

# BUCKEYE SPORTS BULLETIN

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Vol. 41, No. 14

"For The Buckeye Fan Who Needs To Know More"

Jan. 15, 2022



## Buoyant Buckeyes Sink Utes In Rose Bowl Comeback

By **PATRICK MAYHORN**

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Associate Editor

As Ohio State's sideline – down more than 20 scholarship players with injuries, opt-outs and illness impacting starters and reserves alike – streamed to the middle of the finely curated Rose Bowl field for the trophy ceremony, it quickly became apparent that any and all rumors of a lack of interest in or motivation for the Granddaddy of Them All at Ohio State were overblown.

Just seconds removed from an expertly curated game-winning drive by way of quarterback C.J. Stroud and the Noah Ruggles field goal which capped it and pushed the Buckeyes to a 48-45 win over Utah to ring in the new year, those donning the scarlet and gray flocked to the seemingly endless supply of roses for them to claim.

Some passed theirs off to family members in the stands – safety Ronnie Hickman nearly missed the singing of "Carmen Ohio" as he handed his off to his mom. Others took in a tradition of the game, roaming through the postgame chaos with their rose firmly between their teeth. Tight end Jeremy Ruckert, playing his final game as a Buckeye, collected as many as

# Rose To The Occasion

**FEELING ROSY** – Ohio State ended its season with a celebration in Pasadena for contributors new and old, sending off seniors such as Thayer Munford (left) with a win, while welcoming new stars like Dawand Jones (middle) and Jaxon Smith-Njigba (right).

he could, leaving the field with at least half a dozen roses.

The team gathered itself enough for that final alma mater serenade of the season before breaking off into celebratory pockets dispersed throughout the stadium. High school teammates Marvin Harrison Jr. and Kyle McCord made a beeline to the end-zone stands, where Harrison's high school wide receivers coach was seated.

Jaxon Smith-Njigba, the man of the hour, tried to find a quick escape from the ruckus but was caught in interview after interview. Stroud, meanwhile, used his teammate's newfound popularity as a way to absolve himself of the impromptu media hits and shuffled off the field to significant fanfare from the contingent of Buckeye fans who made the trip to Pasadena – outnumbered by Utah fans but in attendance all the same.

The celebration waged on the field longer than it did all sea-

son for the Buckeyes and carried into the locker room, which had been filled with speeches of fighting back and being tougher only a few hours prior after a disastrous first half. For some players, it was a first taste of playing on one of college football's great stages. For others, it was the final step in a tenure that saw Ohio State take two trips to the College Football Playoff, one to the national title game and another visit to this venue back in 2018. A select few fifth- and sixth-year seniors could add a Cotton Bowl and another playoff berth to the résumé.

That group was the one that lingered a bit. Ohio State was without several of its most veteran players because of opt-outs from super senior defensive tackle Haskell Garrett, redshirt

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## Buckeye Leaves

After Ohio State mounted a furious comeback to topple Utah in the Rose Bowl, the Buckeye Sports Bulletin staff and posters on the BuckeyeSports.com forum assigned their Buckeye leaves to the top players from the game.

**Chase Brown, BSB:** Jaxon Smith-Njigba is a record-breaker. Utah's defense didn't have an answer for the sophomore wide receiver, who caught 15 passes for 347 yards and three touchdowns against the Utes.

He broke Ohio State's single-season reception record, single-season receiving yards record and single-game receiving yards record, and he tied the single-game receptions record he had set against Nebraska earlier this season. Smith-Njigba also broke the Buckeyes' bowl game record for receiving yards in a game.

It's safe to say that Ohio State will be just fine without all-time greats Chris Olave and Garrett Wilson. Smith-Njigba is quarterback C.J. Stroud's favorite target. He was all season, even with the future first-round picks on the field, and he will be in the future. Buckeye fans should be excited about what that looks like in 2022 because it might be another special season for Smith-Njigba in the scarlet and gray.

**Patrick Mayhorn, BSB:** Down two first-round wide receivers and a starting left tackle? Facing a top-25 defense in the nation and staring down a deficit for nearly the entire game? Stuck without much of a rushing attack to bail you out on short downs? None of it mattered to Ohio State quarterback C.J. Stroud Jan. 1 as he led a furious Buckeye comeback in the Rose Bowl to beat Utah, 48-45.

Stroud was the guiding force behind 27 second-half points, teaming up with superstar wideout Jaxon Smith-Njigba and rising star Marvin Harrison Jr. for the first 500-yard passing game in Ohio State's history. He packed the stat sheet to the tune of 573 yards and six touchdowns on 37-of-46 passing.

As if that weren't enough, Stroud provided the game-winning drive with only a minute and change on the clock, ending Ohio State's season with a seven-play, 56-yard trek that ended in a Noah Ruggles field goal to secure the victory.

**Braden Moles, BSB:** With the number of scholarship players out in the Rose Bowl, a youth movement was absolutely necessary for Ohio State to claim a 48-45 win in The Granddaddy of Them All. Perhaps no young

player better exemplified that movement than freshman wide receiver Marvin Harrison Jr.

Harrison finished with 71 yards on six receptions, three of which went for touchdowns of 25, 8 and 5 yards. He was an important part of an electric Ohio State offense in its win over the Utes that went for 683 yards against one of the nation's top defenses, hauling in the second-most receptions to Jaxon Smith-Njigba.

This type of performance on one of college football's greatest stages sends Harrison to the offseason on a positive note as he looks to help fill the void left by Garrett Wilson and Chris Olave next season.

**BuckeyeScott:** Well, you have got to give those big Buckeyes up front some Buckeye Leaves. C.J. Stroud had lots of time to throw those deep balls.

**bstu9:** We all know about the stats for C.J. Stroud and JSN so I'm going to go another direction and give my leaves to Tommy Eichenberg. He seemed to be making plays all over the field in what was by far his best game as a Buckeye.

**Poster That Harley Built:** Stroud and JSN are obvious. Eichenberg came out of the blue for a leaf, and how about a season-long achievement leaf for Ruggles?

**PeyoteBuck:** We saw the obvious stars but who was the tackling machine? Tommy Eichenberg. And of course, a slightly battered Ruggles put the cherry on the sundae. I give them all leaves.

**AnthonyBuckeye:** The all-world QB C.J. Stroud and his partner-in-glory Jaxon Smith-Njigba, of course. The entire OL and TEs Jeremy Ruckert and Mitch Rossi for keeping Stroud clean all game long and Marvin Harrison Jr. and Emeka Egbuka for showing glimpses of a glorious future.

It is hard to give Buckeye leaves to the D when the opposition scores 45, but Taron Vincent and Tommy Eichenberg brought energy and effort from the start. The offensive coaching staff for bold play calling including the fourth-and-1 pass to Harrison for a TD! And Noah Ruggles for being a quiet, but cool and reliable Buckeye star.

**Tiffin Buckeye:** Stroud and Smith-Njigba, what a masterful performance.

**R1TBIDL:** Demario McCall, who reportedly gave an inspirational rallying talk in the locker room at halftime.

as an achievement. It helps any team for a future season to make team goals that are rewarding and recognized. Oh, what a beautiful victory but a beautiful way for all BUCKEYE NATION to see this coming 2022 Buckeye team achieve successes.

**Nelson Bell  
Toledo, Ohio**

*If you would like to express an opinion concerning Ohio State University sports, please send your letter to BSB Letters, P.O. Box 12453, Columbus, OH 43212, or email it to bsb@buckeyesports.com. Letters must be signed and include the writer's hometown and a daytime telephone number for verification. Publication priority will be given to those letters that are brief, and we reserve the right to edit letters for publication.*



## From The Message Board

**Ohio State's 2021 season ended with a 48-45 win over Utah in the Rose Bowl. The Buckeyes will have a lot of things to address in the offseason, from replacing all-time great receivers Chris Olave and Garrett Wilson, to a change in the defensive scheme with the hire of coordinator Jim Knowles. We asked posters on the BuckeyeSports.com Fan Forum, as well as staff members, what changes they would like to see from OSU as the Buckeyes head into 2022:**

"I know that improvements in the defense are on everyone's mind, but I think Ryan Day and Kevin Wilson need to improve run-blocking schemes. One of the best schemes I remember is the one the Buckeyes used against Oregon in the 2014 CFP Championship game. The run blocking in that game was unbelievable!

"Upon watching the Rose Bowl game again, the defensive line looked two steps too slow in run or pass defense for much of the game. Is strength & conditioning under coach Mickey Marotti working as it did during Urban's tenure? No one would suggest that one of Urban's teams was not tough!"

**- AnthonyBuckeye**

"Red zone and short-yardage execution need some work. In particular, the use of the running game in those situations. I don't know how many times we got stoned trying to run on third- and fourth-and-short. It happened so much that we just throw in those situations. Look, with a quarterback like C.J. Stroud and his accuracy, it can be done. But at some point, you need to get physical running the football, particularly in the tough games against your rivals."

**- BuckeyeScott**

"The defense needs to go back to school on fundamentals. The basics of tackling, getting off blocks, filling gaps, edge containment, and defensive backs finding the ball on deep throws. I can't remember when there was such a large performance gap between our offense and defense.

"The linebackers need big improvement. In addition, our defensive line this year had no difference-makers like we've had in recent years with players like Chase Young or the Bosa brothers. We were not able to get consistent quarterback pressure, which makes everything else more difficult for

the back seven."

**- Bucks89**

"If the defense improves even marginally, Ohio State should be absolutely one of the top teams in the nation and favored over Notre Dame, Iowa, Wisconsin, Penn State, Michigan State and Michigan. Tough schedule, and it's very, very difficult for any team to go undefeated any season, but my expectations are high."

**- Terrier Buck**

"I think the number one thing that Coach Day will be trying to improve is coaching – not just in terms of their technical ability, but in terms of recruiting ability. I have read somewhere that Coach Studrawa was not an eager recruiter. That may have played a role in his departure."

**- Michael Bauer**

"With new defensive schemes coming in from Knowles, I'd say the sky is the limit. Sure, we are losing key starters, but we have some bright stars coming in. I'd say things are looking good."

**- PeyoteBuck**

"Ohio State's offensive line could use some work. I think TreVeyon Henderson is legit coming out of the backfield, but the big boys up front seemed to let him down against more talented and physical front sevens. With Thayer Munford and Nicholas Petit-Frere out of the picture, the Buckeyes can return to a two-tackle, two-guard system rather than the four-tackle one they used this season. I expect to see Paris Johnson, Matt Jones, Luke Wypler, Donovan Jackson and Dawand Jones lining up for Ohio State against Notre Dame on Sept. 3, which I think would significantly improve the run blocking while still being effective at pass blocking."

**- Chase Brown, BSB**

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Georgia Came Prepared

Memo to Ryan Day:

"That is how you prepare for a football game against Michigan!" - Kirby Smart

**Pence Roth  
Bradenton, Fla.**

### Oh, What A Beautiful Victory

This Rose Bowl victory not only snatched the team from another disappointing defeat but established new Rose Bowl achievements for bragging rights over "that team up North."

The Buckeyes became the Big Ten team with the most Rose Bowl victories, and two great freshman players established new Rose Bowl passing and receiving records too. Any football fan or a high school player desiring to play the game of football appreciates and dreams of games like this game

# Oodles To Unpack Since Our Last Visit

Since last we visited, Ohio State's new defensive coordinator moved into his office at the Woody Hayes Athletic Center, the Buckeyes dispatched one offensive line coach and hired another, receivers coach Brian Hartline added the title of passing game coordinator to his business card, four starters decided to opt out of playing in the Rose Bowl, two former players accused OSU coaches of improper treatment, the team's long snapper announced he is returning for a seventh (not a misprint) season, and a Hero born in Germany joined Ryan Day's recruiting class of 2022.

Outside Columbus, Michigan learned the meaning of the Biblical passage "pride goeth before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall," Alabama extended its record to six appearances in the eight-year-old College Football Playoff championship game, and college football moved closer to becoming a clone of the NFL with programs embracing free agency (also known as the transfer portal) and using the Name, Likeness and Image legislation as a recruiting tool.

Oh, yeah. And the combination of C.J. Stroud and Jaxon Smith-Njigba obliterated the offensive record books in Pasadena as Ohio State spotted Utah 14-point leads at four different junctures before claiming a 48-45 victory in one of the most entertaining games of the college football postseason.

## There's A Right Way

College football players have every right to explore (or exploit) opportunities presented to them, including the transfer portal, NIL money and opting out of postseason games with an eye toward an NFL career. But spare me the sanctimony about how these new rules are somehow payback for the years during which college players were simply indentured servants.

I know the concept of a free college education is lost on many these days, but annual tuition to Ohio State is \$11,518 for in-state students and \$33,502 for those attending from outside the state. Add the academic counseling, physical and mental wellness programs and other amenities that go with being an Ohio State football player, and the experience is not worthless in terms of monetary gain.

For the best of the best, a lucrative professional career awaits. Joey Bosa is currently working on a five-year contract worth \$135 million. His brother, Nick, signed a four-year deal worth in excess of \$33.5 million. Ezekiel Elliott is due \$90 million on his six-year contract, Corey Linsley has a \$62.5 million deal working and Denzel Ward is said to be looking for a contract extension in excess of \$19 million per season.

So, do I blame Chris Olave, Garrett Wilson, Nicholas Petit-Frere or Haskell Garrett for opting out of the Rose Bowl? I do not. Recognizing football is a business, both on the college and professional levels, each made a business decision. I don't have to like their decisions, but I respect them.

On the other hand, there remains a handful of players, disgruntled for one reason or another, who opt out for different reasons.

Williamson might be the perfect example. The 2020 graduate in history and fifth-year defensive back who did not travel to Pasadena with his teammates, dropped a number of social media bombs during the Rose Bowl game, taking particular aim at what he described as untrustworthy coaches and know-nothing fans as well as lobbing accusations that college football takes advantage of its players, particularly black ones.

"POP QUIZ," Williamson wrote. "What American industries rely on free black labor for the lucrative benefit of white men? ...It makes you wonder... How much control do these institutions have over our young black boys?"

Forgetting for the moment that no one twisted Williamson's arm to force him to play college football, how well do you think his tweets will play for prospective NFL owners and coaches? For that matter, how well will they play for prospective bosses in whatever career he chooses

after football?

And then there is K'Vaughan Pope, last seen quitting in the middle of the Akron game before returning to social media in early January to air a number of grievances. Apparently emboldened by Williamson's missives, Pope tweeted, "You only go to OSU if you want to be: highly disrespected by the coaching staff (head coach here & there), treated unfairly (young guys playing before seniors), looked at as a hoodlum (because your vocal) (sic) treated as if you are not a high caliber player (because i am)."

Is it really unfair for young guys to play before seniors if they are better players? Next to nothing I saw from Pope during his three-plus seasons with the Buckeyes ever made me wonder why he was not getting more playing time.

I'm not naïve enough to believe every player in every locker room is joining hands and singing from the same hymnal. Most of today's players have been told from an early age that they are the next Tom Brady, the next Michael Jordan, or the next Mike Trout. Some can handle the adversity that comes with climbing the ladder to success, and some become dismayed when they don't start out on the top rung.

But the sooner youngsters the likes of Williamson and Pope learn that life has a way of punching you in the face just to see how you react, perhaps the better off they will be.

## Some Final Thoughts

If you thought Meyer learned anything from the Zach Smith affair or his epic failure as an NFL head coach, you were mistaken.

During Williamson's social media outburst was the revelation that during his first team meeting at Ohio State in 2017, a photo of a young black man wearing a hooded sweatshirt was part of a presentation outlining the program's no-hoodie policy inside the Woody Hayes Athletic Center. The photo was of Trayvon Martin, the 17-year-old black Floridian fatally shot in 2012, a touchstone for what has eventually become the Black Lives Matter movement.

Williamson's implication was that the Ohio State program was exploiting the image of Martin when, in reality, a low-level support staff member (who was white) used the photo without understanding the potential damage. That person reportedly later apologized to the players who saw the presentation.

When initially asked about the photo and its use, Meyer told author Jeff Snook the incident "never happened." It was an off-the-top-of-the-head, cringeworthy reaction similar to the one the former coach offered at Big Ten Media Days before the 2018 season when he denied knowledge of a 2015 allegation of domestic violence against Smith.

As with the Smith saga, Meyer later admitted the incident with the Martin photo did indeed happen, but in keeping with his character, he took no responsibility as head of the program.

"I wasn't there," he told The Columbus Dispatch. "None of the coaches were present. It was a support staffer who was in error and apologized."

As of this writing, rumors abound that Meyer might be headed back to Fox Sports as a college football analyst. I would never argue against anyone being allowed to make a living and provide for his family. But Meyer has apparently shown his true character over the past couple of years, including the appearance of being loose with the truth whenever it suits him.

Perhaps an analyst's gig is where Meyer belongs because with a trustworthy factor of nearly zero, his coaching days are almost certainly over.

## EDITOR'S NOTEBOOK Mark Rea



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### Ohio State Tabs Frye As OL Coach

Ohio State has picked UCLA offensive coordinator and offensive line coach Justin Frye as its replacement for Greg Studrawa, who was let go by Ohio State on Jan. 6. Frye's hiring was announced on Jan. 10.

Frye, like Buckeye head man Ryan Day, is a product of the Chip Kelly tree, working under Kelly in Westwood at UCLA since 2018. He was hired as the offensive line coach and remained in that role, but also filled the offensive coordinator slot since the end of the 2018 campaign, though Kelly famously calls his own plays and has quite a bit of influence on the Bruin offense.

The connections between Day and his new offensive line coach go deeper. Both

served as graduate assistants at Florida under Urban Meyer (Day in 2005, Frye in 2009-10) and in turn, both joined Steve Addazio's staff at Temple. Frye worked as Addazio's offensive line coach for two seasons at Temple in 2011 and 2012, and then traveled with Addazio and Day to Boston College, working as the offensive line coach for the Eagles from 2013-17. He coordinated the running game as well.

At UCLA, Frye helped to build one of the nation's best rushing attacks this season. The Bruins averaged 215.1 yards per game on the ground, good for 17th nationally. UCLA led the Pac-12 in scoring with 36.5 points per game and Zach Charbonnet became Frye's seventh rusher to finish in the top 30 nationally for total rushing yards. The UCLA rushing attack was even better in 2020, gaining 230.6 yards per game, enough for the No. 12 spot nationally.

Perhaps his best season came in 2013 when his line helped to guide the way for Heisman finalist Andre Williams at Boston College. Williams rushed for 2,177 yards, the fifth-most in a single season in NCAA history.

Frye played offensive tackle for Indiana from 2002-06, setting the school record for consecutive starts by an offensive lineman with 45.

### Barnes Takes New Job, Studrawa Out As OL Coach

After three seasons in Columbus, former Ohio State assistant coach Matt Barnes will be the next defensive coordinator at Memphis.

Barnes will replace former defensive coordinator Mike MacIntyre, who was hired as Florida International's head coach following Memphis' regular season. Last year, the Tigers ranked 91st in scoring defense (29.3 ppg) and 95th in yards allowed at 418.5 per game.

At Ohio State, Barnes held several positions, including special teams coordinator and coaching the safeties and secondary. He was part of Day's initial rash of hirings when he took over, including Barnes, quarterbacks coach Corey Dennis, co-defensive coordinators Jeff Hafley and Greg Mattison and linebackers coach Al Washington.

In 2021, he took over play-calling duties from defensive coordinator Kerry Coombs following Ohio State's challenging start defensively – highlighted by a 35-28 loss against Oregon. The Ducks rushed for 269 yards, going for over seven yards per carry.

While the defense still experienced some struggles after Barnes took over, namely in the loss to Michigan where Ohio State was gashed on the ground, there were improvements seen during the

middle stretch of the season, including a four-game stretch against Akron, Rutgers, Maryland and Indiana in which the Buckeyes allowed just 11.0 points per game.

During his time coaching the secondary, Barnes has helped send Buckeyes to the NFL, including cornerback Jeff Okudah (2020, No. 3 overall), cornerback Damon Arnette (2020, No. 19 overall) and cornerback Shaun Wade (2021, No. 160 overall).

His departure was expected following Ohio State's hiring of Jim Knowles as defensive coordinator, who will likely bring in some of his own staff. If Knowles adds additional hires, more departures will be necessary for Ohio State to get to 10 assistant coaches.

Ohio State also parted ways with Studrawa.

According to reports, Studrawa was dealing with health issues that required back surgery this season, and he was considering retirement following Ohio State's win over Utah in the Rose Bowl.

Studrawa recently completed his sixth season coaching the offensive line at Ohio State. Before he got to Columbus, he spent time at Maryland, LSU and Bowling Green, among other destinations.

Although Ohio State had successful offensive line play during Studrawa's time with the Buckeyes, criticism had ramped

## Buckeyes See 140 Recognized As Academic All-Big Ten Honorees

For the third time in as many years, Ohio State has snapped its own school record for most student athletes honored as academic All-Big Ten honorees, placing 140 on the list this fall, 20 more than the previous record of 120 set in 2020. The group was announced Dec. 14, 2021.

The fall honorees include student-athletes from field hockey, football, men's and women's cross country, men's and women's soccer and women's volleyball. To be eligible for academic All-Big Ten selection, student-athletes must carry a cumulative grade-point average of 3.0 or higher.

The football team led all programs with 46 honorees, trailed by 22 from men's soccer, 18 from women's cross country, 15 from field hockey and women's soccer, 13 from women's volleyball and 11 from men's cross country. Samuel Buzzas of the men's soccer team, men's cross country runner Alex Dediu and field hockey's Sammy Stone were all recognized for a 4.0 grade-point average.

The following is a complete list of Ohio State's fall academic All-Big Ten honorees, including their class year and major. The list is in alphabetical order by sport.

**Men's Cross Country** – Giovanni Copploe, Jr., marketing; John Cuozzo, So., mechanical engineering; Alex Dediu, So., marketing; Jack Good, Sr., marketing; Zubin Jha, So., computer science & engineering; Nicholas Miller, Sr., accounting; Nick Regas, Sr., marketing; Zach Shultz, Jr., city & regional planning; Ivan Slyepkan, Jr., health sciences; Jake Wickert, Sr., mechanical engineering; Mikey Zedan, Sr., civil engineering.

**Women's Cross Country** – Annie Allen, So., business; Gabby Dilick, Sr., nursing; Addie Engel, So., exploring; Erica Francesconi, So., neuroscience; Allie Guagenti, Jr., art education; Emma Hoellrich, Sr., operations management; Alexa Jankowsky, Sr., architecture; Andrea Kuhn, Jr., math; Mia Mlynek, So., pre-health sciences; Hannah Moulton, Sr., microbiology; Suzie Muller, So., exercise science; Gia Napoleon, Jr., journalism; Daniella Santos, So., exploring; Kathleen Shay, Jr., biomedical engineering; Suzanne Stein, Gr., dietetics and nutrition; Ava Tenaglia, So., microbiology; Akemi Von Scherr, So., health, pro-

motion, nutrition & exercise science; Ellie Weber, Sr., marketing.

**Field Hockey** – Leanne Bough, Jr., accounting; Sarah Charley, Jr., psychology; Abby Danson, So., construction systems management; Julia Dickinson, Sr., communication; Kennedy Fertitta, Sr., finance; Emma Goldean, Sr., biology; Ali Gordon, So., exploring; Aaliyah Hernandez, Sr., biology; Jessica Hourihane, Sr., marketing; Tess Maloney, Sr., finance; Megan McKenna, So., health sciences; Katie Pyle, Sr., human development & family science; Sarah Richards, So., health sciences; Sina Schwinn, Sr., psychology; Sammy Stone, Gr., sport management.

**Football** – J.P. Andrade, Jr., consumer & family financial services; Kamryn Babb, Sr., communication; Ryan Batsch, Sr., finance; Chris Booker, Sr., psychology; Steele Chambers, Jr., finance; Robert Cope, Sr., hospitality management; Jacolbe Cowan, So., sport industry; Marvin Davies, So., finance; Dominic DiMaccio, Sr., consumer & family financial services; Tommy Eichenberg, Jr., real estate; Jack Forsman, So., accounting; Patrick Gurd, So., health sciences; Ty Hamilton, So., human development & family science; Jakob James, So., exploring; Paris Johnson Jr., So., journalism; Cade Kacherski, Sr., finance; Cameron Kittle, So., construction systems management; Jagger LaRoe, Sr., business economics; Trey Leroux, So., finance; Cameron Martinez, So., psychology; Jaden McKenzie, Jr., human development & family science; Harry Miller, Jr., mechanical engineering; Teradja Mitchell, Sr., fashion & retail studies; Andrew Moore, So., consumer & family financial services; Nicholas Petit-Frere, Sr., marketing; Noah Potter, Jr., economics; Corey Rau, Gr., sports coaching; Bradley Robinson, Sr., exercise science; Mitch Rossi, Sr., economics; Joe Royer, So., sport industry; Jeremy Ruckert, Sr., social work; Jake Seibert, So., finance; Bryson Shaw, Jr., political science; Cody Simon, So., finance; Ryan Smith, Jr., sport industry; Tyreke Smith, Sr., sport industry; Jaxon Smith-Njigba, So., human development & family science; Master Teague III, Gr., architecture; Grant Toutant, So., psychology; Taron Vincent, Sr., sport industry; Ryan Watts, So., communication; Sam Wiglusz, Sr., marketing;

Kourt Williams, So., communication; Miyan Williams, So., human development & family science; Marcus Williamson, Sr., human development & family science; Luke Wypler, So., sport industry.

**Men's Soccer** – Samuel Buzzas, Gr., sport management; Channing Chasten, Jr., communication; Blake Collins, So., real estate; Connor DesRoches, So., finance; Chris Dowling, Sr., business economics; Brayden Durbin, Jr., sport industry; Devyn Etling, Gr., sport management; Thomas Gilej, So., economics; Xavier Green, Sr., environment, economy, development & sustainability; Parker Grinstead, So., marketing; Luis Hernandez, Sr., economics; Luke Kiley, Sr., criminology; Ty Konrad, So., science & mathematics education; Noah Lawrence, Sr., sport industry; Tommy Marusic, Jr., finance; Sam Mason, Sr., marketing; Joe Ortiz, Gr., social work; Sean Ryan, Jr., business economics; Owen Sullivan, Jr., accounting; Peter Van Euwen, So., finance; Deylen Vellios, So., exercise science; Laurence Wootton, So., economics.

**Women's Soccer** – Christin Baumbick, So., health sciences; Marissa Birzon, Sr., marketing; Chloe Delyser, So., marketing; Brittany Duncan, Jr., biology; Kayla Fischer, Sr., biology; Bailey Kolinski, Sr., logistics management; Nina LeFlore, So., pharmaceutical sciences; Maciah Lipsey, Jr., criminology; Maddy Lowe, Gr., sport management; Peyton McNamara, So., international business; Ariella Pitty, Jr., animal sciences; Haley Roberts, So., health sciences; Izzy Rodriguez, Sr., finance; Emma Sears, Jr., human nutrition; Emaly Vatne, Sr., health and exercise science.

**Women's Volleyball** – Vanja Bukilic, Sr., civil engineering; Gabby Gonzales, Jr., sport industry; Hannah Gruensfelder, Sr., biomedical engineering; Mia Grunze, Sr., sport industry; Emily Londot, So., sport industry; Camryn Moeller, Sr., accounting; Jenaisya Moore, Jr., sport industry; Sarah Sue Morbitzer, So., exercise science; Kylie Murr, Jr., sport industry; Mac Podraza, Jr., communication; Adria Powell, Sr., biology; Rylee Rader, So., sport industry; Josie Vondran, Sr., exercise science.

## 2021 Ohio State Football Schedule

Date	Opponent	Result/Time (ET)	TV	Record, Last Result
Sept. 2	at Minnesota	W, 45-31	Fox	9-4, 18-6 win over West Virginia
Sept. 11	OREGON	L, 35-28	Fox	10-4, 47-32 lost to Oklahoma
Sept. 18	TULSA	W, 41-20	FS1	7-6, 30-17 win over Old Dominion
Sept. 25	AKRON	W, 59-7	BTN	2-10, 49-14 loss to Toledo
Oct. 2	at Rutgers	W, 52-13	BTN	5-8, 38-10 loss to Wake Forest
Oct. 9	MARYLAND	W, 66-17	Fox	7-6, 54-10 win over Virginia Tech.
Oct. 23	at Indiana	W, 54-7	ABC	2-10, 44-7 loss to Purdue
Oct. 30	PENN STATE	W, 33-24	ABC	7-6, 24-10 loss to Arkansas
Nov. 6	at Nebraska	W, 26-17	ABC	3-9, 28-21 loss to Iowa
Nov. 13	PURDUE	W, 59-31	ABC	9-4, 48-45 win over Tennessee
Nov. 20	MICHIGAN STATE	W, 56-7	ABC	11-2, 31-21 win over Pitt
Nov. 27	at Michigan	L, 42-27	Fox	12-2, 34-11 loss to Georgia
Jan. 1	Utah*	W, 48-45	ESPN	10-4, 48-45 loss to Ohio State

\* - Rose Bowl at Pasadena, Calif.

up regarding recruiting in the trenches, which had taken a dip in numbers in recent cycles.

He landed five-star prospects in the 2021 and 2020 classes in offensive guard Donovan Jackson and offensive tackle Paris Johnson Jr., but his 2022 group is without a top 100 player, as the Buckeyes missed on several top targets up front.

He departs having produced eight NFL draft picks, though only two players – Billy Price and Josh Myers – were selected before the third round. Price went to the Cincinnati Bengals in the first round back in 2017, while the Green Bay Packers grabbed Myers in the second round in 2021. Center Pat Elflein (2017, Minnesota Vikings) and guards Wyatt Davis (2021, Minnesota Vikings) and Jonah Jackson (2020, Detroit Lions) were selected in the third round.

### WR Coach Hartline Promoted

Ohio State announced on Jan. 9 that wide receivers coach Brian Hartline was promoted to passing game coordinator while continuing his responsibilities as wide receivers coach.

Hartline's promotion comes on the heels of an incredible season for Ohio State's wide receivers. Sophomore Jaxon Smith-Njigba broke several program records, including receptions in a season (95) and receiving yards in a season (1,606), while breaking single-game records in receptions (15, twice) and receiving yards (347).

In addition, senior Chris Olave and junior Garrett Wilson are both off to the NFL following their final seasons in Columbus. Olave finished with 65 catches for 936 yards and 13 touchdown receptions, while Wilson had 70 receptions for 1,058 yards and 12 touchdowns. Following the conclusion of this season, Hartline was named Wide Receivers Coach of the Year by FootballScoop.

"Brian is a dedicated Ohio State Buckeye," Day said. "He is the top wide receivers coach in college football, and he has continued to develop as an offensive coach to the point where we want him to have more of an impact on our offensive game plan. His taking over as passing game coordinator will allow for this."

Hartline has been on Ohio State's staff since 2017, starting as a quality control coach and becoming the interim wide receivers coach in 2018 before stepping into the role full-time in 2019.

FootballScoop also acknowledged his recruiting ability as a reason for giving him

the coaching award.

Hartline provides no shortage of talent to Ohio State. In 2022, he signed two top 100 receivers in Caleb Burton and Kaleb Brown. He also signed Kyion Grayes and Kojo Antwi – both top 150 prospects in their own right.

It was reported that Notre Dame and new head coach Marcus Freeman were targeting Hartline for a position with the Fighting Irish. Still, his promotion at Ohio State figures to keep him in Columbus for the foreseeable future, as he's not indicated that he's interested in leaving.

### Safety Transfer Picks Buckeyes

Former Oklahoma State safety Tanner McCalister announced on Jan. 5 that he would transfer to Ohio State and follow Knowles, his defensive coordinator with the Pokes.

McCalister, a three-star recruit in 2018 out of Rockwell, Texas, started 13 games for Oklahoma State last season, making 42 tackles and intercepting one pass to go along with six breakups. For his career, he's appeared in 49 games, accruing 123 tackles, the interception as mentioned earlier and 12 pass breakups.

Josh Proctor and Bryson Shaw are expected to fill the two-deep at safety for Ohio State next season. Still, McCalister could slot in at cover safety for the Buckeyes and act as a vital depth player who also has extensive knowledge of Knowles' defensive scheme.

In December, he entered the transfer portal following Oklahoma State's loss to Baylor in the Big 12 Championship Game and Knowles' subsequent departure for Ohio State. He has one year of eligibility remaining.

### OSU Nabs ASU Transfer

For the second year in a row, Ohio State has reached into the Pac-12 and plucked a linebacker out of the transfer portal. After landing USC transfer Palaie Gaoteote IV a season ago, the Buckeyes secured a pledge Dec. 25 from former Arizona State player DeaMonte Trayanum, giving OSU its first transfer portal victory of the cycle.

For Trayanum, the chance to head to Ohio State serves as an opportunity to return home, and to try his hand at something new. The former Sun Devil is an Akron native out of Hoban High School and opted for Arizona State over Ohio State in the class of 2020 largely over positional reasons. The Buckeyes wanted him to suit up at linebacker in college, while Arizona

State offered the chance to play running back, where Trayanum suited up for the last two seasons.

Though he did find some success in that role, rushing for 402 yards and six scores on 78 carries this season, Trayanum is ready to jump to defense and will play linebacker in Columbus, he confirmed on Twitter.

His ability as a college linebacker is an unknown, but he was a first-team All-Ohio linebacker as a junior and Ohio State has recently had success with the same move from tailback to linebacker with redshirt sophomore Steele Chambers, who could work in tandem with the ASU transfer this season, depending on how the Buckeye depth chart breaks down.

With Gaoteote IV, Teradja Mitchell both potentially departing after the season (both are seniors, though they do have one more season each of eligibility), an immediate role could be possible for Trayanum. Chambers has locked down a starting role, but Tommy Eichenberg and Cody Simon battled for playing time all season, while

Reid Carrico, Mitchell Melton and the freshman pairing of C.J. Hicks and Gabe Powers will all look to work into the mix as well.

### Teague, Smith Enter Draft

Ohio State redshirt junior tailback Master Teague III and senior defensive end Tyreke Smith declared for the 2022 NFL Draft, ending their career in college football after four seasons with the Buckeyes.

Teague's announcement comes as something of a surprise, as he found himself buried in Ohio State's depth chart this season and was considered a transfer portal candidate. The Tennessee native carried the ball 67 times for 355 yards and four scores on the season, splitting reps behind leading rusher TreVeyon Henderson with redshirt freshman Miyan Williams, who rushed 71 times for 508 yards and three scores.

Teague's best game of the season came against Michigan State when he

Continued On Page 6

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# OHIO STATE INSIDER

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toted the rock 21 times for 95 yards and a touchdown, which was met with cheers of "Teague" throughout Ohio Stadium in what ended up as his final home game.

He contributed across three seasons for the Buckeyes, backing up J.K. Dobbins in 2019 and nearly gaining 1,000 yards on the year in so doing and working in tandem with starter Trey Sermon in 2020.

The 5-11, 225-pound halfback will hope to prove himself worthy of NFL attention at Ohio State's pro day.

Smith had already declared this would be his last season in Columbus, but he made things official on Jan. 3 when he announced his intentions to enter the 2022 NFL Draft.

"First, I want to start by thanking my God," Smith said in a statement on Twitter. "I'm beyond thankful and blessed to be in the position I am today, and I don't take it for granted. I also want to thank my family. The support, prayers, love and guidance from y'all has been my backbone through this whole process and I'm beyond thankful for y'all. I want to thank Coach Johnson, Coach Mick, Coach Day and the rest of the support staff for shaping me into not only a better player but a better man."

In four seasons at Ohio State, Smith played in 39 games, racking up 55 tackles, 11 for loss, to go along with seven sacks and a forced fumble.

## Podcast Back To Weekly Schedule

The BSB podcast, hosted by associate editors Wyatt Crosher and Patrick Mayhorn, with occasional guest spots from Chase Brown and Braden Moles, publishes every Friday morning, covering the stories of the week in Ohio State athletics.

The show is free for everyone. To find it, go to your favorite podcast app or website and type in "Buckeye Sports Bulletin Podcast," and click the subscribe button.

You can listen on Amazon Music, Apple Podcasts, Audible, Google Podcasts, iHeartRadio, Podbean, Spotify, Stitcher and anywhere else that podcasts are found. For those of you who are new to the podcast world, the show is also posted at 10 a.m. every Friday on BuckeyeSports.com, as well as on the BuckeyeSports.com Fan Forum.

Smith could have entered the draft after last season but elected to return for 2021 and was one of the clear starters at the defensive end for the first time in his career. He responded with career-high numbers in tackles (26), tackles for loss (5.0) and sacks (3.0) and was named second-team all-Big Ten by the Big Ten coaches and third-team all-Big Ten by the media for his efforts.

The Cleveland native is projected as a fifth-round pick in the upcoming draft.

## Several Buckeyes Hit Portal

During Ohio State's bowl game preparation, several players hit the transfer portal in search of a new school where they can continue their collegiate careers.

Quarterbacks Quinn Ewers and Jack

## From The Pages Of BSB

### 40 Years Ago - 1982

They had been on the Ohio State basketball scene only a couple of weeks, but already they had been dubbed the "Canton Connection."

Troy Taylor and Ron Stokes, the lightning-quick guard combination from Canton (Ohio) McKinley, had added a fast-paced dimension to the Buckeye program that had not been seen in some time.

Taylor had come to Ohio State as a highly regarded recruit. Stokes was somewhat of an unknown quantity, a player who came to OSU coach Eldon Miller's attention late in the recruiting season after an impressive performance in an all-star game in Chicago. Together, the two had helped Ohio State to a surprising 5-3 record.

Stokes was scoring at a 9.3 point per game rate, while Taylor was adding seven points per contest. The two had also added slick passing and quick hands on defense to the Buckeye cause.

"I think we're going to be a good ballclub," said Stokes. "We're definitely going to be over .500 this season. We're going to win a lot of ballgames."

"If we're going to keep winning, we're going to have to execute well on offense and play good defense."

### 35 Years Ago - 1987

The descriptions were many:

"He sort of looks like Bugsy Moran," said one press box observer.

"He looks like Jake of the Blues Brothers," said another.

"I really think he looks like a mortician," said yet another.

He, in this case, was Ohio State football coach Earle Bruce. The critics were looking for an apt description of what - or who - Bruce looked like when he took his place on the sideline before the start of the Cotton Bowl.

It was the new Bruce. Bruce, often maligned for his lack of color and drab appearance, now was looking to change his image. An expensive charcoal-colored suit, a black tie with diagonal white stripes, a black Dobbs fedora hat with a wide band and scarlet feather. It was a brand-new identity for Bruce, who had reportedly swapped out his traditional garb for the flashy suit before the game.

"The players kind of looked at me a little differently," Bruce said after Ohio State's Cotton Bowl win over Texas A&M. "And they really looked at me differently when I had the hat."

### 30 Years Ago - 1992

The Ohio State football team entered 1992 much the same way it had left 1991 - poised on the brink of re-entering the brotherhood of the elite of college football, but perhaps forgetting the password.

Perhaps only two plays away from getting the football in a tie game with more than seven minutes remaining in the fourth quarter of the Hall of Fame Bowl, the Buckeyes made a mistake on defense, and they paid dearly for it.

Syracuse quarterback Marvin Graves faked a running play, and OSU cornerback Foster Paulk came up to provide support.

Two steps toward the line and Paulk knew he'd been had. Syracuse receiver Antonio Johnson had gotten behind him, and Graves' rainbow of a pass found him right on the numbers. Paulk could do nothing but chase Johnson to the end zone.

The Orangemen had a 60-yard touchdown play, regaining the lead at 24-17 and the momentum. The Buckeyes never seriously threatened to cut into that deficit, and that proved to be the final score.

"I know that the record is supposed to speak for itself, and in the so-called big games we didn't get it done, but I still think we're right there," said linebacker Steve Tovar. "We're so close to getting over the hump."

"What did we lose to Illinois by? Three points? Iowa lost only one game this year, and they won by a touchdown. And in both of those games, we just as easily could have won."

"Again, today I thought we played a good game. Syracuse hit us

with a couple of big plays, and that was the difference. Take those out and we win the ballgame. We're just so close."

### 25 Years Ago - 1997

Ohio State drove 65 yards in the closing seconds to the winning touchdown in a 20-17 Rose Bowl win over Arizona State Jan. 1 in Pasadena, Calif. That result propelled the Buckeyes to a No. 2 finish in both major college football polls for the 1996 season.

The win marked a major breakthrough for Ohio State, which won the Granddaddy of Them All for the first time in 23 years and the sixth time overall.

It also meant a lot for OSU coach John Cooper, who had won just one previous bowl game in seven tries at OSU after winning the 1987 Rose Bowl when he was the coach at Arizona State.

"We've won some big games," Cooper said. "We haven't won one this big. Maybe you guys will quit writing about us not being able to win the big game."

"It can't get any better than this."

### 20 Years Ago - 2002

The only OSU basketball coach to win a national championship, Fred Taylor, died Jan. 6 at Mill Run Gardens and Care Center in Columbus following a long bout with illness. He was 77.

Taylor had lived in the nursing facility since suffering a brain aneurysm in April 1996. A year later, he survived a heart attack. He had been wheelchair-bound for several years and stayed out of the public eye, one exception being his memorable, emotional appearance for the final basketball game in St. John Arena on Feb. 28, 1998, as many of his former players thanked him and flanked him on the court.

"I'm really saddened by this," former Buckeye and Boston Celtics star John Havlicek told BSB. "I know his quality of life wasn't very good for quite a while, but it still hurts because I can't tell you what Fred has meant to me. I reached the level I did because of him."

"He was a great leader, a great tutor and a great friend. It's basketball's great loss."

### 15 Years Ago - 2007

After waiting 51 days for their team to cement its second national championship in five years, Ohio State fans had exactly 16 seconds to cheer their team before Florida streaked away with a 41-14 victory Jan. 8 in the BCS National Championship Game.

Just 16 seconds into the game, Ted Ginn Jr. crossed the goal line after taking the opening kickoff 93 yards for a touchdown, and the Buckeyes were off to a quick 7-0 lead. But it was all downhill from there as OSU turned its desert delight into something particularly ugly.

The Buckeyes were beaten badly on both sides of the ball, allowing a season-high 41 points to the Florida offense. The 27-point loss was the worst defeat for head coach Jim Tressel since he took over the job at Ohio State, and it was the team's worst loss since the 63-14 thumping it had withstood at Penn State in 1994.

"I don't really know how to define it," senior center Doug Datish said in a hushed OSU locker room after the game. "I never thought something like this was going to happen. I thought we prepared well - just like we always do. In fact, I thought practice was awesome."

"But sometimes execution just doesn't happen. (Florida) has a great team and did a good job of scheming us, but that's no excuse. Nothing they did surprised us all that much. It all came down to what we didn't do. We made turnovers, all caused by our own mistakes, and we didn't execute. And when you don't execute against a team as good as Florida, the score is going to tend to get away from you."

### 10 Years Ago - 2012

The NCAA provided a disappointing bookend to the yearlong scan-

dal that rocked the Ohio State football program when it announced Dec. 20 that it was imposing several sanctions including a one-year postseason ban against the Buckeyes.

Ohio State also received additional scholarship losses over the next three seasons along with a third year of probation, adding to a number of self-imposed penalties announced during the preceding 12 months.

Meanwhile, just under two weeks later on Jan. 2, Ohio State closed out its season on the field in similar fashion, falling 24-17 to Florida in the Gator Bowl, sending its senior class out on a losing note.

"It's been tough," senior center Mike Brewster said. "It would seem like thing after thing after thing for 12 months. I'm not going to miss 2011!"

### Five Years Ago - 2017

Although the Ohio State offense was statistically prolific for the vast majority of the 2016 season, it had a tendency to stall in the biggest games - especially when it came to the downfield passing attack.

Those concerns were never highlighted more than against Clemson in the Fiesta Bowl, a College Football Playoff semifinal bout that left Ohio State with its first shutout loss since 1993, 31-0. The offense, led by junior quarterback J.T. Barrett, managed just 215 total yards.

Head coach Urban Meyer said the Buckeyes would be focusing on improving the offense throughout the offseason, suggesting that changes could be coming.

"I'm going to take a hard look at some things when we get back," Meyer said. "And obviously there were some great things this year. But anytime you struggle a little bit, you always take a look."

Meyer's deliberation didn't take long. Only a day later, co-offensive coordinator Tim Beck was hired away by Tom Herman at Texas. Just hours later, reports surfaced that Ohio State was going to hire Ryan Day as his replacement.

Day, who previously had worked as a graduate assistant under Meyer at Florida in 2005, most recently had served as quarterbacks coach under Chip Kelly in the NFL. According to Fox's Bruce Feldman, the Buckeyes were also planning to bring in former Indiana head coach Kevin Wilson as an offensive assistant to work with Day.

### One Year Ago - 2021

Meyer made major waves on Jan. 14 when the Jacksonville Jaguars announced that he would be their next head football coach, replacing Doug Marrone, who was fired following the end of the NFL regular season.

Meyer's first foray into the NFL marked the end of his second retirement, which began following the 2018 season.

"This is a great day for Jacksonville and Jaguars fans everywhere," Jaguars owner Shad Khan said. "Urban Meyer is who we want and need, a leader, winner and champion who demands excellence and produces results. While Urban already enjoys a legacy in the game of football that few will ever match, his passion for the opportunity in front of him here in Jacksonville is powerful and unmistakable."

Meyer explained his decision to return to football after two years working as an analyst for Fox in his first press conference on Jan. 15.

"Some college opportunities showed up and made (me) start thinking," Meyer said. "There's not a day that goes by that I see that grass, I see the team, I see a locker room and I don't think about coaching. And then I start thinking about the quality of life, etc., and the comment I made is it would have to be perfect."

"College, I just don't plan on doing it. I don't see that happening. The NFL has always been an intrigue. I had some opportunities in the past, but it just wasn't the right time and wasn't the right situation. We have to be in position to go win a game, and I believe this is the place."

