

NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP COMMEMORATIVE ISSUE

Sports Illustrated

PRESENTS

*After the Longest,
Hardest Playoff*
**THE BUCKEYES
ARE BACK**

*Behind 100 yards rushing
and three TDs from
Quinshon Judkins,
Ohio State held
off Notre Dame to
win its ninth natty.*

LAST

STATE

STANDING

LINEUP

OHIO STATE BUCKEYES

CFP NATIONAL CHAMPIONS | SPECIAL COMMEMORATIVE ISSUE

What a Blast

The Buckeyes were hot the entire postseason, up through the title game.



BRYCE FRANCE

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DAY OF REDEMPTION

A coach and a program that were feeling the heat following a brutal loss to Michigan changed the narrative the only way they could

by
PAT FORDE

O

OHIO STATE head coach Ryan Day was tanned and rested when he returned to the Woody Hayes Athletic Center last July after a vacation in Greece visiting his wife's extended family. That destination was a fitting backdrop for what was to come. Day steeled himself to plunge into a six-month odyssey of Homeric scale, an all-or-nothing quest for program immortality, an epic poem of a season.

"The opportunity when you come to Ohio State is as big as there is in the world," Day said in his office, back when the 2024 season was still in front of him. "The opportunity here is tremendous.

But there's a lot that comes with it."

From the outset, this seemed to be a year that would define Day's tenure as it hit its seventh season. It would either elevate him to the championship fraternity of Hayes, Brown, Tressel and Meyer, or it would trap him in the gray area of coaches who are good but don't have greatness in them. Day is a smart and serious man, one who doesn't easily submerge the stress he feels. Armed with a \$20 million roster after a concerted donor push to retain existing talent and attract even more through the transfer portal, he knew what was at stake. Two drastically different outcomes seemed possible: glorious triumph or career-threatening defeat.

Or both, as it turned out.

Thrill of Victory

After years of living with the pressure of the program's high expectations, Day finally experienced the joy of holding that elusive trophy.

The Buckeyes lost a fourth straight game to their all-consuming rival, Michigan, this time by far the most galling result. They were favored by 20 points and simply seized up in a 13–10 stunner in the regular-season finale, a choke of a performance if ever there was one. That led to the team being booed off the field at Ohio Stadium, but not before first engaging in a postgame brawl when the Wolverines planted their flag at the 50-yard line.

That moment of defiance might have helped later, because the Ohio State squad that rose from the Michigan ashes was the juggernaut we expected to see from the beginning. (The Buckeyes were SPORTS ILLUSTRATED's No. 1 team in its preseason top 25.) Repairing their tattered pride, rediscovering their overwhelming talent, Day's team sprinted to the program's ninth national championship.

Somehow, the Buckeyes checked all boxes—good and bad. They lost the game that matters most to their fans, but they

ERICK W. RASCO



won it all. Thus it can be said that the 2024 Ohio State team had an imperfect season blessed by perfect timing. At no previous point in the sport's history would a 10-2 team that didn't win its conference have a chance to throw a championship parade. But the 12-team College Football Playoff arrived just in time to offer a makeup exam those who didn't ace the regular season.

The Buckeyes were ready for their do-over. Their attitude was clear in the first playoff game, when a shocking

amount of Tennessee orange infiltrated the Horseshoe. But the Buckeyes never let the atmosphere turn toxic, pouncing immediately with three straight touchdown drives. Life had begun anew.

That scenario repeated to even more devastating effect in the Rose Bowl quarterfinal round against the only other team that had defeated Ohio State during the year, No. 1 Oregon. It was 34-0 late in the second quarter, the undefeated Ducks roasted early. There was, at least, some struggle in the semifinals

against Texas in the Cotton Bowl. But the Buckeyes scored 14 points in the fourth quarter, capped by a play that will live in school lore forever—defensive end Jack Sawyer sacking Longhorns quarterback Quinn Ewers, forcing a fumble and rumbling 83 yards to score.

For Sawyer to make that play was particularly poignant. From nearby Pickerington, Ohio, he grew up wanting to wear the uniform. He committed to the program as a high school sophomore. He suffered through four losses to Michigan, but he wasn't going to stand still for that flag planting—Sawyer was the one who ripped the flag away from the Wolverines. "I love Columbus," Sawyer said. "I love the state of Ohio. I love Ohio State football."

