 season and you saw a steady improvement and it obviously culminated in a pretty good finish."

**Five Years Ago — 2021**

The Big Ten announced in a statement on March 24 that it would be allowing attendance at sporting events in the spring as long as they "follow local health guidelines and restrictions." The decision included spring football events, like the Ohio State spring game, still tentatively scheduled for April 17.

The conference's protocols had previously taken precedence over local health guidelines, but this move officially shifted the responsibility to the states. This was the latest move in a string of decisions designed to allow more fans into Big Ten events with the proliferation of the COVID-19 vaccine.

"This decision follows the announcements by the conference on March 4, 2021, to allow a limited number of fans to attend the 2021 Big Ten men's and women's basketball tournaments and on March 9, 2021, to follow local health guidelines and restrictions for all remaining 2020-21 Big Ten conference championships and tournaments," the statement said. "The goal is to transition from a conference-wide approach to local decision-making in consultation with public health departments and university medical experts."

**One Year Ago — 2025**

The Ohio State football team got back into the Woody Hayes Athletic Center for the first of 15 spring practices on March 17, and for the first time since 2020, there was no Jack Sawyer, Emeka Egbuka, Denzel Burke, TreVeyon Henderson and so many more who were off to the NFL draft.

But the college football world wasn't stopping for the Buckeyes to allow them to take their time to gather themselves after winning the national championship in the longest season the sport had ever had. Less than two months later, they got back onto the field and started to figure out how to accomplish their three goals in the 2025 season.

As head coach Ryan Day always said, the Buckeyes wanted to beat Michigan, win a Big Ten championship and – the biggest goal of the three – win a national championship and go back to back. It was set to be nearly an entirely new starting lineup for Ohio State.

"Every year that happens, though," Day said. "That's the great thing about being at Ohio State. We have such great impact players, then once spring starts you have to restart and look at it differently. That's part of the process. It's a great opportunity for guys to step up. We're onto the next year now. That doesn't mean it's going to be easy. We're just getting started, but it is a transition for sure."

# OSU A Top Choice For '27 Georgia Safety

As Ohio State continues to put together its 2027 class, it is finding its way to the top of mind for many prospects in the cycle.

## RECRUITING OUTLOOK Greg Wilson

One of those players who recently said that the Buckeyes are one of his top choices is Atlanta Douglas County four-star safety Adryan Cole (6-2, 190). Cole spoke with both On3 and 247Sports about OSU.

"One day, Georgia is on top," Cole told On3. "Then it is Ohio State. I keep going back and forth between those two."

Being from Atlanta, it may be tough to pull Cole away from the Bulldogs, but safeties coach Matt Guerrieri has proved that location doesn't have to limit OSU when it comes to trying to land prospects who are near other powerhouse college football programs.

Most notably in his short time with the Buckeyes, Guerrieri was able to bring Blaine Bradford to Ohio State in the 2026 class, practically out of the back yard of LSU.

Other schools that could still be in the mix for Cole are Georgia Tech, Auburn and South Carolina, where he has already taken unofficial visits. He also has official visits to Florida and Ole Miss scheduled already, according to 247Sports. He visited Ohio State during spring practices on March 28.

"I'm looking forward to seeing the environment and how they compete," Cole told 247Sports before his trip. "How aggressive they are, the tone at practice, how they compete, just all of that."

The Buckeyes and Guerrieri are off to

a strong start at safety, with Cibolo (Texas) Steele four-star Eli Johnson (6-3, 200) and Hollywood (Fla.) Chaminade-Madonna three-star Angelo Smith (5-10, 170) pledged.

Cole would be another strong addition as the No. 258 player in the class, No. 22 safety and the No. 29 player in Georgia. He is hoping to commit in July after he has taken his official visits.

### Inniss Recalls Recruitment For Hankton Hiring

Ohio State became known as "Wide Receiver U" with former receivers coach Brian Hartline in that role with the Buckeyes. He was recognized by many as the top position coach in the country and one of the top recruiters in the country.

But when Hartline left to become the head coach at South Florida after the 2025 season, there were questions about whether the Buckeyes could keep that reputation without Hartline around.

The day after losing the Cotton Bowl to Miami (Fla.), it was announced that head coach Ryan Day had landed on Cortez Hankton from LSU to replace Hartline at Ohio State. The hiring process was something Day had his wide receivers in on, according to rising senior Brandon Inniss.

"Coach Day had me very involved – me, (Jeremiah Smith) and Carnell (Tate)," Inniss said. "(He said), 'If you guys have any names, let me know.' Coach Hank was the first one I brought up because I remember our relationship we had when I was in high school, when he was at Georgia."

Inniss said that Smith also brought up Hankton as one of his first options to take Hartline's spot. Inniss, who was recently named a winter Iron Buckeye and was a captain for the first time last year, looked back at the recruiting process when he brought up Hankton.

"How real he was," Inniss said when asked what resonated with him about his

## 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	★★★★★	Sunbury (Ohio) Big Walnut
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

relationship with Hankton when he was being recruited out of high school. "Even when I committed to Ohio State, he was telling me, 'Good luck. I look forward to seeing you in the future.'"

"He was telling me stuff in high school like I was his player already. It was stuff like that I always kept in the back of my mind."

That relationship has continued with Inniss now that Hankton is at Ohio State, and Inniss said that other Buckeyes who are just getting to know Hankton are enjoying him being with the program as well.

"He was recruiting me in high school, so we always had a relationship," Inniss said. "But ever since he came in here, it's been a good relationship with all of the guys in the room. He brings a lot of energy every day. Jermaine (Mathews Jr.) was telling me before practice (on March 24), 'Damn, I love Coach Hank's energy.' That's what type of coach he is. He's going to bring that energy every day, and that's what we need as a coach."

Hankton hasn't yet landed a wide receiver recruit in the 2027 class in the three months he's been a Buckeye, but he has jumped fully into his responsibilities, offering many top prospects and trying to make sure there is no dip in talent in the wide receivers room.

### Lang Commits To Trojans

Ohio State missed on Santa Ana (Calif.) Mater Dei four-star cornerback Danny Lang (6-0, 160) when he committed to USC on March 25.

The cornerback was projected to land with the Trojans, so it didn't come as much of a surprise that he didn't choose Oregon or Ohio State – the other two programs in his top three – over staying closer to home.

If Lang remains with USC until signing day, he will be a solid addition for the West Coast Big Ten team. As a junior, Lang had 31 tackles, one for loss, 10 passes broken up and one fumble recovery. That was after he had 33 tackles, 3½ for loss, three passes broken up, two interceptions and three forced fumbles as a sophomore.

The Buckeyes were an early favorite for Lang when he received a scholarship offer from them in May 2025 because he grew

up a fan of Ohio State. However, both Oregon and USC were able to get in the mix, and the Trojans were able to come out on top.

"Just looking at what USC has been building, what excited me the most was how they built up the 2026 class – No. 1 in the country – and the direction the whole program is going in," Lang told 247Sports. "That's something I'm excited to be a part of. Me coming in, I know it's going to be good to be playing with some of those guys and everyone I know."

Lang ranks as the No. 104 player in the country, the No. 12 cornerback and the No. 9 player in California.

### Spring Visitors Flock To OSU

Ohio State is taking full advantage of spring practices, getting many recruits out to Columbus to watch practices and get to know the coaches and the campus. Since BSB last went to press, there have been dozens of prospects on site to take in Buckeye practices.

One of the top players who was on campus is the younger brother of former Buckeye wide receiver Marvin Harrison Jr., Philadelphia St. Joseph's Prep five-star wide receiver Jett Harrison (6-1, 175) of the 2028 class.

Harrison has long been on the radar for Ohio State since his brother had so much success with the program, and that likely gives the Buckeyes some sort of advantage when it comes to his recruitment.

Harrison is the No. 4 player overall in the 2028 class, according to 247Sports composite rankings, the No. 2 wide receiver and the No. 1 player in Pennsylvania. He holds nine Division I offers from Boston College, Duke, Nebraska, Ohio State, Oregon, Syracuse, Tennessee, Virginia Tech and Notre Dame.

Also getting to Ohio State was Cincinnati Taft five-star wide receiver Lorenzo McMullen Jr. (6-1, 170). He is the No. 9 player in the 2028 class and the No. 4 wide receiver.

The Buckeyes also hosted Bradenton (Fla.) IMG Academy four-star wide receiver Osani Gayles (6-0, 185), who is considered the No. 47 player in the country and the No. 8 wide receiver in the 2027 class.



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# ASK AN ANALYST

With Garrick Hodge of 247Sports

**How interested is class of 2028 Philadelphia St. Joseph's Prep five-star wide receiver Jett Harrison (6-1, 175) in Ohio State? Do the Buckeyes stand out for him because his brother had so much success in Columbus?**

"It's hard to say for sure because the Harrison family is very private with all things regarding recruitment, but it would be a big surprise if Marvin Harrison Jr. wasn't raving about his time at Ohio State to his younger brother. He got to see it play out firsthand, and that's a great advantage to have in a recruitment."

**Are there any prospects who want to commit in the spring that Ohio State has a chance to land?**

"I don't think there's anybody offhand that would jump out in terms of 'this guy has set a spring commitment date, and OSU is the favorite here,' but going off history, I'm sure Ohio State will get a handful. Making a total guess, Columbus Bishop Watter-son four-star interior offensive lineman Davis Seaman (6-4, 290) seems like he could be that person."

**In the class of 2028, Cartersville, Ga., athlete Madox Davis (5-10, 189) picked up an offer from Ohio State while he was on a spring visit. Have you been able to see him at any camps or on film? What do you make of him as a prospect?**

"I haven't seen him in person, but the film looks great, true

verified 4.4-second 40-yard dash speed. I think he'll be one of the better wide receivers in 2028. It's extremely early in the relationship between him and Ohio State, but it's off to a good start."

**Libertyville, Ill., four-star tight end Brock Williams (6-5, 210) in the class of 2027 seems to be getting closer to making a decision. Where do the Buckeyes stand in his recruitment?**

"I think fans hoping to see a commitment from Williams are probably going to be disappointed, unless something changes drastically. I'd be surprised if he ends up in scarlet and gray. Texas and Georgia are both more likely landing spots right now."

Gayles received a scholarship offer from Ohio State on Jan. 29 and currently has official visits scheduled to get to Alabama on May 29, USC on June 5 and Tennessee on June 12.

Another notable visitor was Atlanta Woodward Academy four-star cornerback Bryce Woods (6-2, 175). He is the No. 154 player in the country and the No. 18 cornerback, and according to 247Sports' Garrick Hodge, Woods is "surging up Ohio State's wish list at cornerback this cycle."

Woods has already set an official visit with Ohio State for June 12. He will also take official visits to Mississippi State on May 29 and Virginia Tech on June 5. In his junior season, Woods finished with 28 tackles (one for loss), six passes broken up, six interceptions and one forced fumble. As a sophomore, he had 31 tackles (one for loss), eight passes broken up and a sack.

The Buckeyes have long been trying to build a relationship with Jacksonville (Fla.) The Bolles School five-star defensive lineman Asher Ghioto (6-5, 240), and that continued when he also visited Ohio State for spring practices. Ghioto is considered the No. 10 player in the 2028 class and the top defensive lineman. He holds 55 Division I offers, so Ohio State has a lot of competi-

tion in trying to land the prospect.

Named a freshman All-American for his 2024 performance by MaxPreps, Ghioto finished his first high school season with 66 tackles, 21 tackles for loss, 15 quarterback hurries and seven sacks. He was also named the top performer of the FBU Freshman All-American Bowl by 247Sports.

Ohio State is also trying to nail down a quarterback for its 2028 class, hosting Danvers (Mass.) St. John's Prep five-star signal caller Christopher Vargas (6-4, 175) on campus as well. He is the No. 5 player in the class and the top-ranked quarterback. As a freshman in 2024, he threw for 1,311 yards, 17 touchdowns and three interceptions.

### More Prospects Narrow Choices

The Buckeyes still have a lot of work to do in the 2027 class, and they have been able to stay in the mix for many top prospects who are narrowing their options as official visits approach.

Dallas South Oak Cliff four-star offensive tackle Brian Swanson (6-6, 315) has Ohio State in his top eight programs along with Arizona State, LSU, Oklahoma, SMU, Tennessee, Texas and Texas A&M.

Swanson is considered the No. 203 player in the country, the No. 20 offensive tackle and the No. 32 player in the talent-rich state of Texas. Currently, Swanson has three official visits already set up. He is set to go to Oklahoma the weekend of May 29, to SMU the weekend of June 5 and to Texas the weekend of June 12.

"Big-framed offensive lineman with experience at tackle and guard who could potentially play either in college," wrote 247Sports scouting analyst Gabe Brooks of Swanson. "Above average functional athlete who, in pads, outperforms testing numbers. Strong hands that send smaller targets flying even on limited contact."

Baton Rouge (La.) Catholic four-star running back Jayden Miles (6-2, 203) is down to six schools. He is going to choose between Auburn, Florida State, Kentucky, LSU, Ohio State and Texas Tech. Miles is the No. 389 player in the 2027 class, the No. 30 running back and the No. 14 player in Louisiana.

The Buckeyes are also in the top six for another running back in the 2027 class, Gainesville, Ga., four-star Nigel Newkirk (5-11, 200), who has OSU on his list along with Alabama, LSU, Miami (Fla.), Michigan and USC. Newkirk is the No. 194 player in the country, the No. 11 running back

and No. 22 player in Georgia.

He has official visits scheduled to get to Alabama on May 29, USC on June 5, Florida State on June 12 and Ohio State on June 19. As a junior, Newkirk ran for 1,496 yards, with nine of his 13 games in the season being 100-plus-yard games for the four-star. He ran for 19 touchdowns and also added 12 catches for 128 yards and another score through the air.

Perhaps the most important list the Buckeyes ended up on since BSB last went to press is the top six for Fort Worth (Texas) North Crowley five-star cornerback John Meredith III (6-2, 175). He has Ohio State on that list along with Alabama, Miami, Notre Dame, Texas and Texas A&M.

Cornerbacks coach Tim Walton is pushing hard to try to get Meredith in Columbus, and that push has been working to this point, with the Buckeyes still well in the running. Meredith already has four official visits scheduled. He is going to Alabama on May 29, Texas on June 5, Texas A&M on June 12 and Ohio State on June 19.

If Meredith doesn't commit to a school before his official with the Buckeyes, it could help that OSU gets to make the last impression of those four programs.

Continued On Page 20

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# Buckeyes In The Hunt For Top Cornerback

Continued From Page 19

Meredith is ranked the No. 2 player in the country and the No. 1 cornerback.

“Advanced cover corner that’s built for the game’s current era with his long limbs, quick reaction times and elite recovery speed,” wrote Andrew Ivins, the director of scouting for 247Sports. “Matches routes with efficient yet explosive feet. Very effective in trail technique with his vision. Will use his hands to battle but tends to avoid flags. Projects as a potential CB1 for a College Football Playoff contender that can help shut down one side of the field.”

The Buckeyes are also in the running for Oakdale (Conn.) St. Thomas More four-star defensive lineman Marvin Nguetsop (6-8, 268). He included Ohio State in his top five along with Kentucky, Michigan, Ole Miss and Tennessee.

Nguetsop is the No. 384 player in the 2027 class, the No. 45 defensive lineman and the No. 2 player in Connecticut. As BSB went to press, 247Sports showed that he had five official visits scheduled already. He was set to head to Tennessee on May 22, Michigan State on May 29, Michigan on June 5, Kentucky on June 12 and Ole Miss on June 19.

Nguetsop was born in Germany and eventually moved to the United States and ended up playing football.

“European defensive end with exceptional physical features that is going to have a chance to be a problem up front if it all comes together,” Ivins wrote in his scouting report. “Still rather green from a technical standpoint but flashes the ability to dip and build speed while turning the corner.”

## Buckeyes Make More Offers

• **Cartersville, Ga., athlete Madoxx Davis (5-10, 189)** – Davis received an offer from Ohio State when he was on campus for a spring visit. The 2028 prospect is currently unranked but has great speed, being timed at 4.42 seconds in the 40-yard dash on March 15. He likely projects best as a speedy slot receiver but plays on both sides of the ball for his high school team. He finished his sophomore season with 36 catches for 774 yards and six touchdowns, also adding two kick-return scores and another score from a punt return.

• **Carrollton, Ga., cornerback Tyler Boyd (6-0, 189)** – Boyd is also unranked in the 2028 class, but he does have a defi-

nite position as of now. The cornerback has been offered by 24 Division I schools, with many Power Four offers coming this spring. His list of offers includes Alabama, Auburn, Florida, Florida State, Georgia, Indiana, Ole Miss, Oregon and Tennessee, among others. He finished the 2025 season with 38 tackles, seven passes broken up, three interceptions, two of which he took back for touchdowns, and one forced fumble.

• **Cleveland Glenville three-star linebacker Kaylon Bailey (6-1, 225)** – Ohio State has a long history with the Glenville program and a very strong one that has continued recently, with Arvell Reese being projected to be selected in the top 10 of the NFL draft this spring and Cincere Johnson joining the roster as one of the top linebacker prospects in the country for the 2026 season. Bailey is currently ranked the No. 644 player in the country, No. 54 linebacker and the No. 27 player in Ohio, and the Buckeyes’ Glenville pipeline has a chance to continue into the 2027 class.

• **Clairton, Pa., wide receiver Brandon Murphy Jr. (6-0, 175)** – Hankton made another scholarship offer, with Murphy being the latest to get one from the newest Buckeye position coach. Murphy

is unranked in the 2028 class, but with 14 Division I offers on his plate already, he will surely end up in a solid position in the composite rankings when they get filled out for his class. His offer list includes Colorado, Florida State, Indiana, Kentucky, Miami (Fla.), Pitt, Wisconsin and South Florida.

## Other Notes And Tidbits

• Fort Lauderdale (Fla.) St. Thomas Aquinas four-star defensive end Wyatt Smith (6-6, 235) scheduled a visit to Columbus for the weekend of the spring game. The Buckeyes are off to a strong start on the defensive line in the 2027 class, but Smith, the No. 75 player in the country and the No. 10 edge rusher, would be a strong addition for defensive line coach Larry Johnson. As a junior, Smith totaled 155 tackles (24 for loss), 33 quarterback hurries, 13 sacks, two passes broken up and two forced fumbles in 15 games. He is the son of former NFL defensive lineman Justin Smith, who was a five-time Pro-Bowler and finished his pro career with 87 sacks in 14 seasons.

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

### 30 Years Ago — 1996

By the time Vanness Provitt finally made it to Ohio State upon graduation from Fork Union (Va.) Military Academy, he would hardly resemble the high school senior who was recruited by the Buckeyes out of Warren, Ohio, during the 1994 football season.

After spending the full academic year at Fork Union, the new and improved Provitt would be bigger, stronger and faster than the two-sport star he was at Warren Harding High School, the same school that produced current Buckeye LeShun Daniels and former great Corey Stringer.

While at Harding, Provitt led the football Raiders to an 8-2 record as a senior, catching 23 passes for 400 yards and six touchdowns. On the hardwood, the versatile athlete led the basketball team to a 16-4 mark, averaging 14.6 points and 10.3 rebounds a contest. Behind a valiant effort led by Provitt, the Raiders battled eventual state champion Zanesville in the regional finals before bowing out.

### 25 Years Ago — 2001

Despite missing almost four games of his junior season with a high-ankle sprain and playing on a team with a losing record for all three of his varsity years, wide receiver Roy Hall of Lyndhurst (Ohio) Brush High School obviously was one of the top prep football talents going into the next season.

At face value, Hall seemed to be blessed with the complete package to succeed both in the classroom and on the gridiron.

“He’s got that rare combination of size, speed and athleticism,” said Brush coach Eric Mitchell of Hall, who also ran relays and sprints for the track team. “Not only that, but he’s also a very smart kid. He’s got a 3.6 or 3.7 grade-point average, and he studies the game inside and out. He does what he has to do to be the best player he can be.”