Miller headline the group of transfers, with Ewers announcing that would return to his home state and play for Texas next season. Miller's decision to leave Ohio State didn't come as a surprise, but his decision to transfer to Florida was unexpected. The Scottsdale, Ariz., native looked destined to head west, but he will test his luck in the SEC in 2022.

Two more signal-callers hit the portal when walk-ons Jagger LaRoe and J.P. Andrade told Day and his staff that they intended to transfer. Therefore, the Buckeyes quarterback room went from six players down to two in less than a month.

Safety Craig Young and cornerback Ryan Watts also found new schools in December. Young announced his decision to transfer to Kansas, where he will play for the up-and-coming Jayhawks led by Lance Leipold. Watts followed Ewer's footsteps and returns home to play for Texas.

Defensive tackle Darion Henry-Young is the final scholarship player to hit the portal. The former Cincinnati Princeton four-star recorded just one tackle in four games over the last two seasons – two as a freshman and two games in 2021, totaling 18 snaps against Tulsa and Akron. He has since transferred to Kentucky.

### Tuimoloau Made Strides In 2021

Ohio State freshman defensive end J.T. Tuimoloau understood arriving months late to campus would come with significant challenges. He didn't expect any preferential treatment. His national recruiting status wouldn't earn him any brownie points with the coaching staff and locker room.

Knowing this, Tuimoloau took a blue-collar approach to his first weeks in the program, using his opportunities to prepare physically and mentally. Ohio State stresses the importance of "mental reps" – watching other players perform and learning from their experience, which the 6-4, 277-pound edge rusher took to heart.

"It was just, keep your head down and stay in the books and stay back a little later to watch film or to meet with (defensive line coach Larry Johnson) one-on-one," Tuimoloau said. "That was my motto coming in is after every practice watch film with him and ask the older dudes just little tips and things I can get from them to apply to my game. That was it for me, keep your head down, watch film, do the extra work so it can get you more prepared."

Tuimoloau must have impressed the Ohio State coaching staff in that short time. He played double-digit snaps in the team's season-opening contest against Minnesota – a Big Ten opponent under the lights. Tuimoloau continued to flash to Johnson and company, as he didn't play fewer than 10 snaps in any game, according to Dan Hope of Eleven Warriors.

The Edgewood, Wash., native, recognized on Dec. 16 how far he'd come in his first year as a Buckeye.

"When I first got here, I didn't talk to anybody. I was quiet for at least two weeks," Tuimoloau said. "I think as we kept moving forward, me and (freshman defensive end) Jack (Sawyer)'s bond grew. It's on the field and off the field. We always talk about what we could do better or what move he used, or how he used this move to get by a de-

fender.

"Once I get to know my teammates, I'm very talkative, but I think when I first got here, I was like, 'I came in pretty late, I've got to get on my stuff.' I was very shy at a certain point, but it wasn't until the older dudes and Jack and the rest of the freshmen in my class just helped me open up."

Tuimoloau emerged as a front runner of the 2021 class and looks poised to continue his ascension. Smith played his final snaps for Ohio State in the Rose Bowl. Zach Harrison, who started opposite of Smith this season, could declare for the NFL Draft soon, while Javontae Jean-Baptiste could return for a fifth season in 2022. However, Tuimoloau only played 50 fewer snaps than Jean-Baptiste this year.

Both Tuimoloau and Sawyer figure to have expanded roles in 2022. Sawyer claims an off-season working with Johnson and player development coordinator Mickey Marotti will help them earn more involvement in the defense.

"I think more so it's kind of like our mindset's changed a little bit," Sawyer said. "As this season's kind of coming to a close and me and J.T. are developing and growing into men, I think we are starting to realize that we have to take it to the next level with everything we do. We're going to have more of an important role next year and more of a leadership role next year that our defense needs. I think that's kind of more the way it's going for us right now."

Due to Tuimoloau's rushed build-up to the season, which featured no winter workouts or spring practices to help him adjust, he is eager to see how the training will help him make strides before his sophomore slate begins.

"I'm actually very excited just to get a full offseason, not only with Coach J but as well as with Coach Mick, everybody and the nutritionists," Tuimoloau said. "Get a full offseason before this season. I feel like I'm really excited to see my body and my technique level up."

Tuimoloau tallied 17 tackles, 4 1/2 tackles for loss, 2 1/2 sacks, a quarterback hurry and a pass breakup this season. He felt surprised with his physicality against Big Ten offensive linemen, but he thanked Ohio State's offensive line for its toughness and how it prepared him for future opponents.

"For the physical part, I feel like I did pretty well," Tuimoloau said. "I did a decent job going against the big O-linemen. I was very surprised, but just knowing what I did before getting here, putting in the training and the dedication, I feel like it all paid off. I feel like the only thing that needed to change was just your mindset. Transitioning from high school to college ball real quick, you just needed to change your mindset on it."

Tuimoloau also credited Sawyer, his family and frequent conversations with his father for helping him through the most challenging parts of that transition. He explained that his father would often remind him "there's a reason you're here" and that "sometimes you have to sacrifice your extra time to get where you want to be."

Tuimoloau believes the best is yet to come in his Buckeye career.

"I feel like the next step for me is just keep doing what I'm doing but take it up one more notch," Tuimoloau said. "Still

## Who Is The Greatest Quarterback In Ohio State History?

### Options:

- J.T. Barrett \_\_\_\_
- Justin Fields \_\_\_\_
- Joe Germaine \_\_\_\_
- Cornelius Greene \_\_\_\_
- Dwayne Haskins \_\_\_\_
- Bobby Hoying \_\_\_\_
- Rex Kern \_\_\_\_
- Craig Krenzel \_\_\_\_
- Braxton Miller \_\_\_\_
- Terrelle Pryor \_\_\_\_
- Art Schlichter \_\_\_\_
- Troy Smith \_\_\_\_

### Instructions:

Number your picks 1-10 (feel free to write in any players we left off the list) and mail this ballot to Buckeye Sports Bulletin, P.O. Box 12453, Columbus, OH 43212. Lists can also be emailed to [bsb@buckeyesports.com](mailto:bsb@buckeyesports.com) or subscribers can vote on the forum at [BuckeyeSports.com](http://BuckeyeSports.com). Please provide your name, age and any additional comments regarding your ballot. Copies of the ballot are accepted and voters are welcome to attach additional paper if more space for comments is needed.

### Comments:

keep my head down, be humble, keep God close and continue to be the better version of myself."

### Johnson Eager To Play Tackle

Ohio State sophomore Paris Johnson Jr. became one of the Big Ten's best offensive guards in 2021, but he isn't looking to stick around at the position next year.

After 12 games as the Buckeyes' start-

ing right guard, the 2020 top-rated tackle prospect smiled and let out a small chuckle on Dec. 16 when reporters asked if he would be ready to transition back to his natural position in the offseason.

"Yeah, I am," Johnson said. "It's been a while since I've been out there in practice, but I'm excited to take that step when it happens."

Johnson worked exclusively at offen-

Continued On Page 8

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# OHIO STATE INSIDER

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sive guard during bowl practices as Thayer Munford transitioned back to tackle in Nicholas Petit-Frere's absence. His only opportunities to develop tackle techniques this season have been in the Woody Hayes Athletic Center hallways when he feels an uncontrollable desire.

Johnson admitted his mind sometimes wandered to his future at tackle, but he quickly reminded himself of the importance of his role as guard with the Buckeyes.

"I can't constantly have my mind on (playing tackle). I took a little time to think, 'Okay, what are the things I need to work on to be a great tackle?' But I can't focus on that right now – even in the slightest – I'm playing guard in the Rose Bowl," Johnson said before the victory over Utah. "There's no need for me to think about what can I do, what can I work on, because it's not over yet. I still want to have a great game at guard, so it's all about what I can do to be the best guard for my teammates in the game.

"When that time (to play tackle) comes, I'll have to reevaluate, but I haven't been in that stance in a minute, so I feel like when that time comes, then I'll figure it out, the things I need to work on specifically."

After his first entire season at guard,

## BSB Switches To Bi-Weekly Winter Schedule

With this issue, Buckeye Sports switches to its bi-weekly winter publishing schedule. The next print issue is scheduled to be mailed on Jan. 25. There is no need to wait until then to read about all the latest Ohio State sports action. The BSB staff will be posting all the latest recruiting news as we approach the traditional signing day on Feb. 2, as well as news of men's and women's basketball teams, the hockey and wrestling teams and any other news of the day as it happens at the electronic BuckeyeSports.com, free to all subscribers.

Along with the daily posts, we offer reprints from the Buckeye Sports Bulletin archives as part of our popular Reprint Thursdays. Also, staff members man the BuckeyeSports.com Fan Forum, interacting with subscribers on the hot topics of the day.

Please note that recent developments with the mail service have us concerned about delivery time for BSB. We remind you the complete print edition of Buckeye Sports Bulletin is posted at BuckeyeSports.com at the time the issue is mailed and is available to subscribers free of charge, as is all the other content provided at the site.

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Johnson earned second-team All-Big Ten from the conference's coaches and a third-team media selection. But Studrawa's decision to start Johnson and Munford in the interior this season wasn't always a success.

Ohio State consistently used guard Matt Jones in the rotation, replacing Johnson and Munford – two natural offensive tackles who made room for Petit-Frere and Dawand Jones to play outside. Johnson said he disagreed with the decision to play guard. Still, he's gained indispensable knowledge from his experience at a new position.

"Looking back before the season, if I had to choose, I would've chosen to be a tackle and come back and return and be one of the best tackles to come back," Johnson said. "I feel like where I'm at right now, I can't really trade the things I've learned being at guard. I can look at my guard and be like, 'OK, I know what you can give me

on this play, I know what you can't, what's realistic, what's hard for you.' So I feel like I'll work better with my guard. I already have been in that situation."

Before this season, Johnson said he thought a guard could do "anything that I needed a guard to do," but he's since learned that was an unrealistic expectation for an interior lineman.

"In practice, it just made it easier when you had (former guard) Wyatt Davis next to you for some reps. In high school, I didn't know what a guard did, so I feel like I have an appreciation for what guards do, and centers too," Johnson said.

Johnson seems confident he'll be playing tackle once in his third season with the Buckeyes. The Cincinnati native added 10 pounds last offseason to get up to 315, which helped him handle the strength of opposing interior linemen. He claimed he can drop his weight ahead of next season as he transitions back out to tackle.

"Going back to tackle and having time and space on my side I feel like would be really fun to get back to," Johnson said. "I'm going against guys that are 300 pounds plus every play. I'm sure going against a guy that's 280 might be really fun when that time comes."

### Doss Inducted To CFB HOF

Former Ohio State defensive back Mike Doss has been selected as a 2022 College Football Hall of Fame inductee, as announced Jan. 10 on ESPN's "Championship Drive" show. Doss is joined by LaVar Arrington, Champ Bailey, Michael Crabtree, Sylvester Croom, Chuck Ealey, Kevin Faulk, Moe Gardner, Boomer Grigsby, Mike Hass, Marvin Jones, Andrew Luck, John Luckhardt, Billy Jack Murphy, Mark Messner, Terry Miller, Gary Pinkel, Rashaan Salaam, Dennis Thomas, Zach Wiegert and Roy Williams in this class.

The group was whittled down from a ballot that included 99 players and 33 coaches. Doss is the 27th Buckeye to enter the Hall of Fame.

Doss is one of the most decorated players in school history. A three-time first-team All-American and a unanimous selection in his senior season, the defensive back helped to usher in the Jim Tressel era, suiting up under John Cooper in his first two seasons in town and helping to bolster Tressel's defense in his final two.

His decision to return to Columbus for the 2002 season, eschewing a potential early draft spot, is considered by many to be one of the biggest moments in what would eventually become Ohio State's first national title season in more than 30 years. He was picked as the Big Ten Defensive Player of the Year for his performance in 2002, racking up 107 tackles, five TFL and eight PBUs with two interceptions, the latter of which kept the Buckeyes alive against Miami in overtime of the national title game.

After graduating from Ohio State, Doss was selected in the second round of the 2003 NFL Draft by the Indianapolis Colts, who he played for from 2003-06, putting up his best statistical seasons as a rookie and a third-year player.

He recorded 102 tackles in 2003 and 77 in 2005 before losing his starting job

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to Antoine Bethea in 2006, which all but ended his tenure in Indianapolis. He had brief stints with Minnesota and Cincinnati before retiring from the league after his release from the Bengals in 2009.

### Former LB Laurinaitis To ND

Former Ohio State linebacker James Laurinaitis has reunited with Freeman at Notre Dame.

Laurinaitis announced on Jan. 3 during 97.1 The Fan's "Bishop and Laurinaitis" that he would join Freeman's staff after the latter became head coach of the program in early December. The pair played together under Jim Tressel and assistant Luke Fickell from 2005-08 and have developed a long-standing friendship from their days in Columbus.

Freeman and Notre Dame have not yet announced what Laurinaitis' role will be, though he is not expected to be a position coach. Laurinaitis is making his first deep dive into coaching after an All-American career at Ohio State, which he followed up with an eight-year stint in the NFL with the St. Louis Rams and New Orleans Saints.

After retiring from the league, he became a color commentator for the Big Ten Network and hosted the local radio show with Beau Bishop.

Laurinaitis' first game at Notre Dame will be in Columbus, as the Fighting Irish will the Buckeyes in the season opener for both teams on Sept. 3, 2022, in Ohio Stadium.

### Winston Charged With Assault

Former Ohio State basketball player Otis Winston has been charged with misdemeanor assault following an incident in Westerville, Ohio.

The incident involving Winston, 48, an actor and stuntman, occurred around 9:45 a.m. on Jan. 4 outside of a CVS Pharmacy, according to the Westerville Police Division report.

The report stated that video from the pharmacy showed a near-collision between an SUV driven by Winston and a car driven by 20-year-old Javon Singleton. Both men live in Westerville, according to the report. Singleton's statement said he waved at the driver of the SUV after getting out of his car. Winston said he made an obscene gesture in his direction, which prompted him to get out of his vehicle.

Singleton wrote in his statement that Winston asked if Singleton displayed a middle finger toward him, to which Singleton responded, "What if I did?" Video from the pharmacy shows the two men exchanging words as Singleton walked upstairs toward the store.

According to the report, Winston pushed him up the steps. Singleton turned around and the men continued their conversation.

"Winston then grabs Singleton by the throat, pushes him backward across the porch in front of the store and throws him into the bushes," the report said. "Singleton gets out of the bushes and advances towards Winston two or three steps, pulling a knife from his right pocket."

The report stated that the video showed Winston head back down the steps and getting into his vehicle while Singleton makes an obscene gesture with both hands

in his direction before backing through the door into the pharmacy.

Winston drove away but then came back. He told police that he returned to the store to apologize for his behavior. However, Singleton believed that Winston came back to continue their fight, causing him to flee the CVS and run down the street.

An off-duty Columbus police officer was driving in the area and stopped Singleton, believing he may have robbed the pharmacy because he ran away from the pharmacy as Westerville authorities arrived on the scene, according to a statement from the off-duty officer.

Singleton was briefly detained but was not charged. Winston was not arrested, but he was given a citation and summons for misdemeanor assault. He was scheduled to appear in Westerville Mayor's Court on Jan. 19.

Winston was a co-captain of Ohio State's 1996-97 men's basketball team. After playing professionally overseas, he returned to central Ohio and has had minor acting roles in more than a dozen movies

### Herbstreit Slams Player Opt-Outs

Former Ohio State quarterback and current ESPN broadcaster Kirk Herbstreit unloaded a barrage on players opting out of bowl games, including the four from Ohio State – defensive tackle Haskell Garrett, Petit-Frere, Olave and Wilson – who did not participate in the Rose Bowl in hopes of preserving their health entering the 2022 NFL Draft.

On the Jan. 1 edition of College Gameday, Herbstreit took aim at the opt-outs, claiming that players don't love football like they used to.

"What's the difference as a player and saying these games are 'meaningless?' " Herbstreit asked fellow commentators David Pollack and Desmond Howard. "(Desmond), we played in 'meaningless games.' I know you guys (Michigan) were (at the Rose Bowl) a lot. I just don't understand that if you don't make it to the playoff, how is it meaningless to play football and compete? Isn't that what we do as football players, we compete? I don't know if changing or expanding (the Playoff). I just think this era of player doesn't love football."

Howard agreed with his cohort, saying that the College Football Playoff, which ESPN holds the rights to, has claimed the vast majority of attention in the sport.

"Their whole mentality is all about the championship or the playoff," Howard said. "Because of that, they don't value the bowl game. When we were coming up, Herbstreit and myself, going to a bowl game was a huge reward for a fantastic season. That's what it meant. Your team played this well so you're going to be rewarded with a bowl game, you're going to get a ring, you're going to get swag. Now, kids don't really care about that. They have a sense of entitlement. It's like, 'If we're not going to the one that matters, it just doesn't have as much value' – like it did for us coming up."

Herbstreit would later apologize for his statement about the extent to which players love the game, after facing backlash online.

"Just wanted to clarify some of my

## 48 Student-Athletes Earn OSU Degrees

Ohio State's fall graduate list included 48 current or former student-athletes. They celebrated with commencement on Dec. 19.

Within the football team, 20 players earned their degrees, including record-breaking wide receiver Chris Olave and four players that no longer suit up for the Buckeyes in wideout Jaylen Harris, who stepped away from the game over the summer, legendary linebacker Andy Katzenmoyer, long-snapper Roen McCullough, who also retired in the offseason, and defensive tackle Tommy Togjai, now a member of the Cleveland Browns. Francesca Di Lorenzo of the women's tennis team also returned to complete her degree after turning pro following two seasons in Columbus in 2017.

A complete list of the graduates can be found below, divided by sport and in alphabetical order.

**Baseball** – Zachary Dezenzo, sport industry; Seth Lonsway, consumer and family financial services.

**Cheerleading** – Lauren Taylor, psychology.

**Women's Cross Country/Track and Field** – Emma Hoellrich, operations management.

**Women's Diving** – Alexandra House, health and rehabilitation sciences.

**Women's Fencing** – Eva Petronchak, anthropology.

**Field Hockey** – Samantha Stone, kinesiology.

**Football** – Kamryn Babb, communications; Sevn Banks, communications; Christopher Booker, psychology; Jerron Cage, consumer and family financial services; Jaylen Harris, communications; Antwan Jackson, sociology; Xavier Johnson, consum-

er and family financial services; Matthew Jones, human development and family science; Andy Katzenmoyer, personalized studies; Christopher Kuhn, construction systems management; Austin Kutscher, human development and family science; Jagger LaRoe, economics and business; Michael Roen McCullough, finance; Teradja Mitchell, fashion and retail studies; Chris Olave, consumer and family financial services; Nicholas Petit-Frere, marketing; Corey Rau, sports coaching; Tyreke Smith, sport industry; Thomas Togjai, consumer and family financial services; Samuel Wiglus, marketing.

**Women's Golf** – Alanis Sakuma, aviation management.

**Women's Lacrosse** – Mary Kate George, psychology.

**Mascot** – Duncan MacKenzie, biomedical engineering; Edward Parsley, finance.

**Men's Soccer** – Samuel Buzzas, kinesiology; Luis Hernandez, economics.

**Rowing** – Rose Carr, sport industry; Ida Petersen, biochemistry.

**Women's Soccer** – Marissa Birzon, marketing; Bailey Kolinski, logistics management; Isabel Rodriguez, finance.

**Softball** – Carley Gaskill, kinesiology; Skylar Hayward, health and rehabilitation sciences.

**Women's Swimming** – Georgia Mosher, psychology; Sarah Sperber, neurology.

**Women's Tennis** – Francesca Di Lorenzo, sport industry; Mary Beth Hurley, health and rehabilitation sciences.

**Women's Track and Field** – Devine Parker, psychology.

**Women's Volleyball** – Hannah Gruensfelder, biomedical engineering; Mia Grunze, sport industry; Rebecca Mauer, health and rehabilitation sciences.

comments from earlier today," Herbstreit tweeted. "Of course, some players love the game the same today as ever. But some

don't. I'll always love the players of this game and sorry if people thought I generalized or lumped them all into one category."

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# Smith-Njigba, Stroud Shatter Records

Continued From Page 1

junior offensive tackle Nicholas Petit-Frere, senior wide receiver Chris Olave, super senior cornerback Marcus Williamson and junior wide receiver Garrett Wilson, as well as injuries to senior cornerback Sevyn Banks and super senior tackle Antwan Jackson, among others.

Ohio State was not without any representation from the upperclassmen, though, and many of them took as much time as they could to leave the football field as an Ohio State Buckeye one last time.

Left tackle Thayer Munford, a team captain and the owner of the "Block O" uniform, meandered, joking with teammates and embracing coaches. Sixth-year senior defensive back Demario McCall, one of the oldest players on the team as a former member of the 2016 recruiting class, stood apart from the celebration, quietly watching the confetti fly and taking in the moment. It wasn't until true freshman defensive tackle Tyleik Williams approached him that he joined the rest of the group.

If the team's words entering the game about its importance to them weren't enough, their actions during and after it were – though they offered a few more words to really etch it in stone.

"That's ridiculous," redshirt sophomore safety Bryson Shaw said of questions of the team's desire to play. "It's the Rose Bowl. Every kid grows up wanting to play in the Rose Bowl. It's the most historic bowl game. We had an

edge. We wanted to prove something. We were hearing a lot of noise, rightfully so after that last game, but we were excited for this one."

The Buckeyes didn't deny that the end to the regular season played a role, too.

"I think what motivated us wasn't just this game, but the previous game," Stroud said. "I know that was my motivation, just getting that bad taste out of our team's mouth and ending the season the right way, sending our seniors off the right way. That was probably the most important thing for me."

"Then on top of that, this is the Rose Bowl, man. This is where the legendary games are being played. If you aren't motivated to play, I question your love of the game. Every game I go out there, I try to do my best and make sure I prepare the right way and do the right things because you never know what can happen in the game. My job is to lead the team, lead our offense."

And in that most historic bowl and the best setting in all of college football, Ohio State offered up a come-from-behind performance fitting of the stage. Trailing 35-21 at the half and unable to find any consistent defensive stops against a powerful and physical Utah offense, the Buckeyes exited the halftime break for the last time this season and delivered an astonishing turnaround.

The Stroud-led offense, which had already nearly touched 300 yards passing at the break, shifted into overdrive, scoring 27 points in the final 30 minutes, including 17 in the final frame. Stroud connected with his newly

crowned No. 1 receiver, Smith-Njigba, on 15 of his 16 targets for an FBS bowl-record 347 receiving yards. Stroud himself crushed Ohio State's single-game passing yardage record with 573 yards, making him the first passer to cross the 500-yard mark in scarlet and gray.

In so doing, he also helped elevate Smith-Njigba to school single-season records for receptions (95) and yards (1,606) in a season that he started as a distant No. 3 option behind a pair of probable first-round selections.

The two wrapped their record-setting day with a beautiful 30-yard touchdown heave, which saw Stroud drop a pass directly over Smith-Njigba's shoulder in the corner of the end zone, giving Ohio State a 45-38 lead (its first of the game). It was a performance that shattered expectations from without the program but only seemed to fulfill those set within it.

"I think Jaxon's done what he's done all year, and that's just play within himself," head coach Ryan Day said. "Certainly, some of the plays he made tonight were tremendous. We leaned on him a lot."

"I also think he and C.J. just have a great connection," Day continued. "They have a great feel, and I think there's a lot of trust there that's been built over the year. It happened a little bit in that Nebraska game. They read each other really well, and they've got a special connection. The throw on the touchdown pass, the inside slot fade, the throw and the catch there is probably as good as I've ever seen in a big-time spot."

It was their connection that ultimately ruled the day, with Utah completely unable to account for the Texas native at any point in the game. Ohio State worked Smith-Njigba all over the field, from his traditional slot position to a more standard outside receiver role and into the backfield – perhaps in a preview for his reign as the top dog at receiver in 2022 – and he won from every spot, presenting an open target for Stroud to find whenever he needed it. Immediately replacing Olave and Wilson is a task that no program wants to undertake, but Smith-Njigba tried his hardest in Pasadena to soften that blow.

"Jaxon just gets open," said offensive coordinator Kevin Wilson. "He's the all-time leading receiver in Texas, and he played in a large division in Dallas, the largest division in the state. That's a pass-oriented state, and here's the all-time leading receiver. He's got a knack for getting open. He's a heck of a practice player. (Wilson and Olave) are phenomenal, and he held his own all year."

Although neither approached the numbers that their counterpart provided, newly minted starters Julian Fleming and Marvin Harrison Jr. made waves with their new quarterback as well. The former suffered an injury that hampered him in the second half while hauling in five catches for 35 yards, while the latter shone in his first significant playing time as a Buckeye, snagging six passes for 71 yards and three scores, while earning Ohio State's most literal nickname in the process.

"I call Marvin 'Route Man Marv,'" Stroud



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explained. “His routes are amazing, especially against a good corner like No. 8 (Clark Phillips). I know No. 2 (Micah Bernard), he had a decent game as well, filling in that spot. I have respect for their defense, but when my guys are rolling, I think we’re pretty much unstoppable.

“We’ve just got to go out there and prove it. Marv had a great game. He showed you all a little glimpse. He has way more in his bag. Julian, I know he popped his shoulder out, but he has way more in his bag as well. I know they’ll hit their peak next year.”

The theme of excitement for next year hovered in the air in both the postgame cacophony and during that frantic second half. It seemed that every critical play in the span of the comeback was delivered by a player set to return for the 2022 season.

Redshirt sophomore linebacker Tommy Eichenberg tackled Utah tailback Tavion Thomas in the backfield on the first Ute possession of the third quarter (only the second TFL of the game for the Buckeyes at the time), freshman cornerback Denzel Burke deflected a third-down pass two plays later, and Shaw recovered a fumbled punt on fourth down to put Ohio State in prime real estate, which Stroud took immediate advantage of by finding the true freshman Harrison for an 8-yard score.

On a fourth-and-short to open the fourth quarter in OSU territory, Utah signal caller Cameron Rising connected with star tight end Brant Kuithe for what looked like a sure-thing first down, only for Hickman to arrive at the scene just in time to force a turnover on downs. It was that play that sold the Buckeye defense on its ability to help seal up the game in the final frame.

“It was awesome,” Shaw said of Hickman’s fourth-down stop. “First half, things were kind of going their way. Everything was going their way. We couldn’t catch a break. To make that defensive stand, we knew it was going to come down to plays like that. We knew at the end of the day it was going to be how we played, how we performed, and in the second half, we stepped up. Rocket (Hickman), he’s a guy that’s built, born for that moment he made.”

Just under four minutes later, Stroud found Harrison again to knot the game at 38. Staring down the first opportunity of the half to deliver the ball back to its offense with a shot at the lead, the youngsters again stepped up for the defense, with freshman defensive end J.T. Tuimoloau and Shaw teaming up on a third-down tackle of Thomas that was set up by a first-down redshirt freshman safety Kourt Williams sack, which knocked Rising out of the game in the process.

“First off, hats off to that quarterback,” Shaw said when asked about Williams’ sack. “I hope he’s doing all right. I wish him a recovery. He was a great player. We knew on film what kind of guy he was, the kind of guy that we thought was overlooked by others and the media, but he’s really good and I think he showed that. He gave us a lot of problems – very versatile. Kourt, he’s been busting his butt all year. That’s the hardest-working dude I know. He’s my brother and I love him, and just to see that hard work pay off, he deserves every minute of it.”

And of course, it was Smith-Njigba – with some help from kickoff return specialist freshman Emeka Egbuka and freshman tailback TreVeyon Henderson – who helped to push the OSU offense down the field on its final two drives, first for that touchdown reception to claim the lead, and then with a pair of recep-



SONNY BROCKWAY

**MVPs – Ohio State linebacker Tommy Eichenberg (left) and wide receiver Jaxon Smith-Njigba (right) took home offensive and defensive player of the game honors after the Rose Bowl.**

tions on the final drive of the game to set up the short Ruggles field goal.

Now, entering an offseason that will be critical for the development of so many of those young players, Ohio State has a performance to hang its hat on – College Football Playoff or no.

“It’s huge to get confidence like that (going into) the offseason,” Shaw said. “I think it’s going to be a turning point on the defensive side of the ball in this program. The first half, obviously we didn’t perform the way we wanted to. We went in and the guys stepped up, came out with a lot of confidence. We turned the table. I think it starts with energy, it starts with passion. I think at times we lacked that this year, and I think we came out with the intent to execute on defense and it felt good.

“We saw that through the last month. We’ve seen guys step up in practice, you’ve seen guys find their voices. I think it’s an amazing thing to watch guys grow, and I think this offseason is going to be the best Ohio State’s had. There’s a lot of guys that are just ready to bust their butts, I know that for a fact. We’re just all excited to get this thing rolling again.”

### Curtain McCall

Ohio State’s second-half defensive turnaround was not some act of divine intervention, nor was it a sudden and radical shift in ideology. The Buckeyes credited their newfound energy and fire to a halftime filled with powerful speeches and calls to action, sparked by a Day decision to leave any motivation up to his team, rather than providing his own speech as is tradition.

“I wasn’t there,” Day said after the game of the locker room at the half. “I heard a bunch of guys speaking up. I don’t know exactly who said it, that’s why I didn’t want to say anything in the press conference. I’m looking to find out, but it was one of those things – usually I give a talk at halftime, (but) I let those guys go. I said, ‘This is your team and you guys have to respond.’

“We talked in the last month about how in 2019, in the Wisconsin game, a bunch of guys stepped up before the second half when it was tied up, and how if we want to go win these types of games going against really good opponents like Utah, it has to come from within.

It did today in the second half, and I think that was the difference.”

Though multiple players spoke, as Day indicated, one senior’s speech stood out above the others for his teammates, as several players singled him out as the leader who incited that change in effort: McCall, the super senior who played seemingly as many positions at Ohio State as he had touchdowns (eight) and never really caught on at any of them but who stuck around regardless.

“I would say the biggest guy who stepped up was Demario McCall,” Shaw explained. “You guys know he’s been in the program a long time. And it’s just the energy and the passion he brings every day. This is nothing new for him, but the way he stood up in front of the team, it was just awesome to see. Everybody fed off that energy.

“Demario is one of the most honest, truthful and big-hearted guys I’ve ever been around in the locker room. He’s nothing but great for this team, this program. I think sometimes people only look at performance on the field – and Demario has stepped up big on special teams this year and he’s played well when he’s been in. But what they don’t see is the impact these guys have in the locker room and have on the team. I think Demario, his legacy in this program is going to be left behind and it’s going to be a big loss from a leadership standpoint. He definitely didn’t get the credit I think he deserved for how good of a man he is.

“If you know him, you know the passion he has for this program. It’s unmatched. I love Demario. I’m really going to miss him. Without him, things could have gone sideways there. He got into the group, got us all going.”

As redshirt sophomore Cade Stover – who played tight end all season but lined up at linebacker on Jan. 1 – elaborated, there was no sweeping change, no hinge point upon which Ohio State built its defensive resurgence. It was a matter of willpower, generated between the end of the second quarter and the start of the third. And again, it was McCall who stuck with Stover.

“To be honest with you, scheme-wise, there wasn’t really an adjustment,” Stover said. “We had guys who got in front of the team – Demario McCall, hats off to that dude. One of the most respected guys in the locker room

for what he’s done. He got in front of us and it was, ‘Toughness is a mind-set,’ and we went out there and strapped in, buckled in, and we were all right.”

Though none of the players would divulge specifically what was said, citing the unwritten code of any locker room chatter remaining within those four walls, McCall told media after the game that he spoke about toughness, about character and about finishing the season – and in turn, his Ohio State career – the right way.

“I had to talk to those boys in the locker room at halftime just to get them up,” McCall said. “It wasn’t going the way we wanted it to in the first half. I got up, said a few things to those boys and then we came out in the second half and got it done. It was a shootout. Before the game, Coach Day told us it could be three ways, and a shootout was one of them. I had to repeat what he said and put my own words together, and hope they’d feel it. And they felt it.”

The North Ridgeville, Ohio, product seemed to have the idea of leaving a mark on his mind after the game. Though he never got the chance to do it on the field in the way he had once hoped, he saw the chance to make his name known as a leader throughout the season, and it was his voice that rang out when the Buckeyes needed it most against the Utes.

“Being the senior, knowing how it feels to be down,” McCall continued, patting his chest. “I’ve been down before in the locker room, back when I was a freshman. And I watched Parris Campbell step up, Terry McLaurin, Billy Price, all of them. I saw them talk to the team. They left a legacy behind, and I wanted to leave one too. It was from the heart. It was from the heart. They know how I feel about the team. They know what I do for the team, so I asked them to do it for me. And they did.”

And though McCall may not be remembered quite like players such as Campbell, McLaurin or Price, all of whom collected on-field accolades and went on to high draft spots, Day agreed that his defensive back, and several other players who donned the scarlet and gray for the last time, secured their legacy when Chris Booker corralled Britain Covey on a kickoff return to end the game.

“I’m just very proud of the coaching staff, the players, and the leaders of this team for playing the way we did, especially in the second half, and winning this game,” Day said.

“We were shorthanded, and there were some guys who weren’t here today. For us to respond the way we did at halftime and to come out and play in the second half says a lot about the character of this team to win this game. That Utah team is a very, very good team. They’re well-coached, very good players, I have a tremendous amount of respect for them. They played their tails off tonight in an unbelievable game.

“But I couldn’t be prouder of our guys. For our seniors, some of the guys who played in this game, I can’t say enough about what they’ve left for a legacy behind, especially winning this game the way we did. Then for our younger guys, a couple of them sitting right here, the momentum that we have right now moving forward is tremendous.

“We have a lot of work to do in the offseason, but we found out a little bit about our team in the second half here.”

# Smith-Njigba and Stroud Break Records In Pasadena

As the sun dropped below the San Gabriel Mountains and the blue sky turned orange and purple, Jaxon Smith-Njigba and C.J. Stroud rewrote the Ohio State record book in a gutsy, come-from-behind win over Utah in the Rose Bowl.

The Buckeyes, without wide receivers Chris Olave and Garrett Wilson after they opted out of the game to prepare for the 2022 NFL draft, were unsure where they might find their offense against the Utes.

Smith-Njigba was Ohio State's leading receiver through 12 games, hauling in 80 passes for 1,259 yards and six scores. Still, losing Olave and Wilson meant the Buckeyes would have to replace 135 receptions, 1,994 yards and 25 touchdowns in the passing game, which would not be an easy task.

But the sophomore wide receiver filled the void, and he did it better than anyone could have imagined. Smith-Njigba caught 15 passes for 347 yards and three touchdowns. It was the most receiving yards by anyone in bowl history, and his records don't stop there. The Rockwall, Texas, native added several accolades to his résumé in Pasadena, including the record for most receptions and receiving touchdowns in Rose Bowl history.

Smith-Njigba will also bring a handful of records back to Columbus, hanging them in the Woody Hayes Athletic Center for future recruits to see. He broke the single-season record for receiving yards, surpassing the previous mark of 1,435 yards set by David Boston in 1998, with a 15-yard reception from Stroud at the end of the first half.

His 10th catch of the game – a 20-yard reception late in the third quarter – gave Smith-Njigba 258 receiving yards, pushing him past Terry Glenn's single-game record of 253 set against Pittsburgh in 1995. With his 11th catch of the Rose Bowl and 91st catch of the season, Smith-Njigba broke Ohio State's single-season record for receptions, surpassing the previous mark of 90 set by Parris Campbell in 2018.

"We all stepped up," Smith-Njigba said. "Opportunities came my way, and it's what I prayed for. I can't be surprised by what I prayed for."

Smith-Njigba largely contributed to a record-breaking performance for Stroud, who threw for 573 yards, six touchdowns and one interception on 37-of-46 passing. The pair powered a fierce second-half comeback against the Utes that had Ohio State erase a 14-point halftime deficit, setting a stage for a 2022 season that will feature high expectations for the quarterback-wide receiver duo.

"C.J. and Jaxon have a great connection," Ohio State head coach Ryan Day said af-

ter the game. "They have a great feel, and I think there's a lot of trust there that's been built over the year. I think it happened a lit-

## GAME NOTEBOOK Chase Brown

tle bit in the Nebraska game. Who knows? You'll have to ask them. Maybe it happened last year. I don't know, but they read each other well, and they have a special connection."

Day could be right. Maybe Smith-Njigba's 15-catch, 240-yard performance against Nebraska is when the chemistry started – a performance that tied Boston's single-game reception record set in 1998. However, the redshirt freshman quarterback claims the bond began long before the players made names from themselves at Ohio State.

"We built that connection all the way back," Stroud said. "We came in as freshmen together and came in early. We were throwing the first day. Scout team last year – we really built it. This doesn't surprise me at all. When I heard the numbers, I didn't really notice because he does this all the time. I'm just blessed to be around guys like this."

Regardless of when the connection started, it was evident on more than one occasion in Pasadena. Smith-Njigba caught two touchdowns of 50-plus yards within 30 seconds of each other in the second quarter, and he almost had a third 50-yard score just over three minutes later had he not fumbled before reaching the goal line.

"Certainly, some of the plays he made tonight were tremendous. We leaned on him a lot," Day said. "At one point I asked him, 'Are you tired?' after the play there where Clark (Phillips) caught him. He looked at me like, 'What are you asking me for? Are you crazy? I'm going back out there.' And played one of the best games probably in the history of the Rose Bowl."

After the fumble, Smith-Njigba went for the records. In the second quarter, he made one more catch – the 15-yard reception that broke Boston's single-season receiving yards mark – before adding 161 yards in the second half, including 89 yards in the fourth quarter, leading the Buckeyes to the win. A beautifully placed over-the-shoulder throw from Stroud to Smith-Njigba gave Ohio State its first lead, 45-38, with 4:22 remaining, but it was not all that was required from the pair to claim victory.



SONNY BROCKWAY

**STROUD IN STRIDE** – Ohio State quarterback C.J. Stroud (7) and Jaxon Smith-Njigba combined for a record-shattering passing performance in Pasadena against Utah.

Utah quarterback Bryson Barnes, who replaced Cameron Rising after he left with a head injury, threw a 15-yard touchdown to tight end Dalton Kincaid in the right corner of the end zone, tying the game at 45 with 1:54 to play.

When Ohio State entered the two-minute drill, Stroud found his favorite target twice, connecting with Smith-Njigba for a pair of passes for 20 yards, pushing the Buckeyes deep into Utah territory and setting up Noah Ruggles with the game-winning 19-yard field goal.

"It's the type of game that I dreamed of," Smith-Njigba said. "I wouldn't want it any other way, so for that to happen, I'm just blessed."

Stroud targeted Smith-Njigba 16 times in the game, resulting in just one incomple- tion. He connected with Marvin Harrison Jr. for three touchdowns. The true freshman wide receiver was Stroud's second favorite target against Utah. He finished with six catches for 71 yards and three scores, standing out among his counterparts Julian Fleming and Emeka Egbuka, who were also contributing snaps in Olave and Wilson's absence.

"C.J. did his part," Harrison said. "He's a baller. I can't even say much about it, but he's a baller, for sure."

Stroud's 573 passing yards were 74 more than Dwayne Haskins' single-game passing yard record (499) set against Northwestern in the 2018 Big Ten Championship Game. He also tied the single-game passing touchdown record he had previously set against Michigan State on Nov. 20.

The Ohio State offense struggled in its first few possessions, failing to gain a first down on either of its first two tries. However, Stroud corrected course, leading his team to points on eight of their next 11 offensive

drives, including touchdowns in six of them.

Stroud had what might have been his best drive of the year in the first half. It ended with a slot fade to Harrison Jr. – the freshman's and Ohio State's first touchdown of the game – where Stroud put the ball directly on the left goal-line pylon. However, the throw arguably wasn't Stroud's most crucial play of the drive.

On one of the biggest stages in the sport, Stroud did what he seldom had done earlier in the season – run the football. Down 14-0 and facing third-and-long, Stroud stepped up in the pocket with no receivers open and made a step toward the middle of the field. He tucked the ball and ran. When he saw he would be hit short of the sticks if he powered down, he made sure he got the first down and extended the drive.

Still, Stroud's arm is what got the Buckeyes back into the game. His vision and confidence in the pocket were on full display, especially on a few crucial fourth-down completions. Stroud's final stats on fourth down this season: 11-of-15 for 169 yards with six touchdowns and zero interceptions – an efficiency rating of 299.97.

This season, Stroud finished with a 71.9 percent completion rate, breaking the previous record of 70.2 percent set by Justin Fields last year. He also ended with a 186.6 passer rating, surpassing Fields' mark of 181.4 in 2019. Finally, Stroud broke the Ohio State record for passing yards per game with 369.6 in his 12 starts, topping the previous record of 345.1 from Haskins in 2018.

"It was a tough month for everybody, for the entire team, for him, for me, the whole group, but he had an edge about him," Day said. "That's what makes a good quarterback – when you can get through adversity and have scars on you. He made up his mind

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# Game Analysis

## What Worked Well

It was the Buckeye passing game, same as it has been all year. You can't break records if things aren't working well, and Ohio State absolutely blasted through nearly every single one in its path. Wideout Jaxon Smith-Njigba claimed school records for yards and receptions in a single season, and a single-game bowl record for yards at 347 on 15 receptions. His three touchdown receptions, as well as the three from Marvin Harrison Jr., are tied for the Rose Bowl record.

Meanwhile, the man throwing them the ball broke some records of his own. C.J. Stroud now sits atop Ohio State's school leaderboard for passing yards in a game with 573 and in both yards and touchdown passes (six) in a Rose Bowl (Smith-Njigba's 15 receptions are a Rose Bowl record as well).

After a pair of sloppy drives to open the game, Ohio State's passing attack was completely impossible to stop and led the Buckeyes on their dramatic comeback all the way to a victory in an instant classic.

## What Didn't Work

The defense, though it tightened up in the second half and allowed only 10 more points, did surrender 35 points in the first half. It was a disastrous start for Ohio State's much-maligned defense, and it forced that electric offense into a second half without any real margin for error.

Ohio State's rushing attack remained at large, too. TreVeyon Henderson rushed 17 times for 84 yards and did not find the end

zone. He was without a big play to inflate his total, and 4.9 yards per carry without a breakaway isn't disastrous, but it didn't seem as though the Buckeyes felt they could rely on the rushing attack in any critical spots. The passing attack rescued them from needing to, though.

## Play Of The Game

Where to begin? Had the result gone in the other direction, Britain Covey's 97-yard first-half kickoff return or Cameron Rising's breakaway, 62-yard quarterback sneak would likely get the nod, but the Buckeyes won, so they earn play of the game honors. And no play is more deserving than Smith-Njigba's 30-yard reception that put the Buckeyes on top 45-38 in the fourth quarter.

Though it would not seal the game – that went to Noah Ruggles' field goal a possession later – it was a fantastic cap to a fantastic performance from both passer and receiver. Stroud put the ball over Smith-Njigba's shoulder in a place only he could snare it, and the sophomore tracked it all the way into his hands, keeping his feet in bounds as he hauled the pass in with a defender nearby, helpless to stop it.

It looked like the kind of catch that junior wideout Garrett Wilson would make, and with Wilson's career at Ohio State coming to a close just before this game, it felt like a passing of the torch.

– Patrick Mayhorn

that he wasn't going to lose that game.”

The Utes entered the game with issues in their secondary. Still, it finished the regular season with the 23rd-best pass defense and No. 10 total defense in the FBS. Utah allowed just 20.6 points to its opponents through 13 games, but Ohio State managed to score 48 points, with approximately 84 percent of its offensive yards coming through the air.

Utah head coach Kyle Whittingham acknowledged that he knew the Buckeyes planned to throw the football, and even though he knew the Ohio State offense planned to pass, his defense couldn't make the stops necessary to win the game.

“Give credit to Ohio State,” Whittingham said after the game. “They played exceptionally well, particularly on offense. That quarterback is terrific, statistically the best in the country as far as the quarterback rating system, and he proved it tonight.”

It's high praise from Whittingham, who has seen plenty of talented signal-callers in his 17 seasons as Utah's head coach. But it's not unwarranted praise for Stroud, who finished the 2021 season completing 317 of 441 passes for 4,435 yards and 44 touchdowns to only six interceptions.

Stroud will head into 2022 – having grasped Day and offensive coordinator Kevin Wilson's scheme fully – utilizing Smith-Njigba as the lethal weapon he proved he can be against the Utes. If the Rose Bowl is any indication, the pairing could be even deadlier next season as the connection develops.

“Honestly, I just trust the process, trust that Coach Day is going to put me in the right opportunity, that C.J. is going to put me in the right opportunity,” Smith-Njigba said. “Just taking advantage of every opportunity that I get. That's the only thing I can do.”

## Eichenberg Saves Best For Last

Tommy Eichenberg isn't a fan of the lime-light. But after a 17-tackle performance in Pasadena, Calif., breaking Chris Spielman's Rose Bowl record for Ohio State, the third-year linebacker had a microphone in one hand and the game's defensive MVP trophy in the other.

He shot a quick grin, lifting his hand before signaling a thumbs up to the Buckeye crowd before offering a short speaking segment where he thanked his coaches, teammates and the team's fans. After returning to the locker room, Eichenberg spoke with the media, telling Buckeye Sports Bulletin and other outlets that individual awards are not his top priority.

“It was cool,” Eichenberg said of the honor. “I didn't really care, honestly. I'm just happy that we won.”

Eichenberg lamented the defense's first-half struggles, saying the Buckeyes were fortunate to walk away with a victory. Ohio State had given up 35 points at halftime, a total that Day called “ridiculous” in an interview with ESPN at halftime.

Utah racked up 324 yards through the first two quarters, and one of its five touchdowns came on a 12-yard pass where running back Micah Bernard torched Eichenberg on a wheel route to the corner of the end zone. Ohio State managed to stop the Utes on their final drive of the first half, which might not seem significant given the offensive onslaught up until that point. Still, Eichenberg said it was critical for the Buck-

eyes' preparation into the next 30 minutes.