"We don't get a chance to play [Michigan] again, but we can still win the whole thing," Howard said before the playoff. "We can't go out any other way than WINNING IT ALL. That's the way I see it."



Although pushed by Texas, Ohio State extended its streak of never trailing in these playoffs. This stampede through the CFP was a confident display of the things the Buckeyes were capable of all along.

As much as any other player, quarterback Will Howard sounded reborn heading into the playoff. After some forehead-slapping mistakes in the losses to Oregon and Michigan, the Kansas State transfer elevated his play to a new level as a swashbuckling dime thrower, fearlessly firing balls into small windows. He grasped the opportunity that lay ahead.

"We talked about how we're going to finish the right way," he said before the Tennessee game. "We don't get a chance to play [Michigan] again, but we still can win the whole thing. We can't go out any other way than winning it all. That's the way I see it."

They won it all. Now let the epic poems be written about a season that touched both the heights and depths of football experience. □



**THE REGULAR SEASON
HAD ITS HIGHS AND
LOWS, BUT IN THE
END THE BUCKEYES
DID WHAT THEY
NEED TO DO BY
QUALIFYING FOR
THE CFP FIELD**

AUGUST 31

Ready to Rock
A motivated Buckeyes team took the field for the season opener and treated the fans in Columbus to a 52-6 blowout win against Akron.

ADAM CAIRNS/COLUMBUS DISPATCH/
USA TODAY NETWORK/IMAGN IMAGES





THE
SEASON
IN

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SEPTEMBER 7

New Kid in Town

Quinshon Judkins, a transfer from Mississippi, contributed 108 yards rushing and two TDs as the offense was firing and Ohio State rolled over Western Michigan, 56–0.

SEPTEMBER 21

Corraling the Herd

TreVeyon Henderson, the Buckeyes' other star back, ran for two TDs as Ohio State unleashed another offensive onslaught, overwhelming Marshall, 49–14.



JOE RUBBINS/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES (WESTERN MICHIGAN);
JASON KOWNY/GETTY IMAGES (MARSHALL)