Coming off a stellar sophomore campaign when he caught a school record-tying 42 passes, Hall was being counted on to help lead his Cleveland-area team out from behind the perennial vapor trail left in the wake of a conference that included last season’s Division I state runner-up, Solon. Brush’s record was 1-9 and 2-8 in Hall’s first two seasons at the school.

### 20 Years Ago — 2006

One name that seemed to be mentioned consistently when it came to Ohio’s top linemen was Nick Schepis, a prospect out of Cuyahoga Falls Walsh Jesuit, the same school that sent former Buckeyes Mike Vrabel and Darik Warnke to Ohio State in the early- to mid-1990s.

The Buckeyes were quite aware of the latest well-regarded Warrior.

“A little while ago, (offensive coordinator Jim Bollman) called my coach, asking about me,” Schepis told BSB. “I get letters from

them also.”

OSU was joined by programs that spanned the continental United States. Schepis’ coach informed him that West Virginia was extremely interested, and Boston College, North Carolina, Duke, Notre Dame, Purdue, Syracuse, Virginia and Stanford were just a few other programs that had made early contact.

Text messages had been a subject of much debate, as they were considered a form of electronic communication and thus an acceptable way to contact prospects when phone calls were prohibited. Some felt that it was a phenomenon getting out of hand, but Schepis believed it was an advantage for a player in his situation.

“I don’t think it’s an added expense,” he said. “I think it’s good for the kids. It’s easier for the kids and coaches to build better relationships because they can’t call.”

### 15 Years Ago — 2011

Although his commitment apparently remained solid to Ohio State, Canton (Ohio) GlenOak running back Bri’onte Dunn planned to check out rival Michigan sometime in the near future.

During a March 23 video interview with BSB recruiting analyst Bill Greene, the four-star prospect revealed that new Wolverine head coach Brady Hoke had issued him a scholarship offer and that he would be traveling to Ann Arbor to see the U-M campus.

“I’ve still got my eyes open,” Dunn said. “I’m going to go visit. I’m not sure when. I’ve got to talk to my mom and dad about it.”

Dunn landed an offer from the Buckeyes on Sept. 15, 2010, and accepted it 12 days later. At the time, he was known to have held offers from Cincinnati, Pittsburgh and Notre Dame and was also fielding interest from a host of other schools, including Alabama.

Six months later, Dunn said that although some schools were still attempting to get back in on him, Michigan was the only new school to have offered him a scholarship.

### 10 Years Ago — 2016

While Las Vegas Bishop Gorman quarterback Tate Martell (5-11, 205) was visiting Ohio State, a wave went through the recruiting world on March 24 when it was reported that Danny Clark was on a visit to Michigan State.

It was naturally perceived as a reaction from the Akron Hoban quarterback and OSU commit to the Buckeyes bringing in the top-rated Martell for a visit, but the trip to East Lansing had nothing to do with that.

Clark’s father, Jeff, was the founder of Unrivaled Athletes Consulting, a company that helped recruits with training and other aspects of the recruiting process. He brought a group of athletes to Michigan State to check out the Spartans, and his son came along with them.

“I did take a group of athletes to Michigan State today and Danny was with me, but he was not there as a recruit,” Jeff Clark

told Scout.com. “There’s no story at all, because Danny is just hanging out with me while some of my guys visit. Everything was cleared with Ohio State prior to us coming.”

“I brought some of my top athletes up here, like I do with many schools, to help these kids the best I can. Danny was with me, but not visiting, per se. He is 100 percent committed to Urban Meyer and Ohio State, and Coach Meyer was aware of the visit beforehand.”

### Five Years Ago — 2021

Ohio State extended a scholarship offer on March 22 to Huber Heights (Ohio) Wayne four-star offensive guard Joshua Padilla.

Padilla was considered the sixth-best offensive guard and No. 161 prospect overall in the class of 2023. He joined Mentor five-star defensive end Brenan Vernon, Findlay four-star offensive tackle Luke Montgomery and Pickerington Central five-star safety Sonny Styles as the only in-state players in his class with an offer from the Buckeyes.

Padilla received the offer during a phone call with offensive line coach Greg Studrawa and offensive coordinator Kevin Wilson. He’d never been to campus but hoped to visit for the first time when the ongoing recruiting dead period came to an end.

If he ultimately chose the Buckeyes, Padilla would have been the eighth player from Huber Heights Wayne to play for Ohio State this century, joining quarterback Braxton Miller, wide receivers John Hollins and L’Christian “Blue” Smith, defensive tackle Robert Landers, linebacker Marcus Freeman, cornerback Donnie Eveye and safety Will Allen.

### One Year Ago — 2025

Ohio State got its eighth commitment for the 2026 class on March 31, and it was a big one, with Baton Rouge (La.) Catholic five-star safety Blaine Bradford pledging his services to the Buckeyes.

He was the No. 1 safety and the No. 23 overall player in the country according to the 247Sports composite ranking. He was the first safety that Matt Guerrieri had landed in the cycle.

Bradford had official visits set to go to Columbus, Texas and LSU but chose the Buckeyes over those two top programs. He could still take those visits, but for the time being, the Scarlet and Gray had the upper hand.

It was noteworthy that they were able to land him over the in-state Tigers, especially given that Bradford’s older brother, Jacob, signed with LSU in the 2025 class. But Guerrieri had already proved in his short time as a position coach that he could compete for the best prospects.

It would likely be a fight until the early signing period in December to keep Bradford in the class, but for the time being, he was committed to Ohio State.

## Ohio State's Comeback Falls Short Vs TCU

By GREG WILSON

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Editor

Ohio State (21-13) dropped a heart-breaker in the first round of the NCAA Tournament March 19 when TCU (23-11) made a game-winning layup with 4.3 seconds remaining for a 66-64 victory.

Ohio State came into the game knowing it was going to be going up against a strong Horned Frog defense, but whatever preparation the Buckeyes did for the pressure TCU brought wasn't enough, as they committed six turnovers in the first half.

However, the Buckeyes cleaned that up in the second half and put together a 15-1 run midway through the second half to get back in the game after being down by 15 at halftime. That effort ultimately fell just short.

The Buckeyes were the first to strike, with senior guard Bruce Thornton making a three-pointer. They took a 5-2 lead when freshman forward Amare Bynum made two free throws, but TCU scored four straight to take its first lead of the game with 17:32 showing.

That was the start of an 8-0 run for the Horned Frogs that gave them a five-point lead, 10-5, at 14:50 while Ohio State was on a field-goal drought that lasted until sophomore guard John Mobley Jr. scored on a baseline floater to pull the Buckeyes within 10-7 with 13:42 left in the half.

Ohio State got the game back to a one-



SONNY BROCKWAY

**TOUGH ENDING** — Senior guard Bruce Thornton (2) looks on as the final shot of his storied Ohio State career is off the mark in a last-second attempt from midcourt. TCU bounced the Buckeyes from the first round of the NCAA Tournament with a 66-64 win on March 19. Thornton became the program's all-time leading scorer this season.

point deficit by getting into the paint and knocking down some easy shots, with junior forward Devin Royal getting a dish from senior center Christoph Tilly to make it 14-13.

Neither team scored for nearly two minutes, but Micah Robinson of TCU ended that streak with a deep ball at 9:06, and Xavier Edmonds followed with a three of his own after Mobley had a turnover. Edmonds added another before Mobley contributed a three of his own for a 23-18 score at the 6:53 mark.

The Horned Frogs' lead stayed within six until they scored 11 straight points to take a 39-24 lead with 34 seconds left in the first half. Brock Harding capped the run by knocking down a three to make it a 15-point lead at the half.

Ohio State went into the locker room with a shooting percentage of 35.7 (10 of 28 from the field). The Horned Frogs forced scored 10 points off of Ohio State's six turnovers, while they made just two turnovers and OSU scored two points off of them. TCU was shooting 7 of 13 from deep at half-time (53.8 percent).

Ohio State started the second half with four straight points to cut the deficit to 11 points but couldn't take advantage of TCU missing its first seven shots of the half and

was able to get the lead back to nine points, 49-40, with a three-point play.

A layup from Tilly and a floater from Mobley made it a five-point game again, and sophomore guard Gabe Cupps made an open corner three to make it 49-47 with 8:50 left in the game.

A free throw from Edmonds and two from Royal made it a one-point game, and when Bynum came up with a steal and a layup, OSU took a 51-50 lead with 7:24 yet to play. The run for the Buckeyes continued when Royal was found in the paint on two straight possessions for two layups and a five-point OSU lead.

The Horned Frogs got back on the board with a three-point play by Punch, and by 4:28, it was just a one-point lead, 57-56, for Ohio State. TCU took the lead back with a fastbreak layup by Punch.

After not scoring for 3:29, Ohio State took the lead back when Thornton got to the line and made both free throws to make it 59-58, OSU, with 2:08 left. Punch took it right back with another three-point play.

Royal tied it up at 61 with two free throws with just 1:16 remaining, but Robinson knocked down an open three. Thornton answered with a tightly contested three with 34 seconds left to tie the game back up at 64.

Edmonds made the game-winner in the paint as the shot clock ran down, and Thornton bounced a halfcourt attempt off the backboard, ending Ohio State's season.

Diebler gave credit to the Horned Frogs for defending the last play of the game well enough to keep Thornton to a halfcourt attempt despite the fact that he had over four seconds for the play.

"I thought TCU corralled the ball well, and maybe that limited (Thornton's) ability to get the ball down the floor," Diebler said. "We were trying to give it to him on the run and give him freedom to make a decision. We had a couple of outlets down the floor that, if we could get it to them, he could, to get a look, or if we could get up there quick enough, we could use a timeout to set up the half-court."

Mobley led Ohio State with 15 points on 6-of-17 shooting while Royal (14), Bynum (12), Thornton (10) and Tilly (10) were each able to reach double digits.

Robinson paced TCU with 18 points, and Punch and Edmonds had 16 each, with Punch making it a double-double with a game-high 13 rebounds. The Frogs held a 38-32 edge on the glass.

## TCU 66, Ohio State 64

March 19, 2026

Bon Secours Wellness Arena • Greenville, S.C.

	1	2	F
TCU (23-11)	39	27	66
Ohio State (21-13)	24	40	64

	TCU	Total				A	PF	Pts.
		Min	M-A	M-A	O-D			
Robinson	37	6-11	2-2	0-5	0	3	18	
Punch	28	6-12	4-6	2-11	2	3	16	
Edmonds	25	6-12	2-4	6-2	3	4	16	
Pierre	35	1-7	1-2	0-0	2	1	4	
Harding	29	3-8	0-0	1-3	3	2	8	
Toolson	17	0-2	0-0	2-1	1	0	0	
Lelevicuis	28	2-8	0-0	1-4	1	0	4	
Salatchoum	1	0-0	0-0	0-0	0	0	0	
<b>Totals</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>24-60</b>	<b>9-14</b>	<b>12-26</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>66</b>	

**Percentages:** FG: 40.0%. FT: 64.3%. **Three-point field goals:** 9-23 (Robinson 4-6, Harding 2-6, Edmonds 2-3, Pierre 1-3, Lelevicuis 0-3, Punch 0-1, Toolson 0-1). **Team rebounds:** 0. **Blocked shots:** 4 (Punch 3, Pierre). **Turnovers:** 7 (Punch 2, Harding, Pierre, Robinson, Toolson, Team). **Steals:** 4 (Edmonds, Lelevicuis, Robinson, Toolson).

	Ohio State	Total				A	PF	Pts.
		Min	M-A	M-A	O-D			
Bynum	35	5-8	2-3	1-8	2	1	12	
Royal	39	5-10	4-4	1-4	0	2	14	
Tilly	30	4-9	2-2	1-5	6	3	10	
Mobley Jr.	39	6-17	0-0	0-3	6	1	15	
Thornton	40	3-9	2-2	0-4	4	3	10	
Njegovan	2	0-0	0-0	0-0	0	0	0	
Chatman	6	0-2	0-0	1-0	0	0	0	
Noel	4	0-0	0-0	0-0	0	0	0	
Cupps	5	1-2	0-0	0-0	0	0	3	
<b>Totals</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>24-57</b>	<b>10-11</b>	<b>6-26</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>64</b>	

**Percentages:** FG: 42.1%. FT: 90.9%. **Three-point field goals:** 6-23 (Mobley 3-11, Thornton 2-5, Bynum 0-3, Cupps 1-2, Royal 0-1, Tilly 0-1). **Team rebounds:** 4. **Blocked shots:** 3 (Bynum 2, Tilly). **Turnovers:** 7 (Tilly 2, Bynum, Chatman, Mobley, Njegovan, Thornton). **Steals:** 4 (Tilly 2, Bynum, Thornton). **Officials:** Barlow, Covington, Greenstein. **Attendance:** N/A.

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# Thornton Limited In NCAA Tourney Loss

The Ohio State basketball team was unable to extend its season, losing to No. 9 seed TCU in the first round of the NCAA Tournament on March 19.

## COURT REPORT Greg Wilson

It was Bruce Thornton's last game of his Buckeye career, and the senior was held to just 10 points in the game due to the defensive pressure he faced from the Horned Frogs, which was especially present in the first half.

TCU head coach Jamie Dixon was extremely pleased with how his team executed the game plan to limit Thornton, saying what they did to limit the four-year Buckeye was "remarkable" due to how productive he usually is.

"The troubling thing was that I was watching film and I go, 'Well, he's better than I thought. Then I looked at his stats, and I thought the 56 percent from the field was wrong. There's no way a guard is shooting 56 percent, but it was accurate,'" Dixon said after the game. "To hold him to what we did, 3 of 9, is remarkable. He had four assists.

"He was getting all kinds of ball screens. We wanted to take away the curls in the lane that he's so good at. We wanted to blow up the ball screens and make him give it up. I've never seen a guard shoot 56 percent. So I'm glad we're done and don't have to play him again."

Ten points is tied with the second-lowest total of the season for Thornton, with only Penn State on Jan. 26 keeping him below that mark (nine points). He was also held to 10 against Iowa in the regular-season loss on Feb. 25 and in the Jan. 23 loss to Michigan in Ann Arbor, the first of the three times the Buckeyes matched up with the Wolverines.

Ohio State as a team struggled in the first half from the offensive end against TCU, scoring just 24 points and shooting 10 of 28 from the field (35.7 percent) while committing six turnovers and making just 2 of 11 from three-point range.

OSU head coach Jake Diebler wasn't happy with how his team played on either side of the ball.

"It was a bad half of basketball for us," Diebler said. "We had been playing so well going into that game, and we just weren't ourselves. From a technical standpoint, our defensive pressure wasn't as good as it had been. We gave up some offensive rebounds, which was a huge key to the game, and we had some costly turnovers that they converted (into points).

"My biggest frustration looking back is that we didn't do what we had practiced



Bruce Thornton

## 2025-26 Ohio State Men's Basketball Statistics

### 21-13 Overall (12-8 Big Ten) Statistics through games of March 19

Player	G-GS	Min.-Avg.	FG-FGA	Pct.	3P-3PA	Pct.	FT-FTA	Pct.	Rebounds		PF-FO	A	TO	BS	ST	Pts.-Avg.
									O-D	T-Avg.						
THORNTON, Bruce	34-34	1241-36.5	237-428	.554	62-155	.400	141-170	.829	31-142	173-5.1	62-0	133	44	8	39	677-19.9
MOBLEY JR., John	31-31	981-31.7	155-359	.432	97-236	.411	79-91	.868	11-64	75-2.4	54-0	87	57	3	23	486-15.7
ROYAL, Devin	32-32	1040-32.5	151-317	.476	31-98	.316	105-131	.802	51-131	182-5.7	86-3	52	54	5	20	438-13.7
TILLY, Christoph	32-32	832-26.0	114-238	.479	13-56	.232	111-152	.730	43-108	151-4.7	102-4	74	49	17	21	352-11.0
BYNUM, Amare	34-24	969-28.5	129-255	.506	28-91	.308	45-62	.726	38-130	168-4.9	87-3	37	38	28	21	331-9.7
NOEL, Brandon	16-10	303-18.9	46-73	.630	3-15	.200	11-15	.733	19-40	59-3.7	22-0	14	16	3	5	106-6.6
CHATMAN, Taison	28-3	363-13.0	40-87	.460	24-51	.471	17-20	.850	7-26	33-1.2	36-1	23	21	3	10	121-4.3
NJEGOVAN, Ivan	30-2	343-11.4	29-51	.569	2-3	.667	19-29	.655	29-61	90-3.0	49-2	20	18	12	4	79-2.6
JOHNSON, Puff	9-1	104-11.5	6-18	.333	3-7	.429	6-9	.667	6-4	10-1.1	18-0	1	4	0	1	21-2.3
CUPPS, Gabe	33-0	406-12.3	17-45	.378	7-27	.259	14-19	.737	6-31	37-1.1	49-0	36	21	1	12	55-1.7
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	29-1	252-8.7	11-28	.393	2-18	.111	1-5	.200	10-19	29-1.0	27-0	12	5	2	8	25-0.9
NASH, Braylen	6-0	08-1.3	0-0	.000	0-0	.000	0-0	.000	0-0	0-0.0	0-0	1	0	0	0	0-0.0
Team									61-56	117			22			
<b>Total</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>6875</b>	<b>936-1907</b>	<b>.491</b>	<b>273-764</b>	<b>.357</b>	<b>552-710</b>	<b>.777</b>	<b>313-816</b>	<b>1129-33.2</b>	<b>594-13</b>	<b>492</b>	<b>350</b>	<b>82</b>	<b>165</b>	<b>2697-79.3</b>
<b>Opponents</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>6875</b>	<b>857-1956</b>	<b>.438</b>	<b>251-788</b>	<b>.319</b>	<b>503-679</b>	<b>.741</b>	<b>350-717</b>	<b>1067-31.4</b>	<b>636-13</b>	<b>457</b>	<b>357</b>	<b>102</b>	<b>185</b>	<b>2468-72.6</b>

near the level we were capable of in the first half. We did it much better in the second half."

TCU came into the game as a highly rated defensive team, and Diebler knew the Buckeyes would have to take care of the ball and wishes his team had adjusted earlier.

"We needed to make quicker decisions when they committed two to the ball. Then, when we got the ball out of that, we needed to make quicker decisions and cut more. You saw that as the second half started and progressed."

### Royal To Enter Portal

Ohio State will be without one of its major contributors next season, with junior forward Devin Royal intending to enter the transfer portal when it opens on April 7, according to multiple reports.

Royal spent three seasons with the Buckeyes and will have one year of eligibility remaining wherever he ends up.

After joining Ohio State out of Pickerington (Ohio) Central for the 2023-24 season, Royal played in 33 games but didn't start as a freshman, averaging 4.7 points and 2.4 rebounds. He found his way into the starting five at power forward as a sophomore, and he put up 13.7 points and 6.9 rebounds per game and was the second-leading scorer behind Thornton.

Then, after being moved to small forward as a junior, his scoring average remained at 13.7 points per game, and his rebounding average went down to 5.7 per contest.

He shot 40 more three-pointers as a junior and made just 31.6 percent of them, while losing efficiency on shots from inside the arc. He had a 59.0 shooting percentage on two-pointers as a sophomore, which went down to 54.8 percent in his third year with OSU.

Royal is the first of the Buckeyes who has gone public with his intention to enter the portal, but he likely won't be the last with how much turnover is common in college basketball today.

### OSU Held To Half-Court Heave

With 4.3 seconds left in the game, the

Buckeyes trailed by two points after a clutch layup from Xavier Edmonds that gave TCU the lead, and they needed a miracle to move on.

Thornton had been able to tie the game up at 64 with 34 seconds left with a highly contested three-pointer, giving the Horned Frogs the ball. After Edmonds' score, the Buckeyes needed to take the ball all the way down the court against a full-court press to get up a possible game-tying or -winning shot.