“I figure it was that drive at the end of the first half, where it's like, ‘OK, we can do this,’” Eichenberg said. “I think it just came down to getting confidence in everyone, and we were just telling everyone like, ‘We can do this, let's go.’ That's what we tried to do.”

Several Ohio State players spoke of the critical speech super senior Demario McCall offered to the team at halftime, which helped energize the Buckeyes and spark a comeback. Eichenberg and Cade Stover immediately responded, engaging with McCall's energy and taking it to the field.

“We came in the locker room and were like, ‘We're going to win this game,’” Eichenberg said. “I was telling him – I was telling everyone – I was like, ‘We're going to win this game.’ The score just kept getting closer and closer, and I just kept looking at Cade and said, ‘I told you.’”

Utah scored twice on five second-half drives with a field goal and a touchdown. The Buckeyes turned the Utes over on downs twice, keeping them to 139 total yards in the final two frames. Eichenberg had nine tackles in the second half. Day said he and Stover were key contributors to the defense's turnaround.

“I thought in the second half they made up their mind on defense that they were going to play differently,” Day said. “It happened in the locker room. I heard it, and I got out of the way. They played with a different toughness, and we talked about playing fast and violent. I thought they played that way in the second half. When you make up your mind that you're going to do something like that, then you can impose your will. I feel like that's what happened.”

“It's a team game. You have to believe the guy next to you is going to do their job. If you do your job and you count on guys to do that, I think we did that in the second half. I thought Tommy played really well. He had a

chip on his shoulder. I thought Cade Stover stepping in at linebacker – he had a chip on his shoulder.”

Eichenberg began the season as one of the team's starting linebackers before losing his job to Cody Simon after the Tulsa game. He faced criticism for playing 53 snaps and failing to record a tackle. After Week 3, he contributed to the Ohio State defense in a spot role as Simon and running back-turned-linebacker Steele Chambers took over the position.

When Simon had shoulder surgery after the Michigan game, it enabled Eichenberg to reclaim his starting spot in the Rose Bowl.

Stover said the situation never bothered Eichenberg, claiming he's not a person who listens to the outside noise.

“If there's one guy that doesn't pay attention to that stuff, it's Tommy,” Stover said. “He's a nose-to-the-grindstone kind of guy, just works his a-- off all the time, and he's the exact kind of guy you want on your football team.”

Eichenberg finished the 2021-22 season as the team's second-leading tackler (64) behind Ronnie Hickman Jr. (100) despite starting in only four games. The record-breaking performance in Pasadena helped him reach that mark, and it will undoubtedly be a foundation for next year's development.

“It builds momentum into the offseason,” Eichenberg said. “I mean, they put up way too many points. That's something we're going to fix. When we get going next year, we're going to play better defense.”

## Game Notes

- The 2022 Rose Bowl was Ohio State's 16th in program history. The Buckeyes improved to 9-7 in “The Granddaddy of Them All” and set a new record for four consecutive wins in the bowl game.

- Ohio State's 573 passing yards and 683 total offensive yards are all-time bests

in the Rose Bowl.

- The Buckeyes' 48-45 victory over Utah marks the first time Ohio State has given up 35 points in the first half and won the game.

- Ohio State and Utah combined for 93 points, the most combined points ever scored in an Ohio State bowl game.

- After allowing 42 points to Michigan and 45 points to Utah, it is the first time in Ohio State history that it allowed 40-plus points in consecutive games.

- The Buckeyes are 5-31 when giving up more than 40 points, with its five wins coming over Utah (2022), Maryland (2018), Michigan (2013), Indiana (2012) and Illinois (1980).
- The Buckeyes' 10.2 yards per play is an Ohio State bowl record and the second-best total all-time behind this season's win over Minnesota (10.3) on Sept. 2.

- TreVeyon Henderson, Miyan Williams and C.J. Stroud combined for Ohio State's 20 rushing attempts – the fewest carries for Ohio State in a bowl game.

- Ronnie Hickman Jr. reached 100 tackles on the season against Utah, becoming the first player to reach that milestone since Raekwon McMillan (102) in 2016.

- With Noah Ruggles' 19-yard field game-winning field goal, Ohio State has now made 13 straight field goals in the Rose Bowl. The team's last miss was 47 years ago against Southern California in 1975.

- Thayer Munford, Zach Harrison and Teradja Mitchell were the captains for the pregame coin toss. Ohio State lost the toss for the 10th time in 13 games.

- Lathan Ransom was carted off the field and taken to a nearby hospital for X-rays to examine a potential bone break after suffering a left leg injury on a second-quarter kickoff. Special-teamer Ryan Batsch was also hurt on the same play.

# Smith-Njigba, Stroud Lead Bowl Comeback

By **CRAIG MERZ**

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

The right arm of C.J. Stroud and the hands of Jaxon Smith-Njigba put No. 6 Ohio State in position to utilize the right leg of Noah Ruggles to claim its fourth straight Rose Bowl victory.

Ruggles kicked a 19-yard field goal with nine seconds left as the Buckeyes rallied from a 14-point halftime deficit for a thrilling 48-45 victory over No. 11 Utah in Pasadena, Calif., on Jan. 1.

With star receivers Chris Olave and Garrett Wilson opting not to play to ready for the NFL draft, the sophomore Smith-Njigba excelled before a crowd of 87,842.

Smith-Njigba broke the FBS bowl record with 347 yards (a school record) on 15 catches, including three touchdowns.

"Honestly, I just trust the process, trust that Coach is going to put me in the right opportunity and that C.J. is going to put me in the right opportunity," Smith-Njigba said after the game.

Stroud, a redshirt freshman, passed for a school-record 573 yards (37 of 46) and six touchdowns, three to freshman Marvin Harrison Jr., who entered the game with five career catches and no TDs.

Cameron Rising of Utah (10-4) passed for 214 yards and two TDs and ran for a team-leading 92 yards but was hurt late on a sack.

Ohio State (11-2) entered the game shorthanded when defensive tackle Haskell Garrett, offensive lineman Nicholas Petit-Frere, Olave and Wilson opted not to play. The Buckeyes were also coming off the emotional letdown of a 42-27 loss to Michigan on Nov. 27 while the Utes won the Pac-12 championship game with their second victory of the season over an Oregon team that beat OSU in week two.

## First Half: Ambushed

The Buckeyes were lethargic on offense at the start with a pair of three-and-outs from poor field position that led to Utah taking a 14-0 lead on a sunny, 60-degree afternoon.

On its second possession, Utah went 56 yards in five plays and 1:37 for the 7-0 lead on a 19-yard Rising pass to Britain Covey at the 9:29 mark. Brant Kuithe had an 11-yard grab, and later a pass interference on safety Kourt Williams put the ball at the OSU 22. Rising ran for 3 yards before the TD.

The Utes' next possession resulted in a 12-yard receiving score for Micah Bernard at 3:28 to complete the eight-play, 67-yard, 4:47 series that included a 27-yard catch by Kuithe to the OSU 40.

Ohio State finally found its form, and Stroud engineered a 76-yard scoring drive to make it 14-7 at 14:17 of the second quarter with Harrison hauling in a perfectly thrown ball to the left corner of the end zone



SONNY BROCKWAY

**A NEEDED SPARK — Emeka Egbuka (12) placed the Buckeyes in great field position for their game-winning drive with a 33-yard kickoff return.**

for a 25-yard strike.

Freshman Emeka Egbuka's 22-yard kickoff return put the ball at the 24. It took 10 plays and 4:05 to get on the board.

Stroud, who rarely tucks the ball and takes off under pressure, did so at a critical moment. Facing a third-and-8 from the OSU 26, Stroud gained 10 yards on the ground to keep the drive alive.

Later, Egbuka had an outstanding catch along the left sideline for 30 to the Utes' 34. TreVeyon Henderson rushed for 3 yards, and Jeremy Ruckert made a catch for 6 yards to end the first quarter.

After Henderson gained nothing, the Buckeyes faced a fourth-and-1 from the 25. Coach Ryan Day went all in and called for a pass that resulted in Harrison's first career TD.

Then the game got wild with five touchdowns in 2:43, and the Utes carried a 35-21 lead into halftime.

The scoring frenzy began at 9:07 when Ute tailback Tavion Thomas ran in from 6 yards for a 21-7 lead. The most important play was a targeting call that was issued to freshman defensive end Jack Sawyer on a 16-yard scramble by Rising. Sawyer was ejected, and the penalty placed the ball on the 6 to set up the score. Earlier in the nine-play, 79-yard, 5:04 possession, Rising had hit Devaughn Vele for 23 yards.

Egbuka returned the kickoff 39 yards to the OSU 40. After Miyan Williams rushed for 10 yards, Stroud found Smith-Njigba at the 25, and he outran the defenders for a 21-14 score at 8:32 on a 50-yard reception.

Just 15 seconds later, Covey went 97 yards with the kickoff to extend the Utah lead to 28-14. OSU sophomore safety Lathan Ransom was carted off the field with a leg injury after the play.

On the ensuing kickoff, Xavier Johnson got the ball to the 33, and a targeting call on Connor O'Toole gave OSU possession at its own 48. On the first play, Smith-Njigba caught a 52-yard TD at 8:02 – the third touchdown in 30 seconds – to make it 28-21.

The Utes responded with a 62-yard TD run by Rising on fourth-and-1 to up the advantage to 35-21. He was stopped 2 yards past the line of scrimmage but broke free to race down the left side.

It looked like the Buckeyes would match the score when Smith-Njigba made a catch at the Utah 30 and raced toward the end zone, but he was stripped by Clark Phillips at the 6 and Cole Bishop recovered the ball in the end zone for the Utes.

Stroud was 15 of 19 for 290 yards and three TDs in the first half with Smith-Njigba making seven catches for 186 yards and two scores. Rising had 250 total yards (158 passing, 92 rushing).

## Second Half: Classic

The Buckeyes received the kick to start the third quarter and moved to the Utah 20 on a 45-yard reception by Smith-Njigba, but on the next play Phillips made an interception in the end zone.

The Utes were forced to punt from their 25, and punter Michael Williams fumbled the snap. Bryson Shaw made the recovery at the 11.

A holding call on Dawand Jones on the first play put the ball back to the 21. Henderson ran for 13, and the Stroud to Harrison connection scored again on an 8-yard toss at 11:20 for a 35-28 score.

The Buckeye defense bent but did not break, and the Utes settled for a 24-yard field goal by Jadon Redding at 7:10 of the

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## OHIO STATE VS. UTAH



SONNY BROCKWAY

**ON THE BOARD — Marvin Harrison Jr. (right) snared three touchdown passes against the Utes, the first of his collegiate career. His fourth-quarter grab brought Ohio State even on the scoreboard for the first time all game.**

third and a 38-28 lead.

The drive started at the Utah 35. Bernard rushed for 22 yards, and Dalton Kincaid made a catch for 23 yards to the 11 among the big plays. Runs by Bernard and Covey netted 3 yards, and Thomas was tackled by Williams at the 6 on third down.

Ruggles countered with a 31-yard field goal with 2:53 left in the third to cut the deficit to 38-31 after the drive started at the Buckeye 10 following a holding call against Julian Fleming on the kickoff that negated a 75-yard return by Egbuka.

Fleming and Harrison had 11-yard catches, and Smith-Njigba added a 20-yarder to the Utah 30. Egbuka made a catch to the 14, but the drive stalled there because of three straight incompletions.

Utah then faced a fourth-and-3 from the OSU 31 early in the fourth. Kuithe made a catch but was stopped a yard short by Ronnie Hickman, and the Buckeyes took over and marched 71 yards in seven plays, using 3:41 to tie the score at 38 with 10:12 left.

Smith-Njigba caught a pass for 30 yards on the second play to the Utah 38. On sec-

ond down from the 34, Mitch Rossi took a pass at the line of scrimmage and ran to the 12.

Henderson had catches of 2 and 5 yards to the 5 before Harrison made the grab for his third TD.

The defense then came up with a stop, including a 7-yard sack by Williams on a play in which Rising left the game with an injury. It was the Buckeyes' lone sack of the game.

After the punt to the 15, the Buckeyes needed nine plays to go the 85 yards in 3:57 with an incredible over-the-shoulder catch by Smith-Njigba with 4:22 left to give the Buckeyes their first lead, 45-38.

The sixth TD by Stroud tied the school record and broke the Rose Bowl record of five by Southern California's Sam Darnold in 2017.

OSU began the drive with Henderson chewing up 11 yards on the ground. Ruckert made a catch for 10 on the next play to the OSU 36. Two plays later Harrison pulled in a 16-yard throw to the Utah 45. On fourth-and-4 from the Utes' 39, Day went for it again and Smith-Njigba rewarded him with a 9-yard reception to the 30.

One the next play, Stroud found Smith-Njigba for the score.

"C.J. and Jaxon just have a great connection," Day said.

Utah replacement quarterback Bryson Barnes, aided by two pass-interference calls and his own 10-yard run, tied the score with a 15-yard pass to Kincaid with 1:54 left in the fourth. The Utes' drive was six plays, 57 yards and 2:20.

Egbuka's 33-yard kickoff return got OSU started at its 42 for the winning drive.

Smith-Njigba made a catch for 8 yards, Henderson ran for 6 and then gained another 9 on a reception to the Utah 35. He rushed for 12 yards on the next play before Smith-Njigba's final catch for 12 yards put the ball at the 11. Henderson added 9 more on the ground to the 2, and the Buckeyes called timeout with 12 seconds left to set up Ruggles.

On the kickoff, the dangerous Covey went 9 yards but was tackled at the 17 by Chris Booker to end the game.

### Numbers:

Ohio State's 683 total yards (573 passing, 110 rushing) are Rose Bowl and OSU bowl game records. ... The 14-point comeback is the third-largest deficit faced in a victory in Rose Bowl history. ... Smith-Njigba's 15 catches are Rose Bowl and Ohio State single-game records. His yardage (347) is the fifth-most ever in an FBS game. ... Harrison totaled six catches for 71 yards. ... Henderson rushed for 83 yards on 17 carries. ... The three touchdown receptions each for Harrison and Smith-Njigba tied the Rose Bowl record. ... Egbuka had 163 yards on seven kickoff returns (23.3 avg.) ... Utah totaled 463 yards (237 passing, 226 rushing) but had just 139 (79, 60) in the second half on 28 plays that averaged 5.0 yards. ... Rising was 17 of 22. Barnes was 2 for 2 for 23 yards and a score. ... Covey's seven kickoff returns totaled 208 yards (29.7).

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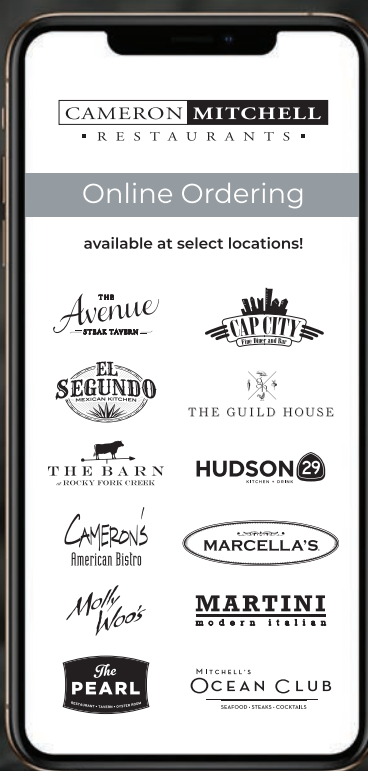
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## BSB Quotebook: Ohio State 48, Utah 45



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**COLD SHOULDER** — Jaxon Smith-Njigba (11) shrugs off a Utah defender on the way to one of his three touchdown receptions of the Rose Bowl, which tied a bowl-game record and gave him nine TDs on the season.

**Ohio State head coach Ryan Day on the team's 14-point comeback:** "I just think it was resiliency, mental toughness, and that says a lot about our culture. Down 14-0, down two scores at halftime, (they) said enough and they were going to impose their will in the second half. I think that's what's going to build momentum in the next year, because that's what we need if we want to go win a bunch of championships, and I think that a lot got done in this game because of that. But I think it says a lot about our kids the way we played this game."

**OSU safety Bryson Shaw on what spurred the comeback:** "I think it was unbelievable (how we responded). It started in the locker room. Leadership, guys stepping up, taking charge. In the second half, I think we held them to 10 points. I think it's going to shape the program this offseason. It's huge momentum going into the offseason to have a second half like that. The first half didn't go the way we wanted, but a lot of guys, a lot of teams would have folded in that halftime. We didn't. That's what I'm most proud of because all year we've all heard the noise. We've all heard the criticism. I think to close the season the way we did in that second half, it's awesome and it's a blessing to be out there with my brothers and to show the world how we can respond to adversity."

**OSU kicker Noah Ruggles on his game-winning 19-yard field goal:** "Block out the noise. It's a mind-set. You've just got to block out all the noise. Early on the stadium got loud – it seemed like a home game for Utah today because their fans are very loud. You just try to put that stuff to the side and focus on the task at hand."

**OSU wide receiver Jaxon Smith-Njigba on his**

**record-breaking performance:** "Honestly, I just trust the process, trust that Coach is going to put me in the right opportunity, that C.J. (Stroud) is going to put me in the right opportunity. Just taking advantage of every opportunity that I get. That's the only thing I can do really. It worked out."

**Stroud on his connection with Smith-Njigba:** "We built that connection probably all the way back – we came in as freshmen together, came in early. We were throwing at the line the first day. Scout team last year, we really built it. This doesn't surprise me at all. When I heard the numbers, I didn't really notice because he does this all the time."

**OSU wide receiver Marvin Harrison Jr. on his performance:** "It felt good. This is 'The Granddaddy of Them All,' the Rose Bowl. It's a big stage, and I was happy to be able to go out there and perform. I had to wait my turn. Garrett (Wilson) is a great player. Chris (Olave) and Garrett are great players. I had to wait my turn, though, and that's fine."

**OSU assistant coach Kevin Wilson on young players stepping up:** "As much as anything, it shows – which people might want to question – the culture of our program. That starts with Ryan (Day) and Mickey Marotti. Those young guys love to practice. And sometimes in this day and age, it's all, 'What about me, what about me now?' Sometimes you're learning how to play, and it takes a little time. It's not necessarily that you're waiting your turn, but it takes a little time. And it's nice when those guys have a little patience, their families stay with them and they embrace coaching, competition and practice. Because then when they get into the game they're (ready to go)."

**Utah head coach Kyle Whittingham on Stroud:** "(C.J.) is tremendous. The QBR, the quarterback rating system that ESPN uses, which in my estimation is the most accurate and the most telling of statistics for determining how well your quarterback's playing, he leads the nation. I think you saw it tonight why."

**Whittingham on Utah's defense and special teams:** "At some point, we have to play defense. We didn't play very well all night long on defense. It wasn't our usual. I'm not sure we'd be able to get a stop. It all started with poor coverage on the kickoff. Our kickoff unit all night long just wasn't up to par where we needed to be. That put us in bad field position several times, and that (final drive) was one of them. Unfortunately, that was the game-winner."

**OSU linebacker Cade Stover on OSU linebacker Tommy Eichenberg and his game-high 17 tackles:** "He's unbelievable. If there's one guy that doesn't pay attention to that stuff, it's Tommy. He's a nose-to-the-grindstone kind of guy, just works his (tail) off all the time. He's just the exact kind of guy you want on your football team."

**Stover on facing adversity:** "You need that. If you don't have a bad day, you don't know what a good day looks like."

**Day on motivation to play in the Rose Bowl:** "I talked to the guys about this before the game. I said somewhere in about 15, 20 years, you're going to be somewhere and the Rose Bowl's going to come on on New Year's and you're going to be sitting there with somebody you love – your son or somebody – and say, 'I played in the Rose Bowl.' I said the first thing they're going to ask is, 'Did you win?' and I said these guys are going to be able to tell an unbelievable story, that they played in this game and they won and they won in a big way when the odds were stacked against us in this game. Some people think we didn't have much to play for, that we were going to come in and lay down in this game, and it says a lot about our kids that that didn't happen."

**Stroud on lessons learned this season:** "Every game, you always have ups and downs. We opened up the season like that. We took a hard loss in that second game. These are all learning experiences. Then we lose again, and we have a tough game in Nebraska. It's all a learning experience."

**OSU offensive lineman Thayer Munford on the win and season:** "It feels great, man. I'm happy that we came out with a win. It's not the prettiest season Ohio State is used to, but at the same time, we came out and kept swinging and swinging. Eventually, we got the win. It wasn't pretty, of course, but we got the win."

**OSU super senior cornerback Demario McCall on his career:** "I'm grateful. Grateful to have the opportunity to be a part of the brotherhood. We know my career didn't go the way I wanted it to, but I'm thankful to be a part and to do what I could for the team. I'm grateful."

**Day on what the win does for next season:** "When you have that type of leadership from within, that's when you can do whatever you want. I think, as we springboard into this offseason, that's the part that we're really going to go back upon in this game is the leadership that drove us in the second half that we weren't going to be denied, and two of them (Stroud and Smith-Njigba) are sitting right here. If we want to get to where we want to be next year – it's a long way away from now, but I'm already thinking about that first game and what that means is the leadership from these two guys has got to really springboard, especially the way they played in the second half of this game, but really the entire game, and it's really going to build some momentum."





# Big Boys Provided Biggest Plays Of Season

By **CHASE BROWN**

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

Ohio State fell short in its goal of winning a national championship in 2021, but the Buckeyes still managed to win 11 games and win their trip to the Rose Bowl.

There were plenty of standout plays made by Ohio State throughout the season, and the Buckeye Sports Bulletin staff voted on the top 10 plays from this up-and-down campaign.

## 10. Henderson Breaks Archie's Record (Tulsa - Sept. 18)

Ohio State's 40-21 victory over Tulsa was much closer than the final score indicated. If not for stellar performances from a few talented freshmen, the Buckeyes might have been biting their nails before the clock ran out.

No freshman was more critical than Hopewell, Va., native TreVeyon Henderson, Ohio State's first five-star running back signee since Chris "Beanie" Wells arrived on campus as part of former head coach Jim Tressel's 2006 recruiting class.

Henderson shattered Archie Griffin's single-game rushing record for a Buckeye freshman of 239 yards gained against North Carolina in 1972 with 270 of his own on only 24 carries. He broke the record with a 52-yard touchdown run that he took directly through the middle of the Tulsa defense before bouncing to the left sideline and into the end zone.

"It's a blessing," Henderson said of establishing a new freshman rushing record. "I'm excited right now. At the same time, I have to keep this going. I can't just let this (kind of performance) be a one-time thing."

Henderson explained after the game that he has lofty goals for himself while he plays for Ohio State and breaking the freshman single-game rushing record was only one of them. He hardly broke a sweat for the Buckeyes despite his output and the difficulty of toppling an almost 30-year record.

"It's all natural," Henderson said. "I try not to think too hard. When the time comes, it's all natural. Like I told you before the season, I had a lot of goals for myself. I reached one of those goals today, but I have plenty more, so I have to keep working."

The Buckeye tailback led the team with 183 carries for 1,248 yards and 15 touchdowns in 2021 and will return to Ohio State next season with an opportunity to break more records as a sophomore.

## 9. Ronnie Hickman's Pick-Six (Akron - Sept. 25)

Ohio State's matchup with Akron in Week 4 was filled with storylines. The most important of them was that C.J. Stroud would rest his ailing shoulder against the Zips and would be used only in an "emergency capacity."

Freshman Kyle McCord received the nod over Jack Miller III to start at quarterback in



SONNY BROCKWAY

## RUMBLING — Haskell Garrett's (92) scoop and score to help seal Ohio State's week-one win against Minnesota cracks the BSB list of top plays at No. 8, one of two fumble returns in the picks.

Stroud's absence, leading the Buckeyes to a 59-7 blowout over the Zips under the lights in Columbus.

Sophomore safety Ronnie Hickman provided a defensive highlight when he picked off Akron quarterback D.J. Irons late in the second quarter and took the interception 46 yards for his first career touchdown.

"Going in, you want to know who the guys would be we were going to count on," OSU coach Ryan Day said. "The more times that some of these younger players start making plays, you look to the guy next to you, and that builds confidence because you know he can do it."

"Ronnie Hickman is a great example. He makes that interception, and he's an example of someone who's playing good football right now. Many people didn't know who Ronnie was (at the beginning of the year). Now he's really doing it."

Hickman continued a strong season for Ohio State in 2021. He finished with 100 tackles in 13 games, becoming the first Buckeye to reach the century mark in that category since Raekwon McMillan in 2016.

## 8. Garrett's Scoop And Score (Minnesota - Sept. 2)

Ohio State's season began with a 45-31 win over Minnesota on Sept. 2. The team's defensive deficiencies were evident at several levels, but the Buckeyes made enough plays to stave off an upset bid from the Golden Gophers.

Despite surrendering 31 points, the Ohio State defense might have made the most crucial play of the game in defensive tackle Haskell Garrett's scoop and score. Given

that the play appears on this list, it's safe to say that the sequence of events was memorable.

In the third quarter, Ohio State took a 24-21 lead with a 56-yard touchdown pass from Stroud to Garrett Wilson. Then, the Buckeye defense turned in a score of its own. Defensive end Zach Harrison strip-sacked Minnesota quarterback Tanner Morgan, causing the ball to fall on the turf before hitting a Gopher offensive lineman and bouncing off OSU linebacker Teradja Mitchell.

After Mitchell couldn't corral the loose ball, Garrett snatched it from the air and took it 32 yards to the end zone for a scoop-and-score touchdown, giving the Buckeyes a 10-point lead and a much-needed momentum swing.

"I thought that was probably the difference in the game," Day said after the game. "Anytime you get a defensive score, whether it's a blocked punt or something like that, that flips the scoreboard and is a huge game-changer."

## 7. Stroud Threads The Needle (Indiana - Oct. 23)

Late in the first quarter of Ohio State's 54-7 win over Indiana on Oct. 23, Stroud took a shotgun snap and saw sophomore wide receiver Jaxon Smith-Njigba run open downfield.

He wasn't that open. He might not have been open at all. But as Smith-Njigba crossed the Hoosiers' logo crowded by three Indiana defensive backs, Stroud roped a pass between the trio of red jerseys and into the hands of the one player wearing white, securing a 32-yard gain for the Buckeyes.

"That look, that was kind of what we practice," Stroud said. "When you see things like that, I just think we're hitting, and we have momentum. We're just rolling. That is a confidence thing."

Stroud's confidence was high against the Hoosiers. He completed 21 of 28 passes for 266 yards and four touchdowns on a cold and rainy night in Bloomington, Ind. It wasn't a Rose Bowl-level performance for the Buckeye quarterback, but it was a strong one, nonetheless. Smith-Njigba finished the game with six catches for 99 yards.

## 6. Marvin Harrison's First Career TD (Utah - Jan. 1)

The action-packed 2022 Rose Bowl makes its first appearance on the "Top Plays" list with Marvin Harrison's first career touchdown reception in Ohio State's 48-45 win over Utah in Pasadena, Calif.

Because Garrett Wilson and Olave opted out of the Rose Bowl, Harrison received his first start as a Buckeye in the season finale of his freshman year. He played a significant role in the Buckeyes' three-point victory over the Utes, catching six passes for 71 yards and three touchdowns.

The first score showed that the Buckeye coaching staff and Stroud trusted him fully despite his inexperience. Ohio State faced fourth-and-1, trailing 14-0 early in the second quarter. Day dialed up a passing play where Stroud threw a deep ball to Harrison, who caught the perfectly thrown pass inside the left boundary of the end zone for a 25-yard score.

Harrison said that catch gave him the confidence he needed to make plays for his team for the rest of the game.

"I was nervous, for sure," Harrison said of making his first start. "I didn't really get my feet settled until after the fourth-down catch. The first touchdown, Coach Day had a lot of confidence in me to go make that play."

That catch proved to be a catalyst as Harrison went on to catch five more passes and two more touchdowns against the Utes, making big plays in scoring territory and taking advantage of his opportunities to propel Ohio State to a Rose Bowl.

## 5. Smith-Njigba Set Loose In Lincoln (Nebraska - Nov. 6)

Against the Cornhuskers on Nov. 6, Smith-Njigba set a new school record for receptions in a game with 15. Even more, he gained 240 yards and scored a touchdown with those catches, helping Ohio State claim a 26-17 win over Nebraska on Nov. 6.

His performance came in the absence of Wilson, who missed the game because of a concussion. The Cornhuskers had an answer for each Buckeye weapon besides Smith-Njigba. The Rockwall, Texas, native ran wild against Nebraska, proving to be a security blanket for Stroud and a "Get Out of Jail Free" card for the Ohio State offense in Lincoln.



SONNY BROCKWAY

**UNCAGED — Jerron Cage's (86) fumble return for a touchdown against Penn State earns this season's top play honors, beating out Jaxon Smith-Njigba's Rose Bowl heroics and TreVeyon Henderson's 70-yard touchdown reception.**

Smith-Njigba's longest reception of the game came late in the second quarter when the sophomore wideout caught a pass over the middle, shook a Nebraska defender and sprinted down the left sideline for a 75-yard catch-and-run touchdown.

"I thought that Jaxon played well," Day said after the game. "On the big play – and it was one heck of a play and an amazing (block) by Chris Olave – the effort there was tremendous. I think Jaxon was gritty. He was cramping up, and he was out at one point, so we had Chris in there in the slot, Julian Fleming on the outside, Marvin Harrison on the outside and we were a little out of whack.

"But he got himself going again and came back. He was still kind of cramping on the field, so not only did he perform, but he was gritty out there. He worked through some things."

Smith-Njigba said he just did his job.

"I got a lot of targets today, and I just tried to make things happen," he said. "I felt really good. I want to thank my teammates. I'm just a little piece of the offense, and I got to see a lot of opportunities and I just tried to cherish every single one of them."

**4. Olave Breaks TD Record (Michigan State - Nov. 20)**

Olave has played alongside some of the best receivers in Ohio State history, usually unbothered to let others grab the spotlight.

But when the senior receiver gathered a 43-yard touchdown from Stroud late in the first quarter in a 56-7 rout of Michigan State, he chased down a program record that had been around longer than he has been alive.

David Boston amassed 34 touchdown receptions during a three-year career at Ohio

State from 1996-98 – a record that was not seriously challenged until Devin Smith finished his days in scarlet and gray in 2014 with 30. Then came Olave, whose relentless pursuit of the record couldn't be stopped.

A perfect toss from Stroud early in the first quarter over two Michigan State defenders to a waiting Olave in the back of the end zone not only got the Buckeyes off and running with their first touchdown of the game, but it was also the 34th of his career, tying him with Boston.

The record-breaker was a thing of beauty. Stroud stepped into a pass that traveled nearly 60 yards on the fly and pinpointed Olave near the goalpost. The official distance through the air was 57 yards, but the touchdown catch was No. 13 of the season and No. 35 of his career for Olave.

"I had to get the ball," a smiling Olave said during his postgame press conference, the record football tucked safely under his arm. "I broke the record, which was a huge blessing, but I forgot to keep the ball. Somebody had to go get it for me, and they gave it to me after the game."

**3. Henderson's First TD (Minnesota - Sept. 2)**

Henderson formally introduced himself to the college football world in Ohio State's win at Minnesota. With the Gophers in striking distance, having just kicked a field goal to pull within seven points, he took a swing pass from Stroud in the flat 5 yards downfield.

However, that's not where the play ended. Henderson found a seam and burst through the Minnesota defense while displaying impressive quickness and speed. When it was

all said and done, the 5-10, 215-pound running back had a 70-yard catch-and-score – his first-career touchdown in an Ohio State uniform.

That kind of run made Day label Henderson a "home-run hitter" for the Buckeye offense.

"Each running back is different, but he's somebody that can hit home runs – and that's special," Day said. "He has a special talent, and when you give it to him, and he gets to that second level and makes a guy miss, it could be a home run, and that's a whole different dynamic."

Henderson caught 27 passes for 312 yards and four scores in 2021. When combined with his rushing numbers, the freshman tailback contributed 1,579 all-purpose yards and a team-leading 19 touchdowns in 13 games.

**2. Smith-Njigba Slot Fade TD (Utah - Jan. 1)**

Smith-Njigba rewrote every possible record book in Ohio State's Rose Bowl victory over Utah on New Year's Day, catching 15 passes for 347 yards and three touchdowns against the Utes.

He broke the program's single-season reception record, single-season receiving yards record and single-game receiving yards record, and he tied the single-game receptions record he had set against Nebraska earlier in 2021. Smith-Njigba also broke the Buckeyes' bowl game record for receiving yards in a game.

Each achievement stands alone in its glory. As does the sophomore wideout's crucial 30-yard touchdown catch that gave Ohio State a seven-point lead with 4:22 to go in "The Granddaddy of Them All."

With the teams tied at 38-all, Stroud took a shotgun snap before taking a two-step drop, surveying his options and making a precise outside-shoulder pass to Smith-Njigba, who ran a slot fade to the end zone.

Smith-Njigba contorted his body to gain vision of the football that sailed over his head toward the boundary. He readjusted his body and tossed his hands into the air, hauling in Stroud's pass and recording his third touchdown of the game.

"C.J. and him have a great connection," Day said. "They have a great feel, and I think there's a lot of trust there that's been built over the year. They read each other well and they have a special connection. The throw on the touchdown pass was probably as good as I've ever seen in a big-time spot."

**1. Jerron Cage Scoops And Scores (Penn State - Oct. 30)**

Everyone had 305-pound defensive tackle Jerron Cage getting a scoop and score on their 2021 Ohio State football bingo cards, right? Neither did Buckeye Sports Bulletin. Still, the staff thought the fifth-year senior's 57-yard touchdown was the play of the year, and for a good reason.

Late in the second quarter of Ohio State's 33-24 win over Penn State, Nittany Lions quarterback Sean Clifford fumbled, leaving an opportunity for Cage to pick up the football and run more than half the field for a touchdown.

"That play was a real game-changer for us," redshirt junior cornerback Cam Brown said after the game. "We were all excited for him. I was probably 60 yards away trying to run down and catch him to celebrate with him."

Cage, a former four-star from Cincinnati Winton Woods, had played 19 games over the previous four seasons. However, he was the star of the show in Ohio State's nine-point victory.

"Whenever we can steal points, we want to do that," Hickman said. "We talk about it before the games, who is going to be the one to get it and who is going to be the one to score. Jerron was the one to do it today, and we are super happy and proud for him."

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# Offense Finished On High Note In Rose Bowl Victory

By CRAIG MERZ

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

Ohio State, guided by redshirt freshman quarterback C.J. Stroud, possessed an unstoppable offense at times.

However, the team, which finished 11-2 after a 48-45 win against Utah in the Rose Bowl on New Year's Day, was not unbeatable, and as such the final marks for the nation's highest scoring team are downgraded a bit.

This is Ohio State after all, and a loss to Michigan sours the outlook even if the defense, or lack thereof, shoulders much of the blame for the thorough 42-27 setback in Ann Arbor on Nov. 27.

Although the Buckeyes amassed 458 yards of offense vs. the Wolverines, there were instances where a sustained drive would have kept the U-M offense off the field. Also, in four trips to the red zone, the Buckeyes managed only two touchdowns to go along with a pair of Noah Ruggles field goals.

Everything seemed to come together in Pasadena, Calif., with a Rose Bowl-record 683 total yards – a school-record 573 through the air by Stroud – and the absence of an impactful running game did not hurt the Buckeyes as it did against Michigan.

That left the nagging question of how good was the offensive line? The group was mauled by the Wolverines and haunted by comments that OSU was soft and could be easily manhandled.

The Buckeyes responded with a snarl vs. Utah and protected Stroud well, but it wasn't enough to prevent head coach Ryan Day from firing OL coach Greg Studrawa on Jan. 6.

In reviewing the second half of the season, which began with a 54-7 win at Indiana on Oct. 23, the entire seven-game stretch must be considered, not just the juggernaut that rolled to record after record in the Rose Bowl.

For instance, there was the 33-24 victory vs. Penn State that shouldn't have been that close except for the Buckeyes managing only one TD and four field goals in six trips to the red zone. The following game against Nebraska, OSU got a touchdown and two field goals in three red-zone opportunities.

Even in the Rose Bowl, the Buckeyes scored only two TDs in five tries. Ruggles made two field goals, including the winner with nine seconds left, and Stroud threw an interception on the other occasion.

For the season, the Buckeyes ranked No. 11 nationally with a 91.5 percent (54 of 59) scoring rate in the red zone on 38 TDs (21 passing, 17 running) and 16 field goals.

The caveat, of course, is Ohio State showed big-play capability with as good a group of receivers as there was in the country.

Ohio State was first nationally in scoring (45.7 points per game), total offense (561.5) and yards per play (7.9).

## Quarterbacks

Stroud, who finished fourth in Heisman Trophy voting, did not have a completion rate lower than 64.7 percent (22 of 34 vs. Penn State) in the final seven games and finished the season at 71.9 percent to break Justin Fields' 2020 school record (70.2 percent).

Against Michigan State, Stroud was 32 of 35 (91.4 percent) for 432 yards. His six touchdowns tied the school record, a standard he would equal in the Rose Bowl.

Stroud's 4,435 passing yards and 44 passing touchdowns in 13 games are each the second most in Ohio State history to Dwayne Haskins (4,831 and 50) in 2018. Stroud threw just six interceptions.

"He started the season without having one college pass under his belt," Day said. "Everything he was doing was for the first time – his first completion, his first interception, his first touchdown, his first win, his first loss.

"There's a lot that came with that. I thought his preparation as the season went on was excellent. His level of play really increased week-in and week-out. He played like one of the better quarterbacks in the country the entire year."

Stroud was on top of his game in the Rose Bowl. He had to be with star receivers Chris Olave and Garrett Wilson opting not to play.

It didn't matter. Sophomore Jaxon Smith-Njigba had 15 catches – tying the school record – for 347 yards, the most ever in a Football Bowl Subdivision bowl.

More importantly, Stroud rallied the Buckeyes from a 14-point halftime deficit to the Utes.

"He's a great leader," said Utah coach Kyle Whittingham. "He's cool under pressure, and he moves well in the pocket. He's a real talent."

The prolific season by Stroud rendered his backups irrelevant. Freshman Kyle McCord earned the role but threw only 14 passes in the second half, completing nine for 68 yards. For the season he was 25 of 38 (65.8 percent) for 416 yards and two touchdowns.

Both redshirt freshman Jack Miller and freshman Quinn Ewers had no impact. Each transferred after the regular season, Ewers to Texas and Miller to Florida.

While Stroud is the unquestioned starter for 2022, he will have no problem with motivation after seeing his friend, Alabama quarterback Bryce Young, win the Heisman Trophy

in December.

"I wasn't happy with the results at the end at all," Stroud said. "I'm super happy for Bryce and the other contenders, but at the end of the day, I don't think I'm a competitor where I'm cool with just being fourth place. I don't like being second, I don't like being fourth, I don't like being nothing – I want to be first. I'm just going to keep working for it.

"Who just wants to see somebody just take the fourth place and be all happy with it?" he continued. "I've never been that type of player. I'm a competitor. I'm not just going to take that and be all jolly and happy with it. It will drive me for the rest of my life, probably."

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

## Running Backs

Freshman TreVeyon Henderson got off to a blazing start in the first half of the season, including the Ohio State freshman rushing record of 277 yards vs. Tulsa. But he and his fellow backs found the going tougher in the second half as Day relied more and more on the passing game.

Overall, the Buckeyes finished 47th with 180.6 rushing yards per game and 24 touchdowns.

They were at their best in the second half of the season in back-to-back wins vs. Purdue (263 yards, 31 carries) and Michigan State (206, 43) before being held to 64 yards on 30 runs against Michigan and 110 yards on 20 carries vs. Utah.

Most telling, OSU averaged 6.5 yards per carry in its wins and 3.1 in its losses to Oregon and Michigan.

Henderson ran for 1,248 yards and 15 TDs. After averaging 8.8 yards per carry in the first half of the season, he dropped off that pace. In the final three games he had 43 carries for 220 yards (5.1 average) and his season average fell to 6.8.

"Early in the season everything was open. After that you just had to fight to get what was yours," Henderson said. "Some people don't understand that you're not always going to have home-run hits. Some defenses we played this year were pretty good and had good players across the field. We weren't going to get those home run hits

they expected every game."

His 19 total touchdowns (including four receiving) set the OSU season mark for a freshman.

"I want to get better at everything," Henderson said. "Each part of my game, I want to be the best at it. There's not one thing. It's pretty much everything."

That includes pass protection.

"I never pass blocked before," he said. "But even though it was my first time ever having to pass block, I think I did all right for being 5-10, 210-to-212 pounds. I think I did OK."

Redshirt freshman Miyan Williams surpassed graduate Master Teague as the No. 2 runner and rushed for 508 yards (7.2) and three TDs on 71 carries while Teague's 67 carries totaled 355 yards (5.3) and four scores.

Williams' highlight of the second half of the season was gaining 117 yards on 14 totes vs. Purdue.

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

## Offensive Line

The big guys up front went through a season of transition. It would be accurate to say they held their own with one major exception, but it's not nice to mention holding around an offensive lineman.

To recap: Nicholas Petit-Frere moved from right tackle to left tackle. Thayer Munford went from left tackle to left guard, tackle Paris Johnson became a right guard, Dawand Jones earned the right tackle spot, and when center Harry Miller became unavailable for the first four games, redshirt freshman Luke Wypler took over. Miller then took snaps at left guard and Matt Jones filled in along the line.

The line had to shuffle again when Petit-Frere opted not to play in the Rose Bowl. Munford took his spot at left tackle, and Jones entered at left guard.

Munford had previously made 45 starts at tackle and earned All-Big Ten first-team honors there in 2020.

"I feel at home," Munford said prior to the Rose Bowl. "I'm just happy that I am back at left tackle right now and just can't wait for this game."

The expectation is that Johnson will be back at his natural tackle position next season under the guidance of a new line coach.

"Going back to tackle and having time and space on my side I feel like would be really fun to get back to," Johnson said.

For all the personnel changes that occurred along the line, the Buckeyes finished tied for 14th with only 17 sacks allowed.

As far as creating holes for Henderson and others, it was an inconsistent second half. In addition to the previously mentioned Michigan and Utah games, the Buckeyes gained just 90 yards on 30 rushes vs. Nebraska. As mentioned, Ohio State finished 47th in the country in rushing yards per game.

The Buckeyes allowed three sacks against Penn State, and OSU had five drives stall inside the 18. Also, the line was guilty of four false starts and one illegal snap.

Then there was Michigan. The Wol-

## Rating The Offense

Here is where the OSU offense ranked among the Big Ten and nationally.

Category	Stats	NCAA	Big Ten
Rushing Offense	180.6	47th	5th
Passing Offense	380.9	3rd	1st
Total Offense	561.5	1st	1st
Scoring Offense	45.7	1st	1st
Turnovers Lost	11	T-10th	T-1st
Third Down Con.	52.3	3rd	1st



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## FINAL GRADES: OFFENSE

verines had eight tackles for loss and end Aidan Hutchinson had three of their four sacks. There were also five false starts.

"We got exposed in some areas, but also at the same time we know what we need to do," Munford said of the game. "We need to run the ball and we need to dominate the line of scrimmage, and that's going to be our motto."

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

### Wide Receivers

There's little to complain about with this group that helped the Buckeyes to the nation's third-best passing game at 380.9 yards per game.

The Rose Bowl was the grand finale even though there was some concern when Olave and Wilson decided to end their careers a game early. But the unit developed by receivers coach Brian Hartline proved once again to be as deep as it is talented.

Everyone knew what Smith-Njigba could do, and many believed he was better than Olave or Wilson. The question was how sophomore Julian Fleming and freshmen Marvin Harrison Jr. and Emeka Egbuka would handle the pressure.

"You're going to see explosive offense and those guys making plays," Stroud said five days before the Rose Bowl "Marvin and Julian are going to step up and they're going to play really hard and they're going to make plays. It's nothing new to them. They've been doing it since they were kids. So I don't expect anything different."

Smith-Njigba and Harrison tied the Rose Bowl record with three TD catches apiece.

Harrison, who entered the game with no touchdowns among his five career receptions, logged six catches for 71 yards.

It was quite the first start for Harrison.

"I was nervous, for sure," he said. "I didn't really get my feet settled until after the fourth-down catch, first touchdown. Coach Day had a lot of confidence in me to go make the play. All my hard work paid off."

His performance in the last game of the season will stay with him as he prepares for the next one.

"I'm just going try to work even harder than I did last offseason," Harrison said. "That's just my goal. Each offseason, work harder than I did last year."

Stroud showed his development throughout the season by distributing his passes in the Rose Bowl. In addition to the numbers posted by Smith-Njigba and Harrison, Fleming gained 35 yards on five grabs and Egbuka totaled three catches for 46 yards among the wide receivers.

For the season Smith-Njigba had 95 receptions for 1,606 yards, both school records, and nine touchdowns.

Wilson was second on the team with 70 catches for 1,058 yards and 12 TDs in two fewer games. He did not play against Nebraska but had consecutive 126-yard games vs. Purdue and Michigan State and was on the receiving end for 119 yards vs. Michigan.

Olave in 12 games had 65 catches for 936 yards and 13 scores.

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

### Tight Ends

Seldom used, for receiving that is, the tight ends earn their keep as blockers but when called upon need to be ready in key moments. Such was the case for tight end/fullback Mitch Rossi, whose 22-yard reception set up a Harrison TD catch to tie the Rose Bowl 38-38 early in the fourth quarter.

That was the lone Rossi catch, but Jeremy Ruckert was targeted five times and caught three for 25 yards.

Meanwhile, Cade Stover had been moved from the already thin tight ends room to linebacker where he made six tackles vs. the Utes.