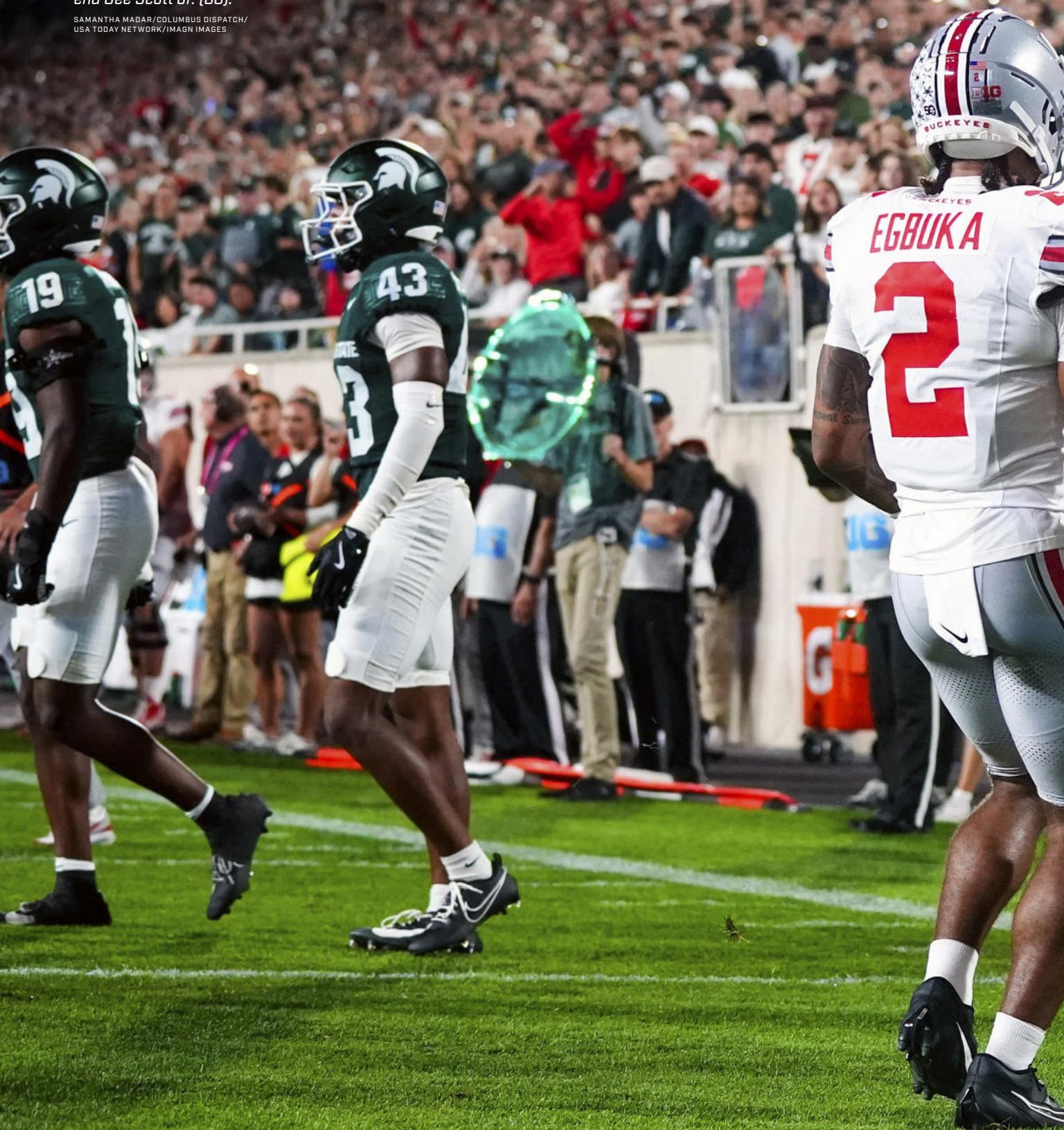


SEPTEMBER 28

Conference Calling

Ohio State opened Big Ten play with a 38-7 win against Michigan State that included a second-quarter TD from tight end Gee Scott Jr. (88).

SAMANTHA MADAR/COLUMBUS DISPATCH/
USA TODAY NETWORK/IMAGN IMAGES





4

BRANTLEY

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BIG

SEPTEMBER 30

Hawkeyes Downed

Emeka Egbuka snared a trio of touchdowns as Ohio State easily handled Iowa in Columbus, 35-7.

IAN JOHNSON/ICON SPORTswire/GETTY IMAGES









SEASON IN PICTURES

OCTOBER 12

Tough One

Will Howard battled for a one-yard touchdown run on a day when the Buckeyes came up just short, falling to Oregon 32-31 in Eugene.

OCTOBER 26

Bouncing Back

Ohio State received more of a fight from Nebraska than expected, but Jordan Hancock's interception with 1:17 remaining sealed a 21-17 win over the feisty Cornhuskers.



AJUKA JENNER/GETTY IMAGES (OREGON); KYLIE ROBERTSON/COLUMBUS DISPATCH/USA TODAY NETWORK; INAGNI IMAGES (NEBRASKA)



NOVEMBER 2

Lion Tamers

Penn State was undefeated until the Buckeyes came to town, and Brandon Inniss's second-quarter TD helped Ohio State hand the Nittany Lions their first loss, 20-13.

NOVEMBER 9

Making His Mark

Jeremiah Smith surpassed Cris Carter's freshman record for receiving TDs when he caught his ninth of the year in Ohio State's 56-0 domination of Purdue.

SCOTT TAFF/GETTY IMAGES (PENN STATE);
BEN JACKSON/GETTY IMAGES (PURDUE)







NOVEMBER 16

Local Hero

Chicago native Carnell Tate looked right at home against Northwestern, reeling in two touchdowns in a 31-7 win over the Wildcats.

MICHAEL REAVES/GETTY IMAGES





SEASON IN PICTURES

NOVEMBER 23

Double Threat

Super safety Caleb Downs was a weapon in the return game as well, bringing a punt back 79 yards for a score during a 38-15 victory over Indiana.