Coming out of a timeout, Ohio State was able to inbound the ball to senior center Christoph Tilly and get it back to Thornton, but he was able to make it only to half court, where he threw up a prayer with a full second left on the clock. The shot was on line but a few feet too high, bouncing off the backboard to end the game.

Diebler said that they drew up a play to get the ball to Thornton on the run, which they were able to do, but they didn't end up getting the shot they wanted on the play.

"We got the ball to Bruce on the run, and we had two outlets down the floor for a throw ahead," he said. "I was watching him with the ball, so it was hard to see if those guys were open or not."

Diebler believes the play he drew up could have been executed a little better by the players on the floor.

"We didn't execute it fast enough. We didn't sprint out of the block fast enough and catch the ball deep enough initially," Diebler said on "The Jake Diebler Show" on 97.1 The Fan on March 23. "We were a little slow on the first part."

He gave credit to the Horned Frogs' defense for shutting down what Ohio State was attempting to do.

"I thought TCU corralled the ball well and maybe that limited (Thornton's) ability to get the ball down the floor," Diebler said. "We were trying to give it to him on the run and give him freedom to make a decision. We had a couple of outlets down the floor that, if we could get it to them, he could, to get a look, or if we could get up there quick enough, we could use a timeout to set up the half-court."

But the Buckeyes weren't able to accomplish that and will have to wait until

next season for another chance at March Madness. But with the way the game ended, and the energy the players felt in the building during the game, the Buckeyes are hungry to try to get back again in the 2026-27 season.

"It's definitely fuel to the fire," said sophomore guard John Mobley Jr. after the game. "It's going to be motivation for me every day in the summer coming up and the work I'm ready to put in to make sure we get back to this position and go farther next time."

Freshman forward Amare Bynum, who, like Mobley, got his first taste of the NCAA Tournament, echoed the sophomore's comments.

"We want to keep building that, me and Juni," Bynum said. "When the guys come in, we're going to be ready to go in the summer."

### Diebler Ready To Build For 2026-27

Now that the season is officially over for the Ohio State men's basketball team, there is likely to be some roster turnover in the coming weeks, as there is for most teams during the transfer portal era.

With the portal opening on April 7, the day after the national championship game, there isn't much time left for teams to prepare. But Diebler is trying to do what he can to build a better team next year.

"We've got to start with retention. That's a major, major focus for us right now," Diebler said on the radio show. "Then we build it out from there. After retention, we figure out where do we go in the portal to raise our level as a team?"

Four Buckeyes are out of eligibility after this season, with Thornton, Tilly, Brandon Noel and Puff Johnson each not able to play any more college basketball. But Mobley, Bynum and more have the chance to return, and Diebler is hoping to bring at least some of them back.

At least in terms of what Diebler has been able to do with building next season's roster to this point, the head coach seems fairly confident in what OSU will be able to do in putting together its team.

"There's a lot of good happening behind

## Bynum Returning For Next Season

Ohio State freshman forward Amare Bynum will be back in Columbus for his sophomore season, it was learned at press time.

Bynum was one of the most important players the Buckeyes needed to retain over the offseason after he broke out as a freshman to average 9.7 points and 4.9 rebounds per game.

He began the year on the bench, with senior forward Brandon Noel in the starting five, but 10 games into the season, Bynum took over as the starting power forward, a role that he kept for the remainder of the year.

As the season went on, Bynum became one of the more consistent contributors for Ohio State. In the final six games of the season, when the Buckeyes were playing their best basketball as a team, Bynum averaged 12.3 points, 6.5 rebounds and 1.5 assists per game. That stretch included a 14-point game in the win over Purdue on March 1 and 18 points in the regular-season finale against Indiana on March 7.

Bynum's intention to return came one day after it was revealed that Devin Royal intends to enter the transfer portal to find a new home for his senior season.

The two instances could be related, with both Bynum and Royal fitting best at the power forward spot, along with the fact that incoming five-star freshman small forward Anthony Thompson will be with the team next season.

the scenes to set us up from a roster construction standpoint," he said. "It's been a battle to get to this point, but I'm excited about the progress that we've made going into this offseason. I feel like we're in a much better place today than we were at this time last year when it comes to getting ready to build our roster."

Also adding to next year's roster will be two incoming freshmen in five-star small forward Anthony Thompson and four-star power forward Alex Smith. Thompson is the first five-star recruit to sign with the Buckeyes since D'Angelo Russell in 2014, so there will likely be a lot of excitement surrounding his arrival on campus.

But the toughest part of this offseason will be replacing what Thornton brought to the table. He finished his four-year Ohio State career with his best season of the four, averaging 19.9 points, 5.1 rebounds and 3.9 assists per game, and he was the only four-time captain in program history.

It will be a tall task trying to replace what Thornton meant to the Buckeyes, but Diebler seems to have some early confidence that, after making its first NCAA Tournament in four seasons, the program will be able to take another step forward.

Even with his eyes looking forward out of necessity, he's not ignoring some of the progress that he believes was made this season for the program.

"From where we've been to where we were this year, there certainly was some progress," Diebler said. "Not only did we play in big-time, meaningful games from the middle of February and on, but we proved that we can win big-time, meaningful games down the stretch of the season against good teams."

### Thornton Reflects On OSU Career

After the loss to TCU, Thornton had to grapple with the fact that his time at Ohio State had come to an end.

The four-year captain didn't spend

much time talking about what went wrong against the Horned Frogs in the locker room after the loss. Instead, he was more focused on the bigger picture of his time as a Buckeye.

"I just appreciate the teammates, coaching staff and Buckeye Nation for sticking with me for four years," he said. "I'm so appreciative of everything in my life. Not the way I wanted to end it, but that's just how it is sometimes."

He did feel pride in getting Ohio State back to the NCAA Tournament, even if it didn't go the way he wanted it to.

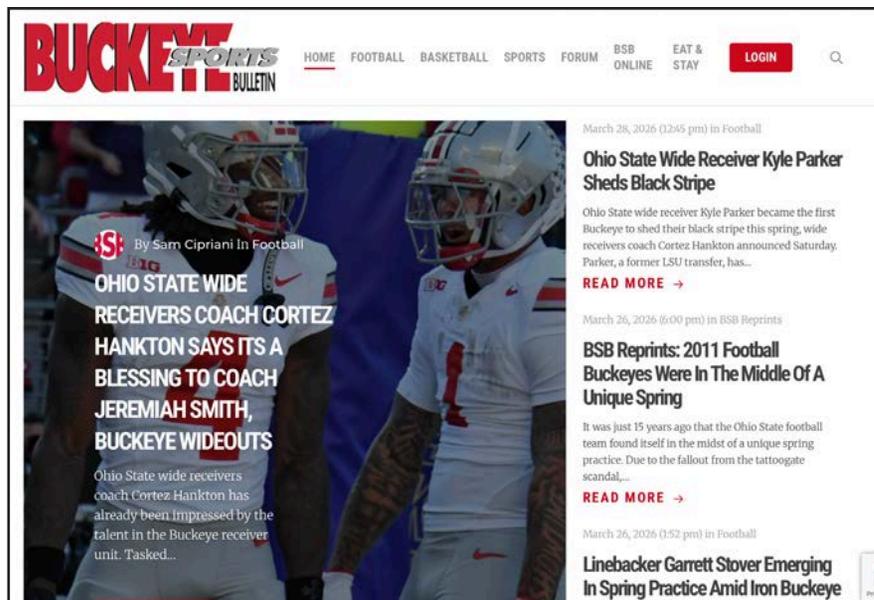
"It's something I can tell my kids and my grandkids in the future," he said. "I'm glad I helped put Ohio State basketball back on the map with a team that made the tournament."

With Thornton's career coming to an end, Mobley and Bynum both talked about what the senior meant to them as teammates.

"He meant everything, especially to me," Mobley said. "Coming in as a freshman into the dorms, he took care of us, me and Colin (White). He had snacks in the pantry when we got there. He was driving us to practice. If I needed to go work out, he'd drive me to the gym to get up some shots. He's a great guy to have. He was a great guy for this program, and he really showed what loyalty meant."

"He meant a lot to me, being my roommate. We talked a lot, and I asked him a lot of questions," Bynum added. "I asked him a lot of questions about how to be a leader. He told me, just show up more and then talk more, and showed me on the court how to really work. We worked out a couple of times in the summer, and he showed me how to really work, and I will put that work in in the summer."

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# Buckeyes Take Step, Still Have Work Ahead

By **GREG WILSON**

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Editor

This basketball season was an important one for second-year head coach Jake Diebler. After not making the NCAA Tournament in his first full season at the helm, he and the fans were looking for the program to take a step forward to show that Diebler could lead the way.

Ohio State was able to make it back to the NCAA Tournament for the first time since 2022 but didn't make it past the first round, falling 66-64 against No. 9 seed TCU in Greenville, S.C., on March 19.

Longtime beat reporter Steve Helwagen of 247Sports believes that simply making the tournament was enough to call this season a step forward for the program.

"I would say that it's definitely a step forward. You get into the tournament, you've earned something," Helwagen said. "That's something they couldn't do the last three years. ... They were so much more competitive this year than they've been any other year."

There were times during the season when there were doubts that the Buckeyes would be dancing once mid-March came around. They were squarely on the bubble throughout the first two months of 2026 and were projected outside the 68 teams to make the bracket by many analysts for much of that time.

But as soon as the calendar turned to March, Diebler led his team to another win over Purdue, which was ranked No. 8 in the country at the time of the victory. It was Diebler's third win over the Boilermakers in as many tries.

Ultimately, Ohio State finished with a 21-13 record, which Helwagen said is right around what he expected going into the season. But Helwagen also thinks it could have been much better than that had the Buckeyes been able to close some games out, which they struggled to do for much of the year.

"They played well enough and were in position in several of their losses that the record could have looked much better than it did," Helwagen said. "Arguably, they should have beaten Pittsburgh, North Carolina and Nebraska. Those three games really stick out. They could have also beaten Michigan State on the road and Virginia in the neutral-site game had they had their full complement of players."

"If they win just two or three of those games, it's a much more successful season and they have a little bit of a better seed and maybe a chance to advance in both the Big Ten tournament and the NCAA Tournament."

While many were projecting Ohio State to miss the tournament before the March 1 victory over Purdue, Connor Lemons, who covers the basketball team for Land Grant Holy Land, never had a doubt that the Buckeyes would be in the field of 68 when Selection Sunday came around.

"There was never a point in the season where I didn't think they were going to make the tournament," Lemons said. "The entire way, I thought they had the talent to get there. When they got their butts kicked against Iowa (Feb. 25), I was starting to



SONNY BROCKWAY

**NEED TO BE BETTER — Jake Diebler promised Ohio State would return to the NCAA Tournament for the first time since 2022, and in his second full season the Buckeyes did. But just getting there - and losing in the first round to TCU - is a low bar, and many want to see the expectations raised, putting the heat on him to produce.**

wonder a little bit, but there was no point in the season where I was like, 'These guys don't have it. They're not going to make it the whole way through.' "

In terms of taking a step forward as a program this year, Ohio State basketball historian Lee Caryer agrees that making the tournament is actual progress that can be pointed to, but it's more complicated than that in today's era of basketball.

"I saw a comment that Jake Diebler made that we're making progress and establishing a program, and I don't think that's possible today," Caryer said. "I don't think that with NIL and unrestricted movement and all those things - every year is a whole new deal. You look at next year's team. I could argue that they're going to have massive losses. I could argue that all their key players will be back. I cannot be confident that they will bring in new players that will be helpful because they have what I would call a very poor batting average on that."

## Portal Troubles

In Diebler's first season, one of the ma-

major disappointments was the portal class that had a very high upside that didn't come close to panning out.

Five-star recruits Aaron Bradshaw and Sean Stewart came to the program without much experience, and neither of them lived up to the potential that Diebler hoped they would. There was also Meechie Johnson Jr., who played with the Buckeyes for 10 games before leaving the program so he could preserve his year of eligibility and transfer back to South Carolina.

After Diebler missed on Bradshaw and Stewart, Lemons noted that it seemed like the head coach changed his strategy in the portal going into the 2025-26 season, adding veteran players Christoph Tilly and Brandon Noel, while bringing in Gabe Cupps as a hopeful bench contributor.

"A couple of years ago, they went after these former five-star recruits that had super high ceilings, but you didn't have any statistics to back up that they were going to be that good, and it turned out that they weren't that good," Lemons said of the transfers OSU signed for the 2024-25 season. "This

year, Diebler went for more veteran, higher-floor guys like Christoph Tilly and Brandon Noel. I think fans were pretty excited that they had gone for more sure things.

"In hindsight, it didn't quite work out that well. Tilly was fine. I think he met the floor of what people expected of him. Gabe Cupps contributed very little. Brandon Noel contributed very little - and that's not really his fault because he got hurt."

Tilly finished the season with 11.0 points per game, which was fourth on the team, but despite being a 7-footer, he brought in just 4.7 rebounds per game.

Rebounding was a big reason Diebler said he went into the portal looking for size, but Tilly was fourth on the team in rebounding as well, trailing junior forward Devin Royal (5.7 per game), senior guard Bruce Thornton (5.1) and freshman forward Amare Bynum (4.9).

Noel began the season in the starting five, but when Bynum proved that he could contribute at a high level for the Buckeyes, the senior Wright State transfer was relegated to the bench to be the sixth man. Soon after his demotion, he went down with a foot injury that kept him out for over two months. Noel played in just 16 games total, making it back for the final two contests against Michigan in the Big Ten tournament and TCU in the NCAA Tournament. He averaged 6.6 points and 3.7 rebounds in that time.

Cupps was another highly touted Ohio high school prospect who didn't have much proof of concept at the college level, and he had spent the previous season with Indiana injured for much of the year. He finished this season scoring 1.7 points per game with 1.1 assists, while his physical defense ended up leading to 49 personal fouls for the season, nearly matching the 55 points he scored.

For Caryer, the percentage that the Buckeyes hit on transfers needs to be much higher than it has been in the past few seasons.

"It comes down to evaluation and development," Caryer said. "It disappoints me that they've been wrong on so many guys that they brought in. You have to be well above 50 percent (hit rate on transfers) to have eight players you can count on with varying degrees of confidence."

It's entirely possible, as Caryer mentioned, that talent evaluation in the portal could be the reason the transfers of the past two seasons haven't been enough to bring the Buckeyes back to the heights the program saw during the best years under former head coach Thad Matta.

However, Helwagen believes that it could be due to a lack of financial resources committed, which he says needs to be addressed this offseason.

"They went after Morez Johnson and didn't have the money they needed to sign him, then Michigan signed him out from underneath Ohio State," Helwagen said. "Then Michigan used him to beat Ohio State three times."

"So if you can't compete money-wise, then you're not going to compete on the court. That's something that's got to be reconciled here as they go forward and decide if they are going to try to compete with the rest of the Big Ten and the country, or are they just going to field a team and play the best teams and hope they catch a break and

win a few games?"

Caryer mentioned Johnson as an example as well, but he also refuses to let NIL be an excuse for the Buckeyes when it comes to putting together a team that can compete.

"NIL is the greatest excuse for failure that's ever been created because it's very easy to say, 'Oh, they spend more money than we do,' and there's no proof," Caryer said. "You've got these people who've been raised as Buckeye fans and that's their excuse. Well, there are also Buckeye fans who do think they want to see improvement and want to see growth and they want to watch a game and enjoy it."

### Bigger Size Has Questionable Results

One of the main things Diebler attempted to do over the offseason was increase the overall size of his team. The main reason for that was that last year's Buckeyes were a poor rebounding team, and that cost them multiple games, so Diebler wanted to get better in that aspect of the game.

He targeted Tilly and Noel for that reason and also, going into the season, moved Royal from power forward to small forward. That might have had a small impact on the rebounding for the Buckeyes, but Royal's position change impacted other areas of the game as well.

During the 2024-25 season, Royal had somewhat of a breakout campaign with 13.7 points per game (second on the team) and 6.9 rebounds as a sophomore. He showed a lot of promise to be a major contributor for the Buckeyes, especially if he took further steps as a junior.

However, he remained stagnant at best as a small forward for the Buckeyes and arguably had a worse season when looking at his efficiency.

He was still a solid contributor, averaging 13.7 points per game again, but dropping to 5.7 rebounds per game. While that still led the team, Lemons believes the junior could have been much better on the boards had he been in the same spot as last year.

"I think Devin's best position is power forward, so I think moving him to small forward didn't put him in the best position to be his best self," Lemons said. "He wasn't in position to be the elite rebounder that I think he is. His rebounding went down and he took more threes, so his overall efficiency dropped because he also wasn't taking the shots that he's best at."

Royal also took 40 more three-pointers than he did during the 2024-25 season, and while his percentage from deep went up slightly, it still wasn't a strong point. He made 31 of 98 shots from beyond the arc this season (31.6 percent up from 27.6). He went through a major cold stretch from Jan. 20 to Feb. 14, making just 2 of 25 shots from deep (8.0 percent). He was able to get out of that for one game against Wisconsin, going 4 for 7 in the home victory, but largely was ineffective from three.

Helwagen also believes that the position change might have hurt Royal on the defensive end, but there were other areas where he excelled in his new role.

"I don't know if he was as good a defensive player," he said. "He certainly was not as good as (Micah) Parrish was as the three-man last year. But on the whole, I think he did OK, and I can't put a lot of the blame at his feet."

As both Helwagen and Lemons believe, the position change for Royal also led to some positive things for the Buckeyes. One of those was the ability to start Bynum for most of the conference schedule.

The freshman made big strides in his first season at the college level and finished the year with 9.7 points per game, while becoming a very strong finisher at the rim.

But even with Tilly standing at 7-0 and Royal at small forward, the Buckeyes didn't take a large leap forward in rebounding, as Diebler said so many times that he was aiming for.

There was some improvement, but it wasn't major. The Buckeyes finished 11th in the Big Ten with 33.2 rebounds per game after last season being No. 13 in the conference with 33.7 boards per contest.

The lack of improvement on the boards was evident in the NCAA Tournament loss to a TCU team that was smaller than the Buckeyes. The Horned Frogs brought down 38 boards compared to Ohio State's 32 which surely helped them get out to a 15-point lead in the first half and hold on for a two-point win by the time the final buzzer sounded.

### Looking Ahead

While the Buckeyes did take a small step forward this season, the program still isn't close to where Diebler has said he wants to be.

When he was hired, Diebler pointed out Final Four banners on the wall to show where he wanted to take his team. But the Buckeyes are in a drought as a program in terms of making runs in the NCAA Tournament.

The last time they made it to the Sweet 16 was in 2013 as a two-seed, winning that game to make it to the Elite Eight and losing to No. 9 seed Wichita State, 70-66, in the regional final.

"People are tired of it. They're tired of it," Helwagen said. "They want a breakthrough, a real breakthrough. They want to get to the second round of the NAAs. They want to contend in the Big Ten, and it's just not there yet."

Lemons also understands that fans are tired of waiting around for a team to make a run in March. And while it's a new era now that players can be paid for their name, image and likeness, and the Buckeyes fund their football program so heavily that the men's basketball program has seemed to take a back seat, Lemons still believes that fans shouldn't be forced to lower their expectations.

"Fans should hold Ohio State to whatever standard they feel is appropriate," Lemons said. "A lot of fans expect them to be in the upper half of the Big Ten every single year and maybe win the Big Ten a couple of times in a decade and make the second weekend of the tournament every couple of

years.

"I struggle with allowing the financial resources to be an excuse. It is a part of everything, but I don't think it's fair to tell fans, 'Well, we've got to remember that they're not working with the same pocketbook that schools A, B and C are, so you should lower your expectations.' Fans shouldn't have to lower their expectations. I think the athletic department should give the program the proper resources so that the team can perform to the standard that the fans expect."