Ruckert's most productive game was at

Indiana when he scored twice among five catches for 47 yards. He never made more than three receptions the rest of the season, and he was shut out vs. Purdue and Michigan and had one catch for 28 yards against Michigan State.

He ended up with a career-high 26 catches for 309 yards and three touchdowns in 12 games.

"I learned a lot this year," he said. "I've never been on a team that's really lost a regular-season game. I feel like I've gotten stronger because of it. It brought our team together. I think this year was a success because of the fact I was around the guys another year."

While his numbers don't pop, it's his all-

around game that could lead to a productive pro career starting next season.

SI.com had this to say about his potential.

"Jeremy Ruckert has the talent not only to be the best from this class, but he could also end up as one of the best tight ends in the NFL. The former five-star recruit is arguably the best blocker at his position in the nation."

Stover and Gee Scott Jr. each had five receptions on the season, but Stover had just two catches and Scott one in the second half.

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



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# Defense Faltered When Buckeyes Needed It Most

By **PATRICK MAYHORN**

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Associate Editor

Ohio State's defense in 2021 could be considered a palindrome in that it ended the same way as it started, with mirrored results in between.

The Buckeyes, coordinated at the start of the season by Kerry Coombs and at the end by Matt Barnes, opened the year with a pair of disastrous showings against Minnesota and Oregon, allowing 66 combined points and more than 900 yards of total offense. They scored enough to hold off the Golden Gophers but suffered their first defeat of the season against the Ducks when the high-powered offense found itself without enough juice to overcome a defense that just could not find its way off the field.

In the weeks that followed, under new management, Ohio State seemed to find a groove. It struggled too against Tulsa, allowing 501 yards, but surrendered only 20 points and managed to pull away late for a 41-20 win despite just a seven-point lead in the middle of the final frame. But with a trio of tuneups against Akron, Rutgers and Maryland, the Buckeye defense began to flash its muscle.

It allowed only 12.3 points and 303.3 yards in those contests, encouraging both the Buckeye staff and their players that improvement was on the way and that the best could still be yet to come.

Out of a midseason off week, Ohio State's defense maintained its form. The Buckeyes traveled to Bloomington and blanked Indiana after its first drive, holding the Hoosiers to 53 yards after that 75-yard opening statement that ended in a Peyton Hendershot touchdown reception.

Penn State and Nebraska offered stiffer challenges than that four-week soiree, but the Buckeye defense held firm in the face of struggles from its own offense. It limited the Nittany Lions to 64 yards on 13 plays in

## Rating The Defense

Here is where the OSU defense ranked among the Big Ten and nationally.

Category	Stats	NCAA	Big Ten
Rushing Defense	126.8	28th	6th
Passing Defense	246.2	97th	12th
Total Defense	372.9	T-59th	9th
Scoring Defense	22.8	38th	9th
Sacks/Game	2.8	T-28th	3rd
Third-Down Def.	41.4	96th	13th

the fourth quarter without a point to show for it, intercepting Sean Clifford on the first Nittany Lion drive of the period and forcing a missed field goal on Penn State's last time with the ball.

All but one of Penn State's three final frame drives came with the Buckeyes out in front by less than a score and could have proven disastrous had the defense faltered.

A week later, the Buckeye offense again struggled to find its way into the end zone, relying on three Noah Ruggles field goals to claim a 23-17 lead through much of the fourth quarter before a fourth field goal sealed the deal. With that slim lead, the defense forced a missed field goal, a punt and an interception – its second straight perfect fourth quarter.

But, just as it had in the first three games of the season, Ohio State's defense seemed to slide in the wrong direction in games 12 and 13.

It was Ohio State's final game of the regular season and its Rose Bowl matchup with Utah, a 48-45 win, that presented the starkest reminder of where the Buckeyes had been. Two and a half months removed from the beatdown that Oregon administered to Ohio State on the ground, Michigan and Utah topped it with 87 combined points and 950 total yards.

Entering both games with the mindset that there were yards to be had on the OSU run defense, the Wolverines and Utes pounded the rock to the tune of 297 yards on 41 attempts and 226 yards on 44 attempts, with U-M scoring on the ground six times in a dominant win over the then No. 2 Buckeyes.

It was a performance that earned Ohio State the "finesse" moniker from Michigan offensive coordinator Josh Gattis.

"They're a good team. They're a finesse team, they're not a tough team," Gattis said of Ohio State. "And we knew that going into the game, that we can out-physical them, we can out-tough them and that was going to be the key to the game, and that's what we prepared for all year long.

"You saw earlier this year in the game they lost to Oregon, Oregon was the most physical team on the field. That's the way they lost, and we committed to that recipe, and it paid off."

It's those final performances, especially the Michigan loss, that paints much of the season for Ohio State's defense. For a program that has shaped so much of its identity around that game, it's hard for it not to have an outsized role when things break so badly. Though the defense was largely able to maintain success through the middle of the season, that way that it started and ended



FILE PHOTO

**HELD IN CHECK – Ohio State's defensive line, led by defensive end Zach Harrison (9), went without a sack in either of Ohio State's final two games. Linebacker Kourt Williams recorded Ohio State's lone sack against the Utes.**

the year factor significantly in determining the final grades for each unit involved.

## Defensive Line

Ohio State always depends on defensive line coach Larry Johnson to create a strong group, around which it can build the rest of the defense, and this season was no different. The Buckeyes entered the year with unproven but highly touted talent at every spot on the line and the expectation that many of those players would take a step forward and lead a resurgence up front after struggling in 2020 without a true star.

In some matchups, the Buckeyes got just that. In the five-game stretch from Maryland to Purdue, finally healthy after struggling with injuries through early-season matchups, junior defensive end Zach Harrison recorded 15 tackles and all but two of his eight TFL on the season, along with two sacks and a forced fumble. In his other seven games of the season, Harrison had only 19 tackles, with just two sacks to bolster his stats.

In six games from Oct. 23 to Nov. 27, Tyreke Smith flashed similar ability across from Harrison after dealing with his own availability issues. He notched 17 tackles, four TFL and three sacks during his healthiest stretch of the season but was nowhere to be found in either of Ohio State's regular-season losses, making nary an appearance in opposing backfields despite his status as the team's most established true pass rusher and recording only six tackles in the two games.

Jerron Cage, Haskell Garrett, Antwan Jackson, Taron Vincent and Tyleik Williams were all similarly streaky in the tackle spots. Dealing with injuries, Garrett recorded just four tackles in the back half of the season, with two TFL (both sacks). Jackson had only 1½ TFL in the back end of the season, recorded against Penn State. The other three

struggled to find consistent playing time as they jockeyed for the spots behind those top two, with none really taking command of the vacancies.

For a group that felt as though it was rounding into form as it emerged from injury troubles, that loss to Michigan served as a punch to the gut – especially as the Buckeyes failed to register a tackle behind the line of scrimmage for the first time since at least 1965. That's not exactly what Cage was expecting when he said that Ohio State was ready to showcase what it could be in October.

"It's really just great to have everybody back, honestly," Cage said. "I mean, from the beginning of the season we've been dealing with injuries and all this extra stuff. But the fact that we're all jelling together, you can actually see it on the field."

And it's the loss to Michigan in particular that lowers the second-half grade for this unit. Impressive performances against Indiana, Nebraska and Michigan State raise the floor, but struggles against the Nittany Lions, Purdue, the Wolverines and Utes keep this unit from reaching its lofty expectations.

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

## Linebackers

The cast of characters changed from the first half of the season to the back half, but the results didn't. Ohio State shifted away from Teradja Mitchell and toward Steele Chambers as the season evolved. It played Mitchell only in special teams spots in each of the last two weeks of the regular season while Chambers broke into a consistent starting role only a few months removed from his switch out of the running backs room and into Al Washington's group of linebackers.

Meanwhile, alongside Chambers, Ohio

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## FINAL GRADES: DEFENSE

State rotated Tommy Eichenberg and Cody Simon, with the latter dealing with injuries for much of the year while the former picked up some of the nuances on the fly.

In some spots, like with the defensive line, the changes at linebacker paid off. Chambers, as Coombs has described, wasn't always in the right place, but his energy and athletic ability added a layer to the Buckeye defense that it was lacking to open the season.

"I was really impressed because here's what Steele does," Coombs said. "He sees, he goes. You say, 'Well that seems really simple.' It's not. Sometimes guys go and then they see. Sometimes they see and then they go. He sees and he goes.

"He's not always right where he's going yet because he needs that experience. But when he sees it, he goes. Guys like that are fun to coach, and we've had a bunch of them here. If he sees it and he goes and he keeps doing that, he's going to play a lot of football for the Buckeyes."

On his best days, Chambers looked like a star for the Buckeyes. He had 28 tackles in the second half of the season and was all over the field against Nebraska, Purdue and Michigan State before the Wolverines managed to scheme him out of the game plan to close the regular season. Despite that, Chambers considered it largely a successful season and looks to be one of OSU's sharpest defenders entering 2022.

"I would say it exceeded my expectations," Chambers said of the season. "I would say I wasn't expecting to get on the field this much, to be quite honest. I definitely feel more comfortable, but it's still hard, because we have to change up stuff every week to stay on our toes and for other teams to not really lock in on what we're doing. It's still hard, but I'm definitely getting used to it."

His battery mates ended the season with fewer reasons for optimism. The senior captain Mitchell, as mentioned, all but fell out of the lineup in the final seven games of the year. Simon was hobbled down the stretch and didn't look himself, recording only 10 tackles in his final three games of the year while nabbing only one-half of a TFL in the last six. He missed the Rose Bowl with shoulder surgery.

Eichenberg took steps in the other direction and impressed with 39 tackles and four TFL in his final five games, but the two seem to balance each other out, just as Chambers and Mitchell do in the other spot, leaving the Buckeyes right where they started.

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

### Defensive Backs

It's a testament to the nature of college football that Ohio State's secondary grades out as the best defensive group on the team, given the circumstances it entered the season under.

Fresh off a season that had the Buckeyes produce the nation's No. 122 pass defense, Ohio State was in need of a new starting cornerback opposite returning starter Sevn Banks, a consistently reliable slot cornerback after the struggles of Marcus Williamson and a bullet to fill in alongside the rock steady Josh Proctor.

And despite a season-ending injury to Proctor in week two and plenty of growing

pains for his replacement, redshirt sophomore Bryson Shaw, Ohio State's secondary was rarely the group to shoulder the blame in down performances. Both losses came to teams that won on the ground rather than through the air, and the most electric performances through the air that Ohio State withstood this season led to no real damage (see: Tulsa, Maryland, Penn State and Purdue).

Though the total stats didn't reflect a huge improvement – Ohio State finished the year No. 96 in passing yards allowed per game (245.8) – there was a marked change in the group's performance as new contributors filled roles admirably.

In the cornerback room, true freshman Denzel Burke earned a starting job from the jump and picked up plaudits from his coaches all season as he looked every bit the part of a No. 1 cornerback in just about every matchup he played, even with nagging injuries hampering his ability down the stretch of the season.

"He's got a long way to go," head coach Ryan Day said of Burke. "He's going to make some mistakes. But if he can learn from those mistakes, then he'll have a chance to be a very good player down the road.

"We knew he was talented but didn't know he'd be able to make the impact that he's had so far."

Opposite Burke, Cameron Brown earned the nod over Banks, and he too shone when needed, staking the claim in his words as one of the nation's better cornerbacks after overcoming injuries that ended each of his last two seasons.

"I believe I've shown flashes that I'm one of the top corners in the country," Brown said. "I've just dealt with different things, but I do believe I've shown flashes that I'm one of the top corners in the country."

And in the other three spots, Ohio State found contributions where it least expected. Williamson re-emerged as a leader for the defense, notching 27 tackles in what will be his final season as a Buckeye as he secured a full-time starting role in the final month of the season. Bullet Ronnie Hickman led the team in tackles with 100 and became the centerpiece of the defense in his first year as a starter. Paired with Craig Young, the Buckeyes worked the bullet position into unique spots and trusted it to make plays throughout the year, especially in the back-end against more run-heavy offenses.

"I think Ronnie's done a very good job," Day said. "He's obviously been very, very productive, and we're moving Craig into a little bit of a different role there, and so he's kind of finding his way in that new role. (We were always) trying to find a way for us to get them both on the field, because they're both very talented."

In the final seven games of the season, Hickman recorded 50 tackles, including a season-high 15 against Penn State.

Shaw was often the target of criticism in the secondary, but he too took steps forward as the season developed, racking up 39 tackles and an interception in the last seven games of the year to give a boost to the unit's grade across the board as not just a passable group, but the one that Ohio State could most consistently rely on in the back half of the year.

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



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# Newcomers Bolster Play On Special Teams

By **JOE DEMPSEY**

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

Ohio State's special teams units exceeded expectations early in the season to quell doubts stemming from the offseason departures of standout punter Drue Chrisman and consistent kicker Blake Haubeil. Freshman punter Jesse Mirco and transfer kicker Noah Ruggles stepped up to fill the voids, both grading well at the time of Buckeye Sports Bulletin's midterm grades in October. Mirco and Ruggles continued to excel in the second half of the season for the Buckeyes, while other areas showed room for improvement.

Long snapper Bradley Robinson helped Mirco and Ruggles thrive all year with steady snaps, taking pride in the success of his teammates.

"This year with Jesse and Noah, who have both performed really well, I measured my performance on, 'What are they doing? Are they doing great?'" Robinson said of Mirco and Ruggles. "Noah's a Groza semifinalist. I think Jesse – if we punted more than pooch punts and stuff – would probably be a Ray Guy finalist. He's talented. They're doing so well on the field, and if they're getting the recognition, that's all I need. It just means I'm doing my job."

Ohio State enjoyed success on kick returns, particularly thanks to freshman receiver Emeka Egbuka, but struggled on punt returns. Overall, the Buckeyes thrived in both kick and punt coverage, but their blemishes stood out in the Rose Bowl. What follows are BSB's second-half and final grades for each special teams unit.

## Punt, Field-Goal Block

Haskell Garrett blocked an extra-point attempt in Ohio State's 52-13 victory over Rutgers on Oct. 2, giving the Buckeyes' kick-blocking units a solid B-grade for the first half of the season. However, Garrett's swat marked the only kick block of the season for Ohio State. Not only did they fail to block another kick or punt, the Buckeyes also did not apply significant pressure to kickers and punters on a consistent basis. This is an area where the program has room to improve, blocking just one kick in the past two seasons after swatting three in 2019.

**BSB Midterm Grade: B**

**BSB Second-Half Grade: D**

**BSB Final Grade: C**

## Punt Team

Mirco began his Buckeye career on a strong note, impressing with his strong leg and ability to down opponents deep in their

own zone. The 24-year-old freshman from Freemantle, Australia, stepped into the big shoes left by Chrisman with a confident calmness and turned his strong start into a solid season. On the season, Mirco averaged 42.3 yards on his 31 punts, pinning 17 inside the 20.

Assisted by a stellar coverage team, Mirco helped Ohio State boast a net punting average of 40.9 to rank No. 34 nationally. On the season, opponents returned only seven punts for 41 yards against the Buckeyes for an average of 5.9 yards per return, ranking 40th in the country.

While Mirco impressed with his boot, his punt coverage team helped Ohio State stay on top of the field-position battle. Former walk-on wide receiver Chris Booker served as an unsung hero of the punt coverage team, stepping up as a gunner.

"It feels great coming from the club team last year, getting my opportunity to be able to play on special teams, and then trying to capitalize off that as best I can," Booker said.

A former teammate of Ezekiel Elliott at St. Louis John Burroughs School, Booker took an unconventional route to become a special teams starter at Ohio State. Booker began his collegiate career by taking a red-shirt at Dayton before transferring to Ohio State, where he chose to focus on academics and joined the club football team.

Under former BSB writer and OSU club football head coach James Grega, Booker was named a 2018 first-team All-American by the National Club Football Association after scoring seven touchdowns in just four games. He spent the past two seasons rotating between receiver and defensive back, but his standout speed earned him reps on special teams. The former walk-on takes great pride in pinning opponents deep to help out the defense.

"That's always the goal on punt and kickoff – decrease their field position and then increase our field position when we have the ball for kickoff return and punt return – so it's always the battle of field position," Booker said. "That's what (head coach Rya) Day preaches, and that's what we preach on special teams is to be able to flip the field and attack them on those numbers."

**BSB Midterm Grade: A**

**BSB Second-Half Grade: A**

**BSB Final Grade: A**

## Kickoff Return Defense

Ohio State's kickoff return defense continued to be a strong spot for most of the season following an excellent start. The Buckeyes finished the season at No. 20 nationally, allowing 17.8 yards per kick return, which includes the 97-yard kickoff return touchdown by Utah's Britain Covey in Ohio State's 48-45 Rose Bowl victory. Outside of the Utes' success against the Buckeyes on kickoff returns, the Buckeyes were excellent in coverage all season.

Ruggles kicked off 99 times with an average of 60.1 yards and 21 total touchbacks. Including the disappointing performance in the Rose Bowl, Ohio State ranked 20th in the nation in kickoff coverage, allowing an average of 17.8 yards per return. Ruggles gave credit to his aggressive teammates for their ability to limit opposing returns.

"It's pretty awesome," Ruggles said. "The guys on my kickoff team are a bunch of savages – they always go down and make the plays. I always know that I trust them. And even when my kicks aren't absolutely great, I know they're going to cover me on that. And I think it's the same with the punt team – we take special teams really seriously here, and you've really got to earn your way onto those units. You've got to earn your playing time, and I think it's important. And guys want to be on that team – they want to be a part of that – they want to make big plays on special teams."

**BSB Midterm Grade: A**

**BSB Second-Half Grade: A**

**BSB Final Grade: A**

## Punt, Kick Return

The punt return team was perhaps the weakest unit for the Buckeyes in 2021. After the Ohio State defense earned stops, the punt return team failed to make plays to improve field position. As a team, Ohio State averaged just 6.0 yards per punt return, tying for 95th in the FBS.

Garrett Wilson returned a team-high 13 punts, averaging 5.2 yards per return with a long of 23, but he returned only one punt in the second half of the season. Jaxon Smith-Njigba took over and led the team with a punt return average of 7.5 on his eight returns, while Chris Olave returned one punt for 4 yards.

While the Buckeyes struggled on punt returns, they transformed their kick return game into a productive unit. After finishing next-to-last in the nation with a meager 13.3 yards per return in 2020, Ohio State climbed to No. 22 in the country at 24.5 yards per return.

Egbuka took the kick return unit to another level in his first season, ranking 12th in the nation at 29.0 yards per return. The dynamic returner shone as a bright spot for an otherwise unimpressive return team. Xavier Johnson averaged 17.3 yards on three returns; Julian Fleming averaged 7.3 yards on three returns; TreVeyon Henderson had a 19-yard return; and Steele Chambers posted

a 13-yard return.

The kick return team performed at an A-level for most of the season, but the lackluster punt return team brought the return game's overall grade down to a B.

**BSB Midterm Grade: B**

**BSB Second-Half Grade: B**

**BSB Final Grade: B**

## Field Goals, PATs

The Ohio State field goal/PAT unit entered the season with uncertainty following the departure of Haubeil, but Ruggles quickly quelled any doubts with a strong start to the season. After connecting on all six of his field-goal attempts and 37 of his PATs in the first half of the year, Ruggles finished the season at 95.2 percent on field goals (20 of 21) and 100.0 percent on PATs (74 of 74). Dominic DiMaccio made his only two PATs on the season, and Ohio State's streak of consecutive PATs extended to 177. The Buckeyes' last miss on a PAT came when DiMaccio misfired during a 76-5 win against Miami (Ohio) in September 2019.

Protecting their kickers is another strong element of the Buckeyes' kicking game. They were one of 29 FBS programs that did not allow a blocked kick in 2021.

Ruggles enjoyed a solid start to the season, but he became a game-winning weapon in the second half. Ohio State won back-to-back Big Ten battles with Penn State and Nebraska by nine points apiece, and Ruggles went 4 for 4 on field goals in both contests.

"When you kick four field goals, and you win by 9, it's obviously huge," Day said of Ruggles after the Nov. 7 win at Nebraska. "And it was a 46-yarder into the wind – it wasn't a strong wind, but it was enough – and he had a lot of distance on it, and protection was solid. He's becoming a weapon for us, and that's huge."

"It's a good feeling when you've got a guy you feel strong about in there, and he's been coming through the past couple games."

The Buckeyes ended their season in a Rose Bowl showdown with Utah, and they needed Ruggles to seal the deal. The UNC transfer drilled a 19-yard field goal to give Ohio State a 48-45 victory in a game it trailed 35-21 at halftime.

"Oh my god, I'm so glad it came down to me," Ruggles said. "I'm so glad I was able to have that opportunity to get that kick to win the game for these guys. Man, I love this team. They put everything on the line tonight. We went into the room at halftime, and obviously it wasn't going our way, but we decided to turn that thing around and fight all the way to the end."

Even though his winning kick was only a 19-yarder, Ruggles said he approaches every kick the same regardless of distance or situation, understanding that each three-pointer could be the decider.

"Every field goal to me is like a game-winner, because it could come down to it at the end of the game," Ruggles said. "College football is crazy nowadays – it comes down to three points – so you can't really miss those opportunities, you've just got to make the most of them."

**BSB Midterm Grade: A**

**BSB Second-Half Grade: A**

**BSB Final Grade: A**

### Rating The Specialists

Here is where the OSU specialists ranked among the Big Ten and nationally.

Category	Stats	NCAA	Big Ten
Avg. Per Punt	40.9	34th	7th
Punt Return Avg.	6.0	T-95th	12th
KO Return Avg.	24.5	22nd	2nd
Punt Return Def.	5.9	40th	7th
KO Return Def.	17.8	20th	8th

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# Stover Eyeing Return To Linebacker Position

By **PATRICK MAYHORN**

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Associate Editor

Cade Stover could be on the move again. For the fourth time in three years at Ohio State, the Mansfield, Ohio, product tried his hand at a new position as the Buckeyes prepared for their Rose Bowl matchup with Utah, and this time, the former four-star recruit was right back where he started.

After he was recruited to Ohio State as an outside linebacker, Stover quickly jumped down to defensive end shortly after his arrival. He worked there for his first season in 2019 before he jumped to tight end in 2020 with the Buckeyes facing a shortage of depth behind Jeremy Ruckert and Luke Farrell following the departure of Rashod Berry.

When Farrell and Jake Hausmann finished their Ohio State careers at the end of the 2020 campaign, Stover slid into the No. 2 tight end spot in behind Ruckert, where he served this season, working largely as a blocker but hauling in five receptions for 76 yards while playing in all 12 of Ohio State's regular-season games.

But with Ruckert and fullback Mitch Rossi entrenched entering the Rose Bowl, and the pairing of redshirt freshman Joe Royer and redshirt freshman Gee Scott Jr. coming on strong, the Buckeyes looked to take advantage of their newfound depth at tight end. In those bowl practices, they worked Stover back in at linebacker, where Ruckert said his teammate is most comfortable – and where the Buckeyes are suddenly lacking in bodies after several in-season transfers and injuries to major contributors such as Cody Simon, who did not participate against the Utes after a season-ending shoulder surgery.

"We've gone against each other in practice a lot," Ruckert said. "He loves it over there, seems like he's home over there, back where he belongs. And practices are fun with us going at it talking smack. It's good to see him enjoying it again. He loved playing tight end, but I think linebacker is really where he wants to be. And we're excited to see that. And hopefully, these

young tight ends can step up because they're doing a great job."

Stover spent his time in the Sam linebacker spot alongside starters Steele Chambers and Tommy Eichenberg both in practice and in the Rose Bowl, offering Ohio State a bit of a new look at the position in general. All three earned a start against the run-heavy Utah offense, with Eichenberg leading the game in tackles (17) and Chambers adding five, while Stover notched six.

As for the long-term implications of this move? The Buckeyes weren't yet ready to think that far out.

"I asked the defensive guys," offensive coordinator and tight ends coach Kevin Wilson told the media Dec. 29. "We thought they were a little bit shy of some body types with a couple of injuries. And with Jeremy and Mitch – Joe Royer has really come on very, very well too, he'll be the third – (we have the guys at tight end). As a matter of fact, (Joe) is technically the second tight end in this game with Mitch being the fullback, and we've got Gee Scott Jr. too. We thought we had enough guys to manage a one-week deal, and we'll see how this goes."

Stover's future position could come down to incoming recruiting numbers. For now, though, the focus is just on getting a new look for a player whom Ohio State would really like to get onto the field more.

"With recruiting, we can decide then what moves have to happen," Wilson said. "I've had a lot of fun with it because I love him. I do everything I can to give him as much grief as I can because, when I love you, I like to grieve you a little bit. I've got a lot of respect for him.

"He's brought a lot of energy. When you say how's practice been, he's brought a lot of energy to the defense. I think playing offense helped him understand some offensive looks of what's going on, so his anticipation looks better. He's practiced well. Defensive guys want to use him. It's been fun going against him. We personally look each other up and have a little fun with each other during practice. It has been really good."

Interestingly enough, throughout his chat



SONNY BROCKWAY

**SWITCHING SIDES** — After jumping from defensive end to tight end in 2020, Ohio State's Cade Stover (16) is looking at a move back to the defensive side of the ball and a return to his high school position.

with the media, Wilson several times eschewed the traditional coaching wisdom in talking about what could go into making the final decision for Stover's future. He said that a big part in the choice will be Stover's preference, which he wants to place as the top priority. There's room at tight end for a move into a starting role next season, but if Stover's preference is on the defensive side of the ball, Wilson doesn't want to deprive him of that if the numbers allow it.

"We'll go through after this game and decide long-term, and I said this to him when we talked to him. I said, 'I don't want to hear what's best for the team because what's best for the team sometimes is a bunch of crap when you're

a player,'" Wilson said. "I said, 'What's best for you? If you don't want to go over to the defense, we'll stay here, you'll keep playing. You'll have a good opportunity. You'll play in this game and play special teams.'

"And now as we finish this game up, after a quick break, we'll get into January and start getting a plan for spring. I do think we're getting to a point where we need to get direction for him so he can have high success. Whether that be he's coming back and going to be a tight end. With Jeremy and Mitch being seniors, there's going to be a great opportunity at tight end.

"But right now, there's a little bit of void at linebacker, and there's an opportunity there. I will say this, I think he loves playing over there and brings a lot of energy and a lot of fun. I think he's been good for the defense in this short period of time. Coach (Ryan Day) will talk about what's best for the team. Personally, I want what's best for Cade. He's one of my favorite guys on the whole team. He's been a pleasure to coach. Selfishly, I'd like to coach him, but I want to do what's best for Cade Stover."

As for the redshirt sophomore himself, Stover was hesitant to make any declarations on where he would prefer to play, saying instead that he wants to line up wherever he's needed most, but after his showing in the Rose Bowl, he sounded keen on the idea of staying put on defense. He mentioned Eichenberg and Chambers as two of his best friends on the team, and he relished lining up alongside them.

"I'm so happy to be back over there," Stover said after the game. "Seeing Tommy win (defensive player of the game) and playing with Steele, my best friends, it's just unbelievable. I was so happy when the opportunity came. So much emotion inside of me just came out. I'm just so happy to be over there and be with my best friends.

"I don't think I'll ever be able to let this (feeling) go. I've got to watch the film yet, but it felt good."

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# Meyer's NFL Stint Was Controversial, Short

By **CRAIG MERZ**

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

The downfall was as swift as it was dramatic when Urban Meyer's brief but disastrous run as an NFL head coach ended after 13 games when he was fired by the Jacksonville Jaguars on Dec. 16.

Ostensibly it was a report the previous day in the Tampa Bay Times in which former kicker Josh Lambo claimed Meyer kicked him in the leg and cursed at him while Lambo was stretching before practice the week leading to the final preseason game that caused the action.

Meyer said the allegation was inaccurate and he had witnesses to prove it.

"(General manager) Trent (Baalke) and I met with him on multiple occasions to encourage his performance, and this was never brought up," Meyer told the Tampa Bay Times. "I was fully supportive of Josh during his time with the team and wish him nothing but the best."

It was the latest in the series of missteps by the former Ohio State coach, but it was the final straw for Jaguars owner Shad Khan, who hired Meyer on Jan. 14, 2021. Although details were not announced, the contract was reported by various sources to be five years at \$9 million per year.

Soon after he took the job, Meyer created a ruckus by hiring then having to release a disgraced former University of Iowa strength coach. There was also Meyer's perceived mishandling of the development by rookie quarterback Trevor Lawrence.

Even more damaging was the social media postings early in the season of Meyer dancing with a woman other than his wife, Shelley, at a restaurant he owns in Columbus. That incident was followed by numerous accounts of the players mocking his coaching ability and dissension between Meyer and his staff.

"After deliberation over many weeks and a thorough analysis of the entirety of Urban's tenure with our team, I am bitterly disappointed to arrive at the conclusion that an immediate change is imperative for everyone," Khan said upon Meyer's firing.

A veteran coach, or even a first-year one like Meyer, might have been able to survive if the team was winning but the Jaguars, 1-15 in 2020-21, didn't. They were 2-11 under Meyer before his exit.

After compiling a 187-32 record – the third-highest winning percentage all-time among college coaches – at Bowling Green, Utah, Florida and Ohio State and earning three national championships (Florida in 2006 and '08, OSU in 2014), Meyer admitted that losing so often at the pro level was difficult to digest.

Just four days prior to his firing he was criticized for his cold, drive-by postgame handshake with Tennessee Titans coach Mike Vrabel, the former Ohio State player who was the defensive line coach for Meyer's first two seasons at OSU (2012-13). The Titans beat Jacksonville 20-0.

"Someone asked me about Vrabel's

(handshake)," Meyer told the NFL Network's Ian Rapoport in a story published Dec. 18. "We're really close. That had nothing to do with him. That's probably one of my issues why I've thought some of the things I said: I can't take losing. I try to accept it. It just eats away at my soul. And I believe our players deserve better."

"I tell people, losing eats away at your soul," he continued. "Once you start losing, it's hard on everybody. I thought at one point, when we won two out of three, there was some momentum, great energy, the defense was really playing well. We were running the ball, and then when that dried up on us, then we started turning the ball over. We had that bye week and then (James Robinson) gets hurt."

There were reports that Meyer after the Tennessee loss got into arguments with his assistants and called them losers. He denied those allegations.

Meyer became a punchline as another college coach who failed in the NFL. Even after his firing the jokes continued.

At his introductory press conference after being elevated to interim head coach from an assistant, Darrell Bevell was met with a statement from an unknown person off camera, "I think you've got a really good chance to finish with more career wins as an interim coach than Urban has as a head coach."

Bevell smiled but did not comment.

Of note, the Jaguars lost three of four games under Bevell to finish at 3-14.

The players weren't unhappy to see Meyer go.

"I wouldn't say 'relief,' but it brings some clarity and some direction moving forward," Lawrence said the day of the firing. "We really want to go and finish this season strong. To be honest, it's been hard the last week with everything going on. There are a lot of things being stirred up – on the outside, too. It didn't help. It made things a lot of worse."

To recap some of Meyer's flash points in Jacksonville:

- In February, he hired former Iowa strength coach Chris Doyle, who was accused of making racist remarks and belittling Hawkeyes players. Doyle resigned a day later.

- In May, at Meyer's urging, the Jaguars signed Tim Tebow to play tight end. The former quarterback helped Florida win the two national titles for Meyer. Tebow was released during the first cuts of the preseason but many viewed him as an unneeded and unwanted distraction.

- In June, the NFL fined the Jaguars \$200,000 and Meyer \$100,000 for excessive contact during a June 1 organized team activity.

- In August, the NFL Players Association said it was concerned after Meyer admitted he and Baalke considered a player's vaccination status for final roster cuts.

Meyer also flip-flopped in playing Lawrence or Gardner Minshew as the starter throughout the preseason before Minshew was traded to the Philadelphia Eagles just before the season opener.

As the regular season began, Meyer

appeared unprepared for the level of play in the NFL, and his decision making came into question.

In the first-game loss to the Houston Texans, considered the worst team in the league, Robinson had just five carries.

Later in the season after Robinson lost fumbles in two games, he was benched for 16 and 20 plays, respectively. When asked about it, Meyer said the decision was strictly by running backs coach Bernie Parmalee.

Lawrence publicly criticized the coaching staff and told them the team's best offensive weapon needed to be on the field.

Meyer got into hot water when photos and a video surfaced of him appearing to dance with a young woman at Urban Chophouse in the Short North District of Columbus the weekend after the Jaguars lost a Thursday night game in Cincinnati to fall to 0-4.

He elected to stay in Ohio instead of returning on the team plane per usual. He said he was out with his family when a group of people wanted a picture with him and they coaxed him onto the dance floor.

"I just apologized to the team and staff for being a distraction," Meyer said. "It was stupid, so I explained everything that happened and owned it. Just stupid. I should not have myself in that kind of position."

Khan at the time put out a terse statement saying Meyer's actions were "inexcusable."

Meyer's relationship with the players dissolved even further after that, and some openly derided his "apology."

Jaguars running back Carlos Hyde, who played for Meyer at Ohio State, said many players were resistant to Meyer's intensity, even during the preseason when the top priority should be preparing for the regular season as opposed to winning meaningless games.

"One thing with Coach Meyer, he wants to keep you on your toes," Hyde said. "He never wants to let you walk around here feeling comfortable. Some guys were trying to figure him out: 'He made me feel like I might be here today, gone the next.' But I was like, 'That's Coach Meyer.'"

One person who defended Meyer after his firing was former Dallas Cowboys coach Jimmy Johnson, who successfully made the jump from the University of Miami to the NFL.

"Going to Jacksonville, just like when I went to Dallas, you knew you were going to lose, you're going to have adversity," Johnson told Pro Football Talk. "The difference is, in Dallas, I had my entire coaching staff from college. I had my administrative assistant, I had my P.R. director, I had my trainer. We were all on the same page when we had adversity. He didn't have that in Jacksonville. There was a lot of backstabbing, one thing or the other, because he didn't have his people."

His words drew attention for numerous reasons. Foremost, he and Meyer are friends and were colleagues at Fox Sports, where Meyer spent two years covering college football after retiring from

Ohio State after the 2018 season.

Also, the "his people" comment belies that Meyer was given control to hire his staff in Jacksonville.

Meyer has been a lightning rod wherever he's gone. He was accused of running a lax program at Florida with 31 players arrested from 2005-10 before he left due to health concerns.

He was an analyst for ESPN in 2011 prior to being named head coach at Ohio State, where he compiled an 83-9 record.

In 2018, he was placed on administrative leave and suspended the first three games of the season over his handling of spousal abuse allegations against assistant coach Zach Smith.

During the season Meyer experienced severe headaches due a cyst on his brain. He again resigned for health reasons following a 12-1 season that included a Rose Bowl victory over Washington on New Year's Day 2019. Ryan Day became head coach the next day.


However, the lure of coaching never left Meyer, though he was respected as an analyst for Fox and his preparation and presentation were well regarded.

Meyer, 57, likely can resume that career if he desires, but his NFL days seem over and a return to college coaching may be on hold for a while.

In his interview with Rapoport, Meyer expressed regret how his time with the Jaguars ended.

"I just apologize to Jacksonville," he said. "It's one of the reasons I took the job. Shad's a great man. Two reasons I took the job: One for him, the second reason was I loved Jacksonville and wanted to help turn around an organization that had been struggling."

"So, I'm just heartbroken that we weren't able to do that. I still believe it's going to be done. It's too good of a place."



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# Remembering Buckeyes We Lost In 2021

By **DAVID BREITHAUP**  
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Contributor

You don't need BSB to tell you that 2021 was a rough year. In what was thought to be a return to normalcy, COVID-19 apparently had different plans for us in 2021. We kept on however, with a rededication to the memories of friends and family members who left the stage last year. What follows is a list of Buckeyes who passed away in 2021, and though we will miss them, they left us with enough memories to make any Buckeye proud.

**Aurelias Thomas** passed away on Feb. 5 at age 86. Thomas was an Ohio State All-American guard and College Football Hall of Famer. He played for the Buckeyes from 1954-57. Weighing only 202 pounds, Thomas was considered undersized for a guard in his era. However, he became known for his tremendous technique as a blocker and mobility as a tackler, and he was able to outmaneuver opponents who were bigger.

Thomas led Ohio State during his senior year to a 9-1 record and a 10-7 victory over Oregon in the Rose Bowl, after which the Buckeyes were named national champions by the coaches and Football Writers Association polls.

He went on to the Pittsburgh Steelers in the 1958 NFL draft in the 22nd round, though he never played in the league. Instead, he became an assistant coach at Ohio State for the following season before becoming a teacher in the Columbus Public School System, where he taught science and physical education for 20 years. He also coached football for six years, four at Columbus East and two at Columbus Central, helping 40 students to earn college scholarships during that time.

Thomas was inducted into the College Football Hall of Fame in 1989 and the Ohio State Athletics Hall of Fame in 1992.

**Jermon Jackson**, former OSU running back, age 45, died unexpectedly on Feb. 26. Jackson was a legend to his high school teammates, the Fighting Tigers of Ironton, Ohio. He was a two-time first-team all-state selection before arriving at OSU, where he was part of the highly touted 1994 recruiting class. Jackson set a freshman record by scoring three touchdowns in his first game with the Buckeyes.

Although he never became a full-time starter, spelling Eddie George in 1994-95 and Pepe Pearson in 1996, Jackson finished his career with 698 yards and seven touchdowns as well as six receptions for 47 yards

in 26 games at Ohio State from 1994-98.

**Granville Waiters**, former Ohio State men's basketball player, passed away on March 23 at the age of 60. Waiters played from 1979-83, totaling 103 games for Ohio State, including 61 starts. His career average was 5.8 points per game with a high of 10.4 points per contest in his senior year. He was a proficient rebounder, hauling in 7.5 boards per game in his final season for the program. On defense, Waiters averaged 1.9 blocks per game in 1981-82 before upping it to 2.2 per game the following season.

Waiters was drafted 39th overall by the Portland Trailblazers, where he averaged 2.4 points, 2.2 rebounds and 0.7 blocks per game during 249 contests played in five total seasons. Following his NBA time, Waiters played overseas for FC Barcelona and Caja Bilbao. During his 1989-90 season with Bilbao, his best European season, he averaged 9.9 points, 8.2 rebounds and 1.1 blocks per contest.

After his playing career closed, Waiters served on the board of directors for After School All-Stars in Ohio which "provides programs and transformative opportunities that help students develop the skills, knowledge and habits needed to succeed in life, school and their future career," according to its website.

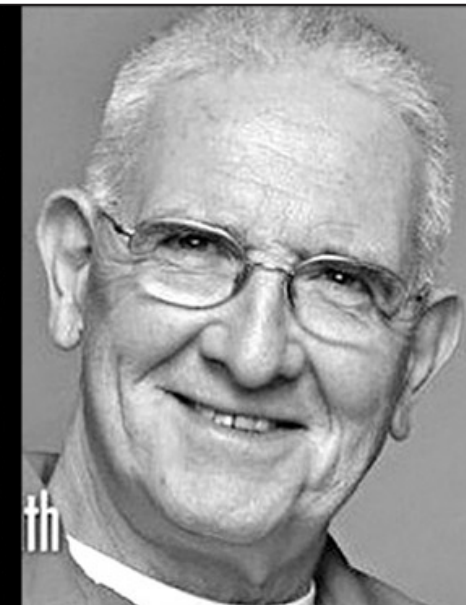
Those close to Waiters sang his praises, both as a player and man. Former Buckeye Jared Sullinger called him a Columbus legend. Current head coach Chris Holtmann said in a statement, "I've been so impressed by the reverence and love his former teammates have expressed this week. It's clear Granville meant so much to so many."

**Kharim Stephens**, former Ohio State walk-on defensive lineman, was killed March 27 in a motorcycle accident. He was 30 years old. A native of Queens Village, NY, Stephens was with the Buckeyes in 2012 but did not appear in any games. He graduated from Ohio State with a degree in public policy analysis and worked as a patient access coordinator at the university.

**Marv Homan** passed away on June 2 at the age of 94. Homan was the longtime Ohio State director of sports information. He began his career in 1949, just one year after graduating from Ohio State, and worked at OSU until retiring in 1987.

Homan's work brought him in contact with such luminaries as Wes Fesler, Woody Hayes and Earle Bruce as well as players such as Howard "Hopalong" Cassady, Vic Janowicz and Archie Griffin. He missed just one of the 403 football games during his 39 years at the school.

He took over as sports information direc-



FILE PHOTO

**LOST CHAMPION — Dick Schafrath, a lineman on Ohio State's 1957 national championship team as well as an NFL champion with the Cleveland Browns, was one the Buckeyes who passed away in 2021.**

tor in 1973. His voice was known to many as the voice of the Buckeyes for 30 years on the radio and later as a television play-by-play announcer.

His lengthy career earned much praise. Homan received the Arch Ward Meritorious Service Award by the College Sports Information Directors of America in 1988. In 2007, he became one of just four Ohio State administrators to be inducted into the Ohio State Athletics Hall of Fame.

**Alex Gibbs** died at age 80 on July 12 from complications of a stroke. Gibbs was an Ohio State offensive coordinator and offensive line coach in the 1970s before embarking on an NFL career that spanned more than 30 years. He coached the offensive line for the Denver Broncos from 1984-87 and again from 1995-2003 before the joining the Broncos for one year in 2013 as a consultant for the offensive line, which was his last year in coaching.

During his time with the Buckeyes, they averaged 32.0 points per game in his first season, which was fourth best in the country. Ohio State's offense remained in the top 25 during each of his four years and earned 36 wins to just 10 losses.

Gibbs added two Super Bowl wins to his résumé (XXXII and XXXIII) during his second stint with the Broncos.

Gibbs left a legacy of schemes that can still be seen in a variety of ways to this day, including at Ohio State, where offensive coordinator Kevin Wilson continues to implement many of the same ideas in the run game of a coordinator who was on the same campus more than 40 years prior.

**Bo Scott** died on Aug. 4 at the age of 78. He was a reserve running back for the Buckeyes in 1962, running 21 times for 142 yards and a touchdown. In 1965 he was drafted by the Cleveland Browns in the third round but decided to play for the Ottawa Rough Riders in the Canadian Football League. He became a star in that league and helped the Rough Riders win the Grey Cup championship in 1968.

Scott teamed up with the Browns the fol-

lowing year and ran for 2,124 yards and 18 touchdowns in six seasons.

After his playing career, Scott returned to Ohio State and earned his degree and worked for the Franklin County Juvenile Court from 1979 to 2004. He spent his last years working with troubled youth in the Columbus area.

**Dick Schafrath**, a former Ohio State captain and national champion, passed away Aug. 15 at 84 years old. Schafrath played offensive tackle and defensive tackle for Ohio State on its 1957 national title team and added captaincy to those roles in 1958 when the Buckeyes went 6-1-2 with a 38-28 win on the road against No. 2 Iowa and a 20-14 victory over Michigan to close the season.

In both seasons, Schafrath helped to block for strong rushing attacks, leading the way for the quartet of Bob White, Don Clark, Dick LeBeau and Frank Kremblas, the latter of whom took the snaps at quarterback for the Buckeyes.

Schafrath beat Michigan in both of his seasons as a letter winner for the Buckeyes before going on to play 13 years for the Cleveland Browns from 1959-71, earning All-Pro honors four times and winning Cleveland's most recent championship in 1964, blocking for, among others, Jim Brown.

He coached in Washington, D.C., for six years after the end of his career and liked the town so much that he decided to enter politics himself, earning a spot in the Ohio Senate for 16 years, serving from 1986-2003. After his retirement, he went back to Ohio State, earning a degree in 2006 at 69 years old. Six years later, Ohio State inducted him into its Athletics Hall of Fame.

**Cecil "Cy" Souders**, former offensive and defensive end, died at age 100 on Aug. 30. He was a member of Ohio State's 1942 national championship team. Souders played for four different coaches during his career with the Buckeyes, which spanned from 1939-46. He was recruited out of high school by Francis Schmidt and spent his

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## IN MEMORIAM

freshman year playing on Ohio State's taxi squad. He left briefly to get married but returned in 1942 and played for Paul Brown, helping Ohio State to its first national championship that year.

After three seasons, the last of which he played for Carroll Widdoes, he left school again to serve in the U.S. Navy during World War II. He returned to Ohio State in 1946 and played his last season for Paul Bixler, winning first-team All-America honors and earning team MVP honors in the process.

Souders entered the 1945 NFL draft and was picked in the 25th round by the then Washington Redskins but ended up playing three seasons for the Detroit Lions. After football he started a 38-year career in business and became president of his own company, which managed freight in Detroit.

Souders was inducted in the College Football Hall of Fame in 2002.

**John Mummey** played fullback and quarterback for Woody Hayes at Ohio State in the early 1960s and then joined Hayes' coaching staff after graduation. He died Sept. 6 at his home in Fairport Harbor, Ohio, at the age of 80.

Mummey was an All-Ohio halfback at Harvey High School in his hometown of Painesville, Ohio. He began his college career at Ohio State in 1960 and moved to quarterback in 1961, helping the Buckeyes win a share of the national championship that season. He was the team's "running" QB, rotating with Bill Murkowski and Joe Sparma. Mummey finished his college career with 775 yards rushing and four touchdowns, averaging 5.7 yards per carry in 1961 and 5.6 yards in 1962.

Following graduation, Mummey became a graduate assistant on Hayes' staff in 1963 before embarking on a teaching career that included high school coaching. He returned to Columbus in 1969 as OSU freshman coach before taking charge in 1972 of receivers and tight ends as well as the team's conditioning program.

After leaving OSU in 1976, Mummey worked for several years in business and then became an Ohio middle school teacher in Kettering and West Carrollton before re-

tiring in 2002.

**Devan Bogard** was killed during the early hours of Oct. 12 when fire engulfed his apartment in Elyria, Ohio. He was 27. Investigators later ruled the cause of the fire as accidental.