NOVEMBER 30

Not a Banner Day

Jack Sawyer defended the home turf from a flag-planting attempt as frustrations bubbled over in Columbus following the Buckeyes' fourth consecutive loss to Michigan, 13-10.

ADAM CAIRNS/COLUMBUS DISPATCH/USA TODAY NETWORK/MAGNIMAGES (INDIANA); BARBARA J. PERINTE/COLUMBUS DISPATCH/USA TODAY NETWORK/MAGNIMAGES (MICHIGAN)

Ohio State's championship march began in the offseason, when the program invested heavily to attract top-rated players from the transfer portal while managing to hold off key talent from leaving early for the NFL

ALL-STAR



Looking Good in Red

Transfers joined established stars to create a loaded roster with great expectations.

EFFORT

by
PAT FORDE

PHOTOGRAPH BY
JEFFERY A. SALTER



D

DONOVAN JACKSON wants to go into sports marketing when he's finished playing football, and the star Ohio State offensive lineman has the personality for the job. Possessing wit, charm and an outgoing nature, the 320-pound Jackson is first-team All-Engaging. Until you ask him about Michigan. And his team's losing streak to the Wolverines (which extended to four games during this championship season). Sitting on a bench beside the indoor field at the Woody Hayes Athletic Center last July, Jackson's voice dropped and his tone flattened as he talked about Michigan winning it all last year.

"Didn't feel good," Jackson says. "Obviously, the rivalry is the rivalry. I have my own personal opinions on that team. Knowing that we were close and knowing how far they went, it wasn't a fun thing to watch. We've just gotta get it this year."

Nothing motivates a college football program like the intolerable pain of losing control of a heated rivalry—and then watching that rival win it all. For Ohio State, Michigan's controversy-steeped championship season spurred "just gotta get it" response the likes of which might be unprecedented in the sport. Players, coaches, administrators, fans and (welcome to the modern world) NIL collectives went all in to chase a title of their own.



Special Additions

Ole Miss transfer Judkins [above] boosted the run game, while offensive coordinator Kelly, who was lured from the top job at UCLA, meshed well with old friend Day [opposite].

The Wolverines defeated the Buckeyes 30–24 in a November 2023 game that came down to a few crucial plays and was tilted by critical errors. Over the next six weeks, Ohio State watched the loathed Team Up North finish 15–0 and win its first national title since 1997.

But instead of wallowing in misery,

the Buckeyes ambitiously drew up plans for a \$20 million comeback—a plan that looked brilliant after Ohio State claimed its own national championship.

Across a nine-day stretch in early January 2024, eight players who would have been NFL draft picks—most of them likely top-100 selections—chose to stay in school. Defensive tackle Tyleik Williams led off on Jan. 3; edge rusher Jack Sawyer and safety Lathan Ransom followed on Jan. 5; Jackson and cornerback Denzel Burke announced five days after that, followed by receiver Emeka Egbuka on Jan. 11; and running back TreVeyon Henderson and defensive end JT Tuimoloau finished off the loyalty drive on Jan. 12. When that flurry



second-team quarterback Will Howard from Kansas State also joined the party.

The roster was suddenly so flush that the school's last two national championship-winning coaches, Urban Meyer and Jim Tressel, both declared last June that this might be the most talented Buckeyes team in the school's storied history. "I've never seen anything like it," said Meyer, who is prone to hyperbole. But the understated Tressel backed him up: "I don't know if I've ever seen that many great players in that building all at once."

can hire not one, but two former NFL and power-conference head coaches to be assistants, your program has some juice.

And some money. Because none of this would have been possible without a lot of that.

Ultimately, Ohio State and its collectives were attempting—within NCAA rules, such as they are—to buy a title. Day made headlines two years ago by estimating that \$13 million was needed to maintain the Buckeyes' roster, a figure that many deemed exorbitant at the



Speaking of the talent on this year's team, former coach Jim Tressel said, "I don't know that I've ever seen THAT MANY GREAT PLAYERS in the building all at once."

was over, four of Ohio State's six 2023 first-team all-Big Ten selections were still in school.