In order to get to that point, Ohio State still needs to take steps in multiple facets. One of those is that Diebler needs to figure out what type of program he wants to lead, at least according to Lemons.

"I think (Diebler is) still learning," Lemons said. "For me, the biggest thing with Jake Diebler is that I've yet to see an identity of his Ohio State teams. With really good coaches and good programs, you'd be like, 'OK, we're going to play Michigan State and Tom Izzo. Regardless of who's on the roster, they're going to crash the glass, they're going to get back in transition, they're going to make you run with them and they're going to out hustle you.'"

"Dusty May has made it an identity where he loves to run two to three big guys, and they love to get out in transition. They love to cherry-pick, send a guy the other way. I don't see an identity of Jake Diebler's Ohio State teams yet."

"When he was the interim head coach for that eight- or nine-game stretch, I thought that was going to be their identity. When he was the interim, that was the hardest I've seen Ohio State play since before Chris Holtmann was the coach. Since then, I haven't seen that level of intensity and collective buy-in, selflessness and hustle."

But the first step for Diebler is building for next season. As the head coach said soon after losing to the Horned Frogs, the first thing he is going to worry about is retention. With Thornton gone after this season, the Buckeyes are losing their biggest contributor from the last few seasons. But they still have players who could help the program take another big step forward next year.

Helwagen has an order of players in terms of which players Diebler needs to be focused on keeping around the most.

"In order of progression, I would say John Mobley Jr. and Amare Bynum and then Devin Royal would be my hierarchy," Helwagen said prior to Royal's announcement of his intention to transfer. "Then Josh Ojjanwuna, he's got to be retained to compete for the starting center position. He and Ivan Njegovan will probably compete. I also believe they've got to find



Amare Bynum

a quality big man in the portal, because you don't know if Josh is going to be fully healthy coming off his knee injury."

Lemons believes that after retention, there needs to be one major thing on the mind of Diebler and his staff when the transfer portal opens, if they are able to retain the players that they want to.

"I think they have to get a point guard, a starting-caliber point guard that can score,"

Lemons said. "That's the only spot in their starting lineup that's open. I don't know how much money they're working with this summer, but if you have to spend most of your excess funds after you were able to keep Mobley, Bynum and hopefully Devin, that would make sense to me."

But Helwagen maintains that the Buckeyes are headed in the right direction. Even with Thornton out of the picture for next year's team, Diebler was able to bring in a five-star recruit for the first time since D'Angelo Russell in the 2014 class, with small forward Anthony Thompson joining the Buckeyes for the 2026-27 season.

"I think it's going in a positive direction with Diebler," Helwagen said. "Diebler is an Ohio guy, and he wants this as much as anybody else. And you have to give him and his staff credit for the development of Royal, Mobley and Bynum."

"They've got a really good McDonald's All-American wing coming in with Anthony Thompson, an Ohio guy who turned down just about everybody in the country. He's a national top-10 prospect. He's an important piece for next year on the wing, and I think it is trending in the right direction."

But Helwagen also believes that the next step needs to be taken soon, both for the sake of the head coach and the fans.

"For Diebler's sake, though, and the impatience of the fan base – which I fully understand, because it's not been up to standard for 13 years – for his sake, they need to contend in the Big Ten and get to a Sweet 16 sooner rather than later. People have pitchforks, and they want a winner. They're not going to accept being mediocre forever."

Whether it's possible that Diebler can get the program back to the heights that it enjoyed in the past, Caryer is still evaluating that.

"Just about anything is possible," he said. "I don't see much proof. I don't have much reason to suspect it's not possible either. It gets back to evaluation and development. I get stuck on those two words."



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# Turnovers Plague OSU In Loss To Notre Dame

During a 2026 season that ended in a third straight second-round exit in the NCAA tournament, the Ohio State women's basketball team wasn't always perfect, but the Buckeyes seldom struggled with turnovers.

## DOUBLE DRIBBLE Bobby Gorbett

Heading into its 83-73 loss to Notre Dame in the second round of the bracket on March 23, the Buckeyes ranked 53rd nationally, committing only 13.6 turnovers per game. However, against the Fighting Irish, the Buckeyes committed 21 turnovers, their second-highest total of the season.

According to head coach Kevin McGuff, whose teams are known for their ability to turn other teams over, the Buckeyes' carelessness with the ball cost them the game.

"We had way too many turnovers that were easy baskets for them," McGuff said. "Typically, we win the battle of points off turnovers, and today it was 25-25. That's not a good recipe for us, but you have to give Notre Dame credit."

Although Ohio State won its first NCAA tournament game 75-54 over No. 14 Howard on March 21, it struggled with turnovers in that game as well.

The Buckeyes coughed up the ball 14 times in the win over the Bison. McGuff said after the loss to the Fighting Irish that he was unsure why his team struggled with maintaining possession of the ball in its final two games.

"We had taken care of the ball really well all year," McGuff said. "Usually, around 13 or 14 turnovers was a normal night for us, but we got really sloppy with the ball the last two games."

Like the Buckeyes, the Fighting Irish pride themselves on their ability to steal extra possessions with their defensive intensity. Led by star guard Hannah Hidalgo, who averages over five steals per game, Notre Dame averages 20.0 forced turnovers per game, the 34th-best mark in the country.

Still, junior guard Kennedy Cambridge felt that Ohio State's turnovers were self-inflicted errors.

"I don't really think it was Notre Dame," she said. "I think that once we started turning the ball over, we got in our heads, and we weren't playing Buckeye basketball."

It wasn't all bad for Ohio State's offense. Sophomore point guard Jaloní Cambridge tied a career-high total of 41 points, but the rest of her team combined for just 32 points on 11-of-27 shooting. Hidalgo said the Fighting Irish planned to slow down some of the team's other contributors.

"We did a great job of just trying to slow them down," Hidalgo said. "Jaloní, she was hooping, of course, so it was hard to slow her down. But we were able to take everything else away, and we were able to get into those passing lanes and get stops."

Although she had one of the best scoring outings of her career, Jaloní Cambridge



SONNY BROCKWAY

**NOT SO SWEET — An 83-73 loss to Notre Dame on March 23 marked the third straight season in which the Buckeyes lost in the second round at home and failed to reach the Sweet 16. Sophomore guard Jaloní Cambridge (22) did her best to keep OSU in the game by tying her career high of 41 points.**

struggled more than anyone with turnovers. The Buckeyes' star committed a game-high seven turnovers in the loss, which she said came down to carelessness.

"We just weren't taking care of the ball," Cambridge said. "I mean, it's Notre Dame, but we've been dealing with that all season, just not taking care of the ball. We just needed to make smarter plays. We could have gotten away with not turning the ball over if we just made smarter plays."

### Gray Concludes Collegiate Career

Not only did Ohio State's loss to Notre Dame cut short the season for the Buckeyes, but it also ended the collegiate career of senior Chance Gray, who, by the end of her two years in Columbus, had emerged as one of the best shooters in the Big Ten.

Gray struggled with consistency at times during her first year with the Buckeyes last year but fixed those issues this year to average 14.7 points, 2.5 rebounds and 2.7 assists per game, while shooting 45.3 percent from the floor and 40.5 percent from three-

point range.

According to Jaloní Cambridge, Gray's presence was just as significant off the court.

"Everything," Cambridge said when asked how much Gray meant to the program after the Buckeyes' loss to Notre Dame. "She's a great leader. She led us through getting to where we were in each of the two years that she was here. I wouldn't trade the world for playing with her. I would do it again in every lifetime if I got the chance. I love her to death, and I wish her the best in success in everything she does in her career."

When asked about Gray after Ohio State's loss to Notre Dame, McGuff echoed Cambridge's remarks about her presence in the locker room.

"She's a great kid, and everybody has seen how much she's impacted us," McGuff said. "On the court, she's a great player. As much as anything, though, off the court, she's been a great leader. She's been incredible in the locker room. She's been great in the community. She's just a really

high-character person that we're going to really miss."

Although her team fell short of many of the goals they outlined ahead of the season, Gray will look back on her final collegiate season with pleasure.

"This was my most fun season of basketball," Gray said. "I'm really happy and glad that this is how I ended my career."

When asked about how she hopes to be remembered at Ohio State, Gray said, "Just that I had fun on the court and was able to bring a lot of joy and fun to people watching basketball."

### Buckeyes Shift Focus To Next Season

After suffering the loss to the Fighting Irish, Ohio State immediately began to shift its focus to what should be a promising 2026-27 season.

On paper, the Buckeyes should have a high ceiling next year, needing to replace only Gray and fellow senior guard T'Yana Todd. However, as Ohio State found out last year when star forward Cotie McMahon departed for the transfer portal, it's often easier said than done to retain important pieces.

"Every kid we have in the program is a great kid," McGuff said. "We have high-character kids. We have a lot of good, young, talented players as well. If we can keep this group, the core of this group together, and keep growing and getting better, we could really end up in some great places. But it's just not easy just saying that. I think everybody likes being here and all that, but there are other factors in this day and age, and we'll start to obviously dive into those as soon as possible."

In terms of retention, priority No. 1 for Ohio State's staff will undoubtedly be Jaloní Cambridge and her sister, Kennedy.

One encouraging sign for the Buckeyes is that Jaloní Cambridge spoke highly of the Buckeyes' chemistry shortly before the end of the season.

"The bond that we share is like no other," Cambridge said of her Ohio State teammates before the team's NCAA tournament games. "It's one of the best teams I have played on. And it's not just from the basketball standpoint, it's off the court, and we share so many great moments together, and I love them all. I'll do anything for them."

As big a loss as Gray will be after she was the second-leading scorer for OSU, the Buckeyes have several three-point shooters waiting in the wings if they can be retained. Sophomore guard Ava Watson improved her three-point efficiency this year while becoming a starter later in the season. After making 31.2 percent of her three-point attempts last season (29 of 93), Watson connected on 35.6 percent of those shots (42 of 118) this year.

Although they didn't earn much playing time down the stretch of the season, freshmen Bryn Martin and Daria Biruk also showed they were capable of providing an offensive boost.

McGuff said everyone on the 2025-26 team is welcome back next year.

"Obviously, we have to get past this really tough loss and then work on the process

2025-26 Ohio State Women's Basketball Statistics

27-8 Overall (13-5 Big Ten)  
Statistics through games of March 23

Player	G-GS	Min.-Avg.	FG-FGA	Pct.	3P-3PA	Pct.	FT-FTA	Pct.	Rebounds		PF-FO	A TO	BS	ST	Pts.-Avg.	
									O-D	T-Avg.						
CAMBRIDGE, J.	35-35	1134-32.4	305-617	.494	49-136	.360	154-187	.824	40-156	196-5.6	97-2	155	106	15	66	813-23.2
GRAY, Chance	35-35	1123-32.1	183-404	.453	85-210	.405	62-70	.886	12-75	87-2.5	27-0	94	64	0	30	513-14.7
LEMMILÄ, Elsa	34-26	897-26.4	131-236	.555	2-13	.154	45-73	.616	78-177	255-7.5	65-0	74	69	77	33	309-9.1
CAMBRIDGE, K.	35-35	1015-29.0	112-268	.418	29-96	.302	61-99	.616	67-98	165-4.7	102-4	117	51	23	130	314-9.0
KITTS, Kylee	30-19	590-19.7	80-185	.432	13-39	.333	48-60	.800	72-97	169-5.6	70-4	28	50	21	19	221-7.4
WATSON, Ava	35-16	922-26.3	87-216	.403	42-118	.356	36-40	.900	26-52	78-2.2	71-0	82	56	5	69	252-7.2
MARTIN, Bryn	35-0	483-13.8	52-118	.441	25-68	.368	4-4	1.000	7-41	48-1.4	52-1	34	18	10	25	133-3.8
TODD, T'vana	35-9	408-11.6	47-136	.346	18-67	.269	19-24	.792	14-23	37-1.1	40-0	16	16	2	16	131-3.7
BIRIUK, Dasha	20-0	146-7.3	23-50	.460	11-32	.344	8-9	.889	5-19	24-1.2	13-0	8	14	3	7	65-3.3
HOBBS, Ella	28-0	199-7.1	23-51	.451	7-16	.438	5-6	.833	17-42	59-2.1	17-0	12	8	3	4	58-2.1
HENRY, Seini	17-0	108-6.4	12-32	.375	1-11	.091	10-16	.625	13-25	38-2.2	15-0	4	10	3	4	35-2.1
Team									46-78	124		21				
<b>Total</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>7025</b>	<b>1055-2313</b>	<b>.456</b>	<b>282-806</b>	<b>.350</b>	<b>452-588</b>	<b>.769</b>	<b>397-883</b>	<b>1280-36.6</b>	<b>569-11</b>	<b>624</b>	<b>483</b>	<b>162</b>	<b>403</b>	<b>2844-81.3</b>
<b>Opponents</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>7025</b>	<b>846-2102</b>	<b>.402</b>	<b>241-721</b>	<b>.334</b>	<b>388-536</b>	<b>.724</b>	<b>416-893</b>	<b>1309-37.4</b>	<b>589-13</b>	<b>504</b>	<b>738</b>	<b>98</b>	<b>233</b>	<b>2321-66.3</b>

of seeing who we can retain," McGuff said. "We love the young group that we have, and everybody's welcome to come back. We have great kids. I really like everybody in our program, and so hopefully we'll get everybody back."

As much optimism as there is with the Buckeyes being led by a young core of players, the Buckeyes still haven't made it out of the first weekend of the NCAA tournament since 2023.

Sophomore center Elsa Lemmilä said that in order for her team to get over the hump, the group will need to take their coaches' advice and make improvements over the offseason.

McGuff said if the Buckeyes want to finally win the first two games of the NCAA tournament, they will need to play their best at the right time, something his teams have failed to do over the past three years.

"At this time of year, high-level execution has got to be a part of the equation to winning. Notre Dame executed better than we did. Our lack of execution led to turnovers and not enough good looks at the basket. That's one of the things we have to learn. Our execution at times was really poor. I thought theirs was better. They executed, and it led to more positive things than what we got."

**Bucks Take Positives From 2026**

Their season may have ended before they had hoped, but McGuff and his players were proud of what the team accomplished over the entire year.

After starting the season unranked, the Buckeyes won 24 regular-season games and made it to the semifinals of the Big Ten tournament. Lemmilä said after the loss to

Notre Dame that the Buckeyes weren't expected to accomplish as much as they did before the season.

"We've grown a lot as a team, and that's what we should be proud of," Lemmilä said. "We did make it this far, and nobody expected us to make it this far."

McGuff emphasized that the Buckeyes' progress over the course of the season was something his team could take pride in.

"We had a lot of big wins, and from where we started the year to where we ended, we made significant progress," McGuff said. "And not that the rankings matter, but we started unranked and ended up as a No. 3 seed. So I think we certainly got better. And that's just a tribute to the character of the players and their commitment to getting better."

McGuff said he knew his group would be disappointed with the way the season ended, but he felt that, in time, the team would also look back on their achievements.

"I've really loved coaching this group, love being around them," McGuff said. "They're great kids. They poured a lot into the season, and this is not what we envisioned or planned, and it's going to hurt, and there's really no way around that. But hopefully we can look back one day, and they can really remember how much they supported each other, how much they liked playing with each other, and what we accomplished too."

**Cambridge Earns All-America Honors**

Jaloni Cambridge was recognized for her standout 2025-26 season on March 19 when the Associated Press named Cambridge a second-team All-American. Cambridge is the seventh player in Ohio State history to be named an AP All-American.

it's really good. I don't really get into all of that media stuff, and I'm not just saying that," Cambridge said of being named an All-American. "I'm grateful. I just want to go out there and have fun."

Although it came in a losing effort, Cambridge's 41-point performance against Notre Dame was an especially impressive way to culminate her season. The Nashville, Tenn., native went a bit cold as a scorer in the Big Ten tournament, having scored less than 20 points in each of her three games in Indianapolis. McGuff appreciated his star player stepping up in his team's final game.

"She's going to take (the loss) really hard," McGuff said. "She's a really competitive person, and she loves to win, and this is a tough loss. She, like everybody, played her heart out and gave everything she had. We just weren't good enough."

**Lemmilä Is Plank's Lady Buck**

Lemmilä is Plank's Lady Buck for the month of March. The Buckeyes' starting center elevated her game in the Buckeyes' final six games. She averaged 9.3 points, 10.2 rebounds, 3.5 assists and 2.5 blocks per game. Lemmilä recorded these impressive statistics despite going against high-level centers, including Sophie Hart of Minnesota and UCLA's Lauren Betts, in the Big Ten tournament.

With Lemmilä's help, Ohio State advanced to the semifinals of the Big Ten tournament before losing to UCLA, but fell in the second round of the NCAA tournament for the third year in a row.



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**Elsa Lemmilä**  
Sophomore Center  
Espoo, Finland

## PLANK'S LADY BUCK OF THE MONTH FOR MARCH

## Ohio State Goes 1-1 In NCAA Tournament

By **BOBBY GORBETT**

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

For the third year in a row, Ohio State (27-8) fell just short of reaching the second weekend of the NCAA tournament. Ohio State defeated Howard in the first round but was handed a season-ending loss by Notre Dame in the second round of the tournament.

## OSU Dominates Howard In First Round

Behind a standout performance from sophomore point guard Jalonni Cambridge, who scored a game-high 21 points, Ohio State (27-7) advanced to the second round of the NCAA tournament with a 75-54 win over Howard (26-8) on March 21 in front of 6,169 fans in attendance at the Schottenstein Center.

Coming off a two-week layoff between games, the Buckeyes weren't very sharp in the opening minutes. They had two turnovers in the first two minutes of the game to fall behind 4-3.

Junior guard Kennedy Cambridge scored the next five points of the game to put Ohio State ahead 8-4, but the Bison responded by scoring six straight to lead 10-8.

Ohio State 75, Howard 54	
March 21, 2026	
Value City Arena • Columbus	
	1 2 3 4 F
Howard (26-8)	15 4 17 18 54
Ohio State (27-7)	20 23 19 13 75
Howard	Total FT Reb.
Min	M-A M-A O-D A PF Pts.
Hemingway	23 0-2 0-0 0-4 1 1 0
Thomas	37 6-19 3-6 2-4 0 1 15
Miller	18 1-4 1-2 3-1 0 4 3
Henigan	30 4-15 6-10 4-6 0 1 14
Stewart	36 6-11 0-0 0-3 0 2 12
Edwards	19 0-2 2-2 0-0 0 2 2
Bynum-Johnson	7 0-0 0-0 0-0 0 0 0
Moreno	9 0-0 3-4 0-1 0 0 3
Watson	3 0-0 0-0 0-0 1 1 0
Kendrick	5 2-2 0-0 0-1 1 1 4
Nuquay	3 0-0 1-2 0-0 0 0 1
Durant	8 0-1 0-0 0-1 0 0 0
Perrin	1 0-0 0-0 0-0 0 2 0
<b>Totals</b>	<b>200 19-56 16-26 13-25 3 15 54</b>
<b>Percentages: FG: 33.9%. FT: 61.5%. Three-point field goals: 0-9 (Thomas 0-3, Henigan 0-3, Hemingway 0-1, Stewart 0-1, Edwards 0-1). Team rebounds: 8. Blocked shots: 1 (Henigan). Turnovers: 17 (Stewart 5, Hemingway 4, Henigan 3, Edwards, Kendrick, Nuquay, Perrin, Team). Steals: 4 (Hemingway, Henigan, Stewart, Bynum-Johnson).</b>	
Ohio State	Total FT Reb.
Min	M-A M-A O-D A PF Pts.
Lemmilä	25 1-5 1-1 3-8 3 3 3
Gray	30 4-11 0-0 0-1 4 1 11
K. Cambridge	28 4-9 2-2 1-6 3 2 11
Watson	34 4-10 0-0 1-1 2 1 11
J. Cambridge	28 9-14 3-3 0-3 1 3 21
Kitts	17 2-4 4-4 2-3 0 2 9
Todd	16 1-3 1-2 0-1 1 3 3
Martin	14 1-2 0-0 0-1 0 2 3
Hobbs	4 0-0 0-0 0-0 0 0 0
Biriuk	2 1-1 0-0 0-0 0 0 2
Henry	2 0-1 1-2 0-0 0 0 1
<b>Totals</b>	<b>200 27-60 12-14 7-26 14 18 75</b>
<b>Percentages: FG: 45.0%. FT: 85.7%. Three-point field goals: 9-24 (Watson 3-8, Gray 3-6, K. Cambridge 1-4, Martin 1-2, Kitts 1-1, J. Cambridge 0-1, Todd 0-1, Henry 0-1). Team rebounds: 2. Blocked shots: 7 (Lemmilä 4, J. Cambridge 2, Kitts). Turnovers: 14 (K. Cambridge 4, Watson 3, Lemmilä 2, Team 2, J. Cambridge, Kitts). Steals: 9 (Gray 2, K. Cambridge 2, Watson 2, J. Cambridge 2, Todd). Officials: Kaz Beverly, Lisa Jones, Felecity Willis. Attendance: 6,169</b>	

Howard led by at least two until senior guard Chance Gray knocked down a pair of three-pointers to lead Ohio State on an 8-1 run to end the first quarter leading 20-15.