Bogard was a receiver and safety on Cleveland Glenville's Division I state runner-up team in 2009 before becoming one of the top recruits in the country. He signed with Ohio State and was a three-year letterman from 2012-14 but a litany of injuries – including three ACL tears – limited his impact.

After graduating from Ohio State, Bogard joined the Elyria football program in 2019 as a linebackers coach on head coach Devlin Culliver's staff. The program had been down for several years but had qualified for the playoffs at the time of Bogard's death.

**Ivan Douglas**, the starting left tackle on Ohio State's 2002 national championship team, died Oct. 21 due to complications from COVID-19. He was 41.

Douglas was hospitalized Sept. 22 after contracting the virus and had remained in an intensive care unit, at one point being placed in a medically induced coma before his death.

A native of University Heights, Ohio, Douglas attended Benedictine High School in Cleveland. His career with the Buckeyes was hindered by the development of blood clots in his lungs. While he started as a junior in 2002 for the national championship team, the condition sidelined him for the 2001 and 2003 seasons. He was a three-year letterman from 2000-02, but the blood clots led to a premature end of his football career. Douglas was a social worker in recent years and leaves behind a wife and two young sons.

**Mike Bordner**, longtime Ohio State athletic trainer, died Oct. 21 after a lengthy battle with cancer. He was 76.



Devan Bogard

Bordner spent 33 years as a full-time athletic trainer at OSU, working primarily with the men's basketball program before his retirement in 2000.

He received a degree in education from Ohio State in 1969. His tenure as a trainer spanned five coaches including Fred Taylor, Eldon Miller, Gary Williams, Randy Ayers and Jim O'Brien. In 1979 he was the trainer for the USA Basketball squad that competed at the World Cup Games. He was also the head athletic trainer for a Big Ten all-star team that toured Japan in 1995. Bordner received an honorary Varsity "O" Hall of Fame award in 2000.

"I believe you tracked down my dislodged tooth in '81 and gave it a chance to be saved for a while," said former OSU star Clark Kellogg of Bordner, who was known to go the extra mile.

**Tom Matte** passed away from complications of leukemia on Nov. 2 at the age of 82 in his home at Ruxton, Md. A native of Cleveland, Matte was an All-America quarterback for Ohio State. He was a first pick in the 1961 NFL draft by the Baltimore Colts and switched to the halfback position. Injuries to Johnny Unitas and Gary Cuozzo thrust Matte into the limelight, and he took over as QB for three games late in 1965.

"It's probably one of my greatest career highlights," Matte said. "I was fortunate that I led the league in total offense a couple times, and I did a lot of good things, I guess, but I had more fun playing quarterback in those three games than anything else."

It was during this time that Matte instituted the infamous wrist band with his plays

written on it, later becoming a staple for many teams.

Matte was a pro-bowl pick in '68 and '69 and helped the Colts to the NFL championship in 1968, making the cover of Sports Illustrated the following week. The Colts went on to win Super Bowl V later in Matte's career in 1971, though he was injured and didn't play. He retired in 1972, working briefly as a sports broadcaster for CBS and then for a decade on Baltimore radio covering the Ravens.

**Richard "Dick" Finn Jr.**, age 88, passed away at his home under the care of Ohio-Health Hospice on Nov. 16. Finn taught math and science as well as coaching football and baseball at Toledo Catholic Central.

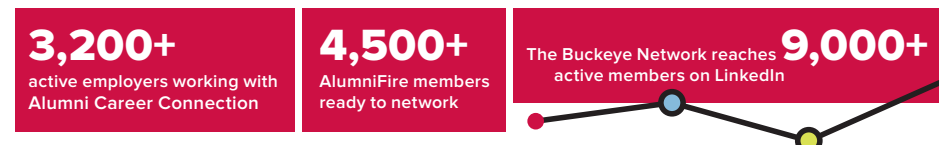
His love of baseball kept him involved in the sport for most of his life. He pitched batting practice for the Toledo Mud Hens and became the head baseball coach at the University of Toledo in 1964, where he remained for five years. Finn was lured to Ohio State in 1969 to fill in for Marty Karow while the latter recovered from illness. He remained for six years as an assistant coach before becoming head baseball coach in 1975.

Finn stepped down in 1987 to become special assistant to athletic director Rick Bay, and he remained an OSU athletic administrator until retiring in 1994.

He filled in his remaining years golfing and doing charity and volunteer work. Finn was inducted into the OHSBCA Hall of Fame in 1975, Lima Catholic HOF in 1990, Ohio Central District HOF in 2000 and Toledo CC HOF in 2006.

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# Rose Bowl Win Proved Cooper's Crown Jewel

*Editor's Note: Buckeye Sports Bulletin is marking the 25th anniversary of Ohio State's 1996 football season with a two-part feature on that Big Ten and Rose Bowl championship season. This is the second in that series.*

By **MARK REA**

BSB Managing Editor Emeritus

Just when John Cooper thought his days of being snakebit at Ohio State were over, the same old snake delivered the same old bite.

The Buckeyes had run roughshod over 10 consecutive opponents to begin the 1996 season, outscoring those teams by a lopsided 426-101 margin while racing to a No. 2 spot in the national rankings. Littered among the Buckeyes' vanquished foes were three ranked opponents, including No. 5 Notre Dame and No. 4 Penn State, dispatched rather easily on back-to-back weekends in late September and early October.

A 27-17 win at Indiana gave Cooper his second Big Ten championship and first outright title in nine years at OSU and punched the program's ticket to the Rose Bowl for the first time in a dozen years. A victory in Pasadena against undefeated and second-ranked Arizona State might just give Ohio State its first national championship since 1968.

But just as the celebration got started, Michigan spoiled the party.

Entering the game with three losses, including their last two in a row, the No. 21 Wolverines took full advantage of the Buckeyes' poorest performance of the year and ran back north across the border with a 13-9 upset victory. The loss dropped Cooper's record to a dismal 1-7-1 against his team's archrival and left the coach searching for answers yet again after failing in the regular-season finale.

"I don't know," the coach said at the time. "You play defense like we did and hold them to 13 points, you ought to win the football game. But we didn't get it done. Give them credit and blame us — or blame me for not getting the job done."

The promise of another season had been squandered, and frustrated fans again prepared to train their offseason assault on Cooper. But just as a renewed cacophony of criticism reached its crescendo, the coach confounded his detractors one more time by leading his team to an exciting come-from-behind Rose Bowl victory against the second-ranked Sun Devils.

"That game, in my opinion, was the greatest victory for John Cooper — not just at Ohio State but during his career as a head coach," longtime OSU football historian Jack Park told BSB. "John was a head coach for nearly 25 years, he's deservedly in the College Football Hall of Fame, and he had some major, major victories. But I think the win against Arizona State in the 1997 Rose Bowl was the signature win of his career."

Cooper himself doesn't disagree.

"I was in coaching for a long time, and it's certainly a game I'll never forget," the coach told BSB recently. "Arizona State was 11-0, ranked No. 2 in the country, and if they win that football game, they're national champions. But we beat them, and I think it was the greatest victory I've ever been associated with."

Much of the criticism stemming for the

loss to Michigan surrounded the fact that Cooper had decided to start sophomore Joe Germaine at quarterback for the first time all season while rotating junior Stan Jackson into the lineup for a few series. The system had worked all year with Jackson starting and Germaine relieving, but then everything came undone against the Wolverines.

Germaine missed split end Dimitrious Stanley in the end zone early, an incompletion that led to Ohio State's first field goal, and Jackson later overthrew a wide-open Michael Wiley, a misfire that led to the Buckeyes' second field goal. Germaine re-entered the game late in the first half and had another potential touchdown pass go off the fingertips of running back Pepe Pearson.

When the team began Rose Bowl preparations in December, Cooper had learned his lesson. He quickly announced he would go back to Jackson as his starter in Pasadena.

OSU's opponent was Arizona State, a school where Cooper had been head coach from 1985-87 and a campus located just a few minutes from where Germaine grew up. But the Sun Devils didn't exactly lament losing out on a native son. They didn't even recruit Germaine, despite the fact he threw for more than 2,000 yards in each of his junior and senior seasons and led Mountain View High School to back-to-back state championship game appearances.

No major college seemed interested in the smallish quarterback with the baby face. His only scholarship offer came from BYU, and that only as a token gesture because of his Mormon faith. Then, when the Cougars suddenly signed an All-America quarterback prospect from California, even they decided there was no room on the roster for Germaine.

Reluctant to give up his dream of becoming the quarterback at a major college program, Germaine enrolled at Scottsdale Community College and flourished, showcasing his strong arm and pinpoint accuracy while running a high-octane offense and displaying the kind of leadership skills every coach wants his quarterback to possess.

Ohio State assistant Larry Coker, who had been defensive backs coach on Cooper's staff in 1993 and '94, had scouted Germaine in high school and lobbied for the Buckeyes to extend a scholarship offer. Cooper wasn't exactly sold on a 6-0, 180-pound quarterback prospect, but he decided to take a chance on the youngster.

Former OSU assistant Bill Conley, who was then in his sixth season as Cooper's recruiting coordinator, told BSB he remembered the head coach didn't think he needed another scholarship quarterback on the roster.

"We had Stan coming back, and he had been Bobby Hoying's backup for the last couple of years, and we had already committed to signing Mark Garcia, another JUCO transfer out of California," Conley said. "We were looking at another couple of prospects late in the game when Larry started lobbying for Joe. I remember it was a pretty good selling job on Larry's part."

Meanwhile, Arizona State wasn't worried much about Germaine. They had their own star quarterback in Jake "The Snake" Plummer, a schoolboy legend out of Idaho who had become an instant star for the Sun Devils.



FILE PHOTO

**AT LONG LAST — John Cooper (left) deployed Joe Germaine (right) for a game-winning drive to earn his first and only Rose Bowl victory as Ohio State's coach against Arizona State following the 1996 regular season.**

He was a four-year starter who had finished third in the 1996 Heisman Trophy balloting behind Florida quarterback Danny Wuerffel and Iowa State running back Troy Davis, and just ahead of Ohio State offensive tackle Orlando Pace.

Plummer threw for 2,776 yards and 24 TDs that season and ran one of the most explosive offenses in the nation, but the quarterback was by no means a one-man show. He had plenty of help from tailback Terry Battle, a second-team All-American who rushed for 1,077 yards that season, as well as consensus All-America left tackle Juan Roque.

On defense, ASU's leader was Derrick Rodgers, another All-America performer who went on to an eight-year NFL career as a linebacker with Miami and New Orleans. The Sun Devils also had the services of an undersized but lightning-quick and hard-hitting junior linebacker by the name of Pat Tillman.

Head coach Bruce Snyder was in his fifth season in Tempe and headed for national Coach of the Year honors. All he needed to complete the Sun Devils' first perfect season in 21 years was a victory against the Buckeyes in the Rose Bowl.

## Defensive Struggle Early

Despite an uncharacteristically overcast morning that spawned off-and-on rain showers, a crowd of 100,635 filed into the Rose Bowl for what was supposed to be a battle featuring plenty of offensive fireworks. After all, Arizona State entered the game averaging 41.3 points per contest while the Buckeyes weren't far behind at 39.5.

What the patrons got instead was an early defensive struggle that kept both teams on their side of the 50-yard line.

The Sun Devils managed to get a first down on the initial offensive series of the game, but Ohio State middle linebacker Andy Katzenmoyer sacked Plummer two plays later for a loss of 7 yards and Arizona State eventually punted the ball away.

OSU didn't do any better. In fact, the Buckeyes went into reverse after Jackson was sacked on second down for a 5-yard loss and

then spilled 2 yards shy of the line of scrimmage on third down.

But Ohio State got rolling with its second possession. Taking over from their own 17 after another ASU punt, the Buckeyes moved 83 yards in 11 plays to score the game's first touchdown. Jackson got things going with a 10-yard pass completion to split end Dee Miller before Pearson carried three times in a row to pick up a total of 15 yards.

From there, Jackson took control. He rolled outside the left end and picked up 5 yards on a keeper. Then after finding Miller in the left flat for an 8-yard gain, the QB raced around right end and gained 19 yards. That got the Buckeyes to the Arizona State 26-yard line before Jackson zeroed in on fullback Matt Keller, who had broken free down the sideline. Keller stretched out to make the catch, good for another 22 yards.

That gave OSU a first-and-goal at the 4, but a false-start penalty immediately pushed the ball back to the 9. After two passes fell incomplete, Jackson threw a dart to freshman receiver David Boston, who came back for the ball and got one foot down in the corner of the end zone before stepping out of bounds. Once kicker Josh Jackson had added the extra point, the Buckeyes had drawn first blood with a 7-0 lead at the 5:04 mark of the first quarter.

Arizona State continued to struggle on offense throughout the remainder of the first quarter. The Sun Devils were limited in the opening period to just 11 yards and that lone first down they had gotten on their first series.

That was all about to change, however, as the second quarter began. ASU finally showed some signs of offensive life when Plummer completed an 11-yard swing pass to Battle on a third-and-10 play. The conversion seemed to jump-start the Sun Devils, and they marched methodically downfield until Plummer found Jeff Boyer streaking down the field on a slant pattern. At the last second, Boyer went airborne to make a diving catch in the front left corner of the end zone.

Television replays seemed to indicate the

## FLASHBACK: 1996 SEASON

ball had hit the ground before Boyer had completed his catch. But in those days, there was no official replay, and the catch stood. The 25-yard play, followed by a PAT from kicker Robert Nycz, knotted the score at 7-7 with 10:04 remaining until halftime.

When the Buckeyes got the ball back after the ensuing kickoff, Jackson was suddenly ineffective. Pearson gained 11 yards on the first two plays of the series, but then the junior quarterback misfired on three straight attempts and Ohio State was forced to punt the ball away again. By the time they regained possession with 5:30 to go in the half, Cooper had decided to see what Germaine could do.

What the junior QB did was hand off to Wiley, the backup tailback, on three consecutive plays. Wiley responded with gains of 11, 3 and 3 yards, but that set up a third-and-4 at the Arizona State 46. Germaine completed his first pass attempt of the game, but it was a quick pass to Boston, who was tackled a yard short of the first-down marker.

Ohio State was forced to punt once again, and by the time it got the ball back, there was less than a minute remaining before halftime and the Buckeyes killed the clock with a pair of safe Pearson runs up the middle.

With the exception of its touchdown drive, the OSU offense had very little to show for its first-half effort. The Buckeyes totaled 125 yards on 30 plays, but subtracting the scoring drive dropped that production to an anemic 42 yards on 19 plays, an average of just 2.2 yards per snap.

Still, that was better than the Sun Devils were doing. Taking away their 13-play, 80-yard scoring drive, they were averaging less than a yard per play – 23 offensive plays and only 16 yards to show for them.

“I felt real good at halftime,” Cooper said. “We knew Arizona State was a good football team, and when you play a team like that, you’re not real sure how well you’re going to match up with them until you actually get into the game.”

“But as the game started and progressed through the first half, our defense was pretty much dominating their offense and we were moving the ball when we had possession. I just felt at halftime that we were the better football team.”

### Fantastic Finish

Arizona State finally snapped out of its doldrums early in the second half thanks to the benefit of some good field position. Ohio State couldn’t do anything with the third-quarter kickoff, and ASU freshman J.R. Redmond returned a punt 12 yards to his own 46-yard line.

It was the Sun Devils’ best starting position of the game, and they cashed in. On the second play of the drive, senior receiver Keith Poole took a reverse for 13 yards to get his team across midfield, and then three plays later, Plummer dumped a tight end screen to Steve Bush, who rumbled for 23 yards before finally being brought down by OSU defensive lineman Luke Fickell and safety Damon Moore.

However, Arizona State was flagged for a costly personal foul penalty after the play had concluded, moving the ball from the OSU 13-yard line back to the 28. The penalty proved to be extremely costly when the Sun Devils suddenly bogged down and were forced to take a 37-yard field goal from Nycz.

That gave ASU a 10-7 lead with 9:12 remaining in the third quarter, but settling for

three points came back to haunt the Sun Devils a few minutes later.

A penalty on the ensuing kickoff pushed Ohio State’s starting point back to the 12-yard line, but Germaine didn’t seem to care. He first completed a pass over the middle to a diving Stanley that was good for 16 yards before going back to Stanley over the middle on the next play. This time, Stanley didn’t have to dive. In fact, the pass hit him perfectly in stride, and the fleet Buckeye receiver sprinted away from two would-be defenders, jetting 72 yards for an electrifying touchdown.

“We ran play-action, and Dimitrious ran a great route,” Germaine told BSB. “It was a post pattern – and they were playing man coverage like they did the whole game – but the

most important thing was Dimitrious broke away and kind of flattened the route which gave him separation. Then our line gave us great protection, and I was fortunate to get the ball to him.”

Germaine was being humble. His fake handoff to Pearson fooled even the TV cameraman, and by the time Arizona State defensive back Jason Simmons discovered he had been snookered, it was too late. Stanley never broke stride after Simmons made a desperate try at a shoestring tackle.

In seemingly the blink of an eye – only 49 seconds on the game clock – the Buckeyes had erased their three-point deficit and taken a 14-10 advantage at the 8:23 mark of the third quarter.

Arizona State got another scoring opportunity late in the third quarter when it got good field position following a poor OSU punt. The Sun Devils set up shop with a short field at the Ohio State 48 and pushed 5 yards closer when the Buckeyes were whistled for an illegal substitution.

Plummer went deep over the middle to Poole but overthrew his intended receiver. However, the Buckeyes helped out again when the bench was penalized for a personal foul after the play. That gave the Sun Devils a first down at the 28-yard line, but they got no closer. Katzenmoyer snatched a Plummer pass attempt out of the air on a third-down

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# Germaine Rallies Team In Second Half

Continued From Page 31

play and the interception ended the threat.

The Buckeyes got a chance to add to their lead midway through the fourth quarter when Pearson broke loose for a 62-yard scamper that took the ball from the OSU 3 to the Arizona State 35. But after reaching as far as the 22, Ohio State faltered when Jackson misfired on second- and third-down attempts.

Josh Jackson came on for a 37-yard field goal try, but Arizona State defensive end Brent Burnstein broke through to block the kick. The Sun Devils scooped up the loose football and returned it into Ohio State territory, but they were penalized for an illegal forward lateral and pushed back to their own 42.

Nevertheless, it was the break Plummer had been waiting for. He completed a third-down pass to Poole to keep the possession going and then made a crucial fourth-down play as the clock ticked under three minutes.

Faced with a fourth-and-4 at the OSU 37, Snyder decided to roll the dice with Plummer. The ASU quarterback faded, looked to his right, stepped up and delivered a pass down the left sideline. Receiver Lenzie Jackson leaped into the air just above the outstretched hands of Ohio State cornerback Ty Howard and came down with 29-yard completion.

Plummer now had a first-and-goal at the OSU 8, but the Buckeyes were unrelenting on defense. Backup running back Jeff Paulk

managed only 1 yard against the middle of the line on first down before OSU linebacker Greg Bellisari chased Plummer down on the next play and sacked him for a 4-yard loss.

With 1:47 showing on the clock, Snyder called for a timeout and motioned for his quarterback to join him on the sideline. Plummer nodded in agreement with the play his coach had called and jogged back to the huddle. On third-and-goal from the 11, the Arizona State QB took the snap and immediately recognized the Buckeyes dropping back in pass coverage. Plummer quickly tucked the ball and scrambled straight ahead for the goal line. By the time any defenders arrived, he had already squeezed his 6-2, 212-pound frame into the end zone.

Nycz added the extra point to cap the 10-play, 58-yard touchdown march, and about 45,000 delirious Arizona State fans began to shake their yellow pompons and celebrate with a 17-14 lead and only 1:40 remaining in the game.

Asked years later what was going through his mind at the time, Cooper replied, "When that happened, I'll be honest with you. I'm thinking, 'What in the world do we have to do to win this football game?' But then Joe came off the bench and, well, you know the rest."

It was a scenario of which Germaine had been dreaming his entire life. While OSU coaches on the field huddled to decide which quarterback would be best to lead the hopeful rally, quarterbacks coach Walt Harris radi-

ated down from the press box that Germaine should be the one to run the team's two-minute offense and engineer the comeback.

With a look of determination on his face, Germaine jogged into the huddle and told his teammates to "get ready for the drive of your lives."

Things looked a little bleak at the beginning of that drive, though, when Germaine failed to connect over the middle with tight end D.J. Jones on both first and second downs. But he went back to a familiar target on third down, completing a pass to Stanley for 11 yards to keep the Buckeyes' hopes alive.

Germaine had Ohio State fans on the edge of their seats with two more misfires before back-to-back completions to Stanley that netted a total of 25 yards and got the Buckeyes a first down at the ASU 29.

A false-start penalty called when Germaine backed away from the snap too early backed OSU up to the 34-yard line before a sideline bomb to Stanley fell incomplete. However, Simmons was called for pass interference inside the 10, moving the ball to the 19 with 41 seconds left.

Germaine scrambled to his right and overthrew Keller on first down before his over-the-middle pass to Stanley was broken up by ASU cornerback Courtney Jackson. Facing third-and-10 with just 28 seconds remaining to play, Germaine tried to get the ball to Boston at about the 5-yard line, but Boston was being held by defensive back Marcus Soward.

That pass-interference penalty pushed the ball to the 5 and gave the Buckeyes a first-and-goal with 24 ticks left on the clock.

With the Sun Devils' defense running out of gas, Germaine called for "Two-Left Twins, 240 Smash," a double slant route that had worked for the Buckeyes all season. At the line of scrimmage, the Ohio State quarterback took a quick survey of the defensive alignment and knew he had called the right play. He shot a quick glance at Boston and, with a nod of his head, took the snap. As Stanley slanted toward the middle of the field, taking most of the Arizona State defenders with him, Boston broke to his right and found himself all alone in the right flat. The OSU freshman gathered in Germaine's quick flip at about the 2 and shuffled backward into the end zone with the 5-yard touchdown pass.

"Dimitrious was lined up (in the slot), and you know he was going to occupy the corner," Germaine said. "Then the guy on David anticipated we would go to Dimitrious, and when he dropped back, David was wide open. All I had to do was get it to him."

Burnstein got through the Ohio State kick protection unit again to block the extra point, leaving the score at 20-17.

But there were only 19 seconds remaining in the contest. Plummer tried his best to get his team into range for a possible tying field goal, connecting with Bush for 13 yards and then Lenzie Jackson for a 17-yard gain to the Ohio State 35. But the over-the-middle reception by Jackson simply took too long to develop, and time ran out before the Sun Devils could run another play.

Germaine finished with rather modest stats, completing 9 of 17 passes for 131 yards and two touchdowns. But it was the way he rallied the team in the second half that set his performance apart and earned him offensive player of the game honors. The 72-yard completion to Stanley was the longest pass completion in Ohio State postseason history, and the fourth-quarter comeback allowed the Buckeyes to pull off their first Rose Bowl victory since a 42-21 triumph over Southern California in 1974.

Asked to remember his "drive of your life" speech in the huddle, Germaine shrugged and said, "There were so many things going through my mind, I can't remember exactly what was said, but I just wanted them to know we were going to get this thing done. We had a good feeling in the huddle, and you just knew something good was going to happen."

Cooper said the contest boiled down to three key matchups.

"First, there was our cornerback Shawn Springs against Poole, their best receiver, and Poole had one catch in that game," he said. "Second, it was Orlando Pace against Derrick Rodgers, and let me tell you that was absolutely no contest. I think Rodgers had only three or four tackles (he was credited with five) and got nowhere close to our quarterback."

"And that was the third matchup – how well we could protect our quarterback. They wound up getting a couple of sacks, but on that last drive, when things mattered the most, our offensive line did an outstanding job of protecting Joe. So, in terms of the three key matchups, we won them all, and there's no question in my mind that the better team won that day."

Ohio State finished its 1996 season with an 11-1 record and a No. 2 ranking behind consensus national champion Florida. The Buckeyes would not return to Pasadena for another 13 years, when they scored a 26-17 victory against Oregon following the 2009 season.

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## 2021 FOOTBALL (11-2, 9-1)

**Sept. 2** at Minnesota, W 45-31; **11** OREGON, L 35-28; **18** TULSA, W 41-20; **25** AKRON, W 59-7.

**Oct. 2** at Rutgers, W 52-13; **9** MARYLAND, W 66-17; **23** at Indiana, W 54-7; **30** PENN STATE, W 33-24.

**Nov. 6** at Nebraska, W 26-17; **13** PURDUE, W 59-31; **20** MICHIGAN STATE, W 56-7; **27** at Michigan, L 42-27.

**Jan. 1** vs. Utah in Rose Bowl, W 48-45.

## 2022 FOOTBALL

**Sept. 2** NOTRE DAME; **10** ARKANSAS STATE; **17** TOLEDO; **24** at Michigan State.

**Oct. 1** at Penn State; **8** RUTGERS; **15** IOWA; **29** INDIANA.

**Nov. 5** at Northwestern; **12** WISCONSIN; **19** at Maryland; **26** MICHIGAN.

## 2023 FOOTBALL

**Sept. 2** at Indiana; **9** SAN JOSE STATE; **16** WESTERN KENTUCKY; **23** at Notre Dame.

**Oct. 7** MARYLAND; **14** at Purdue; **21** PENN STATE; **28** at Wisconsin.

**Nov. 4** at Rutgers; **11** MICHIGAN STATE; **18** MINNESOTA; **25** at Michigan.

## MEN'S BASKETBALL (10-3, 4-1)

**Nov. 1** INDIANAPOLIS (EXH.), W 82-46; **9** AKRON, W 67-66; **12** NIAGARA, W 84-74; **15** BOWLING GREEN, W 89-58; **18** at Xavier, L 71-65 **22** at Seton Hall, W 79-76; **24** at Florida, L 71-68; **30** DUKE, W 71-66.

**Dec. 5** at Penn State, W 76-64; **8** TOWSON, W 85-74; **11** WISCONSIN, W 73-55; **18** at Kentucky, Canceled; **21** TENNESSEE MARTIN, Canceled; **28** NEW ORLEANS, Canceled.

**Jan. 2** at Nebraska, W 87-79 (OT); **6** at Indiana, L 67-51; **9** NORTHWESTERN, W 95-87; **13** at Wisconsin; **16** PENN STATE; **18** IUPUI; **22** NEBRASKA; **27** at Minnesota; **30** at Purdue.

**Feb. 3** IOWA; **6** MARYLAND; **9** at Rutgers; **12** at Michigan; **15** MINNESOTA; **19** INDIANA; **24** at Illinois; **27** at Maryland.

**March 3** MICHIGAN STATE; **6** MICHIGAN; **9-13** Big Ten Tournament at Indianapolis.

## WOMEN'S BASKETBALL (11-3, 3-2)

**Nov. 3** SLIPPERY ROCK (EXH.), W 96-48; **10** BUCKNELL, W 71-48; **14** NORFOLK STATE, W 86-48; **17** BOWLING GREEN, W 94-63; **23** BELLARMINA, W 110-58; **27** CINCINNATI, W 86-50.

**Dec. 1** at Syracuse, L 97-91; **5** at Purdue, W 70-53; **7** MOUNT ST. MARY'S, W 94-50; **12** INDIANA L 86-66; **15** ALABAMA STATE, W 97-51; **19** at UCLA, Canceled; **21** at San Diego State, W 66-54; **31** at Michigan, L 90-71.

**Jan. 3** PENN STATE, Postponed; **6** ILLINOIS, W 90-69; **9** at Northwestern, W 74-61; **12** MICHIGAN STATE; **15** at Minnesota; **20** MARYLAND; **23** at Rutgers; **27** MICHIGAN; **31** at Iowa.

**Feb. 7** RUTGERS; **10** NEBRASKA; **14** at Illinois; **17** at Maryland; **20** WISCONSIN; **27** MICHIGAN STATE.

**March 3-6** Big Ten Tournament at Indianapolis.

## MEN'S ICE HOCKEY (15-6-1, 7-4-1)

**Oct. 8** at Bentley, L 2-1; **9** at Bentley, W 7-1; **15** UCONN, W 4-3 (OT); **16** UCONN, W 3-0; **29-30** MICHIGAN STATE, L 2-1, W 5-1.

**Nov. 5** PENN STATE, W 5-2; **6** PENN

STATE, W 4-1; **12** at Minnesota, W 4-3; **13** at Minnesota, L 2-0; **26** Mercyhurst, L 5-4; **27** MERCYHURST, W 3-2.

**Dec. 3** at Notre Dame, W 4-2; **4** at Notre Dame, L 5-1; **10** MICHIGAN, L 5-2; **11** MICHIGAN, W 6-1; **16** BOWLING GREEN, W 4-3 (OT); **17** at Bowling Green, W 3-2; **31** LIU, W 6-0

**Jan. 1**, LIU, W 7-2. **8** at Wisconsin, W 5-3; **9** at Wisconsin, T 2-2 OT (SW); **14-15** NOTRE DAME, 7 p.m., 8 p.m.; **21-22** at Michigan State, TBD; **28-29** at Penn State, TBD.

**Feb. 4-5** WISCONSIN, 7 p.m., 8 p.m.; **11-12** MINNESOTA, 6:30 p.m., 6 p.m.; **18-19** at Michigan, 7:30 p.m.; 8:30 p.m.

**March 4-6** Big Ten Quarterfinals; **12** Big Ten Semifinal; **19** Big Ten Championship.

## WOMEN'S ICE HOCKEY (17-3-0, 13-3-0)

**Sept. 24** ST. THOMAS, W 6-0; **25** ST. THOMAS, W 4-1

**Oct. 1** at Minnesota, W 4-2; **2** at Minnesota, W 4-1 **15** BEMIDJI STATE, W 7-0, **16** BEMIDJI STATE, W 3-1; **23** at Wisconsin, L 3-1; **24** at Wisconsin, L 2-1 (OT); **29** ST. CLOUD STATE, W 5-2; **30** ST. CLOUD STATE, W 10-1.

**Nov. 5** at St. Thomas, W 8-1, **6** at St. Thomas, W 6-2; **19** MINNESOTA STATE, W 6-3; **20** MINNESOTA STATE, W 9-0; **26** DC Tournament at Washington, D.C., vs. St. Lawrence, W 5-2; **27** DC Tournament at Washington, D.C., vs. Penn State, W 4-2.

**Dec. 3** at Minnesota Duluth, L 5-2; **4** at Minnesota Duluth, W 6-2.

**Jan. 7** LINDENWOOD, W 8-2; **8** LINDENWOOD, W 10-0; **14-15** at St. Cloud State, TBA; **21** MINNESOTA DULUTH, 6 p.m.; **22** MINNESOTA DULUTH, 3 p.m.; **28** MINNESOTA, 6 p.m.; **29** MINNESOTA, 3 p.m.

**Feb. 4-5** at Minnesota State, TBA; **11-12** at Bemidji State, TBA; **18** WISCONSIN, 6 p.m.; **19** WISCONSIN, 3 p.m.; **25-27** WCHA Quarterfinals, TBA

## MARCH 5-6 WCHA Championships.

## WOMEN'S VOLLEYBALL (27-6, 15-5)

**Aug. 27** NORTHERN KENTUCKY, W 3-0; **28** WASHINGTON, W 3-1.

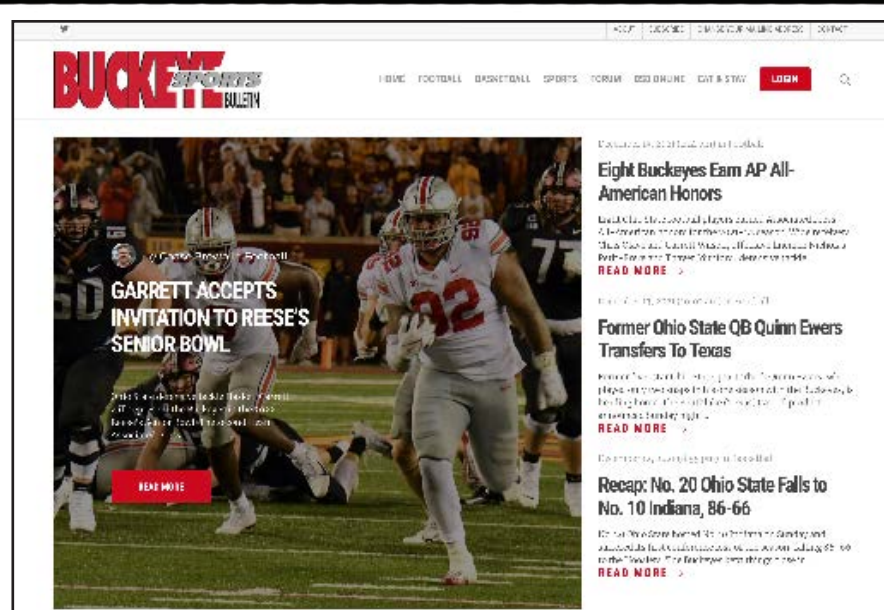
**Sept. 3** Red Raider Classic at Lubbock, Texas, vs. Rhode Island., W 3-0; **4** Red Raider Classic at Lubbock, Texas, vs. Texas State, W 3-1; **4** Red Raider Classic at Lubbock, Texas, vs. Texas Tech, W 3-0; **10** VCU Invitational at Richmond, Va., vs. James Madison, W 3-0; **11** VCU Invitational at Richmond, Va., vs. VCU, W 3-0; **11** VCU Invitational at Richmond, Va., vs. Virginia, W 3-0; **17** at Notre Dame, W 3-0; **19** NOTRE DAME, W, 3-2; **24** at Purdue, L 3-2; **26** at Penn State, L 3-0; **29** INDIANA, W 3-0.

**Oct. 2** MARYLAND, W 3-0; **8** at Michigan State, W 3-0; **10** MICHIGAN, W 3-0.; **15** PURDUE, W 3-1. **16** Rutgers, W 3-0; **22** at Wisconsin, L 3-1; **24** at Minnesota, L 3-1.; **29** at Michigan, W 3-0; **31** MICHIGAN STATE, W, 3-1.

**Nov. 4** MINNESOTA, L 3-1; **6** NEBRASKA, W 3-0; **13** at Northwestern, W 3-1; **14** at Illinois, W 3-0; **19** IOWA, W 3-1; **21** PENN STATE, W 3-0; **24** at Rutgers, W 3-0; **26** at Maryland, W 3-0.

**Dec. 3** NCAA Round 1 vs. Howard, W 3-0; **4** NCAA Round 2 vs. Tennessee, W 3-1; **9** NCAA Regional Semifinal vs. Georgia Tech, L 3-0.

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# Ohio State Signs 19 Commits In Early Signing Period

As is the norm now, Ohio State signed the majority of its class of 2022 during the early signing period from Dec. 15-17, picking up signatures from 19 commits in the class.

"I'm very excited about this class," Ohio State head coach Ryan Day said Dec. 15. "I think that when you combine first off, the athletic ability and the potential these guys have to be really good football players, that's one thing. But it's also the type of people that we have that are coming into this program – these 19 are as quality as you're going get."

## RECRUITING OUTLOOK Braden Moles

Ohio State signed a number of stars, including Kettering (Ohio) Alter linebacker C.J. Hicks and Pickerington (Ohio) Central safety/linebacker Sonny Styles, both with five stars, and figured out the future at quarterback with Draper (Utah) Corner Canyon four-star Devin Brown.

"We want to bring in a quarterback every year for a lot of reasons," Day said. "When Quinn (Ewers) decided to reclassify, we went about the business of finding a quarterback in that class. We weren't going to force it. We had to find somebody we thought fit. We looked really at only two or three guys.

"Devin stuck out. He just did. I was sold when I watched his film and then got him on the phone. Then he showed me a video of him windmill dunking. That put me over the top. I said, 'Look at this guy.' He has a tremendous personality. He is very competitive, very gifted, very intelligent, but also very athletic. I'm excited to see his energy come into this building pretty soon."

The Buckeyes and wide receivers coach Brian Hartline also pulled in a strong haul of receivers with Austin (Texas) Lake Travis four-star Caleb Burton, Chicago St. Rita

four-star Kaleb Brown, Chandler, Ariz., four-star Kyion Grayes and Suwanee (Ga.) Lambert four-star Kojo Antwi.

"We're bringing in four guys at wideout because there's a major need there," Day said. "And we brought in some different guys across the board, in different areas in the D-line, the offensive line, certainly getting depth at quarterback was critical for us," Day said. "There's always needs, and I think we've hit some of these here."

Day said Dec. 15 that Ohio State would look to sign upwards of 20 players in the class, and the staff made good on its promise, earning a number of additional commitments after the early period.

This includes Duncanville (Texas) four-star defensive end Omari Abor, Hammond (Wisc.) Saint Croix Central four-star offensive lineman Carson Hinzman and Rancho Santa Margarita (Calif.) Catholic four-star defensive lineman Hero Kanu, who did not announce until Jan. 8 but signed during the early period, meaning Ohio State's class sits at 21 commits, with Abor and Hinzman still waiting to sign on traditional signing day Feb. 2.

Including the recent transfers of Dea-Monte Trayanum and Tanner McCalister to the Buckeyes, this puts Ohio State at 83 scholarships accounted for, with future decisions still waiting for a number of current players, including Sevyn Banks, Jerron Cage, Zach Harrison, Mitch Rossi, Noah Ruggles, and Taron Vincent, which could open up a number of spots if Ohio State is looking to sign more players in the class.

Even if every player mentioned returns, the Buckeyes would still have two spots for someone else in the class or for additional transfers.

Since the early signing period ended Dec. 17, Ohio State gained two commitments on the defensive line in Abor (6-4, 240) and Kanu (6-5, 293). Abor committed on Jan. 2 at the Under Armour All-American Game, while Kanu announced his commitment on Jan. 8 at the All-American Bowl.

## OSU Football Verbal Commitments

Players in the class of 2022 who have issued a verbal commitment to play football at Ohio State.

Player	Pos.	Ht.	Wt.	Stars	High School
Omari Abor	DE	6-4	240	★★★★	Duncanville, Texas
Kojo Antwi	WR	6-0	190	★★★★	Suwanee (Ga.) Lambert
Devin Brown	QB	6-3	190	★★★★	Draper (Utah) Corner Canyon
Jyaire Brown	CB	6-0	178	★★★★	West Chester (Ohio) Lakota West
Kaleb Brown	WR	5-11	177	★★★★	Chicago St. Rita
Caleb Burton	WR	6-0	165	★★★★	Del Valle, Texas
Bennett Christian	TE	6-6	235	★★★	Acworth (Ga.) Allatoona
Caden Curry	DL	6-3	250	★★★★	Greenwood (Ind.) Center Grove
George Fitzpatrick	OT	6-6	285	★★★★	Englewood (Colo.) Cherry Creek
Kyion Grayes	WR	6-1	170	★★★★	Chandler, Ariz.
Dallan Hayden	RB	5-11	195	★★★★	Memphis (Tenn.) Christian Brothers
Avery Henry	OT	6-7	305	★★★	St Clairsville, Ohio
C.J. Hicks	LB	6-3	220	★★★★★	Kettering (Ohio) Archbishop Alter
Carson Hinzman	OL	6-4	280	★★★★	Saint Croix Central, Wis.
Kenyatta Jackson	DE	6-5	235	★★★★	Hollywood (Fla.) Chaminade-Madonna
Hero Kanu	DL	6-5	293	★★★★	Santa Margarita Catholic, Calif.
Gabe Powers	LB	6-4	230	★★★★	Marysville, Ohio
Kye Stokes	ATH	6-2	185	★★★★	Seffner (Fla.) Armwood
Sonny Styles	S	6-4	215	★★★★★	Pickerington (Ohio) Central
Tegra Tshabola	OT	6-5	340	★★★★	West Chester (Ohio) Lakota West
Ryan Turner	CB	6-0	180	★★★★	Hollywood (Fla.) Chaminade-Madonna Prep

Abor is ranked the No. 38 overall prospect in his class and the No. 4 defensive end. He selected the Buckeyes over his other top schools that included Alabama, LSU, Texas and Texas A&M.

"Honestly, it is really just Larry Johnson and the communication he had ever since he offered me," Abor told 247Sports. "One thing I like about it is it's a well-known school."

He had long been considered an Ohio State lean, receiving an offer from the Buckeyes on Nov. 3, 2020, and eventually getting on campus for an official visit on June 4, 2021.

"Abor owns college-ready size as an edge rusher and appears to possess the frame potential to bulk into a typical strongside type with scheme versatility," said 247Sports analyst Gabe Brooks.

Abor did not sign during the early period and said he plans to continue taking visits to his other top schools, signaling that this is not a done deal for the Buckeyes despite his verbal commitment.

"It's really strange," The Athletic's Bill Landis told BSB. "As long as Larry Johnson doesn't retire, and I don't think he's going to, I would feel OK-to-pretty good about Omari Abor staying in the class. But anytime a guy leaves the door open like that, especially when he's in Texas with the success that A&M and University of Texas are having right now, I wouldn't sleep very well until he signs that letter in the first week of February."

As for Kanu, while he isn't as flashy a commitment as Abor, he's still the 105th-best prospect and the No. 18 defensive lineman, and he helps to round the class out with four on the defensive line.

Ohio State beat out Georgia, LSU, Notre Dame and Oklahoma for Kanu, who is from Germany and began playing high school football just two years ago. He received an offer from the Buckeyes this past May 17 and took official visits to all five of his top schools, including Ohio State on Oct. 30 for the Penn State game.

While Kanu announced his commitment at the All-American Bowl, as mentioned, he's been signed with Ohio State since the early period.

"I love the coaching staff and I love how well they develop defensive linemen," Kanu told 247Sports. "That was always huge for me in my decision. I'm still really new to football and have only played for a couple of years so I wanted to pick a school that I know will help me get better and maximize my potential.

"I wanted to find a family atmosphere because I don't have any family out here," he continued. "Being from Germany, finding a home away from home where I would feel comfortable was big and I felt that at Ohio State."

Though he's relatively new to football, there doesn't appear to be much cause for concern with his transition to the college game, as 247Sports analyst Greg Biggins noted he checks several boxes for intangibles.

"Kanu is a big interior lineman with plus-quickness and athleticism," Biggins said. "He's naturally strong, shows a great get-off and has a rare combination of size, power and twitch with the kind of motor you love to see in an interior lineman. He's only played two years of football and is still learning the sport but has a soccer background that has helped him with his overall quickness and coordination."

Kanu may be viewed as more of a project as he acclimates, but Abor, if he does indeed sign with the Buckeyes, should push for immediate playing time in Ohio State's rotation on the defensive line, potentially joining a storied history of edge rushers at Ohio State to make an impact in their freshman seasons.

## OL Hinzman Leaves Home, Commits To OSU

After a drawn-out recruiting battle between Ohio State and Wisconsin, the Buckeyes came out on top for four-star offensive lineman Hinzman (6-4, 280), who committed to play for Ohio State Jan. 4.

He's rated the No. 134 overall prospect in 2022 and the No. 6 interior lineman, as well as the second-best prospect out of Wisconsin. He committed to Ohio State over in-state Wisconsin and also held offers from

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# ASK AN ANALYST

With Eric Lammers of Rivals.com

**Sonny Styles and Quinn Ewers both made headlines when they reclassified from their respective classes. Are these one-offs, or does it signal a larger trend of players reclassifying?**

"The market will dictate that. The reason that you'd do that as a high school kid is if you see the dollar signs in front of you with the NIL money that could be there for you. If I'm Ohio State or a college program in general, I'm probably a little bit wearier of that, not even just because of the Ewers situation. Getting burned on that doesn't make anybody feel good about the NIL.

"But at the same time, you get somebody like Styles, who is from Ohio, from Columbus, you feel a little bit better about bringing him in.

"I don't know if it's necessarily going to be a trend. At the end of the day, you're talking about 17-year-old kids, bringing them onto a college campus and putting them into an environment that they're not necessarily mature enough and ready for. They should just be high school kids and enjoy high school. Those years, you never get those back.

"When we would talk about midyear enrollees, sometimes you just want that kid to enjoy the last semester of high school. Now, if he has a chance to come on campus and help you immediately, then yes, it makes sense to bring him in there and get him in the strength program and get him on the practice field in the spring.

"I think maturity-wise, not a lot of those kids are ready for

that at that age. They think they are and they think they're ready for the million dollars and things like that, but at the end of the day, it's a whole different ballgame when you're talking about you're stepping into a college locker room and a strength program. Kids might want to do it a little bit more if they have the opportunity because of the deals that are available to them, but I think it's something that staff have to really ask if it is in the best interest of all the parties to do it."

**With Ohio State looking to potentially bolster numbers in the transfer portal, what positions could they be looking at, and are there any transfers they've been in discussion with?**

"Early on they were talking to Eli Ricks, but that fell through. Surprisingly enough, the one position that continues to trickle out is the tight end position. They would like to add to that room heading into the 2022 season. Now, whether or not they're able to do that is yet to be seen. They had Austin Stogner – he ended up going to South Carolina – in for an official visit. They've been in contact with Jake Tonges, a tight end from Cal. He's supposed to decide between Missouri, Ole Miss and Ohio State.

"They can (also) target offensive linemen, especially interior offensive linemen. Some of the concern this year was that they played their best five offensive linemen, which ended up bringing in a lot of tackle bodies. They maybe missed some of that girth inside when it came to run blocking. If anybody pops up on the radar like that, I think (they've) got to look at it.

"On defense, corner is a position that you're looking at and defensive line. I would have to believe that they're going to continue to look to the portal in terms of how they can fill out the rest of this roster."

**Ohio State finished at No. 4 in the class of 2022 rankings, below Georgia, Alabama and Texas A&M. The Buckeyes have not finished ahead of Alabama since 2018, which brings up the question – when will they be able to do it again?**

"That's going to be tough. OSU might have to wait until Nick Saban retires and some things happen down there to shake it out a little bit. Alabama is such a well-oiled machine. The way that it's set up for them with the pool of talent, where they're recruiting from, it's going to be very hard to ever catch them. Now, there are other SEC schools that are doing it, so you can never say never because Texas A&M is pushing them now and Georgia is pushing them now. Ohio State has the brand to do that.