Around the same time, star transfers started migrating to Columbus. Safety Caleb Downs, the No. 1 player in the portal, relocated from Alabama after Nick Saban's retirement. Another first-team All-SEC selection, Ole Miss running back Quinshon Judkins, traded in the Grove for the Shoe. All-Big 12

The talent stockpiling continued, extending beyond the locker room. Head coach Ryan Day revamped his staff, relinquishing play-calling duties and hiring Bill O'Brien from the Patriots as his offensive coordinator. When O'Brien left three weeks later to take over the program at Boston College, Day simply found another savant, Chip Kelly, who stepped down from the top job at UCLA to call plays for the Buckeyes. When you

time. Since then, the price had gone up. Sources familiar with the overall player payroll for the 2024 football season say it was about \$20 million.

Brian Schottenstein, cofounder and board member of THE Foundation, one of two primary collectives supporting Ohio State athletics, says that donations to his nonprofit collective have tripled in the past year. "The big rise in donations came after the Team Up North game,"

he says. “I think people realized now how important NIL is in the new era of college football.”

Michigan had worked the same plan, albeit to a lesser extent in 2023, enticing several key players to choose another year of school, campus hero status, a nice income and the quest for a title over the uncertainty of NFL mid-round draft status. Unable to beat ‘em, Ohio State joined ‘em—and then some.

Without revealing specific numbers, sources familiar with the team salary structure say Tuimoloau was the highest-paid returning Buckeyes player. Downs was the highest-paid newcomer. There was plenty to go around for the other standouts on the roster.

Schottenstein—whose family’s name is on the school’s basketball arena and whose father, who made his money in retail stores, is a former trustee—dates his fandom back to watching Eddie George run all over Notre Dame in 1995. Mark Stetson, who helps run the other major collective, the 1870 Society, cites Tressel’s 2002 title run as his dream season. Both men are fans at heart and businessmen by trade who have somewhat unexpectedly pivoted to become vital fundraisers.

“Holy cow, it’s certainly a whirlwind,” says Stetson, who works in healthcare tech. “The vast majority of us are volunteers, doing this for one reason only. We want to help Ohio State succeed. I’m rooting like crazy for all the other collectives, too. There is zero pride of ownership on my end.”

Says Schottenstein: “I have no experience being a general manager. But sometimes we joke that we feel like GMs.”

The unofficial GMs of Ohio State football acknowledge that while the athletes they’ve made deals with are happy to have money, they say the players also came back for nonfinancial reasons. “As much as it feels like things have changed in college sports, and that a lot of the conversation centers around money, I think a lot of these decisions were old-school,” says Stetson. “These guys weren’t ready to leave Ohio State and, in particular, this group of teammates, and felt like the upcoming season could be special.”

It pretty much had to be special. The buildup had been immense. By mid-July, the school had sold nearly 57,000 non-student season tickets. “Ohio State fans are relentless,” Stetson says. “And I mean that in all the positive permutations, and also in the ways that create something of a pressure cooker.”

It was time for Ohio State to produce a commensurate return on the considerable investment made by everyone. A massive, statewide machine had been engaged. The question was, Would it run smoothly? “All the pressure is on to actually perform,” Schottenstein said in July. “The bar is very high.”

to Mobile, Ala., when he anxiously returned a request from Downs to FaceTime him. Downs, who grew up in tiny Hoschton, Ga., was coming off a 107-tackle freshman season at Alabama. He was now choosing between Georgia and Ohio State. Day figured this would be the deciding moment.

Day was confident. In high school, Downs had FaceTimed Day in tears to say he was turning down the Buckeyes and going to Alabama. With the help of secondary coach Tim Walton and THE Foundation, Day believed OSU had done enough to get Downs the second time around.



ADAM DARNELL/COLUMBUS DISPATCH/USA TODAY NETWORK/IMAGN IMAGES

All the Right Moves

Howard (above) was brought in from Kansas State, while NFL prospects Williams (near right) and Ransom were enticed to stay in Columbus.

DOWNS HAD already decided he was coming to Columbus. But he couldn’t resist putting Day through a few seconds of prankish anguish before delivering the good news.

In January 2024, Day had just gotten off of a plane on a recruiting trip

But Downs began the conversation by apologizing to Day—“I put that sad face on,” he said. Then he hung his head.

“Stop,” Day said. “Don’t do this again.”

“Just kidding, Coach,” responded Downs. “I’m coming.”