Ohio State continued its momentum in the second quarter, scoring 10 straight points to open the frame and lead 30-15. Four different Buckeyes scored on the run, and Jalonni Cambridge led the way with four points.

Howard momentarily stopped the bleeding with a pair of free throws with 5:23 remaining before halftime, but redshirt-freshman forward Kylee Kitts drained a three-pointer on Ohio State's next possession. Kitts started what would be a 13-0 run that put the Buckeyes up 43-17 at 1:22.

Howard scored with 36 seconds left in the half on a fastbreak basket by Ariella Henigan, but that only cut Ohio State's lead to 43-19 by halftime.

The Buckeyes outscored Howard 23-4 in the second quarter, which, according to OSU coach Kevin McGuff, was due to the team's defensive intensity.

"Our second quarter was good, and we imposed our will on the game with our defensive pressure that resulted in some easy baskets, and then that led to better offensive execution," McGuff said.

Howard was much improved to start the third quarter. The Bison scored eight points in the first 3:53 to make it 48-27, but sophomore guard Ava Watson drained a three-pointer to add to Ohio State's cushion.

A questionable foul was called on Kitts, and McGuff was issued a technical foul at the 5:33 mark for voicing his displeasure.

The Bison made just 1 of 4 free throws after the technical, and shortly thereafter, Jalonni Cambridge grew Ohio State's lead to 54-28 with an and-one layup.

Ohio State's lead reached 30 points, 62-32, after a three-pointer from freshman guard Bryn Martin and a free throw from senior guard T'anya Todd with 1:38 left in the third stanza. The Bison scored the last four points of the third quarter to make it 62-36 heading into the fourth.

Watson made a triple to open the final period, but Howard scored six in a row to cut Ohio State's lead to 23 with 8:03 left in the game. Still, the Buckeye lead was safe. Ohio State shot 2 of 5 from the field in the final 4:15 of the game to still comfortably win by 21.

Jalonni Cambridge was the Buckeyes' leading scorer while shooting 9 of 14 from the floor, and Gray, Kennedy Cambridge and Watson each contributed 11 points of their own.

Sophomore center Elsa Lemmilä had a game-high 11 rebounds, and Gray had a game-high four assists.

The Buckeyes were 27 of 60 (45.0 percent) from the floor as a team, including 9 of 24 from three-point range (37.5 percent) in the win.

Howard, which out-rebounded Ohio State 38-33, was led by senior forward Zennia Thomas, who scored 15 points, while Henigan had a double-double with 14 points and 10 rebounds.

## Bucks Bounced Out Of Tourney

The Buckeyes' season ended on March 23 with an 83-73 loss to Notre Dame (24-10) in front of 5,671 fans at the Schottenstein Center.

Jalonni Cambridge had an outstanding night in a losing effort, scoring 41 points, which tied a career high, on 13-of-25 shooting, but the rest of the team combined to score just 32 points while shooting 11 of 27 from the floor. As a team, Ohio State committed 21 turnovers and was outrebounded 36-31.

When asked why his team was knocked out of the NCAA tournament in the second round for the third year in a row, McGuff said his team simply made too many mistakes to advance.

"Just looking at it today, (the problem) was turnovers," McGuff said. "We turned the ball over way too much, and they made us pay. They had too many points off turnovers (25) for us to overcome."

The Buckeyes couldn't have started better against Notre Dame. Jalonni Cambridge made her first three shots of the game to score seven points in the first two minutes and lead Ohio State to a 9-0 advantage.

The run prompted a timeout from Notre Dame, but the Buckeyes added to their lead again after a steal from Lemmilä and a layup from Kennedy Cambridge. Eventually, the Fighting Irish settled in and went on an 8-2 scoring run to cut Ohio State's lead to 13-8 at 5:48 of the first.

After Gray made a pair of free throws, Notre Dame scored four straight to get within three of the lead.

With 1:49 to go in the first quarter, Watson drained a triple to put Ohio State ahead 22-16, but Notre Dame made it a two-point game after closing the quarter with a pair of buckets to make it 22-20.

Ohio State scored first on a Jalonni Cambridge jumper to start the second quarter, but Notre Dame scored eight straight to take its first lead of the game, 28-24. Cambridge ended the run with a midrange jumper, but Notre Dame went up by seven, 33-26 at 4:30, after T'anya Todd fouled Vanessa de Jesus on a three-point attempt, and she made all three free throws.

Gray cut Notre Dame's lead to 33-31 with an and-one layup. However, the Fighting Irish scored the final six points of the half to take a 43-35 lead into the break.

The Fighting Irish struck first in the second half when de Jesus drained a three-pointer on her team's first possession, and after Kennedy Cambridge made a pair of free throws, they scored four straight points to lead 50-37 with 8:09 to play in the third.

Ohio State finally seemed to flip the momentum of the game after a timeout. The Buckeyes held Notre Dame scoreless for nearly four minutes to go on a 10-0 run and make it 50-47. Jalonni Cambridge accounted for half of the Buckeyes' points on that run with a pair of free throws and a three-pointer.

After taking its own timeout, Notre Dame scored on two straight possessions to lead 54-47 after a basket by Hannah Hidalgo, but Jalonni Cambridge scored six

## Notre Dame 83, Ohio State 73

March 23, 2026	
Value City Arena • Columbus	
	1 2 3 4 F
Notre Dame (24-10)	20 23 15 25 83
Ohio State (27-8)	22 13 19 19 73
Howard	Total FT Reb.
Min	M-A M-A O-D A PF Pts.
Cowles	34 1-7 2-2 2-4 2 2 4
de Jesus	35 3-6 7-7 0-3 1 4 15
Hidalgo	38 9-23 7-9 2-11 2 5 26
Prosper	37 5-7 3-4 3-1 2 2 13
Moore	29 4-8 2-2 0-1 0 4 13
Bransford	21 4-8 2-2 1-5 3 0 10
Sanchez	6 1-3 0-0 1-0 0 0 2
<b>Totals</b>	<b>200 27-62 23-26 11-25 10 17 83</b>
<b>Percentages: FG: 43.5%. FT: 88.5%. Three-point field goals: 6-15 (Moore 3-7, De Jesus 2-4, Hidalgo 1-2, Prosper 0-1, Bransford 0-1). Team rebounds: 2. Blocked shots: 2 (Cowles, Prosper). Turnovers: 15 (De Jesus 5, Hidalgo 3, Prosper 3, Moore 2, Sanchez, Team). Steals: 13 (Hidalgo 8, Moore 2, De Jesus, Prosper, Sanchez).</b>	
Ohio State	Total FT Reb.
Min	M-A M-A O-D A PF Pts.
Lemmilä	34 4-6 1-2 0-10 2 4 9
Gray	37 2-5 5-5 0-1 1 3 9
K. Cambridge	32 2-5 2-2 3-1 4 5 6
Watson	37 2-8 0-0 0-2 2 3 6
J. Cambridge	39 13-25 10-13 1-6 2 1 41
Kitts	17 1-2 0-0 0-4 0 2 2
Todd	3 0-1 0-0 0-0 0 1 0
Martin	1 0-0 0-0 0-0 1 0 0
<b>Totals</b>	<b>200 24-52 18-22 6-25 12 19 73</b>
<b>Percentages: FG: 46.2%. FT: 81.8%. Three-point field goals: 7-15 (J. Cambridge 5-8, Watson 2-5, Gray 0-2). Team rebounds: 3. Blocked shots: 5 (Lemmilä 2, J. Cambridge 2, K. Cambridge). Turnovers: 21 (J. Cambridge 7, Lemmilä 4, Gray 3, K. Cambridge 3, Watson 2, Kitts 2). Steals: 8 (Watson 4, Gray 2, Lemmilä, J. Cambridge). Officials: Lisa Jones, Edward Sidlasky, Teresa Stuck. Attendance: 5,671.</b>	

straight to cut the Fighting Irish's lead to 54-53 with 2:42 left in the quarter.

The Buckeyes had opportunities to tie or take the lead, but they couldn't convert, and Notre Dame scored on back-to-back possessions to lead by five, 58-53 and the Irish led 58-54 heading into the final frame.

Notre Dame opened the fourth quarter with a three-pointer by Iyana Moore, and after Jalonni Cambridge made a midrange jumper, de Jesus drained a triple to put Notre Dame up 64-56 with 7:53 showing.

Ohio State then went on a scoring drought and only got back on the board with a pair of free throws from Gray with 5:17 remaining.

The Fighting Irish still led 66-58 after Gray's free throws before Hidalgo buried a clutch triple with 4:35 remaining that made it 69-58. Notre Dame expanded its lead to 16 with 2:33 remaining on a pair of free throws by Hidalgo.

The Buckeyes got only within 10 of the lead before the end of the game and failed to put much game pressure on the road team.

Cambridge's 41 points were a game-high total. No other Buckeye reached double figures, but Lemmilä led the way for OSU with 10 rebounds to go with nine points. Kennedy Cambridge had a game-high four assists, but just six points.

Hidalgo led Notre Dame with 26 points and added a game-high 13 rebounds.

# Transfers Shining Early For Baseball Bucks

By **SAM CIPRIANI**

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

Following a disappointing 13-37 season in 2025, Ohio State and head coach Justin Haire looked to the transfer portal to fulfill many of their offseason needs, hoping to get more experienced as a team.

Needing to replace their entire outfield, much of the pitching staff and a first baseman, the Buckeyes leaned heavily on the portal, adding 16 players to their 37-man roster.

Nearly halfway through the 2026 season, Ohio State's newcomers had already made a strong impact, with the Buckeyes sitting at a 10-13 record before their away series against Minnesota from March 27-29, three games better than their 7-16 start a year ago.

In the outfield, Ohio State replaced 2025 starting outfielders Nick Giamarusti, Trey Lipsey and Reggie Bussey with UNC-Charlotte graduate transfer Noah Furcht, Gannon University junior transfer Alex Bemis and East Arizona junior transfer Miles Vandenheuvel.

Furcht, starting in right field, had been one of the Buckeyes' most productive hitters in 2026. He had started in all 23 games for Ohio State this season through March 24 and ranked third on Ohio State with a .310 batting average among hitters who had at least two plate appearances per game. He was behind second baseman Henry Kaczmar (.333) and Bemis (.314). The Esko, Minn., native also ranked second among Buckeyes with a .419 on-base percentage and 27 hits, and he had hit three home runs.

Vandenheuvel, who was an infielder and pitched for East Arizona a season ago before moving to center field at Ohio State, has been a steady presence for the Buckeyes both at the plate and in the outfield. The 6-2, 200-pounder ranked third on the team with a .417 on-base percentage and carried a .253 batting average, while also starting all 23 games. He was also the lone Ohio State starter with a perfect fielding percentage through 21 games played.

Bemis, in left field, had started in all but two games for Ohio State. The Gannon transfer has picked up steam at the plate recently, earning Big Ten Player of the Week honors on March 23.

With Haire emphasizing Ohio State's culture of discipline and toughness at the plate throughout the season, whether that means drawing walks or taking hit-by-pitches, the Buckeyes' transfer outfielders had fully embraced that approach.

Vandenheuvel (16 walks, five HBP), Bemis (13, four) and Furcht (13, four) each ranked among the team's top three in both categories.

Ohio State's first baseman rotation had also featured a trio of new faces, with sophomore Dane Harvey of Cowley County Community College, junior CJ Reid of Hutchinson Community College and freshman Steven Cavaco.

Harvey, standing at 6-5 and 270 pounds, had also been a force at the plate for Ohio State, playing in 17 games and earning 14 starts, often at designated hitter. He was tied with Bemis for the team lead in home runs (four), while leading the Buckeyes with a strong .650 slugging percentage in 60 at-bats. Harvey was also tied with Bemis for second

on the team with 19 RBI, trailing only catcher Mason Eckelman, who had 23 runners batted in.

While Harvey has provided the power at the plate, Reid has served as the primary starter in the field among the two transfer first basemen, starting in 20 of 21 games he had played in. He had posted a .198 batting average, with 12 hits and three doubles.

Much of Ohio State's 2026 pitching staff has been built through the transfer portal, with the Buckeyes adding eight pitchers overall, including seven juniors and one graduate arm.

Two of those transfers, junior Chris Domke from Youngstown State and Pierce Herrenbruck from Rend Lake College, had made their way into Ohio State's weekend rotation. The pair ranked second on the pitching staff with 27 $\frac{1}{3}$  innings pitched apiece, trailing only sophomore Gavin Kuzniewski, who had thrown 30 $\frac{2}{3}$  innings. Each had appeared six times, with Domke earning five starts to Herrenbruck's and Kuzniewski's six.

Domke had recorded a 6.59 ERA and a 2-3 record while striking out a team-high 34 batters to just nine walks, allowing a .264 batting average to opposing hitters. Herrenbruck, on the other hand, recorded a 2-1 record in his six starts and earned a 4.61 ERA. The 6-2, 205-pound righthander had given up 27 hits, five doubles and two home runs, while allowing a .248 batting average. Herrenbruck had struck out 23 batters to just nine walks but was leading the Buckeyes with six batters hit.

Ohio State had also pitched three of its other transfers in at least four outings in juniors Nick Sawyer and Ryan Zamora of Sacramento City College, as well as junior Lincoln McVicker of Centralia College.

The pairing of Zamora and Sawyer had been two of the Buckeyes' top relievers in 2026, making 10 appearances apiece for Ohio State this season, tied for second most on the team behind graduate Luke Carrell (12).

Zamora ranked second on Ohio State among pitchers to have thrown at least 10 innings with a 3.06 ERA, with his former teammate Sawyer with a 3.12 mark in 8 $\frac{2}{3}$  innings pitched.

McVicker had made seven appearances, posting a 4.76 ERA in 5 $\frac{2}{3}$  innings pitched.

Each of the Buckeyes' other three transfer relievers – junior Jack Cecil from South Mountain Community College, Caden Marcum from Cloud County Community College and graduate Zach Weber of Ohio University – had pitched in two or more outings for Ohio State, but each struggled in those chances with ERAs over 10.

## Bemis Named B1G POW

After helping Ohio State to a 4-0 record and posting a .467 batting average from March 17-22, Bemis was named Big Ten Co-Player of the Week, sharing the honor with Oregon infielder Dominic Hellman, the conference announced on March 23.

Bemis led Big Ten hitters in multiple major offensive categories during the week, topping the conference with nine runs scored, 11 RBI and 17 total bases. He also added seven hits and launched three home runs.

He slashed .467/.600/1.133 over 15 at-bats, and Ohio State went undefeated during the week, as the Buckeyes earned a win over

Xavier and completed a three-game sweep of Butler.

Bemis' most impactful performance came in Ohio State's 14-4 win over Butler on March 22, when he hit two home runs, including a grand slam, while driving in a personal-best six runs.

A day earlier, Bemis was instrumental in the Buckeyes' 13-3 victory, recording a career-high three hits as well as a then-career-high three RBI and scoring four runs in the matchup against the Bulldogs.

Bemis became the first Ohio State player to be awarded Big Ten Player of the Week honors since former Buckeye Hunter Rosson received the mention on April 29, 2024.

## Recap

Since BSB last went to press, Ohio State put together its strongest stretch in nearly two years. The Buckeyes strung together four consecutive wins for the first time since April 28 through May 3 in 2024.

Ohio State began its winning streak with an 8-4 victory over Xavier in 10 innings in a midweek matchup on March 18 at Hayden Field in Cincinnati.

Following the Buckeyes' victory over the Musketeers, Ohio State swept Butler in the three-game series from March 20-22 at Bill Davis Stadium in Columbus.

Ohio State run-ruled the Bulldogs in each of the three contests over the weekend, defeating Butler 11-0 in seven innings on March 20 before needing just eight innings in a 13-3 win

on March 21 and seven innings in a 14-4 victory on March 22.

On March 24, Wright State ended Ohio State's four-game winning streak with a 10-8 victory over the Buckeyes. The Raiders scored the final four runs of the ballgame, and OSU couldn't put a run on the board after the fourth inning.

Ohio State swept Minnesota (17-11, 2-7 Big Ten), taking down the Golden Gophers 4-3 on March 27, before beating them 9-3 on March 28, and 12-9 on March 29 at Siebert Field in Minneapolis.

## On Deck

Following Ohio State's series with Minnesota in Minneapolis, the Buckeyes (13-13, 4-5 Big Ten) were scheduled to return to Bill Davis Stadium for a nine-game homestand to take on Toledo (12-4) at 6 p.m. on March 31.

Ohio State was set to follow up its matchup with the Rockets with a home series against Maryland (12-15, 2-7 Big Ten). The Buckeyes were to play at 6 p.m. on April 3, 3 p.m. on April 4, and 1 p.m. on April 5.

The Buckeyes will continue their homestand against Bowling Green (8-17) at 6 p.m. on April 7.

Ohio State will finish off the two-week stretch with Penn State (8-18, 3-6 Big Ten). The Buckeyes will battle against the Nittany Lions at 6 p.m. on April 11, 3 p.m. on April 12, and 1 p.m. on April 13. All eight games were set to be broadcast on B1G+.



# Women's Hockey Falls Short Of Title Again

By **SAM CIPRIANI**

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

For the second consecutive season, Ohio State stood just one win away from the pinnacle of women's college hockey, with just Wisconsin in its path.

The Buckeyes once again authored a dominant regular season, finishing 30-4-0. Ohio State carried that momentum through deep WCHA and NCAA tournament runs before ultimately falling short in the 2026 national championship game, when it lost, 3-2, to the Badgers on March 22, nearly a year after Wisconsin edged the Buckeyes, 4-3, in overtime in the 2025 national title game.

Still, Ohio State further cemented its status among the sport's elite, claiming its third WCHA title under head coach Nadine Muzerall and embarking on another deep postseason push, as its rivalry with Wisconsin continues to define the race for the top program in women's college hockey.

Ohio State junior forward Emma Peschel said before the championship game that last year's heartbreaking national championship loss to Wisconsin – when the Buckeyes led 3-2 before a penalty for covering the puck with 18.9 seconds remaining led to a Badger penalty shot to tie the game and eventually win – served as one of the team's primary motivations in its push to return to the title game.

"It's been on our mind the whole year" Peschel said. "We started out the year with (the wound) still fresh. We knew that it was going to be a chip on our shoulder the whole entire year, but that message has also never gone away. We've been in three national championships. We've lost two, we've won one. We know what it feels like to win, regardless of how that one went last year. We want that back at the same time."

That motivation was clear early in the season when Ohio State opened the year on a hot streak, winning its first five contests before a loss to Minnesota. The Buckeyes then claimed another 10 victories in a row to reach a 15-1 record before dropping both games in a home series against Wisconsin.