"It's more where all those kids are coming from – Texas and Florida, the South in general, Georgia. NIL is really bringing another element to things. Ohio State's positioned well if they want to unload that toolbox. They can take advantage of it with the best of them. But like I said, Alabama is just such a well-oiled machine. Kids want to go play with the best and they want to compete for championships, and they know you can do that every year at Alabama, so Ohio State has its work cut out for it."

Alabama, Clemson, Michigan, Oregon and Penn State.

"It was their culture," Hinzman told Eleven Warriors of why he picked Ohio State. "I love how they have that championship-winning culture. They have a great chance to further their players and make you better. The competition there is absolutely insane. They're pulling in the best defensive linemen, and if you want to be the best offensive lineman, you have to beat the best defensive linemen. I love the consistency, it's huge for me, and they've been consistently great."

He took official visits to the Badgers on June 4 and the Buckeyes on June 11, where he received his offer just days later, as well as to Iowa and Notre Dame, though schools other than Ohio State and Wisconsin never seemed to take hold in Hinzman's recruitment. He was originally set to commit and sign during the early period but then recanted, saying he hadn't made his mind up yet.

While the margins between these schools seemed razor thin for Hinzman's services, a potential tipping point happened at the last minute, with Wisconsin's offensive line coach, Joe Rudolph, leaving for the same position at Virginia Tech. Rudolph was Hinzman's primary recruiter for the Badgers, and his departure advanced Hinzman's timeline.

"It was hard," Hinzman said of the coaching change. "Obviously you can't pick a coach over a college. I knew that right from the get-go. I've been talking with my family about that. You obviously can't pick schools on coaches, because they can leave. You have to be committed to the culture there, and the culture stems from all the people, not one or two coaches. That's what really made me feel comfortable going here."

While former offensive line coach Greg Studrawa's firing would raise similar questions, both Hinzman and Englewood (Colo.) Cherry Creek offensive lineman George Fitzpatrick confirmed during practice at the All-American Bowl that they are not waver-

ing in their commitments.

"I was surprised," Fitzpatrick told 247Sports about the firing. "I had a great relationship with Coach Stud. To see him go is disappointing, but it definitely doesn't change things. That's something my parents told me about this process. Don't go to a school for the coach, go for the culture, the program, the history and the tradition. And that's what Ohio State has. Knowing Coach Day and the culture he's built, I know he's going to bring someone in that fits that culture and that's going to be a good coach at the same time."

Hinzman played at every position on the offensive line high school, so Ohio State has a clean slate to work with for the Wisconsin product, though he'll likely project to either guard or center.

"Hinzman is a good athlete who has also played basketball," said 247Sports' Allen Trieu. "He'll come into college with four years of varsity experience. He plays hard and to the whistle, he's nimble and gets into the second level with balance and fluidity.

"Now, he needs more experience and reps against top-level defensive linemen. He has to still add weight and get stronger. But he's technically sound, works and plays hard, he's position-versatile and he has good agility – all qualities that make him a very safe prospect. He should be a multi-year college starter with a good chance to play beyond that."

The new trio of verbals brought Ohio State up to 21 commitments – 19 signed, two waiting to put pen to paper – in the class of 2022, which is still ranked the fourth-overall class in the country behind Georgia, Alabama and Texas A&M.

## Bucks Lose Out On OL Greene

Bellflower (Calif.) St. John Bosco four-star offensive lineman Earnest Greene (6-4, 330) ended any lingering questions in his recruitment, issuing a verbal commitment to Georgia during the All-American Bowl on Jan. 8.

Greene, rated the No. 40 overall prospect in 2022 and the No. 2 interior lineman, committed to the Bulldogs over Alabama, Ohio State, Texas and USC.

"I like their style of play and fit in really well with what they do," Greene told 247Sports of why he committed to the Bulldogs. "Their offensive line allowed the least amount of sacks, aside from Army and Navy who run the ball. They really rely on their dominant offensive line play. I like how they scheme and I just like their overall style of play."

The Buckeyes were heavily involved in Greene's early recruitment, but Alabama and Georgia had taken the lead in recent months. He visited Ohio State on Oct. 30, but a crystal ball prediction had already been issued by Biggins to Georgia at that point, and 247Sports' Steve Wiltfong predicted Greene to the Bulldogs Dec. 16.

While losing Greene hurts, Ohio State did not feel the sting as badly with Hinzman committing days earlier. This leaves the Buckeyes with a four-man class on the offensive line, with Hinzman joining West Chester (Ohio) Lakota West four-star Tegra Tshabola, Fitzpatrick and St. Clairsville, Ohio, three-star Avery Henry.

## OSU Well-Represented In All-American Bowl

The annual Army All-American Bowl was played Jan. 8. with the West taking home a 34-14 win over the East.

At the Alamodome in San Antonio, Ohio State was among the most well-represented schools, with 11 commits on the All-American Roster.

The Buckeyes were represented by wide receivers Antwi, Burton and Grayes; offensive linemen Tshabola, Fitzpatrick and Hinzman; Devin Brown; and Greenwood (Ind.) Center Grove four-star defensive lineman Caden Curry, in addition to Kanu, who committed during the game via video chat.

Kaleb Brown and West Chester (Ohio)

Lakota West four-star cornerback Jyaire Brown were also set to compete but were forced to miss the bowl following positive COVID-19 tests.

## Knowles Already In Contact With Recruits

Ohio State announced the hire of defensive coordinator Jim Knowles on Dec. 7, and though he wasn't fully integrated into the program until January, he's been in contact with Ohio State recruits since his hiring.

"Jim spoke with a bunch of them, and any of them who had any questions, he was there for them," Day said Dec. 15 "The structure of what we're going to do isn't going to (change much), but a lot of those guys, we encouraged them to watch the film at Oklahoma State and see how they're doing things and ask questions."

Linebackers Hicks and Gabe Powers both told Eleven Warriors that Knowles has been in contact, and Hicks said he's watched film at Oklahoma State to get a sense of Knowles' scheme.

"They kind of run a similar defense to (my high school), so it's not that much different, just different terminology," Hicks said. "He's a good coach, and I like him. I enjoy him a lot."

It was also reported that Knowles contacted Fort Worth (Texas) North Crowley three-star linebacker S'Maje Burrell, who received an offer from the Buckeyes on Dec. 8.

Burrell is ranked the No. 423 overall prospect in 2023 and the No. 33 overall linebacker. He holds other offers from Baylor, Kansas, SMU, TCU, Texas, Texas Tech and Utah, among others.

## OSU Hosts Rose Bowl Practice At St. John Bosco

Just because Ohio State's focus was on the Rose Bowl doesn't mean that recruiting took a back seat.

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The majority of the staff from inside the Woody Hayes Athletic Center was on the West Coast for Ohio State's win over Utah in the Rose Bowl, and that staff saw an opportunity to get in front of some recruits by hosting practice at St. John Bosco High School, just 25 miles down the road from Pasadena, on Dec. 27.

On hand were 2023 five-star defensive end Matayo Uiagalelei, brother of current Clemson quarterback D.J. Uiagalelei, as well as four-star safety Peyton Woodyard and four-star linebacker Kyngstonn Viliamu-Asa, both in the 2024 class.

"We all had a great time at the practice," Woodyard told BuckeyeScoop. "I'm very grateful to have been invited to go watch the practice. It was nice to see all of the coaches."

### Miller Postpones Commitment To NSD

The Buckeyes will be waiting on National Signing Day for their remaining signatures from 2022 commits, and they'll also be looking out for Ellenwood (Ga.) Cedar Grove four-star defensive lineman Christen Miller, who announced he plans to commit on Feb. 2, pushing his schedule back from a planned commitment at the All-American Bowl.

He's rated the No. 107 overall prospect in 2022 and the No. 19 defensive lineman. His top three schools are Alabama, Georgia and Ohio State, and while the Bulldogs have been a long-time lean for the Georgia product, Ohio State has made inroads in recent weeks.

One factor that could be in Ohio State's favor is defensive tackle Antwan Jackson, who attended the same school as Miller, albeit separated by a few years.

"You have to bring some good players in after you," Jackson said. "You have to keep the Ohio State tradition going. Christen, I'm his mentor. He has somebody to look up to that's in college to tell him what's going on. I never tell him where to go. I'm always going to be proud of him no matter what college he picks. I love him."

Miller posted a graphic on Twitter that says, "Hand Down The Legacy," showing Jackson holding an Ohio State jersey with Miller's name on it.

"Just look at who is in our defensive line room," Jackson said. "We have the best defensive line coach. The tradition here, the guys that were here before us, they passed it down to us. Now we have to pass it on to them. Coach (Johnson) is bringing in some great guys, and I'm excited to see what they can do."

### USC Completes Sweep Of Branch Brothers

USC head coach Lincoln Riley is keeping it all in the family, pulling in the Branch brothers – 2022 four-star safety Zion and 2023 five-star wide receiver Zachariah – from Bishop Gorman in Las Vegas.

Zion announced his commitment to the Trojans on the first day of the early signing period, while Zachariah announced on Christmas Eve.

Zion, rated the No. 46 overall prospect and No. 6 safety in his class, announced a top three of Ohio State, Oklahoma and USC just days before his commitment to the Trojans. Zachariah, meanwhile, is rated the No. 14 overall prospect in 2023 and the No. 2 wide receiver in his class. He had the same top schools as Zion, in addition to Alabama.

"I feel like USC was always home for me, and I feel more than comfortable with my decision," Zach told 247Sports. "I definitely see things are about to change. The culture, the energy, the vibe is different, and you can feel it being around the staff, the new coaches and the players. You can just tell a different switch has turned on."

The Buckeyes at one point seemed to be the favorite for the Branches due to turmoil within the USC program following head coach Clay Helton's firing and the ensuing coaching search. However, boosted by the arrival of ex-Oklahoma head coach Riley, USC came in at the last minute, including an in-home visit on Dec. 1, to turn the recruitment around.

With the loss of Zion and Southeast Polk, Iowa, four-star safety Xavier Nwankpa, who

committed to Iowa in December, Ohio State has just two safety commits signed in 2022 in Styles and four-star Kye Stokes. This comes with the caveat that Styles potentially projects as a hybrid safety/linebacker, and though Stokes is listed as a safety, he could be moved around on the defense.

On the other side of the ball, while Zachariah is a significant target off the board for Ohio State, it is still in on Bradenton (Fla.) IMG Academy five-star wide receiver Carnell Tate, whose recruitment is expected to come down to the Buckeyes and Notre Dame. He's rated the No. 20 overall prospect in 2023 and the third-best wide receiver.

Ohio State could also be in position to make up ground in the recruitment of Fort Lauderdale (Fla.) American Heritage five-star wide receiver Brandon Inniss, who decommitted from Oklahoma following Riley's departure. He's the No. 1 wide receiver in 2023 and the No. 9 overall prospect.

### Brooks Decommits During Early Signing Period

The early signing period mostly went off without a hitch for Ohio State, the lone exception being Little Elm, Texas, four-star cornerback Terrance Brooks' flip to Texas.

Brooks, rated the No. 59 overall prospect and No. 8 cornerback in 2022, had been committed to Ohio State since June 30, just weeks after receiving an offer on June 14 and visiting on June 21, but he announced his flip at a signing event in Texas Dec. 15.

"Very disappointing for sure," Day said Dec. 15. "Leading up to it, there weren't any conversations that was going to happen. It caught us off-guard."

The Longhorns picked up some steam with the in-state prospect in the weeks leading up to his flip, utilizing a home visit from head coach Steve Sarkisian on Dec. 9 to help secure the commitment. Following that visit, the Longhorns felt they had a "50/50 chance" at flipping Brooks, according to a report from 247Sports.

Back when Brooks committed to Ohio State, he had a top five of Alabama, Florida, Oregon, Texas and Texas A&M.

"(Texas) would be special for me," Brooks said during the signing. "It's like home. (I have) a great relationship with the coaches, and I feel like I'll be developed."

Though Brooks had been committed for months, the Ohio State staff kept in close contact, including a high school visit from Kerry Coombs on Nov. 29. Following the visit, Little Elm head coach Kendrick Brown told 247Sports that Brooks is "100 percent locked and loaded for Ohio State," though Texas obviously made gains since Coombs' visit.

Little Elm was also the home of former Ohio State cornerback Ryan Watts, who transferred to Texas Dec. 22, though it's unlikely that factored into any decision, as their time on the roster in high school did not overlap.

### Freeman Could Enhance Battle Between OSU, ND

Former Notre Dame head coach Brian Kelly was always a solid recruiter in his own right, bringing in a top-15 class in nine of the last 10 years with the Fighting Irish.

However, with Kelly's departure to LSU and Marcus Freeman's subsequent hiring as head coach at Notre Dame, the Ohio native could look to inject some juice into the

recruiting battles between the Buckeyes and the Fighting Irish.

"It's going to make things maybe a little more challenging (for Ohio State)," BuckeyeScoop recruiting analyst Marc Givler told BSB. "He's very well-liked by players and coaches in Ohio. He's been recruiting the state for a long time, was doing it at Cincinnati, was doing it at Purdue. It's going to give Notre Dame a little bit of a jolt. But ultimately, these are two programs who have been going head-to-head for players for a very long time."

Those battles extend as far back as Freeman himself, who chose Ohio State over Notre Dame in 2004, a choice which he recently referred to as "the wrong decision" while writing for The Players' Tribune.

In recent years, the schools have battled for prospects such as cornerback Lathan Ransom and safety Sonny Styles, who ended up at Ohio State, as well as offensive tackle Aamil Wagner, who ended up with the Fighting Irish.

In the upcoming classes, Ohio State is still pursuing five-star defensive lineman Brenan Vernon, who committed to Notre Dame in June, and the schools are up against each other for the Montgomery brothers – 2023 four-star offensive tackle Luke and 2025 quarterback Ryan, who each have been offered by both programs.

"There's always going to be some Notre Dame and Ohio State battles geographically," Givler said. "Ohio is always going to be important to both programs, especially the big Catholic schools in Ohio. You're always going to have some battles in Chicago and Indianapolis, things like that. It's going to be interesting."

Freeman is looking to improve Notre Dame's recruiting, but it won't be an easy task given the high bar that Kelly set in his time in South Bend.

"I know (Freeman) and he's so personable and I think he's going to do a really good job at Notre Dame, but Notre Dame recruited well under Brian Kelly," BuckeyeScoop recruiting analyst Bill Greene told BSB. "I don't think it changes much. I think Ryan Day's a great recruiter. I think the battles that they've had will continue, but I don't see much of a change there."

### OU Decommit Webb In Contact With OSU

Jacksonville (Fla.) Trinity Christian Academy four-star running back Treyaun Webb (6-0, 188) is one of the top backs in 2023, and he's on the market after decommitting from Oklahoma on Nov. 28 following Riley's departure.

Webb's recruitment spans further back, including a previous commitment to Georgia in November 2019 and an ensuing commitment in January 2021. The Buckeyes offered Webb back in 2020, and he was on campus for an unofficial visit on June 8, 2021.

"It was everything I imagined and way more," Webb told Cleveland.com of the visit. "Honestly, I didn't want to leave. It was that good."

Since he decommitted, he's been in contact with a number of schools, including Ohio State, which is looking to take two running backs in the class.

"Right away, schools like Penn State, Ohio State, Georgia, Auburn, Ole Miss, Miami, and some others called and hit me up,"

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he told On3 Sports. "It got crazy pretty quick when everyone knew that I wasn't committed to Oklahoma anymore."

Trinity Christian Academy is the alma mater of current Ohio State running back Marcus Crowley, as well as former defensive backs Shaun Wade, who is with the New England Patriots, and Tyreke Johnson, who transferred to Nebraska.

### OSU Among Top Schools For 2023 Prospects

Ohio State was listed in the top seven for Kissimmee (Fla.) Osceola four-star defensive lineman Derrick Leblanc (6-4, 250), along with Clemson, Florida, Miami (Fla.), Oklahoma, Penn State and UCF. He's the No. 84 overall prospect in 2023 and the No. 13 defensive lineman.

Leblanc has long been viewed as an Ohio State lean, and the Buckeyes hold the lone 247Sports crystal ball prediction from Wiltfong. He visited multiple times over the summer, and at one point it was thought a commitment might be coming following his visits, but he's since taken unofficial visits to Clemson, Florida, Florida State and Miami (Fla.), and there's no timeline for his commitment.

Regarding another Florida product, the Buckeyes were listed in the top seven for Orlando (Fla.) Dr. Phillips four-star offensive tackle Payton Kirkland (6-5, 330), along with Clemson, Georgia, Miami (Fla.), Michigan, Oklahoma and Penn State. He's the No. 201 overall prospect in 2023 and the No. 15 offensive tackle.

He visited over the weekend of Ohio State's win over Purdue and told BuckeyeScoop that both he and his mom enjoyed the visit.

"It was beautiful," Kirkland said about the visit. "I got to watch practice. We also had meetings, did a photoshoot, and got to chill with the staff. I got to speak with Coach Day, Coach (Tony) Alford, and Coach Stud. They were just asking me how I was liking it and giving me leadership tips."

As for a non-Florida prospect, Ohio State was listed in the top 12 for Downey (Calif.) Warren five-star quarterback Nicholaus Iamaleava (6-5, 195), along with Alabama, Auburn, BYU, Georgia, Miami (Fla.), Ole Miss, Oregon, Oregon State, Notre Dame, Tennessee and UCLA. He's the No. 17 overall prospect in 2023 and the No. 4 quarterback in the class.

He camped at Ohio State in June and received an offer, though the Buckeyes do not appear to be near the top of Iamaleava's list, with Alabama, Oregon and UCLA among the expected favorites for the five-star signal-caller.

Returning to the Sunshine State, Ohio State was listed in the top five for Kissimmee (Fla.) Osceola four-star defensive lineman John Walker (6-4, 280), along with Alabama, Florida State, Penn State and UCF. He's rated the No. 99 overall prospect in 2023 and the No. 17 defensive lineman.

He visited Ohio State in June and told 247Sports that he'll likely be back on campus for an official visit this summer.

Ohio State was also listed in the top seven for Deerfield Beach (Fla.) four-star linebacker Jayvant Brown (6-0, 220), along with Alabama, Florida, Florida State, LSU, Michigan and Penn State. He's the No. 176 overall prospect in 2023 and the No. 13 linebacker, and he visited on Oct. 9 for Ohio State's game against Maryland.

Moving on to a wide receiver, the Buck-

eyes are in on DeSoto (Texas) four-star Johntay Cook II (6-0, 170), who listed Ohio State in his top seven along with Alabama, Clemson, LSU, Ole Miss, Texas and Texas A&M. He's the No. 41 overall prospect and No. 7 wide receiver.

Ohio State offered Cook in May, but he has yet to make it on campus and has taken a number of unofficial visits to Texas A&M.

The Buckeyes were also listed in the top seven of Milton (Mass.) Academy four-star tight end Andrew Rappleyea (6-4, 215), along with Boston College, Michigan, North Carolina, Penn State, Wake Forest and Wisconsin. He's rated the No. 333 overall prospect and No. 20 tight end in his class.

Rappleyea recently picked up a number of offers, including Ohio State (Dec. 2), Wisconsin (Dec. 3), Illinois (Dec. 20) and Michigan (Dec. 26), though he indicated to On3 Sports that the Nittany Lions are leading things right now.

The Buckeyes already have a tight end commit in 2023 in Thompson Station (Tenn.) Independence four-star Ty Lockwood, but Ohio State has been looking to sign a two-man class at tight end for a number of years now.

"It's something I definitely look (at)," he said of Ohio State already having a tight end commit. "But not something that concerns me. I'm going to have to compete to get on the field anywhere I go."

Last but not least, Ohio State was listed in the top 10 for Folsom, Calif., four-star wide receiver Rico Flores Jr., along with Alabama, Georgia, LSU, Notre Dame, Oregon, Pittsburgh, Texas, UCLA and USC. He's rated the No. 152 overall prospect and No. 22 wide receiver in his class.

"Ohio State has great people and is

also very welcoming and honest," he told 247Sports. "When you play for Ohio State as a receiver, you know you're going to have a lot of opportunities because the ball is always in the air."

He also said Texas "felt like family" and that LSU has been his favorite school growing up.

### OSU Issues Additional Offers

Ohio State has issued a number of offers since Buckeye Sports Bulletin last went to press. The most notable is Windsor (Conn.) Loomis Chaffee School four-star offensive tackle Olaus Alinen (6-7, 315), who received an offer on Dec. 16. Rated the No. 125 overall prospect and the No. 12 offensive tackle in 2023, he holds offers from Alabama, Florida, Michigan, Oklahoma, Ole Miss, Oregon, Penn State, Texas and USC, among others.

The Buckeyes also issued an offer for 2024 to Long Beach (Calif.) Millikan wide receiver Ryan Pellum (5-10, 160) on Dec. 27. He does not yet have a composite rating, but 247Sports has him as a four-star prospect and the No. 56 overall recruit in 2023. He holds other offers from Alabama, Auburn, LSU, Miami (Fla.), Michigan State, Notre Dame, Oregon, Penn State and Texas A&M.

Looking even further out, Ohio State offered Philadelphia St. Joseph's Prep School safety Anthony Sacca (6-4, 195), a 2025 prospect, on Dec. 16. He holds offers from Notre Dame, Penn State, South Carolina, Temple and Tennessee.

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

### 35 Years Ago - 1987

Cincinnati Purcell Marian's Jay Koch was at the top of many major-college recruiting lists, including Ohio State's, and played both offense (tight end) and defense (outside linebacker), but soccer is what helped develop him into an athlete.

"It gives you a chance to develop your body better," said Koch, who played on two soccer teams in the summer of 1986 as part of his training program for his final football season.

"You use your whole body in soccer, not just upper body like in certain positions in football," Koch said. "You develop eye-and-feet coordination, legs, quickness and footspeed."

### 30 Years Ago - 1992

After suffering a serious knee injury in the first game of his senior season, Grove City, Ohio, running back Louis Willard found that many schools didn't want to take a chance on him and consequently backed off in recruiting.

He went from the No. 1 prep running back prospect in the nation, according to SuperPrep magazine, to the kind of guy college recruiters tell, "Don't call us, we'll call you."

But the Ohio State coaching staff reassured Willard that it would stick by him throughout the injury and subsequent surgery and rehabilitation. That persistence paid off as he gave a verbal commitment to play football for the Buckeyes Dec. 30.

"I just chose them because I felt that was where I would fit in best," Willard told BSB. "I've always liked the team and the players. Then, when they stuck by me through this injury, that just helped me make up my mind."

### 25 Years Ago - 1997

In a major case of déjà vu, Clarksdale, Miss., lineman Terrence Metcalf visited Ohio State Dec. 14-16 and apparently committed to the Buckeyes, according to several sources.

In fact, the OSU coaching staff introduced Metcalf as a new commitment to the team after one bowl practice at the Woody Hayes Athletic Center, according to one source.

But, just as Winter Park (Fla.) Lake Howell lineman Tam Hopkins had done, Metcalf returned home and seemed to waver on his commitment.

His mother said BSB reports he had committed to OSU were not true. Another source told BSB that Metcalf was committed to

OSU, but he told the coaching staff he would make other visits.

### 20 Years Ago - 2002

Larry Fitzgerald Jr. of Wayne (Pa.) Valley Forge Prep School was a new and old name to OSU recruiting circles.

The Buckeyes had tried to recruit Fitzgerald (6-4, 215) out of Richfield (Minn.) Holy Angels Academy. He committed to Pittsburgh, but when he failed to qualify academically, he enrolled at Valley Forge.

Fitzgerald's father, Larry Sr., confirmed that his son was planning to visit OSU sometime in January.

"We think it will be in the next couple weeks," Fitzgerald Sr. told then-BSB recruiting analyst Bill Kurelic. "We don't have an exact date, but it's going to happen."

### 15 Years Ago - 2007

After his team's 13-12, season-opening victory over Cincinnati Moeller on Aug. 25, West Chester (Ohio) Lakota West defensive end Solomon Thomas told BSB that once he retook the ACT, Ohio State could expect a commitment from him.

Three-and-a-half months and one ACT later, Thomas got the score he needed and eventually the school he wanted, too. Thomas became the 12th member of OSU's class of 2007 when he called OSU head coach Jim Tressel on Dec. 16 to inform him of his decision.

Thomas was the first defensive lineman to commit to the Buckeyes, but he said he was not being viewed primarily as a lineman. Instead, OSU planned to have Thomas add 10 pounds of muscle and play a "Leo" position similar to what former Buckeye Bobby Carpenter had played and Vernon Gholston was playing.

"It's going to be a challenge," Thomas said. "I don't know how good I am at pass coverage."

### 10 Years Ago - 2012

One of the first major breakthroughs Urban Meyer accomplished as Ohio State's head coach was getting the program in position to have one of the top-ranked quarterbacks in the 2012 class in for a visit.

It looked like Meyer would accomplish his goal to get Jameis Winston of Hueytown, Ala. - the No. 2-ranked quarterback in the 2012 class committed to Florida State - to Columbus for a visit

before February's National Signing Day.

"I have talked to Coach Meyer a few times and we are cool," Winston said. "He keeps telling me I am his kind of quarterback and he can't wait to get me on campus so we can talk football."

### 5 Years Ago - 2017

When five-star athlete Jeffrey Okudah was ready to announce his commitment on national television at the U.S. Army All-American Bowl on Jan. 7, there were three hats on the table.

The hat Okudah was about to choose might have been one of the worst kept secrets of the 2017 recruiting cycle. Okudah, a Grand Prairie (Texas) South product, picked up the Ohio State hat sitting on the table, confirming that he would be a Buckeye after listing head coach Urban Meyer's team as his leader for most of his recruitment.

"I was really considering Florida State all the way to the end," Okudah said. "Committing to Ohio State with Florida State being right there, there were a lot of sleepless nights. Yesterday, I talked to my family again, and we all just decided that Ohio State had the best for me off the field as far as life after football. With that being said, it was the obvious choice for me."

### One Year Ago - 2021

Ohio State followed up its impressive win over Clemson in the Sugar Bowl with yet another victory over the Tigers when the Buckeyes landed a commitment on Jan. 2 from Jacksonville (Fla.) Robert E. Lee five-star cornerback Jaheim Singletary.

The 6-1, 170-pound Singletary was considered the fifth-best cornerback and No. 10 prospect overall in the class of 2022 after he recorded 18 tackles, six pass breakups, three interceptions and one blocked field goal to lead the Generals to an appearance in the state semifinals. He chose Ohio State over finalists Clemson, Florida and Georgia.

Singletary landed an offer from the Buckeyes in early November, whereas the Bulldogs (May 2019), Gators (June) and Tigers (July) had been in contact much longer. Nevertheless, head coach Ryan Day and defensive coordinator Kerry Coombs made quite the impression in just a few short weeks, pushing Ohio State to the forefront of Singletary's recruitment.

# Recruiting Analysts Break Down OSU's Class Of '22

By **BRADEN MOLES**

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

After the commitments of three four-star prospects following the early signing period, Ohio State has likely put the finishing touches on its class of 2022.

The Buckeyes gained recent pledges from Duncanville (Texas) defensive end Omari Abor, Hammond (Wisc.) Saint Croix Central offensive lineman Carson Hinzman and Rancho Santa Margarita (Calif.) Catholic defensive lineman Hero Kanu, which brings Ohio State's class to 21 prospects.

This ranks as the fourth-overall class in the nation, trailing Georgia, Alabama and Texas A&M, which is on pace to sign the top recruiting class in the history of the sport according to the 247Sports Composite team rankings.

"I think it's a good class," said Bill Landis, who covers Ohio State for The Athletic. "It's a bit difficult for people to come around on that idea because of how good Texas A&M, Alabama and Georgia are recruiting this cycle. But if you look at the average player rating and Ohio State's class compared to those other classes, it's right there. It's right on par, if not better than most of the classes Ohio State has signed over the last decade or so. Maybe the only two classes that are better than this one are last year's class and the 2017 class in terms of average player rating, so I think this is a pretty strong class."

Ohio State is third in average player rating at 94.32, which ranks third in the nation behind only Texas A&M (94.61) and Alabama (95.19). This discrepancy in overall rankings is due to the size of classes that these SEC schools are signing – Alabama has 24 commits, followed by Georgia with 26, while Texas A&M has 28 commits, the most in the nation.

"For the most part, I think they've done a good job of addressing their needs," Landis said of the Buckeyes. "There's one or two perhaps that they didn't quite nail, but I think

overall they did a pretty good job of, even though it's a smaller class, still finding a lot of quality in that class."

Those needs were in the trenches, secondary, linebacker and at quarterback, which became necessary following the transfer of several of signal-callers.

Ohio State answered the call in the trenches, signing four-man classes on both sides of the ball, as well as at linebacker with Kettering (Ohio) Alter five-star C.J. Hicks and Marysville (Ohio) four-star Gabe Powers, and pulling Draper (Utah) Corner Canyon four-star quarterback Devin Brown away from USC.

"I think Devin Brown (is underrated)," said BuckeyeScoop recruiting analyst Bill Greene. "C.J. (Stroud) is a Heisman finalist, and he's going to be amazing next year. I still have really, really high hopes for Kyle McCord. But Devin Brown, to be able to pull a kid of his stature with that loaded of a quarterback room – I mean, Devin can play. Devin Brown is probably going to be an NFL guy. To land him, I think, was really something people are kind of missing because you take for granted how young C.J. is and how good he is."

Recruiting on the offensive and defensive lines looked questionable heading into the early signing period with just two commitments on the defensive line and three on the offensive line, but the addition of Abor, Kanu and Hinzman to their respective position groups established a solid group on both sides of the ball.

"I think the defensive line was probably one of two or three biggest needs in this class," Landis said. "If you get Kenyatta Jackson, Omari Abor, Caden Curry and Hero Kanu, that's an excellent class. That's one of the better classes along the defensive line that Ohio State's had since I've been covering the team since 2014. To do that, on the heels of signing, J.T. Tuimoloau, Jack Sawyer, Mike Hall and Tyliek Williams last year, you're looking at something potentially pretty special here when you sign back-to-back



PHOTO COURTESY OF OHIO STATE ATHLETICS

**BIG FISH** – Ohio State landed a critical piece of its 2022 class when Hero Kanu (middle) committed on Jan. 8 at the All-American Game.

groups like that."

The secondary, however, is where the Buckeyes missed out. Little Elm, Texas, four-star cornerback Terrance Brooks made an eleventh-hour decision, flipping from Ohio State to Texas on the first day of the early signing period.

"On defense, the two most important positions are the guys that are going to get after the quarterback and the guys that are going to cover," said Eric Lammers, an Ohio State recruiting analyst for Rivals.com. "When you lose a guy that can cover, especially one that was highly rated and tabbed as somebody that could be a Denzel Burke type where he can step in and play early, and lose that one so late on signing day, I think is a pretty big gut punch."

Beyond Brooks, the Buckeyes also had Jacksonville (Fla.) Riverside five-star cornerback Jaheim Singletary committed in the class for seven months, but he decommitted in August and later signed with Georgia. At safety, Ohio State had good positioning for both Altoona (Iowa) Southeast Polk four-star Xavier Nwankpa and Las Vegas (Nev.) Bishop Gorman four-star Zion Branch, but they ended up at Iowa and USC, respectively.

Head coach Ryan Day and company are certainly pleased with the two signed cornerbacks – West Chester (Ohio) four-star Jyaire Brown and Hollywood (Fla.) Chaminade-Madonna Prep four-star Ryan Turner – but the numbers were not what Ohio State wanted.

"They have to be disappointed with the defensive backs," Greene said. "I mean, this is not the defensive backs class they thought they were going to sign. It wasn't all that long ago they were looking at Jaheim Singletary, Terrance Brooks, Zion Branch, Xavier Nwankpa, and they didn't get any of those guys. There has to be some disappointment there."

While there were misses for Ohio State in the class as any school has, there are more than enough positives to take away

from the Buckeyes' most recent haul.

Among Ohio State's commits, the stars stand out – both literally and metaphorically – with Hicks and Pickerington (Ohio) Central five-star safety/linebacker hybrid Sonny Styles highlighting the class.

"I'm a little bit biased toward C.J. Hicks," Lammers said of his favorite player in the class. "He is the linebacker that the Buckeyes need. I think he's the sideline-to-side-line guy. He's the natural leader. He's athletic. The intangible stuff that Hicks is going to bring is off the charts. He's a tremendous gift for the staff."

Greene echoed Lammers' comments on Hicks, saying that he has the highest potential in Ohio State's class.

"I'm really excited about C.J., and I won't be shocked if he's either starting or on the field next year," Greene said. "I think he's a kid that's mature beyond his years. I think he's mature physically and super smart, and he's played a lot of cornerback and safety in his career. He's going to know how to cover people where a lot of times with high school linebackers, they don't cover anyone in high school."

Styles can be similarly impactful given the number of things he can do on defense, but there are a number of gems throughout the class for Ohio State to hang its hat on.

"He's getting a lot of attention, but I feel like he might even deserve more – Caden Curry," said Bucknuts recruiting analyst Bill Kurelic. "I think he's really, really good. I think he's going to be a really good player for Ohio State. George Fitzpatrick, I don't think people realize just how good that kid is. He is a legitimate offensive tackle that can be a great player for Ohio State."

A number of analysts also pointed to Acworth (Ga.) Allatoona tight end Bennett Christian, one of two three-star recruits in the class alongside St. Clairsville, Ohio, offensive lineman Avery Henry, who could make waves at Ohio State.

"I know Ohio State as a program that

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doesn't throw the ball at the tight ends very much and we talk about that every year, but Bennett Christian in that light is more of the kind of guy that they should be recruiting at that position," Landis said. "He wasn't a receiver-first kind of player at his high school program. I think Ohio State over the years has taken a lot of guys who were more receiver types and tried to turn them into well-rounded tight ends and bulk them up a little bit, and that's a process that takes a few years. If you look up Bennett Christian, he's 6-6, 240 pounds or right around there, and where he excelled in high school was in the blocking game."

Lammers said Christian projects as a future NFL tight end, and he also viewed Seffner (Fla.) Armwood four-star safety Kye Stokes as someone underrated throughout this process.

"Kye Stokes is pretty under-appreciated for the sole reason that Buckeye fans were very high on either landing Xavier Nwankpa or Zion Branch, and so they wanted to land one of those two guys all while they had Kye Stokes already in their class," he said. "Don't get me wrong, Nwankpa is going to be a stud. Branch is going to be good too. But Stokes, he's a heat-seeking missile out there when he diagnoses. I think he's somebody that really shouldn't be slept on. He has the frame, too, that the strength staff is going to drool over when he gets into their program and they can add some mass onto him."

And while the battle for Abor is not yet over, if Ohio State can secure his signature on National Signing Day, he'll be the third-highest ranked recruit in the class for

the Buckeyes.

"He is a borderline five-star prospect. He's not in their geographic footprint, and he would represent a big win for them in the state of Texas at a time when the landscape down there seems to be changing," Landis said. "Texas has been really important to Ohio State over the last four or five classes, and I think there's maybe some warranted fear that that could be changing because of what A&M and Texas are doing right now."

In terms of where Ohio State went for talent this cycle, the Buckeyes pulled six recruits from Ohio, three from Florida, two from Georgia and Texas, and one each from Arizona, California, Colorado, Illinois, Indiana, Tennessee, Utah and Wisconsin.

"I think that it's always a priority for Ohio State to keep the elite players, the top players in Ohio at home," Kurelic said. "From that standpoint, landing C.J. Hicks and Gabe Powers, Jyair Brown, Tegra Tshabola, that was really, really important. Those are top guys that they targeted, especially Hicks and Powers, because they're five-star or close to five-star talents."

Brown, out of Draper, Utah, was the most out-of-the-way recruit for Ohio State's class, but he could end up being the most important in the grand scheme of things.

Stroud is the unequivocal starter heading into next season, but Brown will have a chance to win the job in 2023 when he and McCord battle for the starting position. Not to mention, with the transfers of Quinn Ewers and Jack Miller as well as walk-ons Jagger LaRoe and J.P. Andrade, it left Ohio

State with just two quarterbacks on the roster heading into the offseason, so an injury or another transfer could quickly move Brown up the depth chart.

"When they were able to secure Devin Brown that late in the process, I think that's a pretty big home run for Day and staff," Lammers said. "To be able to get that type of talent that late in the process when some things with your quarterback room are happening, I think that's just a pretty big win at the most important position on the field."

## Big Ten Steps Its Game Up

As expected, Ohio State had the top class in the conference, though a couple of Big Ten foes – namely Penn State at No. 6 in the rankings and Michigan at No. 9 – made a jump into the top 10 classes nationally in 2022.

The Wolverines and Nittany Lions each signed a five-star recruit, and Michigan signed 10 four-star prospects, with Penn State inking 15 four-stars.

"There's a (clear) difference between the Ohio State class and the Purdue class, but when you're looking at these top teams – Michigan really came on late, I think that's what really helped their recruiting," Greene said. "They got things turned around, beat Ohio State. I think there was a lot of excitement toward Michigan where usually at this time of the year, they're getting stoned by Ohio State and decommitments and coaching changes and things, so they've turned completely around."

Elsewhere in the conference, Michigan State came in at No. 21 and Iowa (No. 27),

Rutgers (No. 28) and Maryland (No. 29) each signed a top-30 class.

The real surprise in the conference, however, was Indiana, which pulled in the No. 17 overall class ahead of teams like Clemson (No. 24) and LSU (No. 18).

The Hoosiers' class consists of five four-star prospects, including Bloomington (Ind.) South four-star linebacker Dasan McCullough, a former Ohio State commit and top-100 recruit, as well as 15 three-stars.

"I was impressed with Indiana to have that kind of class in the midst of having this kind of season," Landis said. "That's maybe a little bit of momentum from last year. I know they were a trendy pick to be good this year and just didn't live up to that. Long term, I'm not sure what I think of that program, but this is a really good class for them to be in the top five in the Big Ten."

The 2022 class also showed a disparity between the East and West divisions in the conference, as seven of the top eight classes in the conference were in the East, the lone exception being Iowa's sixth-ranked class in the conference.

The bottom six spots in the conference rankings were all reserved for teams from the West, with Nebraska currently residing at the bottom with the No. 52 overall class in the country and just two top-500 recruits.

If the conference is looking for a reason as to why the East Division is on an eight-game winning streak in the Big Ten Championship Game since the divisions were introduced in 2014, look no further than the recruiting rankings.



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# Nebraska QB Martinez Transfers To Kansas State

Former Nebraska quarterback Adrian Martinez, who holds the Husker record for the most total yards in a career, announced his decision to transfer to Kansas State.

"Excited for the next chapter," Martinez said in his tweet.

Martinez's Nebraska career ended after the dual-threat quarterback suffered a severe shoulder injury – which required season-ending surgery – at Wisconsin on Nov. 20. The quarterback is facing a long post-surgery rehab which may have made it difficult for him to participate in spring camp, where new Husker offensive coordinator Mark Whipple will be installing his pro-style offense.



He completed 61.8 percent of his passes for 2,863 yards with 14 touchdowns and 10 interceptions in 2021, but the Huskers stumbled to 3-9 overall and 1-8 in the Big Ten. Martinez concluded his career as the Nebraska all-time leader with 10,792 total yards.

Husker head coach Scott Frost spoke highly of Martinez and departing center Cam Jurgens, acknowledging how his team must fill substantial holes.

"Those guys are making the decisions that they think are best for them, and I had great conversations with every one of them about helping them succeed," Frost said. "There are programs all over the country that are losing guys, and replacing those types of guys are not going to be easy, but we will get there."

The Cornhuskers did grab Texas transfer Casey Thompson as a potential replacement. Thompson played in all 12 of Texas' games this season, throwing for 2,113 yards and 24 touchdowns to nine interceptions while completing 63.2 percent of his passes. He also rushed 55 times for 157 yards and four scores.

## BIG

### 2021 Standings

#### East Division

	Conf.		All		Pct.
	W	L	W	L	
x-Michigan	8	1	12	2	.857
Ohio State	8	1	11	2	.846
Michigan State	7	2	11	2	.846
Penn State	4	5	7	6	.538
Maryland	3	6	7	6	.538
Rutgers	2	7	5	8	.385
Indiana	0	9	2	10	.167

#### West Division

	Conf.		All		Pct.
	W	L	W	L	
x-Iowa	7	2	10	4	.714
Wisconsin	6	3	9	4	.692
Minnesota	6	3	9	4	.692
Purdue	6	3	9	4	.692
Illinois	4	5	5	7	.417
Nebraska	1	8	3	9	.250
Northwestern	1	8	3	9	.250

x – denotes division champion

#### Dec. 4 Game

Big Ten Championship Game at Indianapolis  
Michigan 42, Iowa 3.



SONNY BROCKWAY

**LOOKING ELSEWHERE —** After four seasons with Nebraska, quarterback Adrian Martinez (2) announced his intentions to play his final year at Kansas State.

entered the transfer portal on Dec. 30.

"I wouldn't be where I am without (head coach Pat Fitzgerald) and everyone else who helped me at Northwestern," Joseph wrote on social media. "My time at Northwestern will be with me forever, and Evanston will always be in my heart."

The College Station, Texas, native stood out in 2020, picking off six passes in just nine games as a redshirt freshman, which marked the most interceptions by a Wildcat since Willie Lindsey recorded seven in 1991. Joseph helped lead Northwestern to its second Big Ten West title and the 2021 Citrus Bowl against Auburn.

In 2021, Joseph was named to the All-Big Ten second team by the Big Ten media, finishing with three interceptions.

The former Wildcat expressed his excitement to join a Notre Dame defense that struggled in its 37-35 Fiesta Bowl loss to Oklahoma State, surrendering 371 yards and four touchdowns through the air.

"The reason I was in the transfer portal was to join one of the best defenses in the country," Joseph explained. "I wanted to be surrounded by great players and great coaches that can take my game to the next level. That is why Notre Dame is a great fit. I believe they can take my game to the next place I envision it can be. I am going to be surrounded by dogs on the defense. They can help me excel my game and take it where I want it to be. To join a team like this, being a Fighting Irish is a perfect fit."

#### Illini Hire OC From UTSA

Illinois announced Barry Lunney Jr. will be the program's next offensive coordinator and

quarterbacks coach after he spent the past two seasons as the offensive coordinator for UTSA.

The Roadrunners averaged 36.9 points per game in 2021, tying with Cincinnati as the No. 11 scoring offense in the nation on their way to a 12-2 season.

Lunney will replace Tony Petersen, who was fired following one season in Champaign. The former UTSA offensive coordinator spent time with Illinois head coach Bret Bielema at Arkansas, serving for five years as the Razorbacks' tight ends coach.

When Lunney took over as offensive coordinator/associate head coach at UTSA, he helped the Roadrunner offense to score nearly 10 more points per game, jumping from 19.0 points per game in 2019 to 28.6 points per game in 2020.

UTSA ran an up-tempo, run-heavy spread option attack under Lunney, which allowed tailback Sincere McCormick to rush for 2,946 yards and 26 touchdowns and haul in 42 receptions for 315 yards in two seasons. Quarterback Frank Harris threw for 4,807 yards, 39 touchdowns and 12 interceptions while rushing for 1,094 yards and 15 touchdowns in his two seasons with Lunney.

Prior to his coaching career, Lunney started four seasons at quarterback for Arkansas from 1992-95, throwing for 5,782 yards with 33 touchdowns and 28 interceptions. A versatile athlete, Lunney also played basketball for the Razorbacks and spent one season of minor-league baseball in the Minnesota Twins organization.

Before the Illini's 37-30 loss to UTSA on Sept. 4, Bielema praised his then-foe Lunney.

"Barry is a very accomplished coach, an incredible person, father," Bielema said. "He's

#### Northwestern S Joseph Transfers To Notre Dame

After standing out in the Northwestern secondary, All-American safety Brandon Joseph will head to a different private school in the Midwest.

Joseph's commitment to Notre Dame marks an immense loss for the Wildcats' defense and a major acquisition for first-year Fighting Irish head coach Marcus Freeman. A 2020 consensus All-American, Joseph had

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# BIG Conference Bowl Matchups **BIG**

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<p><b>Gator</b> Dec. 31 • 11 a.m. ESPN</p>  <p>Wake Forest 38, Rutgers 10</p>	<p><b>Orange (CFP Semifinal)</b> Dec. 31 • 7:30 p.m.</p>  <p>Georgia 34, Michigan 11</p>	<p><b>Outback</b> Jan. 1 • Noon ESPN2</p>  <p>Arkansas 24, Penn State 10</p>	<p><b>Citrus</b> Jan. 1 • 1 p.m. ABC</p>  <p>Kentucky 20, Iowa 17</p>	<p><b>Rose</b> Jan. 1 • 5 p.m. ESPN</p>  <p>Ohio State 48, Utah 45</p>

got two incredible young men, two boys, who are just awesome people. When I hired him, he was the offensive coordinator at Fayetteville High School. When I was taking over, his dad was a legendary coach, represents everything that's great about our profession. I interviewed Barry, quickly realized he was somebody I wanted to have in my program. I had only a tight ends position open. He worked with the tight ends. He always had his eye on that quarterback position. He's a guy that I have a tremendous amount of respect for."

## IU DC Warren Departs For UNC

Indiana defensive coordinator Charlton Warren announced his decision to leave Bloomington after one season to become the co-defensive coordinator and defensive backs coach at North Carolina on Jan. 9.

In his only season at the helm of the Hoosier defense, Warren coached an Indiana defense that took a significant step backward following its stellar 2020 season.

Indiana's defense ranked last in the Big Ten by allowing 33.3 points per game and 10th in the conference by allowing 384.1 yards per game. The 2020 Hoosiers had a knack for forcing turnovers and making big plays, but Warren's unit had only five interceptions, ranking last in the Big Ten.