Following the Buckeyes' two losses to the Badgers, Ohio State went 15-1 the rest of the regular season, with its only defeat coming in a road series to Wisconsin, in which both teams earned a 4-1 win.

However, Ohio State's regular season was anything but ordinary. Midway through the season, five Buckeyes – junior forward Joy Dunne (United States) and freshman forward Sanni Vanhanen (Finland) plus a

Swedish contingent of freshman forward Hilda Svensson, freshman defender Jenna Raunio and sophomore defender Mira Jungåker – left midway through the season to compete for their respective countries at the 2026 Olympic Winter Games in Milano Cortina, Italy.

Dunne, along with former Buckeyes Cayla Barnes and Hannah Bilka from Ohio State's class of 2024, claimed gold for the United States with a 2-1 victory against archrival Canada.

Before the NCAA tournament, Muzerall reflected on Ohio State's season, pointing out the team's ability to adapt as key players competed at the Olympics, while praising the overall strength and resilience of the roster throughout the season.

"It's been a great and fun season for us," Muzerall said. "There have been moments where our players had to step up, when our Olympians were away, and they did just that. They continued to be our leaders throughout the season. Even when the Olympians returned, they didn't miss a beat, and we've been a unified front the whole way. It's been a great group, a young group, but a fun group with eyes wide open and excited to be here for the first time with a lot of experienced players to guide them along the way."

With players out at the Olympics, Ohio State's youth had the opportunity to shine. Six of the eight Buckeye freshmen played in at least 30 games – forward Cassidy Carmichael (40), Svensson (33), forward Macy Rasmussen (40), forward Maxine Cimoroni (41), forward Vanhanen (35) and defender Leah Wicks (41) – while Taylor Kressin started six games in goal.

Following the culmination of the regular season, Ohio State earned the No. 2 seed in the WCHA conference tournament.

The Buckeyes opened the first round of the tournament at the OSU Ice Rink with 5-1 and 4-1 victories over No. 7-seeded St. Thomas. Ohio State then ousted No. 3 Minnesota, 4-0, in the semifinal.

In the Final Faceoff championship, Ohio State found itself matched up against No. 1-seeded Wisconsin once again.

Despite the Badgers scoring the game's opening goal with just under 10 minutes remaining in the third period, the Buckeyes battled back with two goals in the final 5:30 of the contest from Svensson and junior forward Jordan Baxter to clinch a 2-1 victory over Wisconsin.

Prior to the NCAA tournament, Muzerall emphasized the team's consistency down the stretch of the season, feeling the Buckeyes' approach of all-out effort on each shift would continue to fuel their success.

"Winning the last nine games goes to show that we have a plan," Muzerall said on March 19. "We have our system, and we stick to it. We also know that when we get out of our system, we're maybe not as successful. We can reset after the period and get back into it shift after shift. We talked about being a one-shift warrior, giving our all in one shift and continuing to build on it."

However, Ohio State was unable to replicate a similar run in the 2026 NCAA championships.

No. 1-seeded Ohio State opened its tournament in Columbus with a 6-1 victory over Yale to make it to the Frozen Four. There, it shut out No. 5 Northeastern 5-0 to set up a rematch with Wisconsin in the national championship, the sixth time the Buckeyes and Badgers clashed this season.

In the championship game, Wisconsin built an early 2-0 lead in the first period and maintained it until the start of the third frame, when Ohio State began its comeback attempt. Just 3:32 into the third period, Carmichael deflected a shot from Jungåker into the net to cut the Badgers' lead to one, before junior forward Jocelyn Amos tied the game at 5:34, finishing a rebound off a shot by Peschel to even the game at two apiece.

Despite the Buckeyes' comeback, Wisconsin had the last laugh deep into the third period when senior forward Claire Enright put in the game-winning goal with just over six minutes remaining in the period.

With 42.2 seconds remaining, a scramble in front of the Wisconsin net led Muzerall to seek a penalty shot on a potential puck-covering play on a Jungåker shot attempt. But replay review ruled there was no penalty, sealing the Badgers' 3-2 win over the Buckeyes and Wisconsin's second consecutive national championship.

Following the loss, Muzerall said she was proud of Ohio State's effort, particularly coming back from a 2-0 deficit, despite ultimately coming up short.

"As we expected, it was a back-and-forth battle between two talented teams," Muzerall said after the loss. "My team came out and played with their heart and gave everything they had. I think it speaks a lot for their character when you're down to nothing, and you punch back. We got two quick goals and got some momentum. I was very proud of them, and I really thought that they did a great job. You have four penalty kills, so you're trying to kill off half a period, and that can get a little tiring, but I thought they persevered and showed some grit and heart. It's been a very fantastic year for all of these young women, and I'm just very proud of them."

Leading the charge for Ohio State in 2026 was the rookie Svensson, who anchored the Buckeyes offensively and emerged as one of the team's most consistent producers. Svensson led the team in assists (34) and points (52). Svensson ranked fourth nationally with 1.03 assists per game.

Svensson's stellar rookie season did not

go unnoticed by her teammates. Peschel praised Svensson's seamless transition into the college ranks.

"I don't think there's enough you can say," Peschel said. "She came in as a freshman putting up that many points, putting up that many numbers, going to the Olympics and coming back and not missing a beat. She's played such a pivotal role in our group, and to step in as a freshman and have that much competitiveness, that much drive, it shows a lot about her character."

Dunne totaled a team-high 27 goals for Ohio State, despite missing 10 of 41 games due to the Olympics. She ranked second behind Svensson with 51 total points and was third nationally with 0.84 goals per game.

Peschel led the team with 35 blocks, while Carmichael was second nationally with 26 penalties.

Amos ripped a team-high 215 shots and ranked third among Buckeyes with 48 points (22 goals, 26 assists).

In goal, senior Hailey MacLeod was among the best in the country, starting 30 games for Ohio State while allowing just 43 goals the entire season. Her 1.484 goals against average placed her third nationally in the category.

Ohio State's roster produced at a high level throughout the season, and the foundation behind that success remained firmly in place. Shortly after the season, Muzerall was rewarded with a five-year contract extension, extending her through the 2033-34 season and further solidifying her role at the helm of one of the premier programs in women's college hockey.

For Peschel, Muzerall's extension came as no surprise.

"I think from what the program was when she came in, it was at ground zero. They're below .500, not really winning any conference games, and then to also be the only team here, six Frozen Fours in a row under her leadership is unheard of," Peschel said. "I think that just goes to show her commitment and her dedication to our program and our team. We were all cheering (when she announced her return) because we knew that was her commitment to us and she wasn't going to let us down."

Ohio State senior forward Sloane Matthews, who played in all 41 games and was fourth on the team in points (44), expressed a similar sentiment.

"I think she's been the best coach this or any program has ever seen," Matthews said. "She did mention to us yesterday in practice that she wasn't leaving and she received many cheers and lots of stick tapping. She has built this program from nothing. She continues to inspire us every day, lead us into better people and just carry this program."

Even after another narrow loss to Wisconsin in the national title game, the Buckeyes' trajectory remains clear.

With a young core producing at a high level, Muzerall feels that Ohio State is poised to remain in the championship conversation.

"I think the future is the Buckeyes," Muzerall said after Ohio State's national championship loss. "You can write that down."



Nadine Muzerall

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# A Look Back And Ahead After Season-Ending Loss

When one season ends, as it did for Ohio State in the Big Ten title game on March 21, the build-up to the next one isn't far behind.

In fact, for Ohio State coach Steve Rohlik, the crafting of the 2026-27 Buckeyes is under way with the priority of retaining the current players, adding through prospect commitments and venturing into the transfer portal.

## IN THE CREASE Craig Merz

He barely had time to take a step back from the 7-3 loss to Michigan in the title game when the program took a hit after junior forward Riley Thompson signed a contract with the Philadelphia Flyers on March 26 and made his pro debut two days later for their American Hockey League affiliate, the Lehigh Valley Phantoms.

His one-year entry-level contract begins with the 2026-27 season, so he played for the Phantoms on a professional try-out (PTO).

It was a blow because Rohlik could use one of his top scorers returning for a senior season.

That's from a coaching side for selfish reasons. But he has always backed a player's choice even if it comes at the expense of the team, and he also knows anytime a Buckeye turns pro, it's a good recruiting tool.

He can proudly point to recent examples of Mason Lohrei, a mainstay on the Boston Bruins defense, and goaltender Jakub Dobeš, who, in his first full season in the NHL, has become the starting goalie for the Montreal Canadiens.

Thompson had an assist 6:53 into his first game with the Phantoms on March 28 and finished plus-2 in the 4-2 win over Hershey. He was minus-3 the next night during a 5-2 loss to Wilkes-Barre/Scranton.

Thompson, an alternate captain for 2025-26, was fifth on the team with 27 points (13 goals, 14 assists) and a team-leading eight power-play goals in 37 games. He finished strong with four goals and seven assists in the final 10 games.

The 6-2, 222-pound forward was honorable-mention All-Big Ten in 2024-25 when he had 33 points (17 goals, 16 assists) in 40 games as OSU earned an at-large bid to the NCAA tournament. The Buckeyes reached the Big Ten title game in each of his two seasons at Ohio State after he started his career at Alaska Anchorage.

In addition to Thompson, second-leading scorer Davis Burnside, a senior, won't be back. The two-time captain had 32 points (12 goals, 20 assists) this season and 49 goals and 63 assists for 112 points in 155 career games.

Also exhausting their eligibility were forwards Jake Dunlap and Adam Eisele, and defenseman Ethan Straky.

On March 30, junior defenseman Broten

Sabo signed a two-year AHL contract with Wilkes-Barre/Scranton beginning next season. He was third on the team with 19 assists along with two goals in his only season at OSU after transferring from Alaska Fairbanks.

Rohlik will be busy preparing for the transfer portal, which this year is more streamlined than football's. In hockey, a 15-day window opens *after* the national title game on April 13. Last year's window was 45 days from March 30 to May 13.

In football, the portal is concurrent with the bowl season and the playoffs, essentially handicapping teams still in the running for a championship.

While the shortened portal is good for coaches because the following season's roster will take shape sooner, Rohlik knows it's going to be a mad scramble.

"It will be NASCAR on steroids," he said. "Obviously, there's a little bit of everything going on. You've got guys signing, and you try to go through the process with them. Then, we had a team meeting recently, and guys are still decompressing from the season and you're looking at the big picture.

"We've still got a great nucleus. We're excited about what we've got coming back. We're extremely excited about what we've got coming in. We've got a good group, and we want the guys that want to be here and continue to do the right things and believe in the culture of what we're trying to accomplish here at Ohio State."

The priority will be getting back to the NCAAs. It won't be easy because the top teams in the conference, such as Michigan, Michigan State and Penn State, are willing to spend more money on players and facilities than Ohio State.

### Close Not Good Enough

It was a frustrating season for the Buckeyes, who were 14-21-2 overall and 8-15-1 in the Big Ten, finishing fifth.

They were competitive, but a 1-8-2 record in overtime and a 4-11 record in one-goal games in the regular season made them appear worse than they were.

The National Percentage Index (NPI), the selection process that determines the NCAA field, bears that out.

OSU is ranked 21st, three spots from making the 16-team tournament. The next highest rated team with a losing record is Northeastern (17-18-1) at No. 27. The Buckeyes are ahead of 16 schools with .500 or better records.

"What stands out to me is the belief that our team had from day one, and they never wavered," Rohlik said. "You lose eight 3-on-3 overtime games, and we had so many tight games, and for whatever reason, we didn't find a way to win a lot of those during that middle stretch, but our team never backed off from the belief in how good we can be.

"That's the most impressive thing for me. My staff, support staff, all the players, never wavered. When you look down the stretch in the second half, there were still a lot of tight games, but we were one of a few teams that got points every weekend.

"We were one of those teams capable of running the table at the end, which I thoroughly believed, and I told this team for a long time that I felt we could do it. Unfortunately, we came up 10 minutes short."

It sounds like hyperbole that a team with the record that Ohio State had could even think of making the Frozen Four, but Rohlik has a point.

In the penultimate weekend of the regular season, the Buckeyes took four of six points in East Lansing to knock Michigan State from the No. 1 ranking in the country to sport a 2-1-1 mark vs. the Spartans for the season.

Then came the frustration of back-to-back overtime losses at home to last-place Notre Dame. But OSU rebounded to thrash No. 10 Wisconsin 7-1 on the road in the Big Ten quarterfinal and scored a 3-2 overtime victory at Michigan State in the semifinal before facing No. 1 Michigan in the title game in Ann Arbor.

OSU was tied 3-3 with 12 minutes left before the Wolverines pulled away for a 7-3 victory, including an empty-net goal. The Buckeyes' only hope of making the NCAAs was to win the game for the automatic qualifier.

To Rohlik's point, Wisconsin went on to play Michigan State in an NCAA regional final. The Badgers rallied for two goals in the final five minutes of regulation to tie it 3-3 and scored the winner 24 seconds into OT to advance to the Frozen Four.

On April 9 in Las Vegas, Wisconsin plays North Dakota while Michigan plays Denver. The championship game is on April 11.

From Rohlik's perspective, it could have been the Buckeyes instead of the Badgers still playing if they could have found a way to pull the upset in the Big Ten final.

"Unfortunately, we just came up a little short," he said. "Yeah, it was disappointing, absolutely, because I think everyone in our room believed we were good enough to be playing in those final 16 games."

### Slipped Away

The downfall against Michigan began in the final minute of the second period when the Wolverines scored on the power play to tie it 3-3 at Yost Ice Arena. Who knows what would have happened if the Buckeyes, the first No. 5 tourney seed to reach the final, had been able to carry the lead into the third?

But it wasn't to be, and the Wolverines scored three goals in a five-minute span en route to their fourth conference title before a sellout crowd of 5,800.

The Buckeyes dropped to 0-4 in the championship game, although this was the first time they didn't go to overtime.

Junior defenseman William Smith, freshman Jake Karabela and Eisele scored, and Kristoffer Eberly made 22 saves. Smith and Karabela were named to the all-tournament team.

### Special K

Karabela, who was named to the Big Ten All-Freshman team, is the Varsity Club Icer of the Month for March.

He had three goals and three assists in three tournament games. He had a goal and an assist vs. Wisconsin, a goal and two assists – including on the OT winner by Felix Caron – against Michigan State, and one goal against U-M.

He ended the season with 12 points (six goals, six assists) in a seven-game point streak to lead the team in points (37) and assists (22), and his 15 goals shared the lead with Max Montes.

*For a complete recap of the Michigan game, go to the [BuckeyeSports.com](http://BuckeyeSports.com) website, free to all Buckeye Sports Bulletin subscribers.*



Riley Thompson

## VARSITY CLUB ICER OF THE MONTH For March



**Jake Karabela**  
*Freshman Forward*  
*Guelph, Ontario*

# Davino, Mendez Finish Second, Bucks Fifth

At the 2026 NCAA wrestling championships at Rocket Arena in Cleveland from March 20-21, Ohio State's No. 2 Ben Davino and No. 1 Jesse Mendez each earned second-place finishes at their respective weight classes, coming up just short of their championship aspirations.

## ON THE MAT Sam Cipriani

Both Davino at 133 pounds and Mendez at 141 pounds entered the title matches 4-0 in the tournament, having defeated every wrestler they've faced this season. However, the pair ultimately suffered losses in the championship bout to Oklahoma State freshman wrestlers Jax Forrest and Sergio Vega.

Mendez and Vega kicked off the championship round at 141 pounds, with each of the wrestlers entering the match with a perfect record. Mendez and Vega each secured one-point escapes to begin the second and third periods, but the match was sent to sudden victory after a 1-1 tie through seven minutes.

With just 22 seconds left in the sudden-victory period, Vega secured a takedown on Mendez to earn a 4-1 decision, capturing the 141-pound title and completing a major upset for the Cowboys.

With the win, Vega became the first undefeated true freshman to win the national championship since 1947, ending Mendez's perfect 22-0 season and hopes of becoming just the third Ohio State wrestler to claim three individual national titles.

Ohio State head coach Tom Ryan was sympathetic to his star wrestler's loss, calling Mendez's defeat "heartbreaking" while emphasizing the legacy the senior 141-pounder left with the Buckeyes.

"He is a tremendous leader. He does everything right. I think probably the biggest message is that winning is hard and being the best in the world at something is incredibly hard," Ryan said. "He wrestled a good match. I don't know if he wrestled perfectly or had his best match. I'm sure there was a ton of pressure on him to win his third NCAA title, and he was in the hunt for the Hodge Trophy. There were all these things mixed into the match. There were a number of ways we could have won the match. We

just didn't win that night.

"One match doesn't take anything away from him being one of the toughest human beings I've ever been around. It doesn't change anything. He's one of the great wrestlers in NCAA and Ohio State history."

Davino capped off the NCAA championships at 133 pounds, with the freshman Buckeye suffering a similar fate against Oklahoma State's Forrest.

After Davino took a 1-0 lead on an escape early in the second period, Forrest clawed back with an escape of his own to begin the third frame. Forrest then earned a takedown of Davino midway through the final period to take a 4-1 lead, before another point was allotted to the Oklahoma State wrestler for over a minute of riding time against Davino.

The strong third period allowed the Cowboys' freshman to claim a 5-1 decision and the 133-pound national championship over Davino.

For Ryan, Davino's loss came down to a combination of momentum-shifting calls and failed shots at critical moments late in the match.

"That was the first time Davino was taken down this season. A piece of that was in the round before the officials hit him for a stalling call in the semifinals that was egregious. There was no stalling at all, and that call almost caused him to lose the match," Ryan said. "Now fast-forward to the next night, you're wrestling again, and you get hit again for a really bad stalling call.

"What that does to the psyche of a student-athlete is it lives in the back of your mind when you're competing. So it impacts the decisions that he's making out there. I think Ben felt pressure to go, and he took an ill-advised shot on Forrest, and it cost him.

"(Late in the third period), Forrest did a really good job keeping him down. Davino is unbelievable. He's so good on the bottom. If you get out in 15 seconds, it gives you a decent amount of time to go and get a takedown, and Forrest rode him really hard. Davino, again, is not easy to ride. I think he got out with maybe 10 seconds left, so that hurt us as well."

Despite Davino's loss, Ryan credited Forrest for his performance, while adding that he believes the two 133-pounders are destined to meet again down the line if the Cowboy remains in the weight class.

"They are some of the best young wrestlers, and they are only about a month apart," said the coach. "They're two of the bright young stars in this country, and they

went round one. Let's see what happens in round two, because if Forrest doesn't go up (to 141 pounds), they'll be seeing each other for a long time. Davino will not move up. He's a 133-pounder for life."

## OSU Takes 5th At NCAA Championships

For the second consecutive season, Ohio State placed fifth at the NCAA championships, with five Buckeyes – including Davino and Mendez – earning All-America honors by advancing to the tournament's quarterfinals and placing in the top eight of their respective weight classes.

While Davino and Mendez finished in second in their weight divisions, Ohio State's No. 4 Carson Kharchla and No. 8 Brandon Cannon both ended their seasons by taking home fourth-place at 174 and 157 pounds, respectively.

Cannon defeated West Virginia's No. 11 Ty Waters in the consolation semifinals before falling to Penn State's No. 1 P.J. Duke by a 20-4 technical fall in the third-place match to end his tournament with a 5-2 record. Despite the loss to Duke, Cannon's fourth-place finish marked the first All-America honor of his career.

At 174 pounds, Kharchla earned a 5-2 decision over Missouri's No. 7 Cam Steed to reach the third-place bout. But the graduate wrestler dropped a 9-6 decision to Iowa's No. 5 Patrick Kennedy, ending with a 5-2 record in the tournament and closing out his Ohio State career as a two-time All-American.

Senior Paddy Gallagher was the last Buckeye to earn All-America status at the national tournament, taking home eighth place in the 165-pound weight class. Despite opening as the bracket's No. 16 seed and falling to Penn State's No. 1 Mitchell Mesenbrink via a 12-0 major decision in his second bout of the weekend, Gallagher clawed his way back with three straight victories to be placed in the seventh-place bout.

In that match, Gallagher fell to North Carolina's Bryce Hepner – a former Buckeye – via a 9-1 major decision. Though the loss in his final bout may not have been the ending to his Ohio State career that Gallagher had hoped for, he still earned his first All-America honor in his five-year tenure with the Buckeyes.

Ryan pointed to the performances of Gallagher and Kharchla as bright spots for Ohio State in the tournament, praising their perseverance through the consolation brackets and noting his excitement that both have the opportunity to finish their careers on a high note with All-America honors.

"Both really stepped up in the critical moments," Ryan said. "Paddy was down by one with seven seconds left in the All-America round. He's worked extremely hard for five years, and all of that work shone with 10 seconds left. He just kept chasing the kid around the mat, and the refs hit Stanford's E.J. Parco for stalling and sent the match to overtime. Paddy then won in overtime on

conditioning, desire and will. So that was fantastic.

"Then Carson in the All-America round. I mean, you can't really get a much worse draw than to have to beat the No. 2 seed Simon Ruiz (of Cornell) in the All-America round. That guy got upset and lost early, so he fell back and outside of the bracket, and Kharchla wrestled really well to beat him. Those are huge wins for each of those guys."

While five Ohio State wrestlers ended their seasons as All-Americans, each of the other five Buckeye participants fell short of that mark but earned at least one victory in the tournament.

Transfers No. 7 Ethan Stiles and No. 12 Dylan Fishback both finished 1-2 at 149 and 184 pounds for Ohio State. After strong Big Ten tournaments that had both wrestlers finish in the top four in their weight class for the conference, No. 3 Nic Bouzakis and No. 5 Nick Feldman each went home empty-handed at the NCAA championships, earning 2-2 records at 125 pounds and heavyweight.

At 197 pounds, 12th-ranked Luke Geog won three of his five matches, but his season was ultimately ended by a 9-0 major decision to Stanford's No. 9 Angelo Posada in the consolation quarterfinals.

Ryan expressed that it was a difficult weekend for the entire team, noting that while he was proud of the team's five All-Americans, he believed Ohio State had the potential for more before injuries sustained at the Big Ten tournament left the Buckeyes less than full strength heading into the NCAA championships.

"Overall, it was a tough weekend," Ryan said. "We had five All-Americans, which I was super proud of, but I think the way the season was moving along and progressing, I thought we could have 10 All-Americans. There was a time when our guys were wrestling well enough, and it certainly didn't end the way that we thought it would."

"Ultimately, I think the Big Ten tournament hurt us a bit. We wrestled really well, but we did not get out of there healthy. Feldman couldn't walk after, and he had a bad injury with 10 seconds to go in his third-place match. He hurt his leg badly, and we didn't think he was going to wrestle at the NCAAs, but he tried to. Bouzakis was injured at the Big Tens, so at the end of the year, you want to be your best, and we weren't."

## Hepner, Welsh Claim All-America Status

After transferring away from Ohio State before the 2025 season, Penn State's Rocco Welsh and North Carolina's Hepner earned All-America honors at the NCAA championships.

Hepner, who previously spent five years with the Buckeyes from 2020-25, totaling a 25-14 career record, became an All-American for the first time in his career with a major decision over Ohio State's Gallagher to claim seventh place at 165 pounds.

Hepner's victory made him the first All-America Tar Heel at 165 pounds since Ethan Ramos in 2015.

Welsh, on the other hand, finished in second place at 184 pounds for the second time in his collegiate career, falling to Min-



Jesse Mendez

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# WRESTLING

nesota's No. 3 Max McEnelly via a 4-2 decision in the title bout.

Before his transfer to the Nittany Lions, Welsh spent two seasons with Ohio State and totaled a 41-6 record, including a 26-6 season in 2023-24 that had the true freshman advance all the way to the national finals before he was defeated by Penn State's Carter Starocci by a 2-0 decision.

## OSU Boasts Strong Recruiting Class

While Ohio State's 2025-26 season has come to a close, the Buckeyes have a bright future ahead of them with yet another strong incoming freshman class.

Ohio State will lose multiple key contributors, including Mendez, Kharchla and Gallagher, but the Buckeyes have reloaded with three top-20 recruits in the class of 2026.

The class is led by Quakertown (Pa.) Faith Christian Academy's Adam Waters, the No. 12 overall recruit in the class and top-ranked wrestler at his 190-pound weight class, according to FloWrestling as of March 25. At Faith Christian, Waters ended his career with a 166-7 record, winning two state titles apiece at 172 and 189 pounds. He is projected to wrestle at 197 pounds or heavyweight with the Buckeyes.

Ohio State also added Dom Munaretto, the No. 19 overall prospect, from St. Charles East, Ill. Munaretto is the third-ranked overall wrestler and second-ranked senior at 120 pounds but must beef up to 125 with the Buckeyes.

The Buckeyes then flipped Antonio Mills from Missouri, earning his commitment on Oct. 12, 2025. Mills, the No. 15 overall recruit and the nation's top-ranked 126-pounder, wrestled for Mill Creek High School in Georgia.

"These are weights that we need," Ryan said. "They've been on world teams. They've won national titles in high school. They love the sport, and we are excited about them reporting in June."

Finally, Ohio State flipped Lakewood (Ohio) St. Edward's Karson Brown from Pittsburgh on March 25. Brown, the third-ranked recruit at 138 pounds, was a four-time OHSAA Division I State Champion for the Eagles, claiming championships at 113, 120, 136 and finally 138 pounds as a senior in 2025.

Ryan said that while the Buckeyes are excited for the late flip of Brown, he and the rest of the freshmen must maintain their hunger and work ethic to succeed at the next level.

"We also picked up Karson Brown, four-time (Ohio) state champion," the coach said. "He flipped from Pitt to us. He's ranked as the No. 1 senior in Ohio. He's a 141-pounder, which is a weight that we were looking at, and he's another St. Edward kid. We're excited about them, but they have to come in with the same fire they had as seventh- and eighth-graders chasing state championships and high school national titles."

# BUCKEYE SCOREBOARD

## FOOTBALL

**Sept. 5** BALL STATE; **12** at Texas; **19** KENT STATE; **26** ILLINOIS.

**Oct. 3** at Iowa; **10** MARYLAND; **17** at Indiana; **31** at USC.

**Nov. 7** OREGON; **14** NORTHWESTERN; **21** at Nebraska; **28** MICHIGAN.

**Dec. 5** Big Ten Championship Game at Indianapolis.

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

**Feb. 13-14** vs. Saint Louis at Pensacola, Fla., W 7-1; W 3-2; W 7-3; **20** vs. Louisiana Tech at Grind City Classic in Memphis, Tenn., L 6-0; **20** vs. Memphis at Grind City Classic in Memphis, Tenn., W 12-5; **21** vs. Louisiana Tech at Grind City Classic in Memphis, Tenn., L 9-3; **22** vs. Memphis at Grind City Classic in Memphis, Tenn., W 8-2; **27** vs. Texas-San Antonio at BRUCE BOLT College Classic in Houston; L 6-5 **28** vs. Ole Miss at BRUCE BOLT College Classic in Houston, L 8-0.

**March 1** vs. Texas at BRUCE BOLT College Classic in Houston, L, 10-3; **4** XAVIER, L 13-4; **6-8** UCLA, L 11-1; L 19-6 (8 inn.); L 10-7; **10** KENT STATE, L 8-5; **13-15** at Washington, W 10-9 (10 inn.); L 5-4 (11 inn.); L 5-4; **18** at Xavier, W 8-4 (10 inn.); **20-22** BUTLER, W 11-0 (7 inn.); W 13-3 (8 inn.); W 14-4 (7 inn.); **24** at Wright State, L 10-8; **27-29** at Minnesota, W 4-3; W 9-3; W 12-9; **31** TOLEDO.

**April 3-5** MARYLAND; **7** BOWLING GREEN; **10-12** PENN STATE; **15** MARSHALL; **17-19** at Purdue; **21** AKRON; **24-26** at Rutgers.

**May 1-3** NEBRASKA; **5** MIAMI (OH); **8-10** MICHIGAN STATE; **12** WRIGHT STATE; **14-16** at Michigan; **19-24** Big Ten tournament at Omaha, Neb.; **29-31** NCAA Regionals, TBA.

**June 1** NCAA Regionals, TBA **June 5-8** NCAA Super Regionals, TBA; **12-22** College World Series at Omaha, Neb.

## MEN'S BASKETBALL (21-13, 12-8)

**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, W 84-78; **31** at Wisconsin, L 92-82.

**Feb. 5** at Maryland, W 82-62; **8** MICHIGAN, L 82-61; **11** USC, W 89-82; **14** at Nashville Hoops Showdown in Nashville, Tenn., vs. Virginia, L 70-66; **17** WISCONSIN, W 86-69; **22** at Michigan State, L 66-60; **25** at Iowa, L 74-57.

**March 1** PURDUE, W 82-74, **4** at Penn State, W 94-62; **7** INDIANA, W 91-78; **12** Big Ten Tournament in Chicago vs. Iowa, W 72-69; **13** Big Ten Tournament in Chicago vs. Michigan, L 71-67; **19** NCAA Tournament at Greenville, S.C., vs. TCU, L 66-64.

## WOMEN'S BASKETBALL (27-8, 13-5)

**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, W 81-58.

**Feb. 1** NEBRASKA, W 90-71; **5** at Washington, W 70-60; **8** at Oregon, W 80-64; **15** MARYLAND, L 76-75; **18** at Minnesota, L 74-61; **22** USC, W

88-83; **25** MICHIGAN, L 88-86 (OT).

**March 1** at Michigan State, W 87-68; **5** Big Ten Tournament in Indianapolis vs. Indiana, W 83-59; **6** Big Ten Tournament in Indianapolis vs. Minnesota, W 60-55; **7** Big Ten Tournament semifinals in Indianapolis vs. UCLA, L 72-62; **21** NCAA TOURNAMENT IN COLUMBUS vs. HOWARD, W 75-54; **23** NCAA TOURNAMENT IN COLUMBUS vs. NOTRE DAME, L 83-73.

## 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-Feb. 1** Schiller Duals in Evanston, Ill., Men 5-1, Women 6-3.

**Feb. 21-22** CCFC Championships in Granville, Ohio, Men 4-0, Women 5-1.

**March 8** NCAA Midwest Regionals in Cleveland, NTS; **19-22** NCAA Championships in South Bend, Ind., NTS.

## MEN'S ICE HOCKEY (14-21-2, 8-15-1)

**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, L 6-4; L 3-2 OT.

**Feb. 6-7** at Minnesota, W 6-2; W 2-1; **13-14** WISCONSIN, L 4-2; W 3-2; **20-21** at Penn State, L 11-4; L 5-4 OT; **27-28** at Michigan State, W 5-1; T 3-3 OT (SL).

**March 5-6** NOTRE DAME, L 5-4 (OT); L 4-3 (OT); **11** Big Ten Tournament quarterfinals at Wisconsin, W 7-1; **14** Big Ten Tournament semifinals at Michigan State, W 3-2 (OT); **21** Big Ten Tournament finals at Michigan, L 7-3.

## WOMEN'S ICE HOCKEY (36-5-0, 24-4-0)

**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).

**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, W 6-2; W 3-1.

**Feb. 7-8** at Wisconsin, W 4-1; L 4-1; **13-14** MINNESOTA, W 4-2; W 3-1; **20-21** at Bemidji State, W 7-1; W 6-3; **27-28** WCHA FIRST ROUND vs. ST. THOMAS, W 5-1; W 4-1.

**March 5** WCHA Final Faceoff at St. Paul, Minn., vs. Minnesota, W 4-0; **7** WCHA Final Faceoff at St. Paul, Minn., vs. Wisconsin, W 2-1; **12** NCAA Columbus Regional vs. Yale, W 6-1; **20** Frozen Four at University Park, Pa., vs. Northeastern, W 5-0; **22** NCAA Championship Game at University Park, Pa., vs. Wisconsin, L 3-2.

## MENS SWIM & DIVE (3-1)

**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, W 193.5-106.5.

**Feb. 13-15** OHIO STATE WINTER INVITATIONAL, NTS; **25-28** Big Ten Championships at Madison, Wis., 3rd/1,035.5 pts.

**March 9-11** NCAA Zone Diving Championships, NTS; **13-15** CSCAA National Invitational Championship at Ocala, Fla., 2nd/746.5 pts.; **25-28** NCAA Championships at Atlanta, 13th/72 pts.

## WOMENS SWIM & DIVE (2-2)

**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, W 195-105.

**Feb. 13-15** OHIO STATE WINTER INVITATIONAL, NTS; **18-21** Big Ten Championships at Minneapolis, 3rd/1,066 pts.

**March 9-11** NCAA Zone Diving Championships, NTS; **13-15** CSCAA National Invitational Championship at Ocala, Fla., 3rd/496 pts.; **18-21** NCAA Championships at Atlanta, 12th/87 pts.

## TRACK & FIELD

**Jan. 9-10** Rod McCravy Memorial Invitational at Louisville, Ky. NTS; **16-17** Indiana Invitational at Bloomington, Ind., NTS; **23** Stan Scott Invite at Lubbock, Texas, NTS; **30-31** PNC Lenny Lyles Invitational at Louisville, Ky., NTS; **30-31** Meyo Invitational at South Bend, Ind., NTS.

**Feb. 13-14** David Hemery Valentine Invitational at Boston, NTS; **13-14** Tiger Paw Invitational at Clemson, S.C., NTS; **26-28** Big Ten Indoor Championships at Indianapolis, Men 8th/15, 41 pts; Women 10th/18, 25 pts.

**March 13-14** NCAA Indoor Championships at Fayetteville, Ark., Men 52nd, 1 pt; Women DNP, 0 pts; **20-21** USF Alumni Invitational at Tampa, Fla., NTS; **26-28** Raleigh Relays at Raleigh, N.C., NTS.

**April 1-4** Texas Relays at Austin, Texas; **17-18** Tom Jones Memorial at Gainesville, Fla.; **17-18** Virginia Challenge at Charlottesville, Va.; **23-25** Penn Relays at Philadelphia.

**May 1-2** JESSE OWENS CLASSIC; **15-17** Big Ten Championships at Lincoln, Neb.; **27-30** NCAA East Preliminary Round at Lexington, Ky.

**June 10-13** NCAA Championships at Eugene, Ore.

## MEN'S VOLLEYBALL (12-10, 7-6)

**Jan. 8** CENTRAL STATE W 3-0; **9** N.J. INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY, W 3-0; **15** GEORGE MASON, W 3-0; **17** LONG BEACH STATE, L 3-1; **23** LINCOLN MEMORIAL, W 3-0; **29** Big Ten Challenge at Los Angeles vs. UCLA, L 3-0; **30** Big Ten Challenge at Los Angeles vs. USC, L 3-2.

**Feb. 5** at Northern Kentucky, W 3-0; **8** CENTRAL STATE, W 3-0; **13** at Queens University of Charlotte, W 3-1; **15** at Queens University of Charlotte, L 3-2; **19** BALL STATE, W 3-0; **21** PURDUE FORT WAYNE, W 3-0; **26** at Lewis, L 3-0.

**March 1** at Loyola-Chicago, L 3-1; **5** LINDENWOOD, L 3-0; **7** MCKENDREE, L 3-0; **12** at Ball State, L 3-1; **14** at Purdue Fort Wayne, W 3-0; **19** LOYOLA-CHICAGO, W 3-1; **21** LEWIS, W 3-0; **25** at Penn State, L 3-1.

**April 4** NORTHERN KENTUCKY; **9** at McKendree; **11** at Lindenwood; **18** MIVA Quarterfinals; **22** MIVA Semifinals; **25** MIVA Finals.

**May 7** NCAA Quarterfinals; **9** NCAA Semifinals; **11** NCAA Finals.

## WRESTLING (18-1, 7-1)

**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, W 30-10.

**Feb. 1** MICHIGAN, W 26-16; **6** IOWA, W 24-9; **13** at Penn State, L 36-5; **15** at Maryland, W 29-16.

**March 7-8** Big Ten Championships at State College, Pa., 2nd/148.5 pts.; **19-21** NCAA Championships at Cleveland, 5th/84.5 pts.

# Sporting Bond With Parents Will Always Be There

The first Ohio State game I ever attended was in 1976, a beatdown of a pretty bad Illinois team in early November. Both of my parents were OSU alums, and I had grown up in the shadow of the Horseshoe, so going to a Buckeyes game was a pretty big deal for me.

## THE FACTS MAN Mike Wachsman

I don't remember much of the game itself, but I do remember the roar that emanated from the crowd when the PA blared out "final score from West Lafayette – Michigan 14, Purdue 16." The place went nuts, and even though I was young, I knew exactly why – the big rival had unexpectedly lost. And a bad day for the Wolverines was a good day for the Buckeyes.

Another distinct memory was getting my program autographed after the game by Nick Buonamici, who at that time was probably the largest human I had ever seen.

But the thing that sticks with me the most is that I attended the game with my father.

Most kids get their love of sports from their parents. Whether it's watching games on television or going to the stadium, the spirit of the team is imbued into the child at an early age. So going to that game with my dad was merely a rite of passage.

My grandfather was a huge baseball fan, and growing up in the 1920s and 1930s in New Jersey, he had a front-row seat to some of the greatest players the national pastime has ever seen. He was able to watch Ruth, Cobb, Gehrig and so many others and was blessed to have three teams in New York to follow. He was an avowed Giants fan, but once they moved west, his fandom shifted to

the Yankees. He often regaled me with stories of Joltin' Joe DiMaggio and Whitey Ford and Yogi Berra, and though I grew up as a Reds fan, it was impossible not to soak in the history lessons. He attended Don Larsen's perfect game in the 1956 World Series, which meant the bar was set high for me if I wanted to see something historic.

Even with that halcyon era of baseball, my dad ended up with just a passing interest in sports. Most of my sports fandom came from my mother. She was more into the games than my dad was, and I remember many times when she and I watched college hoops together, or boxing, or OSU football. She wasn't into it to the point of knowing stats or records, but she liked the competition and enjoyed watching games. She's the one who got me at a young age to idolize Roger Staubach. She knew his backstory from Navy, and when he went to the Cowboys, it was even better, as that was my NFL allegiance.

I took that love of sports with me into my formative years and was often the source people sought out when they needed to settle a sports argument. I probably spent more time on sports than I should have, which explained my average marks as a scholar. I knew that sportswriting was my future, so bisecting a triangle or learning about photo-synthesis was of zero use to me.

All of that knowledge and passion for sports served me well as my journalism career began. Saturdays in the fall were filled with OSU football, and Sundays included some NFL watching – at least a little, when I wasn't sitting at the keyboard pounding out stories for BSB. College hoops was the programming choice when it was in season, and baseball was a spring evening distraction.

In a nutshell, it was anything and everything sports-related, and as I got older, thoughts would often turn to having kids. Would they love sports as much as I did? That is always the hope, but it doesn't al-

ways work out that way.

I mention this because on March 13, we lost our oldest child, our son Liam, at age 26. He had been battling health issues for some time and finally succumbed to them that morning after a brief stay at Ohio State University Hospital.

Liam was a kind, gentle, caring soul, and as much as I tried, I could not get him to share in my love of sports. I would ask, "Hey, buddy, wanna watch this game with me?" and he would always respectfully pass. It was a little disappointing, but nothing I could force.

Even though sports were not on Liam's radar, he did end up loving the Buckeyes. It was probably impossible to do otherwise, given how associated with Ohio State I was, and how often they were on the television, and how much apparel, hats and items I had in my closet and on my shelves.