The defensive drop-off in Bloomington is exemplified by the drastic difference in the Hoosiers' havoc rate, which measures the percentage of plays in which a defense records a tackle for loss, forces a fumble or intercepts or breaks up a pass.

Indiana ranked No. 4 nationally under former coordinator Kane Wommack, boasting a mark 4.6 percent above the national average, according to ESPN's Bill Connelly. Under Warren in 2021, the Hoosiers' havoc rate floundered to No. 107 in the country.

Warren is not the only Indiana coach on his way out, with defensive line coach Kevin People heading to Missouri after two years in Bloomington.

Earlier in the offseason, head coach Tom Allen replaced offensive coordinator Nick Sheridan with former UMass head coach Walt Bell.

Cornerbacks coach Brandon Shelby, safe-

ties coach Jason Jones and outside linebackers/special teams coach Kasey Teegardin are still on Allen's defensive staff following the dis-appointing 2021 season.

Indiana announced a day after Warren's departure that it would be grabbing Minnesota defensive line coach Chad Wilt to replace Warren, though it has yet to find a replacement for People.

## IU Adds Pair Of Transfer LBs

On the same day they lost Warren to North Carolina, the Hoosiers added two transfer linebackers from Power 5 programs.

Kentucky transfer Jared Casey and UCLA transfer Myles Jackson announced their commitments to Indiana, seeking more opportunity after serving in reserve roles at their respective schools.

Casey recorded 22 tackles, including two for loss, in three seasons at Kentucky, and he has three years of eligibility remaining. A 6-3, 235-pound four-star recruit from Louisville (Ky.) Ballard, Casey was the No. 21-rated inside linebacker in the 2019 class.

In two seasons at UCLA, Jackson posted seven tackles, including two tackles for loss and a sack. Jackson was a three-star recruit in the 2020 class out of Hoschton, Ga., who possesses skills as an edge rusher. The 6-2, 235-pound linebacker has four seasons of eligibility left.

## B1G Declarations For NFL Draft

Upon the conclusion of the 2021 college football season, many student-athletes across the Big Ten declared for the NFL draft, forgoing their remaining eligibility.

Michigan has had several key players declare early for the draft, including All-Big Ten defensive back Vincent Gray, All-American tailback Hassan Haskins, All-Big Ten safety Daxton Hill, All-Big Ten defensive lineman Chris Hinton and All-American outside linebacker David Ojabo.

Penn State and Illinois will both need to replace one of the best all-conference players on their respective defenses, with Nittany Lion linebacker Brandon Smith and Illini safety Kerby Joseph declaring for

the draft.

On the other side of the ball, Iowa and Nebraska need to fill big voids left by All-Big Ten offensive standouts in Hawkeye tailback Tyler Goodson and Husker center Cam Jurgens.

Unsurprisingly, Michigan State will need to find a new tailback with Doak Award winner Kenneth Walker heading to the NFL, along with Spartan receiver and return specialist Jalen Nailor. Fellow star wideout Jayden

Reed is expected to return to East Lansing, though.

Purdue lost key players to the draft as well, including standout wide receiver David Bell, All-Big Ten standout defensive end George Karlaftis, and offensive lineman Tyler Witt.

Additionally, Maryland saw running back Tayvon Fleet-Davis and safeties Nick Cross and Jordan Mosley declare for the 2022 draft.

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# COVID Pause Disrupts Nonconference Slate

Fresh off a four-game winning streak, which featured home victories over a pair of then-ranked foes in Duke and Wisconsin, Chris Holtmann's Ohio State basketball squad was riding high. Sitting at 8-2 on the year, the Buckeyes had jumped into the top 20 in the national rankings and worked their way into the upper echelon of Big Ten consideration after a groggy start that had some questioning the team's ability to absorb the loss of star guard Duane Washington Jr. to the NBA.

## COURT REPORT Patrick Mayhorn

Entering a prime-time Dec. 18 matchup with Kentucky in Las Vegas, Ohio State had a chance to announce itself not just as a Big Ten contender but as one of the nation's best teams, a year removed from a top-10 finish and a No. 2 seed in the national tournament before an embarrassing first-round loss to 15th-seeded Oral Roberts.

Two days before the two were set to square off, just before the Buckeyes packed up shop and headed out west, an increase in positive COVID tests within the Ohio State program shut everything down. The team ceased practice and in-person team activities as a large portion of its roster faced 10-day isolation periods associated with the positive test, and that marquee matchup with the Wildcats was canceled.

"That was a difficult conversation to have with our players," Holtmann said on 97.1 The Fan. "They really wanted to play in the game. It's a rarity when you get a chance to play Duke and Kentucky. Obviously, we were able to beat Duke here. I think even as good as Kentucky played on Saturday (a 98-69 win over North Carolina Dec. 18 in a hastily

## 2021-22 Ohio State Men's Basketball Statistics

### 10-3 Overall (4-1 Big Ten) Statistics through games of Jan. 9

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.						
E.J. Lidell	13-13	400-30.8	87-171	.509	19-51	.373	68-90	.756	30-63	93-7.2	34-1	36	40	41	7	261-20.1
Malaki Branham	13-12	329-25.3	49-107	.458	13-31	.419	24-26	.923	9-36	45-3.5	20-0	25	23	3	10	135-10.4
Zed Key	13-10	293-22.6	52-84	.619	0-0	.000	17-28	.607	21-53	74-5.7	28-0	10	13	10	2	121-9.3
Kyle Young	11-1	235-21.4	31-55	.564	10-24	.417	27-31	.871	10-54	64-5.8	19-1	13	13	7	5	99-9.0
Justin Ahrens	13-13	352-27.1	28-76	.368	28-74	.378	14-19	.737	1-38	39-3.0	21-0	17	11	1	6	98-7.5
Jamari Wheeler	13-13	393-30.2	32-66	.485	15-39	.385	11-12	.917	9-40	49-3.8	29-1	56	25	0	22	90-6.9
Meechie Johnson Jr.	13-1	257-19.8	28-76	.368	20-50	.400	10-14	.714	4-17	21-1.6	24-0	18	23	1	12	86-6.6
Justice Sueing	2-0	30-15.2	5-13	.385	0-4	.000	2-2	1.000	1-6	7-3.5	3-0	0	2	0	1	12-6.0
Cedric Russell	11-0	104-9.5	12-29	.414	10-22	.455	3-4	.750	0-5	5-0.5	8-0	5	5	0	0	37-3.4
Eugene Brown II	9-0	88-9.8	8-17	.471	3-9	.333	0-2	.000	9-9	18-2.0	10-0	5	4	2	1	19-2.1
Jimmy Sotos	8-0	71-8.9	5-9	.556	3-5	.600	2-4	.500	1-7	8-1.0	8-0	11	4	1	1	15-1.9
Joey Brunk	12-2	68-5.6	7-10	.700	0-0	.000	3-4	.750	1-12	13-1.1	11-0	4	3	2	1	17-1.4
Harrison Hookfin	2-0	4-1.9	0-1	.000	0-0	.000	0-0	.000	1-0	1-0.5	1-0	0	0	0	0	0-0.0
Team									14-15	29			4			
<b>Total</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>2625</b>	<b>344-714</b>	<b>.482</b>	<b>121-309</b>	<b>.392</b>	<b>181-236</b>	<b>.767</b>	<b>111-355</b>	<b>466-35.8</b>	<b>216-3</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>170</b>	<b>68</b>	<b>68</b>	<b>990-76.2</b>
<b>Opponents</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>2625</b>	<b>323-793</b>	<b>.407</b>	<b>86-272</b>	<b>.316</b>	<b>176-232</b>	<b>.759</b>	<b>145-287</b>	<b>432-33.2</b>	<b>235-5</b>	<b>140</b>	<b>141</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>94</b>	<b>908-69.8</b>

arranged game), I think we would've had a great shot at full strength to play well there. We were really fighting for that opportunity.

"And honestly, we were going to do it relatively shorthanded. We were headed there with somewhat of a thin bench and some important, key players that were not going to be able to play in the game. But we wanted to go anyway because we felt like we owed it to CBS Sports and we felt like we owed it to Kentucky."

The Buckeyes didn't surrender that opportunity without a fight. Holtmann was in contact with Kentucky head coach John Calipari about a potential rescheduling of the matchup, but OSU was without the numbers and Kentucky was without the time to make it happen.

"He called me last night because it's public knowledge now that their Louisville game was canceled," Holtmann said. "He talked to me about playing on Wednesday there and then returning to the game next year.

"We just couldn't do it. Just num-

bers-wise. But I tried like crazy. I was throwing out after-Christmas dates. UK had a very willing partner in us. We just don't have the numbers."

Although the cancellation – as well as two others that followed with the Buckeyes missing out on matchups against UT Martin and New Orleans – was disappointing for Holtmann and his team, he felt that Ohio State had established itself all the same during the nonconference slate.

"(The cancellation) was disappointing for everybody. But again, we've had a phenomenal schedule," Holtmann said. "It's what makes you really glad that you put a really challenging schedule together in the nonconference so that we're not sitting here and saying, 'Kentucky, that's an important résumé-builder win – ugh, we can't play in that game.' Well, we've been able to bank some really good résumé-building wins, and obviously, we'll have plenty of opportunities in Big Ten play."

The Buckeyes returned to play Jan. 2 against Nebraska in Lincoln without any COVID-related vacancies on its roster.

### Buckeyes Add IUPUI To Schedule

Ohio State will be making up for one of the three games that it lost during a 22-day COVID pause, as it has reached a deal to match up with IUPUI on Jan. 18 at 7 p.m. on the Big Ten Network. The school an-

nounced the newest matchup on Jan. 10.

The game will fall right between Ohio State's back-to-back home matchups with Penn State on Jan. 16 and Nebraska on Jan. 22. IUPUI sits currently without a win in the Horizon League and with only one win in 12 games on the season – a 61-41 victory over Spalding University, a Division III school with a 2-11 record.

It serves as a chance for the Jaguars to recoup some games as well after they had a trio of matchups canceled over COVID concerns from Dec. 30 through Jan. 6. IUPUI is led by head coach Matt Crenshaw, serving his first season in the role, and guard B.J. Maxwell, who is averaging 11.8 points per contest in his seventh season of college basketball after playing for Abilene Christian from 2015-19, Detroit Mercy in 2019-20 and St. Edward's University in 2020-21.

### Ohio State Halts Concessions

In what could be accurately referred to as a concessions concession, Ohio State has closed down concessions sales at all university sporting events, beginning with the women's basketball team's matchup against Illinois on Jan. 6. Fans will not be permitted to bring their own food or drink into venues, though water will be made available.

The change is part of a university response to the rapid spread of the Omicron

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## OSU Men's Basketball Signees

Players in the class of 2022 who have signed to play basketball at Ohio State. (Star ratings are from the 247Sports composite rankings.)

Player	Pos.	Ht.	Wt.	Stars	High School
Roddy Gayle	SG	6-4	195	★★★★	Youngstown (N.Y.) Lewiston Porter
Bowen Hardman	SG	6-3	160	★★★	Cincinnati Princeton
Felix Okpara	C	6-11	210	★★★★	Branson (Mo.) Link Academy
Brice Sensabaugh	F	6-6	240	★★★★	Orlando (Fla.) Lake Highland Prep
Bruce Thornton	PG	6-2	205	★★★★	Alpharetta (Ga.) Milton

variant of COVID-19, with cases jumping sharply within Ohio. Other Big Ten programs – Maryland, Michigan, Michigan State and Rutgers – have moved to require a negative COVID test or vaccination cards for entrance to sporting events, but Ohio law prevents the state school from making a similar move, prompting this decision.

The goal of the policy is to keep masks in place, as required both by the university and by a Columbus city mandate. The move was no surprise to Holtmann, but his frustration with the pandemic at large remains.

"If you read the tea leaves, you kind of got the sense that some of this was coming, that more policies would be coming," Holtmann said. "In some ways, it can be a frustrating thing, and yet at the same time, you just hope that the numbers continue to go down, and that we're able to get back to a regular environment at home. But I know our university officials and our medical staff are working to make sure that safety is (the priority)."

Ohio State's first home men's basketball game under the new rules came Jan. 9 against Northwestern, in an 95-87 Buckeye win. Attendance dipped slightly below the 12,274 average, checking in at 10,620.

### Branham Boom Bewilders Bucks

Ohio State needed someone to step up in its Jan. 2 matchup with Nebraska in Lincoln. Lacking its traditional glue guy in Kyle Young because of a non-COVID illness, and dealing with one of the worst performances of the season from star forward E.J. Liddell, who shot only 2 of 14 from the field, the Buckeyes looked doomed to take their first Big Ten loss of the season.

Enter true freshman guard Malaki Branham, considered one of the most talented players on the team by way of the recruiting rankings but also thought of largely as a role player focusing on his development this season.

For much of the first third of the season, that bore out. Branham started in nine of Ohio State's first 10 games but averaged only 6.3 points, with 1.6 assists and 3.0 rebounds per contest. Known as an excellent shooter at Akron St. Vincent-St. Mary, the 6-4 guard struggled at times early in the season to find his touch, shooting only 38.8 percent from the field and 33.3 percent from deep.

Against the Cornhuskers, though, everything seemed to click into place for the youngest player on Ohio State's roster. Branham was on fire from the field early and earned 43 minutes of playing time because of it, ultimately leading the Buckeyes to an 87-79 overtime victory with 35 points, which more than tripled his previous career high of 11.

His hot start – Branham scored 21 points

in the first half – secured his career day, as he earned a green light from the coaching staff early.

"I kind of built my confidence after I hit those first couple," Branham said. "They just told me to keep shooting, so that's what I did."

In the historic performance – which placed Branham second on the school's all-time freshman scoring list behind only Jared Sullinger, who put up 40 points on IU-PUI in 2010 – Branham also earned quite a bit of trust and leeway from his teammates, who fed him passes as often as they could and waxed poetic about his performance afterward.

"That boy's good, I'm telling you," center Zed Key said. "He's going to be a really good player. We needed it. Some of us didn't have our legs back just from being off for that amount of time. For him to step up tonight, it shows how good of a player he is."

And for a coaching staff that wanted to see a more aggressive Branham for much of the season, it felt like proof of concept.

"That's a phenomenal effort by Malaki," Holtmann said. "We knew there was going to be some opportunities for other guys because of how they were going to collapse on Zed and E.J., and it created some opportunities for Malaki. He took full advantage of it."

"This is kind of a wild one, but he's had really good moments. Malaki's maturity is one of the things that we've been so impressed with ever since we started recruiting him about three years ago. That's allowed him to grow as a player."

With more than half of the season still in the offing, keeping that aggressiveness and that focus is the key for Branham and could be critical for Ohio State's long-term success. The Buckeyes are still without a consistently reliable scoring threat in the backcourt, and though Meechie Johnson Jr., Cedric Russell, Jimmy Sotos and Jamari Wheeler have teamed up to create a capable group outside of Branham, none is averaging more than 6.9 points per contest. A confident Branham could be the go-to guard the Buckeyes want, and his 10.4 points per game on the season has him up into the No. 2 spot for scoring on the team.

"I'm just trying to tell myself, 'Keep being aggressive. Keep being aggressive,'" Branham said. "And (against Nebraska,) I kept being aggressive, shots kept falling. I kept telling myself that because I know sometimes you have a big half like I did and you cool off in the second half. I didn't want to do that."

### Notes Around The Buckeyes

• For his performance against the Cornhuskers, Branham was named Big Ten Freshman of the Week on Jan. 3, the first such honor of his career. He was also

named the CBS Sports Freshman of the Week. He claimed the former honor once again a week later after scoring 13 points against Indiana and 24 against Northwestern.

• Branham's six three-pointers against Nebraska are the most for a Buckeye freshman since Feb. 26, 2019, when Justin Ahrens drilled six in a 29-point explosion to lead Ohio State to a 90-70 victory.

• The last Buckeye to score at least 35 points was Keita Bates-Diop on Feb. 8, 2018, when he racked up 35 of his own in a victory over Illinois.

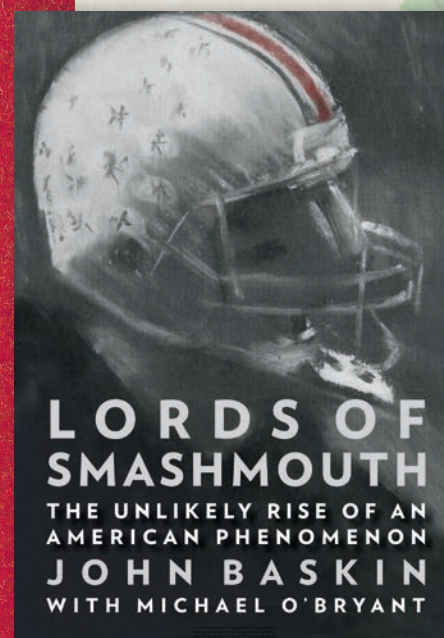
• Ohio State opened conference play at 4-1, its best start since Holtmann's first season in town, when the Buckeyes opened conference play with nine straight wins.

• The Buckeyes checked in at No. 16 in the Jan. 10 AP poll, dropping three spots from No. 13, their highest ranking of the season. They moved up two spots during the span of their lengthy COVID pause because of losses around the nation for top teams. Ohio State is one of five Big Ten teams in

the rankings, alongside No. 7 Purdue, No. 10 Michigan State, No. 13 Wisconsin and No. 25 Illinois.

• Ohio State has a 56.7 percent effective field-goal percentage (which adjusts for the fact that a three-pointer is worth more than a two-pointer, per Basketball Reference), the highest mark for the program since at least 2008 when BartTorvik.com began tracking it. Only nine teams have a higher percentage in college basketball thus far this season.

• Washington earned his first career start for the Indiana Pacers on Dec. 31 in a loss to the Chicago Bulls. He scored eight points on 3-of-14 shooting from the field. He bounced back in his second start against the Cleveland Cavaliers, pitching in a career-best 20 points on 8-of-17 shooting, and added another 17 points against the New York Knicks on Jan. 4. Through Jan. 10, he's averaging 8.7 points, 1.9 assists and 1.9 rebounds on 34.6 percent shooting in his first professional season.



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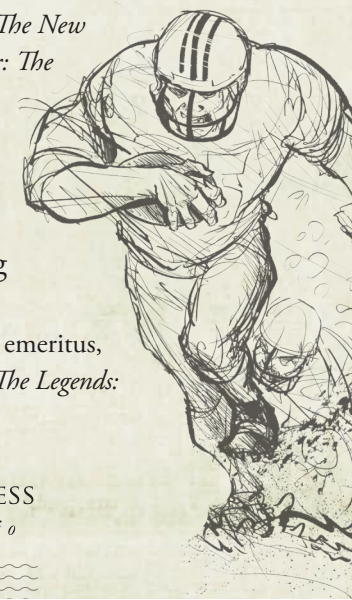
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# Ohio State Returns To Play In B1G Way

By **PATRICK MAYHORN**

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Associate Editor

Ohio State returned from a 22-day team hiatus as a result of positive tests within the program in a big way, jumping feet first into league play after losing out on the final three nonconference games on the schedule.

A nearly full-strength Buckeye team reopened its season in Lincoln, Neb., to take on Nebraska, squared off with Indiana in Bloomington and then returned home for the first time in more than a month to host Northwestern.

Despite some COVID-related rust, Ohio State went 2-1 in that stretch, improving its overall record to 10-3 and its league record to 4-1, the second-best start of the Chris Holtmann era in Columbus.

## Branham Lifts OSU In Lincoln

If not for Malaki Branham's breakout performance, Ohio State might have lost its first game after its 22-day break for COVID-related quarantine and isolation.

When the No. 13 Buckeyes tipped off against Nebraska, they began their first game since Dec. 11. No Ohio State team had endured such a lengthy in-season layoff for nearly 80 years – it was the program's most extended break since the 1943-44 season. That team played Indiana on Feb. 24 before a 29-day gap, which ended with a March 22 contest against Kentucky in Madison Square Garden.

There wasn't exactly a precedent for how Ohio State should respond to its less-than-ideal circumstances. Yes, the World War II-era Buckeyes dealt with a longer break, but basketball has significantly changed in the last 78 years. Luckily for the Bucks, Holtmann could turn to Branham – a true freshman and the highest-rated recruit of the head coach's five-year career in the program.

Branham exploded for a career-high 35 points and the Buckeyes (9-2, 3-0 Big Ten) overcame a two-possession deficit in the final 30 seconds to force overtime, where they defeated the Cornhuskers, 87-79 before 14,478 at the Pinnacle Bank Arena.

"This is my first game in college that I kind of took over," he said. "The team kind of needed me, but there (were) also great plays from all the team all the way down."

His 35 points are the second most for an Ohio State freshman in program history, trailing only Jared Sullinger's 40-point game against IUPUI in December 2010.

Jamari Wheeler and Meechie Johnson Jr. opened overtime with consecutive three-pointers, which gave Ohio State enough of a lead to sneak past Nebraska (6-8, 0-3). The Buckeyes never led by less than three in the extra frame.

Ohio State led by as many as eight points on three occasions in regulation. However, Nebraska answered to keep itself in the game. The latest Buckeye run came with 10:07 left, when an E.J. Liddell three-pointer pushed the Buckeyes ahead 59-51.

Still, Ohio State would require late-game heroics to force overtime against Nebraska. Down by five points in the final minute, Wheeler hit a three-pointer, and Nebraska's Lat Mayen missed two free throws with 22.4 remaining. Liddell rebounded a Johnson miss and was fouled on the putback, sending him to the line for two free throws with 8.9 seconds left with his team down 72-70.

Liddell was 1 of 2 from the line until that point, but he hit both to tie the game. Eugene Brown blocked Nebraska's final driving attempt, sending the game to overtime.

"I just want to point out Eugene Brown's block," Holtmann said after the game. "It was such a critical play in this game right now. And he's a young man who has had COVID a couple of times. I'm

just really proud of that kid."

Ohio State has won six straight against Nebraska and is now 16-2 against the Cornhuskers since they joined the Big Ten.

Graduate forward Kyle Young, averaging 10.0 points and 6.7 rebounds, did not make the trip while dealing with what a team spokesman said was a non-COVID illness.

Branham's previous career high was 11 points. He surpassed that mark when he hit his fourth three-pointer of the game at the 7:20 mark of the first half. Two possessions later, he threw down a one-handed dunk before adding his fifth three-pointer with 4:56 to play before the break. He finished the first half with 21 points and was 5 of 8 from beyond the arc.

Nebraska erased multiple deficits throughout the game, finally taking a 63-62 lead with 6:39 left, but Branham always seemed to have an answer.

Wheeler contributed 16 points and seven rebounds, while Liddell finished the game with 10 points on just 2-of-14 shooting. He also added eight rebounds and five assists. Zed Key led all rebounders with 14. Ohio State was 16 of 34 from deep, with Branham connecting on 6 of 10.

The Huskers were paced by Bryce McGowens with 18 points.

## Ohio State Falls In Familiar Territory

There's not a team that Ohio State has more familiarity with than the Indiana Hoosiers. Since 1949-50, the Buckeyes have faced off with their neighbors to the west more than any other foe, and on Jan. 6, the two squared off for the 134th time in that span, playing their 64th game in Bloomington and their 46th game in historic Assembly Hall.

Neither Assembly Hall nor its predecessor, the Gladstein Fieldhouse, has been friendly to the Buckeyes. Ohio State (9-3, 3-1) entered its matchup with the Hoosiers (11-3, 2-2) with a 19-44 overall mark in Bloomington and an 11-34 record in Assembly Hall – compared to a 39-31 record in Columbus – and the trend continued with a 67-51 loss.

In its first trip to Indiana in nearly two years, Ohio State couldn't weather a superlative performance from star IU forward Trayce Jackson-Davis to secure what would have been Holtmann's third win in Bloomington as Ohio State's head coach and the 10th victory of the season for the Buckeyes, who were winners of five straight before the loss.

The game, played before 14,130, was not without its excitement for Holtmann's squad. After an early 7-0 run to snatch a 15-7 lead, capped by a layup for Joey Brunk, the former Hoosier, Indiana rallied, and Ohio State fell cold. Indiana rattled off nine straight points to snare an 18-16 edge at the 8:35 mark, and the two went back and forth for the remainder of the half until Indiana led at the intermission, 33-30.

Neither team was helped by some paltry shooting from deep, at just 4 of 22 from downtown combined in the first half

## Ohio State 87, Nebraska 79

Jan. 2, 2022  
Pinnacle Bank Arena • Lincoln, Neb.

	1	2	OT	F
Ohio State (9-2, 3-0)	34	38	15	87
Nebraska (6-8, 0-3)	32	40	7	79

Ohio State	Total	FG	FT	Reb.	A	PF	Pts.
	Min	M-A	M-A	O-D			
Ahrens	24	1-5	2-2	0-2	1	2	5
Key	34	3-5	1-2	6-8	2	2	7
Liddell	40	2-14	5-6	3-5	5	4	10
Branham	42	13-19	3-4	0-6	2	2	35
Wheeler	31	6-8	0-0	3-4	2	2	16
Johnson Jr.	21	2-5	0-0	0-1	2	3	6
Brown III	7	1-1	0-0	1-0	1	1	2
Brunk	5	0-0	0-0	0-1	0	2	0
Russell	12	1-4	0-0	0-0	0	1	3
Sotos	8	1-2	0-0	0-0	2	0	3
<b>Totals</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>30-63</b>	<b>11-14</b>	<b>13-29</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>87</b>

Percentages: FG: 47.6%. FT: 78.6%. Three-point field goals: 16-34 (Branham 6-10, Wheeler 4-5, Johnson Jr. 2-4, Sotos 1-1, Russell 1-4, Ahrens 1-5, Liddell 1-5). Team rebounds: 1. Blocked shots: 5 (Liddell 3, Brown III, Key). Turnovers: 16 (Wheeler 5, Liddell 3, Branham 2, Johnson Jr. 2, Ahrens, Brown III, Brunk, Key). Steals: 4 (Johnson Jr. 2, Ahrens, Wheeler).

Nebraska	Total	FG	FT	Reb.	A	PF	Pts.
	Min	M-A	M-A	O-D			
Mayen	31	3-8	2-4	3-4	1	5	8
Walker	34	6-10	3-4	3-7	1	3	15
Verge Jr.	22	1-6	4-6	0-2	4	0	6
McGowens	38	6-19	4-4	2-3	2	1	18
Tominaga	17	2-5	2-2	0-0	1	1	7
Wilcher	34	5-8	0-0	1-0	1	2	13
Webster	31	2-6	2-3	0-3	2	1	8
Andre	11	2-2	0-0	0-3	1	2	4
Lakes	6	0-1	0-0	0-0	0	1	0
<b>Totals</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>27-65</b>	<b>17-23</b>	<b>11-23</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>79</b>

Percentages: FG: 41.5%. FT: 73.9%. Three-point field goals: 8-23 (Wilcher 3-4, Webster 2-3, McGowens 2-6, Tominaga 1-4, Lakes 0-1, Verge Jr. 0-1, Mayen 0-4). Team rebounds: 3. Blocked shots: 0. Turnovers: 8 (Walker 3, Andre, Mayen, McGowens, Verge Jr., Webster). Steals: 9 (Walker 4, Andre 2, Verge Jr. 2, McGowens). Officials: Sciroto, Garrison, Daily. Attendance: 14,478.

– three from the Buckeyes, one from IU.

Both teams came out cold in the second half, and Indiana was able to expand only slightly on its lead, going up 46-41 before four points by Branham closed the gap back to one.

But a quick flurry from IU, capped by a Jackson-Davis breakaway and-one layup, gave Indiana its largest lead of the game to that point at seven points, 52-45. A deep Johnson triple gave Ohio State brief life, but a 13-0 response extended Indiana's lead to 65-48 with 1:59 left to play, and Ohio State's ability to keep up ran out.

Ohio State was limited by a weak shooting performance, hitting only 16 of its 52 shots from the field (30.8 percent). Indiana was 25 of 61 for 41.0 percent but was only 2 of 15 from long range (13.3 percent).

Branham led the team in scoring for the second straight game with 13 points on 5-of-13 shooting, while Liddell's post-COVID woes continued. He scored only 11 points and knocked down just 3 of 12 shots, though he did corral nine rebounds.

"We have to get some guys rested," Holtmann said. "We have to learn how we can do some things better. Bottom line is, tonight our offense really failed us. I thought defensively we didn't play as smart as we needed to all the time, but tonight was really about our lack of offensive performance."

Jackson-Davis led the game with 27 points, 12 rebounds and five blocks. Indiana outscored the Buckeyes 38-10 in the



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paint and outrebounded them 41-33.

"They certainly controlled the paint, both offensively and defensively, really," Holtmann said. "I thought E.J. got bodied and knocked off a couple of his shots, but he's also got to kind of play through – not play through contact – but he's got to play to score the ball. But I think in general, again, we've just got to find ways to put him in better spots. The paint was the difference, for sure."

## Buckeyes Bounce Back Against NW

Jake Diebler couldn't have asked for a much better start to his tenure as Ohio State's head coach. Filling in for Holtmann and assistant Ryan Pedon, who missed the game because of COVID protocols, Diebler claimed victory in his first career game as acting head coach, with the Buckeyes (10-3, 4-1) scoring early and often to pull away from Northwestern (8-5, 1-3), 95-87 at Value City Arena in front of 10,620.

"Yes," Diebler said with a laugh when asked if he was nervous for his first game as a head coach. "I get nervous before every game, to be honest. This game has been so good to me, it's so important to my family so there's a deep-rooted passion and love for this game. I always have nerves, before every game because of that. There were certainly a few more this game, but I've been talking to Chris nonstop, and he gave me a lot of confidence, talked to me, kept me calm. Our staff on the bench, I felt like we were connected and really poised in a game that had multiple runs. Those

things gave me a lot of peace once we got out there and got going."

It was Liddell, who had struggled in his first two games back from COVID pause that forced him to isolate for 10 days, who led Ohio State to its fourth league win in five tries. The junior forward scored a career-high 34 points on the game, with Northwestern unable to find an answer for him inside or outside of the key. He rattled off 17 of Ohio State's first 19 points, knocking down five three-pointers and all six of his shots overall, helping the Buckeyes to a 19-11 lead at the 15:00 mark.

"I felt a little bit more in shape, honestly," Liddell said after the game. "I'm still trying to get back into the shape I was in before the pause because that was a pretty long break with no games or whatnot. I came into this game with the same mindset as always. A lot of people were doubting me after two bad games, but truthfully I just kept playing with confidence, kept my head up, and did what I know how to do."

He finished the half with 21 points on 8-of-11 shooting as Ohio State rocketed out to a 51-39 lead at the break – the new high-water mark for the Buckeyes in a first half this season, edging a 42-point outburst against Niagara.

The game nearly got out of hand early for the Wildcats, thanks in large part to the barrage of Buckeye shots from downtown. When Northwestern shifted to focus on Liddell defensively out of the first break of the game, Ohio State found both Branham and Johnson for triples of their own, pushing the lead to 15 points at 29-14 and forcing a Northwestern timeout with more



SONNY BROCKWAY

## BREAKTHROUGH — Malaki Branham (22) earned his first Big ten Freshman of the Week honors after a 35-point outburst to help the Buckeyes survive a scare from Nebraska Jan. 2.

than 12 minutes to play in the first frame.

A quick 10-2 Northwestern run cut into the Ohio State lead, but a Cedric Russell three-pointer and a pair of Young foul shots put the Buckeyes back up 36-24 just out of the under-eight-minute timeout.

Ohio State shot a hot 66.7 percent from the field in the first 20 minutes, including 9 of 16 from deep. However, eight turnovers, which the Wildcats converted into 11 points, helped keep Northwestern in the game.

Liddell started the second half as he started the first, with a bucket, but Northwestern again found a run to put pressure on the Buckeye lead. Amid a stretch that included a two Buckeye turnovers and three missed shots from downtown, Northwestern's Ty Berry found eight points to spark a 12-2 run, cutting the OSU lead down to just four, 55-51, the smallest deficit since 13-9 at the 15:47-mark of the first half.

And as it did after the run in the middle of the first half that cut Ohio State's 29-14 lead in half, Ohio State had a response. Branham snapped a nearly three-minute

scoring drought with a jumper, and Key added one of his own to push the lead back to eight points.

Behind a bucket from Berry and a three from Chase Audige, Northwestern would get back within two scores at 61-56, but never closer as Ohio State rattled off a quick seven points, capped by another Russell three-pointer, to push the lead back into double digits.

Ohio State would go on to lead by as many as 13 in its seventh straight home win of the season, where it has yet to lose this season and where it hasn't dropped a game in front of fans since Jan. 23, 2020, against Minnesota (COVID restrictions kept fans out of Value City Arena in the 2020-21 season).

Liddell led all scorers, while Branham added in 24. Berry, Audige and Pete Nance led the Wildcats with 23, 20 and 20 points respectively. Wheeler's eight rebounds led all Buckeyes, as did his six assists and five steals.

Indiana 67, Ohio State 51										
Jan. 6, 2022 Simon Skjodt Assembly Hall • Bloomington, Ind.										
	1	2	F							
Ohio State (9-3, 3-1)	30	21	51							
Indiana (11-3, 2-2)	33	34	67							
Ohio State	Total	FG	FT	Reb.						
	Min	M-A	M-A	O-D	A	PF	Pts.			
Ahrens	28	2-6	0-0	0-3	1	1	6			
Key	15	0-2	2-2	0-3	1	2	2			
Liddell	32	3-12	4-4	2-7	0	1	11			
Branham	34	5-13	2-2	0-5	3	1	13			
Wheeler	34	1-5	0-0	0-2	6	2	3			
Young	17	1-4	0-0	1-1	0	2	3			
Johnson Jr.	18	2-6	1-2	1-1	1	1	7			
Brunk	8	2-2	2-2	0-2	0	1	6			
Russell	4	0-2	0-0	0-0	0	0	0			
Brown III	10	0-0	0-0	1-3	0	2	0			
<b>Totals</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>16-52</b>	<b>11-12</b>	<b>5-28</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>51</b>			
<b>Percentages: FG: 30.8%. FT: 91.7%. Three-point field goals: 8-27 (Johnson Jr. 2-4, Ahrens 2-6, Branham 1-3, Young 1-3, Liddell 1-5, Wheeler 1-5, Russell 0-1). Team rebounds: 1. Blocked shots: 3 (Liddell 2, Young). Turnovers: 15 (Liddell 3, Wheeler 3, Young 2, Ahrens, Branham, Brunk, Johnson Jr., Key, Russell). Steals: 7 (Key 2, Ahrens, Brunk, Johnson Jr., Key, Liddell, Wheeler).</b>										
Indiana	Total	FG	FT	Reb.						
	Min	M-A	M-A	O-D	A	PF	Pts.			
Kopp	21	2-6	0-0	0-4	1	0	4			
Jackson-Davis	34	11-17	5-6	5-7	2	1	27			
Thompson	30	3-7	5-5	2-5	2	1	11			
Johnson	26	1-7	0-1	0-4	3	1	2			
Stewart	28	2-8	0-0	0-3	2	4	5			
Phinisee	22	1-6	0-0	1-3	0	1	2			
Durr	6	1-1	2-2	1-0	0	1	4			
Bates	4	0-2	0-0	0-0	0	1	0			
Geronimo	10	1-2	1-2	1-1	0	2	4			
Galloway	19	3-5	2-2	1-2	4	1	8			
<b>Totals</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>25-61</b>	<b>15-18</b>	<b>11-30</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>67</b>			
<b>Percentages: FG: 41.0%. FT: 83.3%. Three-point field goals: 2-15 (Geronimo 1-2, Stewart 1-5, Johnson 0-1, Thompson 0-1, Kopp 0-3, Phinisee 0-3). Team rebounds: 1. Blocked shots: 6 (Jackson-Davis 5, Geronimo). Turnovers: 9 (Jackson-Davis 4, Kopp 2, Thompson 2, Johnson). Steals: 7 (Galloway 2, Stewart 2, Geronimo, Johnson, Phinisee). Officials: Boroski, Kimble, Oglesby. Attendance: 14,130.</b>										

Ohio State 95 Northwestern 87										
Jan. 9, 2022 Value City Arena • Columbus, OH.										
	1	2	F							
Northwestern (8-5, 1-3)	39	48	87							
Ohio State (10-3, 4-1)	51	44	95							
Ohio State	Total	FG	FT	Reb.						
	Min	M-A	M-A	O-D	A	PF	Pts.			
Nance	30	7-12	3-4	3-3	3	4	20			
Beran	22	0-6	0-0	1-1	1	5	0			
Buie	29	4-12	2-2	0-0	8	2	11			
Audige	29	7-14	4-6	3-2	1	2	20			
Berry	33	8-12	3-4	0-6	1	4	23			
Greer	11	0-1	0-0	0-0	0	1	0			
Young	17	4-7	0-0	5-0	1	1	8			
Simmons	3	0-0	0-0	0-0	0	0	0			
Williams	11	1-3	0-0	1-1	2	0	2			
Roper II	15	1-1	1-1	1-1	2	0	3			
<b>Totals</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>32-68</b>	<b>13-17</b>	<b>16-16</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>87</b>			
<b>Percentages: FG: 47.1%. FT: 76.5%. Three-point field goals: 10-24 (Berry 4-6, Nance 3-5, Audige 2-5, Buie 1-5, Greer 0-1, Beran 0-2). Team rebounds: 4. Blocked shots: 3 (Beran, Nance, Williams). Turnovers: 12 (Buie 3, Nance 3, Young 3, Audige, Beran, Berry). Steals: 7 (Berry 2, Audige, Beran, Nance, Roper II, Young).</b>										
Ohio State	Total	FG	FT	Reb.						
	Min	M-A	M-A	O-D	A	PF	Pts.			
Ahrens	22	0-5	0-0	0-3	1	0	0			
Young	23	1-3	4-4	1-1	2	2	6			
Liddell	34	12-20	5-5	0-4	2	3	34			
Branham	33	5-8	13-14	1-3	5	1	24			
Wheeler	34	2-4	4-4	1-7	6	3	8			
Key	20	4-4	0-0	1-2	0	2	8			
Johnson Jr.	15	2-3	0-0	0-2	0	2	6			
Russell	15	3-4	0-0	0-0	2	2	9			
Brown III	4	0-0	0-0	0-0	0	0	0			
<b>Totals</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>29-51</b>	<b>26-27</b>	<b>7-22</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>95</b>			
<b>Percentages: FG: 56.9%. FT: 96.3%. Three-point field goals: 11-25 (Liddell 5-7, Russell 3-4, Johnson Jr. 2-2, Branham 1-3, Wheeler 0-2, Young 0-2, Ahrens 0-5). Team rebounds: 3. Blocked shots: 8 (Liddell 5, Branham, Brown III, Young). Turnovers: 14 (Wheeler 3, Young 3, Branham 2, Key 2, Liddell 2, Ahrens, Johnson Jr.). Steals: 9 (Wheeler 5, Branham 3, Johnson Jr.). Officials: Carstensen, Smith, Eppley. Attendance: 10,620.</b>										





# OSU's Season Again Impacted By Pandemic

UCLA, sitting at 5-3 before its scheduled matchup with Ohio State on Dec. 19, was set to be the highlight of the Buckeyes' nonconference schedule. The Bruins were ranked as high as No. 19 earlier this season after beginning 3-0, and it would have provided Ohio State an additional opportunity to face a strong opponent before heading into the conference portion of the season.

## DOUBLE DRIBBLE Braden Moles

Instead, the game was canceled on Dec. 18 due to COVID-19 issues within UCLA's program, leaving the Buckeyes stranded on the West Coast with no opponent until a matchup with San Diego State on Dec. 21.

"We didn't get the word until Saturday, so the day before, and so we had prepared and we were ready to go and it would have been a great opportunity against a terrific team," said Ohio State head coach Kevin McGuff. "That's just kind of where we're at with COVID right now."

It figured to be Ohio State's last significant test before the Big Ten conference schedule began in full, but the Buckeyes

still made the most of the time available to them following the cancellation.

"We were still able to practice, run up and down, scrimmage against each other, run our plays, make sure that everything was up to par – just staying on top of our craft," sophomore guard Kateri Poole said in "The Experience: The Road To March Madness," an Ohio State video production.

Ohio State's cancellations come as women's programs across the country are seeing games either postponed or canceled. Games have been impacted for Arizona, Indiana, Kansas State, Northwestern, Oregon, Oregon State, Syracuse, Texas Tech and UConn, among others.

"We were disappointed that the game got canceled," junior guard Jacy Sheldon said. "We were looking forward to it. They're a great team. But once we heard the news, I think we kind of took advantage of being in California, going out and seeing stuff. It was fun. We got to spend time with each other. We got to hang out with the coaches, too, so that was good downtime for us. We had a lot of fun despite the disappointment behind that cancellation."

College basketball is not alone, as the entire athletics world is once again coming to grips with the coronavirus infiltrating programs, including those of the NBA, NFL and NHL, as well as other collegiate programs.

Despite the challenges, Ohio State was still able to come out and earn a 66-54 win over San Diego State Dec. 21 to close out the nonconference schedule and end the long trip on a positive note.

"It's been a rough trip – an exhausting one," senior guard Braxtin Miller said. "Being able to come out strong and get this win was really important. I think we did a good job sticking together and keeping our heads in the right mind space with everything that's happened and staying focused on the game."

After returning from the West Coast and falling to Michigan on New Year's Eve, 90-71, a home contest with Penn State set for Jan. 3 was postponed, so Ohio State did not return to the court until a 90-69 victory Jan. 6 against Illinois, meaning the Buckeyes played just three games between Dec. 15 and Jan. 6.

"It's definitely not what we were hoping for this coming year, but I think going through that COVID year, we're kind of ready for it," McGuff said. "We're used to it, which is unfortunately the reality of it, but just staying ready for each game and hoping for the best each day and working equally as hard every day at practice – it's what's keeping us well."

It's reminiscent of last season in which Ohio State saw seven games either canceled or postponed, and while Ohio State is hoping to avoid that this season, it's a possibility that's being prepared for.

"It's tough," McGuff said. "We can't control that, but we're going to do the best we can to take care of ourselves. But it's really difficult. I hate it. Our kids are doing a great job, showing up every day and doing what they can do. But it's really, really, really tough because the uncertainty really weighs on our kids."

## Perry Nominated For All-American Game

Ohio State commit Mya Perry, a 5-11 shooting guard out of Reynoldsburg, Ohio, has been nominated for the 2022 McDonald's All-American Game, an annual contest to display the best in high school basketball across the country.

The McDonald's All-American Game returns this year after a one-year hiatus and will be played in Chicago in March to celebrate the 45th anniversary of the game.

She will be joined by fellow nominee and teammate Imarianah Russell, who

is committed to West Virginia. Perry would be Ohio State's first McDonald's All-American since Kierstan Bell made the team in 2019.

Other McDonald's All-Americans for the Buckeyes include Tori McCoy (2016), Kelsey Mitchell (2014), Sierra Calhoun (2014), Stephanie Mavunga (2013), Linnae Harper (2013), Tayler Hill (2009), Samantha Prahalis (2008), Jantel Lavender (2007), Alison Jackson (2007), Marscilla Packer (2004), Brandie Hoskins (2003) and Jessica Davenport (2003).

## OSU Falls Out Of AP Top 25

In the AP top 25 poll released Jan. 3, Ohio State fell out of the rankings for the first time since the 2019-2020 season, though it still received 24 votes.

The Buckeyes had been ranked in 25 consecutive polls dating back to the 2020 preseason poll, the fourth-longest streak in team history according to College Poll Archive. During that time, they rose to as high as No. 11 in the country.

The longest streak for Ohio State was 130 consecutive appearances in the poll from 2004-11, and McGuff's teams also had 59 straight appearances from 2015-18.

## Sheldon Is December's Lady Buck Of The Month

In an up-and-down month for the Buckeyes, Ohio State junior guard Jacy Sheldon earns Plank's Lady Buck of the Month award for December, a testament to her consistency that helped Ohio State through a challenging stretch of the season.

She averaged 19.4 points per game, 3.6 rebounds and 2.6 assists and shot 50.9 percent from the field, including 44.8 percent from beyond the arc, during the month in which Ohio State finished with a 4-3 record. She notched 26 points in a loss to Michigan and 23 points in each of the Buckeyes' losses to Syracuse and Indiana, but she bounced back with 19-point performances in wins over Mount St. Mary's and San Diego State.

So far this season, Sheldon is leading Ohio State in points per game (18.7) and steals (2.0) and is among the team's top shooters at 52.7 percent.

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# Buckeyes Beat Spartans After 27-Day Break

The Ohio State wrestling team returned to the mat after a 27-day break with a dual meet at Michigan State in the Big Ten opener on Jan. 8 in East Lansing, Mich.

The Buckeyes last competed on Dec. 12 against Pittsburgh, defeating the Panthers 30-7 at the Covelli Center. Their final nonconference dual with American University was canceled because of inclement weather in the Washington, D.C., area on Jan. 3.

## ON THE MAT Chase Brown

Ohio State head coach Tom Ryan said his team had practiced, enduring the monotony of conditioning and training throughout that time. They also dealt with the Omicron variant of COVID-19 and its spread throughout Columbus. Still, Ohio State dived straight into its Big Ten slate after a month without competition.

"We wanted to compete in the American dual to get us back on the mat before Big Ten play," Ryan said. "American ultimately decided to cancel, and we agreed with it. We were supposed to leave for D.C. that morning (Jan. 3), but they felt the weather would be bad. We offered to have the dual meet with no spectators, but they felt the best thing would be to cancel it, so we did."

Ryan said he wanted to see a few things from Ohio State's final nonconference dual. First, he thought it would be helpful for his players to have a final weigh-in before entering the conference slate. Second, he believed his wrestlers would benefit from facing an opponent rather than teammates.

"We looked like we needed some fresh looks for our guys," Ryan said. "Our last competition was Dec. 12 against Pittsburgh, which is almost a month ago at this point. We wanted to get away before Big Ten competition, cut weight and have an efficient performance against a quality opponent in American."

However, it didn't appear that Ohio State needed a final tuneup before conference play after it won its 12th straight match over Michigan State with a 27-14 victory in the weekend dual.

The No. 7 Buckeyes (5-0) won six of 10 matches at Jenison Field House – highlighted by four bonus-point wins. Sammy Sasso, the No. 2 wrestler at 149 pounds, headlined the victories. The redshirt junior pinned Jaden Enriquez in 5:39 for his 25th consecutive win in dual competitions. He also extended his Big Ten dual winning streak to 19.

Malik Heinselman started the dual for Ohio State at 125 pounds. The No. 14 lightweight earned the afternoon's first points, taking down Tristan Lujan with under a minute in the opening period. Lujan responded with two escapes before Heinselman scored the final four points, winning a 6-2 decision.

True freshman Will Betancourt made his Buckeye debut at 133 pounds against Michigan State redshirt senior Rayvon Foley, who moved up from 125 pounds in the offseason. The Lancaster, Penn., native didn't fare well in his first start, losing a 16-0 technical fall to Foley.

At 141 pounds, Klay Reeves received his first-career start. He wrestled unattached from the program as a freshman and did not compete in 2020-21. Still, Ryan and his staff decided Reeves could contend in the weight class, but the redshirt sophomore lost a 5-3 decision to Jordan Hamdan in a hard-fought match.

After Sasso's victory, Jashon Hubbard made his return to the starting lineup after Ohio State elected to wrestle Bryce Hepner at 157 pounds in its more recent competitions. The redshirt junior failed to take advantage of his opportunity, losing a 4-2 decision to Chase Saldade.

The Buckeyes entered halftime trailing the Spartans 11-9.

Carson Kharchla, the No. 5 wrestler at 165 pounds, took the mat first after the break in a matchup with Caleb Fish. Kharchla continued his early-season dominance with a 14-6 major decision, claiming his third bonus-point victory of the year.

Ethan Smith quickly built a 6-2 lead before ending the first period leading 10-4 over Nathan Jimenez. The No. 7 174-pound wrestler increased his lead to 17-6 and continued extending it until earning a 24-9 technical fall.

Seventh-ranked 184-pounder Kaleb Romero pinned Marty Larkin at 3:22 to make the score 24-11 Buckeyes. Rocky Jordan lost the Buckeyes' next match at 197 pounds to Cameron Caffrey – a 7-2 decision in favor of the Spartans.

Gavin Hoffman wrapped up the competition for Ohio State at the heavyweight. He started in place of All-American Tate Orndorff, who missed the competition for an undisclosed ailment. Hoffman defeated Brad Wilton in a 10-3 decision, giving the Buckeyes the 27-14 victory in East Lansing.

Ohio State's next match will be against No. 4 Michigan on Jan. 14 at the Covelli Center. The match will start at 7 p.m. and will be televised on the Big Ten Network.

### No Help From Extra Eligibility

Because of COVID-19, the NCAA allowed wrestlers who competed during the 2020-21

season to exercise an extra year of eligibility because of their hardship endured during the pandemic.

Traditionally, NCAA Division I programs are allowed 9.9 scholarships per team. However, wrestlers who chose to remain with their programs or transfer to another school using their pandemic-related eligibility do not count against the scholarship number.

"Any senior from last year that came back this season does not count against the allotment," Ryan said. "That creates a big challenge for us. There are teams with 15 or 16 scholarships, while others like us have 9.9 scholarships. Just by pure chance – the age of your team and class of your team can impact what kind of roster you have."

Ryan said that Ohio State does not have any players currently on the roster taking advantage of the extra year. There were only three graduating seniors last season. Elijah Cleary earned his degree before transferring to Pittsburgh, "Gas Tank" Gary Traub went to Oregon State, and Zach Steiner is a graduate assistant in Ohio State's agriculture communications department.

"We still have a bunch of studs on our team, but we face a significant disadvantage of making sure that they develop," Ryan said. "Some other programs have wrestlers that have already developed and been through challenging situations. For a freshman at 19 years old to wrestle a 25-year-old seems silly, but it is what it is."

Ryan also expressed his grievances with the transfer portal, claiming that it created an extra layer of difficulty for the Ohio State coaching staff in an already difficult landscape.

"This whole transfer portal has been an issue too," Ryan said. "I haven't been a real proponent of some of the decisions that have been made in the past couple of years. The wrestling landscape can change within a week. Things happen fast in college sports, and with this transfer thing wrestlers can go whenever they want."

"There's no penalties or guidelines any-

more. It's going to be interesting to see how things go forward in this type of competitive situation. Our focus is getting who we already have ready to go and being ready to face whoever stands in front of us, regardless of what their roster might look like."

### Iowa's Lee Out For Year

Three-time NCAA champion Spencer Lee announced on Jan. 1 that he would no longer compete during the 2021-22 season. He will undergo surgery to repair his knees fully and will be eligible for a medical hardship waiver to return for 2022-23.

"My coaches, medical staff and family believe the best course of action at this time is surgery so that when I return, I can compete at my full potential," Lee said in a statement.

Lee won his third national title last season less than two weeks after tearing his anterior cruciate ligament in his left knee. He was already wrestling with a torn ACL in his right knee. Lee went 5-0 and outscored his opponents 59-8 to win at 125 pounds, leading the Hawkeyes to an NCAA team championship.

With Lee out for the year, the Big Ten title and the national title race are now wide open at the weight class, and Heinselman could be one of the biggest benefactors.

"We expect Malik to be dominant," Ryan said. "Nick Suriano transferred to Michigan in the offseason from Rutgers using COVID eligibility so that he will be a test for Malik at 125, but we expect dominant performances from him in the Big Ten."

Suriano graduated from Rutgers in the spring after becoming the first NCAA champion in school history. He wrestled at 133 pounds for three years, amassing a 70-7 record with 48 bonus victories. At Michigan, Suriano takes over the 125-pound slot, where he competed at the beginning of his collegiate career.

Heinselman finished fourth in the 2021 Big Ten championships, losing a 7-2 decision to Michigan State's Foley in semifinals, and he followed up that performance with a 1-2 record at the NCAA championships.



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# Icers Giving Opponents Third-Degree Burns

The saying for years about the NBA regular season is that there's no need to tune in until the final two minutes because that's when all the action happens with a game on the line.

## IN THE CREASE Craig Merz

It might be a bit unfair to stretch that analogy for the Ohio State men's hockey team, but for some reason the No. 17

Buckeyes (15-6-1, 7-3-1-1 Big Ten) don't kick it into gear until the third period.

The latest example was the series at Wisconsin on Jan. 8-9. The Buckeyes in the opener were down 3-2 entering the third but scored three times for a 5-3 victory to extend their winning streak to six games.

In the rematch, Wisconsin scored late to go up 2-1, but freshman Georgii Merkulov scored even later (4:54 left in regulation) to make it 2-2. The game was recorded as a tie after the scoreless overtime, but the Buckeyes earned the bonus conference point and ran their unbeaten streak to seven by winning the shootout 2-1 in four rounds on the deciding goal by

graduate forward Eric Cooley.

How dominant have the Buckeyes been with their late surges?

Well, here's an impressive stat: OSU has outscored opponents 43-14 in the third period (plus 2-0 in overtime). Meanwhile, Wisconsin has scored 43 goals for the season.

"We work so hard during a practice that I don't think a lot of teams can compete with us," said OSU freshman goalie Jakub Dobeš. "We know that the third period is ours. We take the confidence we have that if we just work hard, we usually get it done."

Ohio State is 5-6-0 when trailing after two periods, and no comeback was as dramatic as the 4-3 win against Bowling Green at Value City Arena on Dec. 16.

The Falcons were in command with a 3-0 lead until they were hit with a tidal wave in the third period.

OSU scored three unanswered goals before senior Gustaf Westlund netted the winner at 1:55 of overtime for the 4-3 victory before a crowd of 5,232.

The rally got its genesis in the waning moments of the second period. Through the first 19 minutes, BG held the Buckeyes to three shots, but in the final 60 seconds OSU showed some life and put three more shots on goal.

"Give credit to Bowling Green," Buckeye coach Steve Rohlik said. "I mean that was probably one of the worst periods I've seen out of our team in a long time. We got a little momentum in the last shift in the second. The third period, it was a matter of starting to believe and gaining confidence."

There was no fiery speech or a fist slamming a locker between the second and third periods. Rohlik looked around the room and saw a team eager for the challenge of climbing back into the game.

His message was clear: "At that point, I almost just said 'We've got to hit reset.

BIG		Men's Hockey				
	Pts.	W	L	T	OTL	
Minnesota	25	8	4	0	1	
<b>Ohio State</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	
Michigan	23	7	5	0	2	
Notre Dame	22	8	4	0	0	
Michigan State	15	5	7	0	0	
Wisconsin	12	3	8	1	0	
Penn State	8	3	9	0	0	

Let's go win a hockey game. Take it one shift at a time. We have to try to get the first one before you can get the second. We have to start playing the right way."

"Give credit to our guys. A big win. Maybe we didn't deserve to win, but we found a way."

That path was led by Dobeš, whose last of 30 saves was stopping a breakaway just before Westlund's heroics.

"He's the reason why we're still in the game," Rohlik said. "There's no question. Without what Jakub did there during the game, even in a third, the number of odd-man rushes, the number of point-blank shots, we certainly wouldn't be talking about a win on our side."

Rohlik said the key to the victory, in addition to the outstanding play of Dobeš, was getting a quick goal at the start of the third period.

"You score early in the third and everybody believes and now all of a sudden it's muscle memory," he said "You remember games. We've done well in the third before. All that stuff starts to come to fruition, and it did there in the third period again."

The following night in the return match at BG, there was more third-period magic, although not all of it was in the goal-scoring department.

OSU rallied twice and got the winning goal by freshman Cam Thiesing at 6:37 of the third for a wild 3-2 victory to earn the sweep.

There were 29.8 seconds left when several skirmishes broke out in the BG end. The officials went to video review to sort it out, and after a lengthy delay, numerous penalties were assessed. Play resumed, but the clock did not start.

Dobeš tried to get the officials' attention by intentionally knocking the net off its moorings. After more consultation it was ruled that Dobeš' tactic – officially a delay of game infraction – was an automatic penalty shot when it occurs inside two minutes remaining in the game.

There were 19.6 seconds left when Taylor Schneider tried to tie the score at 3, but Dobeš made a glove save to cap a career-high 42 stops, to the disappointment of a sellout crowd of 5,000.

When Ohio State next took to the ice on New Year's Eve at Value City Arena, it was scoreless through 40 minutes with second-year program Long Island University.

It's not hard to guess what followed. The final score was OSU 6, LIU 0 as Dobeš earned his second shutout.

On New Year's Day the Buckeyes scored three in the second and three



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more in the third for a 7-2 win over the Sharks. It was the rare occasion when the third period wasn't critical to the outcome.

On Oct. 15, the Buckeyes trailed Connecticut 3-0 but rallied to a 3-2 deficit entering the third period before securing a 4-3 overtime win.

Ohio State widened a one-goal lead vs. Michigan State on Oct. 30 with three goals in the third for a 5-1 final.

Down 1-0 to Penn State within the first four minutes on Nov. 6, OSU scored four times in the third for a 4-1 triumph.

At Minnesota on Nov. 12, OSU was down 3-0 to the Golden Gophers after the first period. The Buckeyes won 4-3 with two goals each in the second and third periods.

On Nov. 27, Kamil Sadlocha broke a 3-3 deadlock against Mercyhurst with the winning goal at 11:22 of the third.

Finally, while not a comeback victory, Ohio State led Michigan 2-1 after two periods and scored the final four goals for a 6-1 victory on Dec. 11. The Buckeyes scored three goals in a 50-second span to put away their Big Ten rival.

"I thought our guys played hard start to finish," Rohlik said. "That's what we asked out of them, and they got rewarded."

"It was almost like once we got to (3-1) the boys felt like, here we go, had that swagger again and it was just our night. The puck started going in and in again."

**Where They Stand**

Halfway through the Big Ten sched-

ule, the Buckeyes' 23 points tie them with Michigan for second, two points behind Minnesota.

Notre Dame, which visits Value City Arena on Jan. 14 (7 p.m.) and 15 (8 p.m.), is fourth with 22 points.

Of note, the Gophers' Jack LaFontaine, named the top collegiate goalie last season, stunned the team by signing an entry-level contract with the NHL's Carolina Hurricanes on Jan. 9, a day after helping complete a sweep of Michigan State.

LaFontaine started all 20 games for Minnesota this season, posting a 12-8-0 record with a 2.69 goals-against average and .900 save percentage with one shut-out.

Another thing to watch is how the NHL's decision not to send their pros to the Winter Olympics in China in February because of COVID-19 concerns changes the college hockey landscape.

Minnesota and Michigan are among schools that could lose top players to the Olympics for much of next month.

**Ice Chips**

Merkulov leads the team with 11 goals and 22 points. ... Thiesing has seven points (three goals, four assists) in a five-game point streak. ... Staying on the freshman theme, Dobeš is 14-5-1 with a 2.14 goals-against average and .927 save percentage. ... The seven-game unbeaten streak is the Buckeyes' longest since winning seven in a row from Jan. 12-Feb.9, 2019. ... The Buckeyes' seven conference wins have already surpassed

**VARSITY CLUB  
ICER OF THE MONTH  
For December**



**Grant Gabriele**  
*Senior Defenseman  
Brighton, Mich.*

last season's total (6-16-0). Their 15 wins more than double the 7-19-1 overall record.

**Two-Way Player**

Grant Gabriele, the fifth-year defenseman from Brighton, Mich., is the Varsity Club Icer of the Month for December for contributing at both ends of the ice.

He had two goals and six assists for

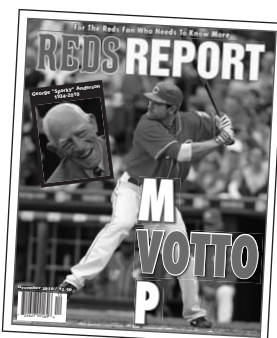
eight points and was a plus-6 in seven games, highlighted by a plus-4 in the 6-1 win over Michigan on Dec. 11. Gabriele had a goal and assist in the comeback victory vs. Bowling Green on Dec. 16.

*For recaps of all games, go to the BuckeyeSports.com website, free to all Buckeye Sports Bulletin subscribers.*

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# Hession Retires After 30-Year OSU Career

By **CHASE BROWN**

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

For the better part of 30 years, Therese Hession walked the 36 holes of the Ohio State Golf Club, just a short seven-minute drive from the Columbus campus.

She became incredibly familiar with Dr. Alister McKenzie's original 1938 design – the parkland course and bunkering, the characteristic creek and the Turkey Run pond – and worked closely with Jack Nicklaus when he redesigned the property in 2006.

The Scarlet and Gray courses were Hession's home when she coached multiple Big Ten Players of the Year, All-Americans and future LPGA professionals on the women's golf team. But after three decades with the program and a brief stint as director of men's and women's golf, Hession retired from the university on Jan. 7.

The decorated Buckeye head coach and Ohio State Athletics Hall of Fame member traveled to the golf club in an official capacity for the final time, saying her goodbyes to the players, coaches and staff.

In an official statement to the program, Hession thanked the late former Ohio State athletic director Jim Jones and former women's athletic administrator Phyllis Bailey for hiring her in 1991, offering her a coaching opportunity after she finished an 11-year career as a full-time professional golfer.

She also expressed her gratitude for the countless people who stood beside her during her time with the Buckeyes and reflected on the school's significant role in her life.

"I am so grateful to the many student-athletes of both the men's and women's golf teams for their tireless work and dedication to our programs both academically and athletically," Hession said. "It was a privilege to be a small part of their life both on and off the golf course."

For Hession, golf has always been about the people. She avers that foundational relationships between administration, coaches and players are crucial to success. That relentless pursuit of perfection from all three parties creates strong culture, which ultimately leads to individual and team championships and titles.

Ohio State senior vice president and athletic director Gene Smith shares her thoughts and said Hession's teaching ability and leadership set herself and her teams apart from others.

"Therese Hession exemplifies what it means to be a coach," Smith said. "She is one of the best teachers I have ever had the pleasure of working with. The accomplishment of



PHOTO COURTESY OF OHIO STATE ATHLETICS  
**MOVING ON — Longtime Ohio State golf coach Therese Hession called it a career on Jan. 7 when she retired from Ohio State, where she worked as a coach and later the director of golf for nearly 30 years.**

her players reflects who Therese is as a teacher and mentor. She has been tireless in the pursuit of greatness over her career as a professional athlete and coach, and I am thankful for all she has accomplished as a Buckeye."

Hession's accomplishments at Ohio State cannot be overstated, especially for a northern program in Columbus, where student-athletes do not have year-round access to collegiate-level courses and favorable weather that's sunny and 75 degrees.

In her 27 years of coaching, she was a two-time NCAA Coach of the Year and seven-time Big Ten Coach of the Year. She led the Buckeyes to 47 tournament wins, 11 Big Ten titles, 18 conference tournament titles and 17 NCAA championship appearances.

Several players Hession instructed earned impressive individual accolades. She coached eight Big Ten Freshman of the Year winners, 15 conference tournament medalists, 66 All-Big Ten honorees and 13 All-Americans from 1991-2018.

Hession also emphasized the importance of academic success for her teams, which led to the program accumulating 182 Ohio State scholar-athletes, 124 Academic All-Big Ten honorees and 48 Academic All-Americans during her tenure.

Current women's golf head coach Lisa

Strom played for Hession from 1995-99 and became a two-time All-Big Ten player and four-time Academic All-Big Ten honoree. She was a member of the 1999 Big Ten championship team before playing 11 years on the LPGA Tour and Futures Tour.

After Strom finished her professional career, she returned to Ohio State as an assistant under Hession from 2011-16, helping her guide the program to six straight NCAA regional appearances and four appearances in the NCAA championships. She briefly coached at Texas State and Kent State before Hession brought her back to Columbus to lead the Buckeyes in 2021.

"Words cannot express how much Coach Hession means to Ohio State golf," Strom said. "From my first interaction with her as a recruit to being chosen to lead the Ohio State women's golf team, I have deeply admired her desire to show up every single day and help others be their best and never to stop learning."

"Our relationship has evolved from coach to mentor to friend over the past 25 years, and I can say without a shadow of a doubt that I would not be where I am today without her. I am humbled and honored to have been chosen to lead our program as we begin this new chapter. A foundation of success on and off the golf course has been laid, and we will always take great pride in knowing the impact Coach Hession has had on each one of us."

Hession officially became the director of men's and women's golf in 2018 but still coached the women's program until Strom's arrival in June 2021. Her role led to more behind-the-scenes activities for Ohio State golf, which paired her with university administrative staff such as Michelle Willis, Richelle Simonson, Heather Lyke and Martin Jarmond. Hession said each person supported her desire to build bigger and better things for men's and women's golf in the Big Ten and nationally.

She also worked with executive associate athletic director of development Dan Cloran to ensure the athletic department's support of golf and future investments into the sport during and after her tenure.

"I want to thank Dan Cloran and Gene Smith, who gave me the latest opportunity to be the director of the men's and women's golf programs," Hession said. "The last 3½ years have been remarkable and a great honor to serve both teams. I appreciate them trusting me with this opportunity, and I enjoyed the opportunity to learn and grow."

Cloran said Hession's versatility in coaching golf and having business-oriented discussions about the sport's future at Ohio State made her an easy partner throughout her time in the role.

"I commend Therese for what she has done for the hundreds of student-athletes who have excelled in life and as athletes, because of the influence Therese has provided over the years," Cloran said. "Her list of accomplishments are exemplary, to say the least. I have learned so much from her over the last four years and have appreciated her leadership and friendship."

Men's golf head coach Jay Moseley also has appreciated his friendship with Hession. When Moseley came to Ohio State in 2015 after a record-breaking tenure at Kennesaw State, he and Hession were equals, both leaders of their respective teams.

Three years later, when Hession was promoted to director, Moseley said their relationship could have changed – after all, she was now his boss. However, Moseley believes that Hession's new role only strengthened her heart for Ohio State men's and women's golf and didn't create a power struggle between the two coaches.

"What will be missed the most from her absence is her determination and character as a leader," Moseley said. "I have been blessed to be surrounded by great people throughout my life, and Coach Hession is one of the finest human beings I have ever met."

"Anyone who truly got to know her understood her commitment and passion for Buckeye golf and Ohio State was unparalleled. She would do anything to help student-athletes as well as those fortunate enough to coach alongside her. Words simply seem inadequate to describe everything she has meant to me and to Ohio State golf."

Still, Hession's departure neither means the end of Ohio State golf nor her impact on the men's and women's teams. In 2021, she told BSB that she has high expectations for the future of both programs and fully trusts Strom and Moseley to bring a title back to Columbus soon.

"The ultimate goal is always to compete for a national championship," Hession said. "We always want to compete for conference titles and have student-athletes become Academic All-Big Ten and Academic All-Americans. That's what makes Buckeye fans proud. There's a lot of things we can't control, but there's also a lot that we can. You can control the process of reaching those goals. Our teams have all the tools in place to make it happen. They just need to believe in themselves and go out and do it."

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# Looking At The Rose Bowl And Beyond

There is little doubt the Ohio State-Utah game can best be described no other way but exciting from start to finish. Buckeye and Ute fans, as well as the national viewing audience, were on the edge of their seats as the two teams traded blows for four quarters until one was left standing, the Ohio State Buckeyes.

## COACH'S CORNER Bill Conley

It was great to see a matchup between Pac-12 and Big Ten opponents, a Rose Bowl tradition which has been altered at times within the past two decades since the inception of various national playoff formats. The first game was held in 1902 and called the Tournament East-West football game, the purpose to help fund the cost of the Rose parade which had been an annual event since 1890.

The first game matched the University of Michigan against Stanford but was far from a success. In front of just 8,000 fans, Fielding Yost's Michigan team was destroying Stanford so badly, 49-0, that the Stanford coaches pulled their team from the field and quit in the third quarter. It left such a bad taste in the mouths of the organizers that an annual football game was replaced by a variety of other events such as chariot and even ostrich races.

It wasn't until 1916 that football re-emerged as the main event, and by the early 1920s the game officially became the Rose Bowl. It is the oldest of all bowl games, thus the title, "Granddaddy of Them All."

Only twice since its inception has the Rose Bowl game been played in a different location from Pasadena. In 1942 the game was moved to Durham, N.C., in fear of a Japanese attack on the West Coast during World War II, and the January 2021 game was played in Arlington, Texas, due to California's Covid restrictions.

There have been plenty of close games in the history of the Rose Bowl, but the Jan. 1, 2022, slugfest between Ohio State and Utah ranks as the most entertaining in my lifetime, and its excitement was not for the faint of heart.

### Records Broken

One of the things which made this year's Rose Bowl exciting was the number of re-

cord-breaking performances. The Buckeyes as a team tallied more total yards and total passing yards than any other Rose Bowl team in history with 683 and 573, respectively.

The two teams scored a combined 56 first-half points to tie another record previously held by Oregon and Wisconsin.

As well as both teams played offensively in the Rose Bowl, it was the individual performances of Buckeye quarterback C.J. Stroud and wide receiver Jaxon Smith-Njigba that stole the show. Stroud was responsible for all the 573 record-breaking passing yards as well as the most touchdown passes in Rose Bowl history with six.

The accuracy and ability of Stroud to drop the ball over the top of opposing defensive backs into the hands of his receivers is uncanny. His ability to lead the team down the field to sustain drives, score points and get the ball in at least field-goal range for Noah Ruggles was extremely frustrating to the Ute defense while inspiring the Buckeyes.

The Ohio State offense scored on 8 of 10 possessions starting with 3:22 left in the first quarter (not counting the end of the first half) until the final whistle blew. Stroud wasn't the only exceptional performer, but he was the ringmaster.

The absences of Chris Olave and Garrett Wilson had little impact on the powerful Buckeye passing attack. As a matter of fact, the two future NFL receivers might have even upped their stock if they had played in the game. But Olave and Wilson are history, and Smith-Njigba is now a national name going into the 2022 season.

His 15 receptions and 347 yards were Rose Bowl records. Smith-Njigba, along with Marvin Harrison Jr., tied another with three receiving touchdowns apiece.

Smith-Njigba is a terrific talent who is fluid in his route running, athletic with tremendous body control, has soft and sure hands, and is dangerous to opponents with his ability to make valuable yards after the reception. Receivers coach Brian Hartline must feel like Santa was very good to him with Smith-Njigba, Harrison, Emeka Egbuka and Julian Fleming returning in 2022. Most importantly, the Buckeyes have Stroud for at least one more season.

### Defense Came to Life

The first-half defensive display was absolutely awful and in many ways embarrassing for the Buckeyes. After forcing a punt on Utah's first possession of the game, the Utes scored touchdowns on their next four pos-

sessions of the first half.

They were accumulating more yards than those ostrich races in Pasadena in the early 1900s. The Buckeye defense seemed plagued with the same inconsistencies that had haunted them all season like poor tackling, inability to stop the run and mediocre pass coverage. The Utes were getting their yardage in big chunks, rarely needing to convert a third down.

They left the field at halftime with 35 points and over 300 yards in offense, not counting a Britain Covey 97-yard kickoff return for a touchdown. It looked like the game was going to be a Texas shoot-out unless one of the two teams' defenses decided to show up in the second half.

Fortunately, it was the Buckeyes who rose to the occasion on defense in the second half. Whether inspired by the coaching staff or the players themselves, something or somebody lit a fire under the defense.

After each team traded turnovers on their first possessions of the second half, the Buckeye defense was no longer comatose, played more aggressively and made some big plays on crucial possession downs. The Buckeyes gave up 10 more points the second half, but the Buckeye offense would add 27 and the 2022 Rose Bowl would go down as a 48-45 thriller and a Buckeye victory.

### 2022 Outlook

The Ohio State offense will have some

key players to replace on the offensive line and tight end positions. Fortunately, there is plenty of depth at wide receiver and, for now, at least two good quarterbacks.

TreVeyon Henderson and Miyan Williams have the potential to be the best one-two punch of running backs in the conference next season. Ending up with the No. 1 offense in the country was a major accomplishment for Ohio State in 2021. Ryan Day is a proven winner and produces high-scoring offenses, and I am sure one of his major goals is to make the Buckeye offense in 2022 more balanced between the run and pass.

Jim Knowles and whoever ends up on the defensive side of the football have a major challenge in terms of improvement for next season. There was a ton of youth starting on the defense last season, but now they have a year of experience under their belts.

Hopefully, Knowles and his staff can mold those players into a defensive unit that plays soundly and aggressively against both the run and the pass. Odds are he will do exactly that, and the Buckeye defense will be fun to watch in 2022.

Who knows, the Buckeyes might return to Southern California in 2023, not to the Rose Bowl, but SoFi Stadium in Inglewood, site of the 2023 national championship game.

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# QB Stroud Proved Greatness In Pasadena

C.J. Stroud either made great strides forward during the season or I was blind to his talent for far too long.

But the Rose Bowl convinced me. This guy really is more than just a good quarterback with a great group of receivers. He's great himself.

**EXNER  
POINT  
Rich Exner**

The difficult passes he completed, his consistent accuracy and the patience he showed in the pocket as the Buckeyes rallied for their thrilling 48-45 victory over Utah more than made his case.

This guy has arrived, if he hadn't already. Early on, I wondered whether he was

the right choice this season. Too many passes were off target, and as his accuracy improved, it seemed that was being done with the help of a lot of safe pass calls by coach Ryan Day.

Even when Stroud went to New York for the Heisman Trophy ceremony, I wondered whether he belonged. Was he there because of C.J. Stroud? Or was Stroud merely a good quarterback who made his way there because he had the best collection of receivers in the country, and in Ohio State history?

After the Rose Bowl, there are questions no more.

Ohio State will have another great collection of receivers next year. Jaxon Smith-Njigba, Marvin Harrison Jr., Julian Fleming, Emeka Egbuka and probably others will see to that. But there is no longer any uncertainty at quarterback.

Next up, Notre Dame in Ohio Stadium on Sept. 3. Trying to figure out what to do

with Stroud already, I am sure, is Notre Dame's new coach – former Buckeye line-backer Marcus Freeman.

Good luck with that.

## Stroud By The Numbers

Not only did Stroud finish with the second-most passing yards in a year in Ohio State history (4,435 yards, behind only Dwayne Haskins' 4,831), but after only one season Stroud ranks 14th on OSU's career passing list.

I'm not ready to say Stroud is better than Justin Fields, but it's worth noting that Fields passed for 5,373 yards in one-plus seasons (22 games) for the Buckeyes, just 938 yards ahead of Stroud's total through 12 games.

Stroud's passing efficiency rating of 186.6 is an OSU single-season and career record (so far). For a season, by the way, Fields is second (181.4 in 2019) and third (175.5 in 2020).

And Stroud's 44 TD passes ranks second for a season (behind Haskins' 50) and eighth for a career. Art Schlichter, by the way, had 50 TD passes as a four-year starter.

## More Numbers

For a season, Smith-Njigba is No. 1 in OSU history for receptions (95, topping Parris Campbell's 90) and No. 1 for receiving yards (1,606, topping David Boston's 1,435). What's more impressive is that he put up those numbers while most of the season sharing the targets with Garrett Wilson (70 catches) and Chris Olave (65).

Smith-Njigba had 10 catches for 49 yards in limited duty as a freshman. Even if next season, his junior year, is his last season at OSU, he very likely could leave as the top receiver all-time in both catches and yards, after only two full seasons on the field.

K.J. Hill currently is No. 1 for career catches with 201 (96 ahead of Smith-Njigba). And Michael Jenkins is first for yards with 2,898 (1,243 ahead of Smith-Njigba).

## No Game, No Blame

Much was made of Wilson, Olave and others skipping the Rose Bowl, including by none other than ex-Buckeye Kirk Herbstreit.

I have no problem with it, even if I would have preferred to see those players one more time in the Rose Bowl.

With assistant coaching salaries now approaching \$2 million a year and still no direct pay for the players, the risk of an injury in what really amounts to an exhibition game just months before the NFL pay day is a legitimate concern.

The Big Ten Conference in 2019-20, according to the website Business College Sports, received \$80 million in bowl money to divide up among the schools.

Maybe it's time to reconsider where all this money goes. If, for example, the Rose Bowl sees value in the top players showing up, maybe some of that money should go to the players, instead of filtering its way from the conferences to the schools and to the coaches and administrators.

## How Good Were The Buckeyes?

Writing this ahead of the national championship game, I'd rank Ohio State third in the final poll behind the championship participants – Alabama and Georgia.

Our friends to the north might not agree with me, but I believe based on the body of work for the entire season and the way things closed out, Ohio State deserves to be ranked above Michigan.

For one day, Michigan was better; for the season Ohio State was better.

Yes, Michigan beat Ohio State. But Michigan also lost to Michigan State, and few people outside of East Lansing, Mich., probably are making the argument that MSU should be ranked higher.

UM, MSU and OSU all finished with two losses. In round-robin games among them, they were all 1-1.

So, I looked at the rest of the season, including the head-to-head games. Ohio State was the best of the three.

OSU never got blown out (as Michigan did against Georgia, and Michigan State did against Ohio State), and OSU had far fewer close games during the season.

With that in mind, here's my top 10.

1. Alabama/Georgia winner (14-1)
2. Alabama/Georgia loser (13-2)
3. Ohio State (11-2) – more impressive throughout the season than any other two-loss team and better than one-loss Cincinnati
4. Michigan (12-2) – Its win over Ohio State is better than anything offered below.
5. Baylor (12-2) – Closed out with a 21-7 win over Ole Miss in a Sugar Bowl that pitted the nation's seventh- and eighth-ranked teams against each other. Baylor's five straight wins down the stretch also included victories over Oklahoma State and Oklahoma.

6. Oklahoma State (12-2) – Solid finish in taking care of previously one-loss Notre Dame in the Fiesta Bowl, 37-35. Notre Dame entered the game ranked fifth nationally. The win made Oklahoma State deserving of this spot.

7. Cincinnati (13-1) – A great season for the Bearcats. Against most any competition, it's tough to go undefeated. And UC did that until the national semis. The win over Notre Dame was impressive. Unfortunately, that was UC's only serious competition until the playoffs.

8. Michigan State (11-2) – With the Peach Bowl victory over ACC champion Pitt and a regular-season win over Michigan, MSU is deserving of this slot.

9. Notre Dame (11-2) – Notre Dame can't point to any big wins, but 11-2 is 11-2; not a bad record.

10. Oklahoma (11-2) – I'd like to slip Utah in the top 10 because they were so impressive, not only in the Rose Bowl but in how they rallied from a 1-2 start to get there. But I just can't overlook Utah's four losses overall. For the 10th slot I'll go with a team that closed out with a victory, Oklahoma. The Sooners took care of Oregon, 47-32, in the Alamo Bowl.

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# Buckeyes' Win Seen Through Rose-Colored Glasses

## THE VIEW FROM 15TH & HIGH Frank Moskowitz, Publisher

How does a bowl game in which Ohio State trails an underdog opponent by 14 points at the half, gives up a total of 45 points, and has to execute a game-winning two-minute drill to eke out a three-point win become an instant fan favorite?

I think I can explain that.

Buckeye fans heard more than a month of chatter about how Ohio State, devastated by a humiliating loss to archrival Michigan which knocked OSU out of the playoffs, would deponently sleepwalk into Pasadena to face a solid, if not playoff-caliber, Utah team thrilled to be in the Rose Bowl for the first time since entering the Pac-12 in 2011. The memo that the playoffs are all that matters hasn't quite gotten to Utah and its legion of fans yet.

With many Buckeye fans proving just as despondent as their beloved team, few showed much interest in the trek to Southern California, and it became quickly apparent that this would be one of the few times where the fans decked in scarlet and gray would be greatly outnumbered by followers of their bowl opponent.

With Ohio State's potentially bad attitude, coupled with a suspect defense and a Utah team featuring a hard-nosed, balanced offense (216.1 yards rushing, 212.5 passing), this was a potential recipe for disaster.

And then when kickoff finally came, that anticipated disaster started to play out right before everyone's eyes.

Ohio State stopped Utah on its first possession, but when the pass-happy Buckeyes got the ball, they ran it twice for a total of 3 yards, Heisman finalist C.J. Stroud misfired on third down and the Utes were in business.

They picked up the pace on offense, leaving the Buckeyes defenders scrambling to find proper position at the snap of the ball, and they marched, seemingly at will, to two quick touchdowns and a 14-0 lead with 3:28 left in the first quarter. Ohio State, meanwhile, had mustered all of 11 yards on its first two possessions.

It took a daring call on fourth-and-1 to finally get the Buckeyes on the board early in the second quarter and possibly save the game. With TreVeyon Henderson having failed to convert on third-and-1, Stroud dialed up freshman Marvin Harrison Jr., pressed into service when starting receivers Chris Olave and Garrett Wilson opted out of the game, for a perfectly executed 25-yard touchdown. It was a call reminiscent of the Holy Buckeye play at Purdue 19 years previous, and if it had failed, it might have sealed Ohio State's doom right there, because the Buckeye defense still couldn't stop the Utes.

They easily marched for another touchdown to make it 21-7. That started a lightning round of 35 combined points in a matter of less than three minutes, with Utah adding insult to injury with a 97-yard kickoff return for a touchdown to help offset scoring passes of 50 and 52 yards from Stroud to Jaxon Smith-Njigba.

To make matters worse, the suddenly prolific OSU air attack lost a chance to close the gap to 35-28 when Smith-Njigba had the ball knocked away at the Utah 6 on his way to what would have been a 50-yard touchdown reception.

The Buckeyes, despite 237 yards passing in the second quarter alone, simply could not catch up.

But a funny thing happened on the way to the second half. The Buckeyes decided to play some defense.

"I thought in the second half they made up their mind on defense, that they were going to play differently," Ohio State coach Ryan Day

said. "It happened in the locker room. I heard it, and I got out of the way. They played with a different toughness, and we talked about playing fast and violent. I thought they played that way in the second half. When you make up your mind that you're going to do something like that, then you can impose your will. I feel like that's what happened."

That the Buckeyes might turn things around in the second half wasn't apparent immediately, however.

With the offense seemingly starting to hum in the second quarter, fans had some reason for optimism with Ohio State getting the ball to start the second half. But doubts had to start to creep in again when Stroud, who moved the Buckeyes to the Utah 20 with a 45-yard strike to Smith-Njigba, promptly threw an interception in the end zone. It was playing out as fans had feared.

That's when what I believe to be one of the crucial plays of the game occurred. A score by the Utes to make it 42-21 could have been a demoralizing blow. Instead, the revitalized Buckeye defense held Utah to a three-and-out, and punter Michael Williams fumbled the snap, with Bryson Shaw recovering at the Utes 11. Harrison cashed in from Stroud two plays later, and instead of what might have turned into a rout, the Buckeyes and Utah had themselves a ballgame, with the score now 35-28.

The Ohio State defense allowed just 139 yards in the second half and 10 points. Utah's lone touchdown in the final 30 minutes was aided by two Ohio State pass-interference calls (did anyone besides me recall Ohio State's game-winning drive in the 1997 Rose Bowl, which was also aided by two pass-interference calls?), neither of which seem particularly flagrant.

Meanwhile, Stroud kept right on firing, tacking on another 283 air yards and three more touchdowns in the second half. The Buckeyes calmly marched down the field on their game-winning drive, putting Mr. Reliable, Noah Ruggles, in chip-shot range for the game-winning three points.

So why did this win, which for much of the game looked like it might be an embarrassing loss, generate such a positive vibe within Buckeye Nation?

I think, first and foremost, it was the grit that the Buckeyes showed when everyone was expecting the opposite. I think also, with the offense putting on a passing show for the ages and most of the principals on that side of the ball coming back, the sight of a suddenly resurgent defense gave Ohio State fans a glimpse of what might be next season – a trip back to the playoffs?

But you know what? I think, deep down, despite playoff mania, Buckeye fans – at least those of us over 40 – still hold a reverence for the Rose Bowl. It's the view from this corner that that's the way it should be.

Day summed up a lot of the feelings for many of us when he told his players, "Somewhere in about 15, 20 years, you're going to be somewhere and the Rose Bowl is going to come on on New Year's and you're going to be sitting there with somebody you love – your son or somebody – and say, 'I played in the Rose Bowl.' I said the first thing they're going to ask is, 'Did you win?' and I said these guys are going to be able to tell an unbelievable story, that they played in this game and they won and they won in a big way when the odds were

stacked against us in this game. Some people think we didn't have much to play for, that we were going to come in and lay down in this game, and it says a lot about our kids that that didn't happen."

### Rose Bowl Ramblings

I was never really worried about Olave and Wilson, two of the best to ever catch passes at Ohio State, opting out of the game. The Buckeyes simply had too much depth in Brian Hartline's receivers room for me to worry about that.

Smith-Njigba had already equaled or surpassed the two departing future pros in the receiving pecking order, and guys like Harrison and Julian Fleming were champing at the bit to get their chance. And regardless of who lined up at the receiver slots, it was still going to be Stroud throwing the passes, and he only added to his legend with his record-shattering performance in Pasadena.

The young receiver whom I think gets lost in the shuffle is Emeka Egbuka. He had three catches for 46 yards against the Utes, more yardage than Fleming. On the season, he had nine catches for 191 yards, entering the Rose Bowl with more catches than Harrison, and in the end he averaged 21.2 yards per catch, tops on the team and besting even Njigba at 16.9.

Where Egbuka has garnered attention is returning kicks, where he injects excitement into a play that has been muted by the fair-catch rule. The Rose Bowl was just another example, with Egbuka returning seven kicks for 163 yards and a long of 39 with a 75-yard return called back because of holding by, of all people, Fleming.

While Stroud, Smith-Njigba, Henderson and, of course, Ruggles will get credit for the game-winning drive, Egbuka allowed the Buckeyes to set up shop in excellent field position at their own 42 with a 33-yard return.

I can't help but wonder if the outcome of the Michigan game might have been different – "might" being the operative word – if Egbuka had played in the game.

If you recall, the Wolverines jumped out to a 7-0 lead on their first possession and Fleming mishandled the ensuing kickoff, leaving the Buckeyes to start at their own 4, keeping the early momentum on the side of the home team. Fleming returned only one kick after that, for 11 yards, giving the Buckeyes the ball at their 18 (though they did march 82 yards for a TD on that drive). Ohio State started at the 25 on their other five drives that started with a kickoff.

Could better field position somewhere along the way have given the Buckeyes some sort of spark?

• Speaking of Henderson, he was the subject of some criticism after he rushed for just 9 yards on six carries in the first half against Utah. Lost in the barrage of passing records for the Buckeyes was the fact that Henderson had a solid, if unspectacular second half against the Utes. He carried 11 times for 74 yards in the final 30 minutes (6.7 average), including seven times for 47 yards in the pivotal fourth quarter.

As referenced earlier, he played a key role in the game-winning drive, rushing three times for 27 yards with two of the runs resulting in first downs and the third pushing the Buckeyes down to the 2 to set up Ruggles' chip-shot. Henderson had a 9-yard reception

on the drive for good measure, giving him 36 of the 56 yards on the march.

• In a game like this Rose Bowl, with so much action and excitement, key moments can be forgotten.

With all the attention paid to how the defense improved in the second half, it's easy to forget that the second-half turnaround may have been fueled by a stop before the break.

Utah had already scored 21 points in the second quarter and led 35-21 with a shot at adding to that lead after Smith-Njigba's momentum-stopping fumble. The Utes took over at their 20 with a full 4:40 to play and immediately started marching again, gaining two first downs and penetrating into Buckeye territory. But Taron Vincent helped stop two running plays that netted just 4 yards, and Utah quarterback Cameron Rising misfired on a pass and the defense had checked the Utes at the 45, forcing a punt, and the score remained at 35-21.

What followed after that, of course, is history.

"I figure it was that drive at the end of the first half, where it's like, 'OK, we can do this,'" said linebacker Tommy Eichenberg, who was one of the stars of the game with 17 tackles. "I think it just came down to getting confidence in everyone, and we were just telling everyone, 'We can do this, let's go.' That's what we tried to do."

### I Have My Favorites

During my more than 40 years on the Ohio State beat, I have frequently had favorite players who were maybe lesser known or may have been perceived as underachievers. Over the last few years, I have made no secret that I have been rooting for Demario McCall, a guy who never quite found a position, who never quite had that major breakthrough. Ironically, it was in the halftime locker room at the Rose Bowl that McCall finally found his position and had that breakthrough.

The Buckeyes, particularly those on defense, needed an attitude adjustment, and the players took it upon themselves to make that change.

"I would say the biggest guy who stepped up was Demario McCall," said Shaw, who was second on the team with nine tackles against the Utes. "You guys know he's been in the program a long time. Just the energy and the passion he brings every day. This is nothing new for him, but the way he stood up in front of the team, it was just awesome to see. Everybody fed off that energy. I would say we weren't worried going into that second half. I don't think we were worried at all. They were catching breaks, we weren't executing, and we knew all the things were fixable at halftime, so I think we made the right adjustments and it showed."

Not that McCall's career at Ohio State was completely devoid of production. Over six seasons he rushed 90 times for 565 yards (6.3 average) and six touchdowns and caught 20 passes for another 300 yards, a 15.0 average, and two touchdowns.

He switched to the defensive side of the ball this season at cornerback, and in addition to this inspiring speech, he registered six tackles and broke up a pass.

"I'm grateful," McCall said of his Ohio State career after the Rose Bowl. "Grateful to have the opportunity to be a part of the brotherhood. We know my career didn't go the way I wanted it to, but I'm thankful to be a part and to do what I could for the team. I'm grateful."

He may not have ended up an All-American, but he makes the All-Frank team.



# FOR ATHLETES

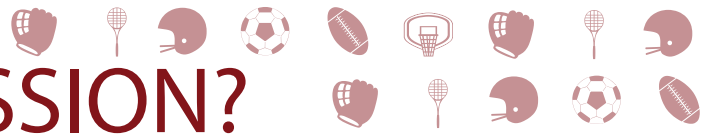
## HEADS UP CONCUSSION IN YOUTH SPORTS

- CONCUSSION SYMPTOMS**
- Headache, nausea, vomiting, balance problems, dizziness, double or blurred vision, sensitivity to light or noise, feeling sluggish, hazy, foggy, or groggy, just not "feeling right" or "feeling down," memory problems, confusion, and trouble sleeping.

### WHAT IS A CONCUSSION?

A concussion is a brain injury that affects how your brain works. It can happen after a bump, blow, or jolt to the head that causes your brain to rapidly move inside your skull.

### WHAT SHOULD I DO IF I THINK I HAVE A CONCUSSION?



**REPORT IT.** Tell your coach, parent, and athletic trainer if you think you or one of your teammates may have a concussion. It's up to you to report your symptoms. Your coach and team are relying on you. Plus, you won't play your best if you are not feeling well.

**GET CHECKED OUT.** If you think you have a concussion, do not return to play on the day of the injury. Only a healthcare provider can tell if you have a concussion and when it is OK to return to school and play. The sooner you get checked out, the sooner you may be able to safely return to play.

**GIVE YOUR BRAIN TIME TO HEAL.** A concussion can make it harder to do everyday activities, such as concentrating at school. You may need extra help getting back to your normal activities. Be sure to update your parents and doctor about how you are feeling.

### WHY SHOULD I TELL MY COACH AND PARENTS ABOUT MY SYMPTOMS?

Playing or practicing with a concussion is dangerous and can lead to a longer recovery.

While your brain is still healing, you are much more likely to have another concussion. This can put you at risk for a more serious injury to your brain and can even be fatal.

GOOD TEAMMATES KNOW: IT'S BETTER TO MISS ONE GAME THAN THE WHOLE SEASON

<http://www.odh.ohio.gov/concussion>



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