Liam didn't watch the games but would ask me when I'd get home whether OSU had won. He knew of my affinity for Zeke Elliott, so when the Cowboys were playing, he would ask me how Zeke was doing. He loved going with me for walks in my old campus neighborhoods, and as we got closer to the stadium, he always wanted to slow down and take a long look.

He was usually working on Saturdays, but when I told him that we had tickets for an Ohio State football game, his smile lit up the room. It was for Northwestern in 2016, just before Halloween, and there may not have been a happier person in Columbus on that day – unless you include me.

No, it wasn't a full-fledged dive into fandom, but on this day, I was able to share an Ohio State sporting memory with my son.

We got to campus early that day, and Liam's eyes seemed wider than usual as he took in the sights and sounds of the day. We stopped when we saw the OSU marching band walk into St. John Arena for the Skull Session, and when we found our seats in B Deck, Liam didn't seem bothered that they weren't closer to the field. He was at a real Ohio State football game, with Dad, on a sunny afternoon. Life could not have gotten better than it did on that day.

As we left the stadium and headed back to the car, which was parked in front of my old house on Indianola Avenue, he looked at me and said, "Dad, this was really the best day I've ever had."

When you hear words like that from your child, you know that you did something right. I know we walked back to the car, but it felt more like I was floating as I was taking in the day with my son. We also attended OSU hoops, baseball and softball together, but nothing was as glorious for Liam as that day inside Ohio Stadium.

His health battles started after graduation from high school, sometime in 2021. They weren't debilitating at the beginning, and he was still able to work and live life as he always had. He would still go to the gym and go for walks, and we would occasionally head down to campus to see the sights if the weather was agreeable.

Things slowly began to deteriorate in 2024, though there were some moments of optimism and rallying. Liam still enjoyed his walks, with or without me, and he still asked

during football season whether or not the Buckeyes had won. He had mentioned for some time wanting to attend an OSU-Michigan game, and I had started on a plan to get tickets for the 2026 showdown in Ohio Stadium so that he could have another box checked.

I was able to take Liam with me to football interviews last fall, and while I was working, he was looking around at the players and coaches and even had a nice conversation with recently retired OSU SID Jerry Emig. Liam kept on talking about how cool it was being maybe 30 feet from Ryan Day, which brought a smile to my face.

When you have children, your hope is that they grow up to be kind, caring, empathetic and successful, whatever measure for that you want to use. Secondly, a part of you hopes that they embrace whatever passion you might have – in this case, sports – and that they would hand it down to their children.

I know that sports are supposed to be a distraction, and in the grand scheme of things, they are not all that important. Still, it has been a huge part of my life, from childhood until recently, and I wanted nothing more than to share more of that with Liam and to have the chance to share it with whatever children he might have had. So it's tough to just toss it aside.

Here is the hard truth, which I realized before Liam's death – sports as a whole no longer resonates with me. Aside from college football, it is seldom on my television. I cannot name more than maybe two players on the Reds' roster or the Columbus Blue Jackets' roster, and I have not watched a moment of March Madness for probably three years now.

Maybe it's a natural part of aging to lose interest in sports. Maybe it's because life and family take precedence, and sports sort of bleed into the background. Whatever the reason, it is no longer a priority for me.

Liam's "favorite" thing about being at University Hospital was his walks in the hallway, which led to a corridor that looked out over Ohio Stadium. It always brought light to his eyes and a smile to his face. It will remain one of my happiest memories of this difficult time, something I will carry with me this fall as I am watching the Buckeyes.

It would be impossible to end my OSU football fandom because it's something I've been following since age 6, but going forward, it will be the only thing that holds my attention on fall Saturdays.

Actually, that's not entirely true.

I will have thoughts of Liam and will still tell him the outcome of each Buckeye game. I know that even though things will be a bit less enjoyable for me, he will be looking down and enjoying the view from above.

Until then, all I can say is that I love you, son.

Rest easy and cheer loudly.

And save me a seat next to you, OK? Just don't be too upset if it takes a while for me to join you.



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# Following Hoopsters Makes For A Basket Case

## THE VIEW FROM 15TH & HIGH Frank Moskowitz, Publisher

I know that I have been telling you the last few weeks that my primary attention has been focused on spring football, despite the fact that we have been smack dab in the middle of March Madness. The season is over now for both Ohio State basketball teams, so I should make some comment on their performances.

It's hard to deny that the men made progress this season, especially down the stretch, including their big win over Purdue. Making the NCAA Tournament for the first time in four seasons is progress in anybody's book.

"From where we've been to where we were this year, there certainly was some progress," Ohio State coach Jake Diebler said. "Not only did we play in big-time, meaningful games from the middle of February and on, but we proved that we can win big-time, meaningful games down the stretch of the season against good teams."

I think the question is *how much* progress did the team make? Was this just a baby step and we are still years away from making the Sweet 16 or more? Is this the end of the line as far as progress? Or as exhibited down the stretch, are we in the midst of a steady march to a return to basketball prominence?

This season could have been problematic for Diebler, but he seems to have survived with the team's solid play down the stretch, just as Diebler won his hire after the 2024 season with the team's solid play at the end of the season while he was interim coach. Both seasons featured an upset of Purdue. Next season will definitely be pivotal and could – should? – be make-or-break for Diebler.

Athletic director Ross Bjork went out on a limb by hiring the inexperienced Diebler as head coach, and that limb is starting to sway in the Columbus wind.

Michigan's hiring of Dusty May will hang over Bjork and Diebler until Diebler proves his worth, one way or the other.

Just as a reminder, Diebler and May were hired at the same time. May took an 8-24 team and went 27-10 in his first season, making it all the way to the Sweet 16. This season the Wolverines were 35-3 and went all the way to the Final Four – and maybe even to the title game by the time you read your next BSB. Meanwhile, Diebler took a 22-14 team and was 17-15 his first year and 21-13 this year with the brief trip to the NAAs.

It's not Diebler's fault that he will be forever compared to May. What was he supposed to do when Bjork offered him the job? Say no?

But there is going to be a tremendous amount of pressure on both Diebler and Bjork next season. Let's see if/how much the Buckeyes grow.

The situation with the women's basketball team is a little more complicated. Buckeye basketball fans, and more importantly Bjork, have to decide if they are content with having a solid record every year but finishing the season with little to show for it, or want to take a step up in class and join the women's basketball elite.

This season marked the third year in a row that Kevin McGuff's team won at least 26 games but was unable to make it out of the first weekend of the tournament, even though they were the host team all three years.

McGuff is becoming the John Cooper of Ohio State women's basketball, having a strong regular season most years but unable to make much noise in the NCAA tournament other than an Elite Eight appearance in 2023. Any Buckeye football fan knows that despite many good seasons, which helped him maintain his job at Ohio State, Cooper was 2-10-1 against Michigan and 3-8 in bowl games.

Notre Dame, on the other hand, is one of the women's basketball elite teams. They came into The Schott as the No. 6 seed to Ohio State's No. 3 yet won by 10 points. While the Buckeyes were left to empty out their lockers, Notre Dame ad-

vanced to the Sweet 16 for the fifth season in a row.

If you want to get a sense of women's basketball royalty, you can always look to Connecticut. But don't forget that from 2011 to 2020, under the legendary Muffet McGraw, the Irish had nine straight seasons of 31 wins or more and made it to seven Final Fours in that time. Ohio State has had no such run.

History says that McGuff's team will have another strong campaign next season. Many Lady Buckeye fans will be satisfied because of the team's heart and hustle under McGuff.

But consider this.

McGuff just finished his 13th season at the Buckeye helm. After Cooper's 13th season, Andy Geiger fired him and brought in Jim Tressel.

Two seasons later, the Ohio State football team won its first national championship in 34 years.

### Productive Quarterbacks

The pundits, as well as many Buckeye fans – seem to have written off former OSU quarterback Justin Fields, though I did hear one of the talking heads say that now that he is with Kansas City, Fields could roam the sidelines with a ball cap and clipboard and make a nice and lengthy living backing up Patrick Mahomes.

And after a late-season collapse, the status of another noted former Buckeye quarterback, C.J. Stroud, went from "future NFL star" to "questionable."

I wanted to remind our readers just how good – and productive – Fields and Stroud were in their time at Ohio State.

In 2019, Fields' first year in Columbus, he completed 238 of 354 passes for 3,273 yards and a 67.2 percentage, with 41 touchdowns against three interceptions. For good measure he added 137 carries for 484 yards and 10 touchdowns, production you are probably not going to see from Julian Sayin this season, even though the staff is saying he is going to run more.

Fields' numbers dropped in 2020 with only eight games due to COVID. Fields was 158 of 225 for 2,100 yards and a 70.2 percentage with 22 TDs to six picks. He rushed 81 times for 383 yards and five scores.

In 2021, Stroud was even more productive, completing 317 of 441 passes for 4,435 yards, a 71.9 completion percentage and 44 TDs to six INTs. No need to list his rushing stats.

He came back in 2022 and completed 258 of 389 passes for 3,688 yards, 41 scores and six interceptions, while completing 66.3 percent of his passes.

As a measuring stick, Sayin, who entered the starting lineup with comparable experience to Fields and Stroud, completed 301 of 391 passes last season for 3,610 yards and a 77.0 percentage with a 32-8 TD to interception ratio.

While all of us raved about Sayin's production last season, up to the final two games of course, I think you can easily make the case that Fields and Stroud were more productive, especially if you look at passing yardage and touchdown passes vs. interceptions. I think we were a little enamored with Sayin's incredible completion percentage, though Fields and Stroud completed passes at a high rate, as well.

But remember, Stroud and Fields had two years to make their mark in Columbus. Sayin's second season is yet to come, and I am as excited as the next Buckeye fan to see what chapter two for Sayin brings.

As you look at their college numbers, you can see why I am perplexed that Fields and Stroud have not done better in the NFL, though Stroud

in particular may quickly bounce back. They, too, have more chapters to write.

### Dammit, Jim, I'm A Publisher

I have made no secret that I am not a particularly good businessman. I am somebody who is more skilled at putting out a quality newspaper, trying to deliver it on time despite the post office's persistent efforts to make that difficult and to back the product up with quality service – something which we do and I am quite proud of.

Maybe if I were a better businessman I would be better able to solve the dilemma we have been faced with. How do we keep the price of Buckeye Sports Bulletin affordable for those whom we risk losing because of affordability, while keeping BSB "vibrant and viable" as you frequently hear me say.

Let me remind you that in addition to BSB, only Notre Dame's Blue & Gold Illustrated still publishes weekly in football season, and they are down to 18 issues a year as opposed to BSB's 24. Publications at such places as Michigan and Penn State are now monthly, and the formerly strong publication at Purdue no longer has a print component at all.

Yet we soldier on.

The solution that this non-businessman has come up with to solve this dilemma is to simply come out and ask those who can afford to do so to help out. The simplest way to do so is to just pay full price. When we send you a promotion, instead of taking advantage of the discount, go ahead and pay the listed rate. There is also a space on that renewal card for an additional donation. Go ahead. Give what you can. If we can offset the people who truly need the discount, BSB and the BSB family lives on.

Ever since we started asking readers to help us make up for the many readers we lost last year because of delivery problems, I have gotten to speak to so many of you who have called to offer assistance. You have spoken of your passion for Buckeye Sports Bulletin. As I keep saying, it is humbling to realize that our staff, past and present, has created something that brings so much joy to so many Buckeye fans.

As you know by now, our big push currently is the "I Believe in BSB" initiative, where we are not only asking for readers to pay full price, but to pay full price for two years. Those who pay full price for two years will be recognized in the paper. New "I Believe" readers are listed on page 5 of this issue.

Another way to help out is through our popular VIP program, with that status starting as low as \$50. For information on the VIP program see page 8 of this issue. Or just make a simple donation. Call us at (614) 486-2202 or (800) 760-2862 and we will figure out a way for you to help. If you are struggling to pay for your BSB, call one of those same numbers and we will try and find a promotion that suits you.

### The Header To The Previous Note

Here's what AI, via Google, says about the reference I used: "Dammit, Jim, I'm a doctor..." is a legendary catchphrase from Star Trek used by Dr. Leonard "Bones" McCoy to Captain Kirk. While often quoted, McCoy rarely said "dammit" in the TV series, usually saying "I'm a doctor, not a...".

### A Unique Letter

As I mentioned, so many of you have expressed your passion for BSB when we have chatted by phone. But I also had correspondence by mail recently that moved me. One of our most loyal readers had been released after

20 years in prison, now free to breathe the fresh Buckeye air.

"I just wanted to thank you for helping me get through the trying times of life and feelings of homesickness by continuing the print version of BSB," he wrote. "I know the margins are thin and the post office can make even the simple things difficult, so I am appreciative of the good service and writings."

Thank you for reaching out and best of luck on the next chapter of your life.

### First-Class Upgrade

You didn't think I was going to go through this column without mentioning upgrading your subscription to first class, did you? This is the companion initiative to "I Believe in BSB."

We are offering a chance to upgrade your subscription to first-class mail from the Football Preview issue through coverage of the Michigan game at the current rate of \$35, or \$45 through the playoffs and the Football Recruiting Wrap-Up in February.

Why not try the upgrade? If you don't see the value simply don't upgrade next year. Don't forget, your BSB will arrive in more pristine condition because it is mailed in an envelope and the replacement policy is also more liberal for first-class subscribers.

To show how serious we are about encouraging you to upgrade, we have also lowered the annual rate for those who want their first-class delivery for the entire year.

Call us at the above numbers or upgrade by writing us at P.O. Box 12453, Columbus, Ohio, 43212. If paying by credit card, don't forget your three- or four-digit code.

### Parents And Passing

In his "Facts Man" column on page 34 of this issue, Mike Wachsmann talks of how parents pass on their love of sports to their children. In Mike's case it was his mother, the late BSB assistant publisher Karen Wachsmann, who nurtured Mike's love of the Buckeyes and sports.

While he doesn't mention it in his column, it was Karen who dragged him kicking and screaming to his first Ohio State women's basketball game. And despite all that kick and scream, he would be the first to admit that he became immediately hooked.

Mike's mention of parents and children and the love of sports was his gentle way of leading into the news that he lost his son, Liam, on March 13, and this is my gentle way to lead into that same news.

I have always believed that a parent losing a child is life's cruelest irony. It's an irony that we have had too much of at BSB, with Karen's replacement as assistant publisher, Becky Roberts, having lost her beloved Brynn in June of 2023.

I've known Liam since he was released after 48 days in NICU at a petite 3.8 pounds, and I have a treasured picture of me, Mike and a tiny Liam to prove it.

The thing I will remember most about Liam as a child was how quick he was to dish out a hug. And I love hugs.

As a young adult, Liam would frequently come into the office with Mike, and there was a very visible ease in their relationship. Liam would correct Mike when he was wrong or roll his eyes when Mike said something only Mike could say, and it was enjoyable to spend time with them.

As you will learn if you read Mike's column, Liam wasn't much of a sports fan, but he indulged his father. I only hope that they went to an OSU women's basketball game and Liam didn't put up much of a fight, as his father did many years ago, if they went.

My thoughts are with Mike, wife Stacey, and the entire Wachsmann family.



# Columbus Clippers

# 2026 SCHEDULE

SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
Opening Night						27 IOW 8:08 PM
29 IOW 2:08 PM	30	31 IND 6:15 PM	1 IND 6:15 PM	2 IND 6:15 PM	3 IND 6:15 PM	4 IND 4:05 PM
5 IND 1:05 PM	6	7 WOR 6:05 PM	8 WOR 12:05 PM	9 WOR 6:05 PM	10 WOR 6:05 PM	11 WOR 4:05 PM
12 WOR 1:05 PM	13	14 IOW 6:15 PM	15 IOW 6:15 PM	16 IOW 12:05 PM	17 IOW 6:15 PM	18 IOW 4:05 PM
19 IOW 1:05 PM	20	21 BUF 6:05 PM	22 BUF 6:05 PM	23 BUF 6:05 PM	24 BUF 6:05 PM	25 BUF 1:05 PM
26 BUF 1:05 PM	27	28 TOL 6:15 PM	29 TOL 6:15 PM	30 TOL 6:35 PM	31 BUF 6:05 PM	

SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
						1 TOL 6:15 PM
3 TOL 1:05 PM	4	5 IOW 7:38 PM	6 IOW 1:08 PM	7 IOW 1:08 PM	8 IOW 8:08 PM	9 IOW 4:08 PM
10 IOW 2:08 PM	11	12 STP 7:37 PM	13 STP 7:37 PM	14 STP 7:37 PM	15 STP 7:37 PM	16 STP 3:07 PM
17 STP 3:07 PM	18	19 LOU 7:05 PM	20 LOU 12:05 PM	21 LOU 12:05 PM	22 LOU 7:05 PM	23 LOU 7:05 PM
24 LOU 1:05 PM	25 TOL 5:05 PM	26	27 TOL 11:05 AM	28 TOL 6:35 PM	29 TOL 7:05 PM	30 TOL 7:05 PM
31 TOL 2:05 PM						

SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
						1
7 OMA 1:05 PM	8	9 IND 7:05 PM	10 IND 1:35 PM	11 IND 7:05 PM	12 IND 7:05 PM	13 IND 7:05 PM
14 IND 1:35 PM	15	16 SWB 7:05 PM	17 SWB 7:05 PM	18 SWB 12:05 PM	19 SWB 7:05 PM	20 SWB 7:05 PM
21 SWB 1:05 PM	22	23 OMA 8:05 PM	24 OMA 8:05 PM	25 OMA 8:05 PM	26 OMA 8:05 PM	27 OMA 7:05 PM
28 OMA 6:05 PM	29	30 LOU 7:05 PM				

SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
						1 LOU 7:05 PM
5 LOU 1:05 PM	6	7 LHV 11:35 AM	8 LHV 6:45 PM	9 LHV 6:45 PM	10 LHV 6:45 PM	11 LHV 6:35 PM
12 LHV 1:15 PM	13	All-Star Break		17 IND 7:05 PM	18 IND 7:05 PM	
19 IND 1:05 PM	20	21 STP 8:07 PM	22 STP 2:07 PM	23 STP 8:07 PM	24 STP 8:07 PM	25 STP 7:37 PM
26 STP 3:07 PM	27	28 TOL 7:05 PM	29 TOL 7:05 PM	30 TOL 12:05 PM	31 TOL 7:05 PM	

SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
						1 TOL 7:05 PM
2 TOL 1:05 PM	3	4 SYR 6:35 PM	5 SYR 12:05 PM	6 SYR 6:35 PM	7 SYR 6:35 PM	8 SYR 6:35 PM
9 SYR 1:05 PM	10	11 OMA 7:05 PM	12 OMA 7:05 PM	13 OMA 7:05 PM	14 OMA 7:05 PM	15 OMA 7:05 PM
16 OMA 1:05 PM	17	18 STP 7:05 PM	19 STP 7:05 PM	20 STP 12:05 PM	21 STP 7:05 PM	22 STP 7:05 PM
23 STP 1:05 PM	24	25 IND 6:35 PM	26 IND 1:35 PM	27 IND 6:35 PM	28 IND 7:05 PM	29 IND 6:35 PM
30 IND 1:35 PM	31					

SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
						1 IOW 6:35 PM
6 IOW 1:05 PM	7	8 LOU 6:35 PM	9 LOU 12:05 PM	10 LOU 6:35 PM	11 LOU 7:05 PM	12 LOU 7:15 PM
13 LOU 1:05 PM	14	15 STP 6:35 PM	16 STP 6:35 PM	17 STP 6:35 PM	18 STP 7:05 PM	19 STP 4:05 PM
20 STP 1:05 PM	21	22	23	24	25	26
27	28	29	30			

HOME
AWAY
“TANSKY TUESDAY” DIME-A-DOG
FIREWORKS
COPA DE LA DIVERSIÓN



## PROMOTIONAL SCHEDULE