Downs brought along his own painful memories about Michigan: His Crimson Tide team had just lost to the Wolverines in overtime in the College Football Playoff semifinals. Downs came within an inch of making an impact immediately in that game, intercepting J.J. McCarthy on Michigan’s first offensive play, but he landed with his toes just out of bounds.

In Columbus he was drinking from a deeper well of maize-and-blue angst.

"There's a hunger in the facility," said Downs last summer. "Not just to win against Michigan but to win every game."

Downs joined Ransom, Burke and senior cornerback Jordan Hancock to give OSU the best secondary in the land. The Buckeyes had a top defensive line as well, with Sawyer, Tuimoloau, Williams

recalls. "They came out and they said, 'Let's do it.' That was tremendous."

Combine that pair with the usual embarrassment of receiving riches in Columbus, and it took pressure off new QB Howard. The Buckeyes also had the luxury of leaning on Kelly's fertile mind to build an offense around whatever best suited the team's personnel.

As startling as the Buckeyes' player

that I'm still in the room working on the game plan, is what I like."

Still, it took a deep personal connection between Kelly and Day to make this happen. Day, 45, played quarterback at New Hampshire when Kelly was the offensive coordinator there, and Day became a fixture in the coaches' offices as he sought to soak up knowledge from one of the pioneers of no-huddle, up-tempo football.

"He was in the facility 24/7," Kelly says. "Every time you turned around you were like, 'He's here again?'"

If Kelly were a Bobby Petrino-type hired gun brought onboard to save a floundering offense, it might have been a tough marriage with him and Day. But the two had their long-standing relationship from which to build.

"I learned so much from him, not only as a player, but then as a coach," Day says. "He's forgotten more football than almost any coach in the game. I think he missed the coaching part of football."

DAY KNEW the question was coming before it was fully articulated. The inquiry was about losing agonizingly close elimination games to teams that went on to win the previous two national titles—Georgia in the 2022 CFP, Michigan in Ann Arbor in '23—and finding the inches that turn those defeats into wins.

"I know what the question is," Day said crisply in his office last July. "And I've thought about it long and hard. We have to leave no doubt. It can't come down to a photo finish. It can't come down to one field goal. If you're a heavyweight boxer and you leave it to the judges at the end, anything can happen."

The answer, then, was to knock out everyone. Or to at least beat enough teams to make the first 12-team playoff field, then knock out all comers. As Jackson said, talking about the near misses of previous years, "It weighs heavy on you knowing you were right there, and the team that beat you went on to win it all. But the game of football don't care. That's the message of this offseason, man—the game doesn't care, you've just got to win."

Which is just what they did. □



and defensive tackle Ty Hamilton. And the other instant-impact transfer from the SEC, Judkins, gave the program one of the best running back tandems in college football.

Given his starring role at Ole Miss and that program's recent momentum, Judkins was a surprise portal entry. And Ohio State might have originally seemed an unlikely destination after Henderson announced he was staying in school. But it's a two-back world now, and the duo meshed on Judkins's campus visit.

"I kind of put them in a room and said, 'You guys talk through this thing,'" Day

retention and acquisition moves were, poaching Kelly from UCLA might have been an even bigger sign of the times in college football. Kelly is a pure football guy who rediscovered the fun of hands-on coaching when he filled in as the Bruins' QB coach for the L.A. Bowl. In an era when being a head coach is less about ball and more about roster management, the Ohio State job was a return to Kelly's comfort zone.

"We're sitting in a meeting room and Ryan gets pulled out to take a call about somebody in the portal," Kelly says. "The fact that I don't have to answer that call,

FRESHMAN PHENOM

While the Buckeyes' roster was built around returning veterans and portal additions, the championship wouldn't have been possible without a 19-year-old who rose to the moment

T

by
PAT FORDE

HE HAWKEYES had been dispatched, 35–7 in the fifth game of the 2024 season, and the Buckeyes' final duty before leaving the field was to link arms and sing. It was "Carmen Ohio" time. Brian Hartline held his young daughter in his left arm and slung his right around the back of arguably the most talented player he's ever brought to Columbus.

If you were Ohio State's wide receivers coach, you would hold tight to Jeremiah "JJ" Smith, too.

Hartline is widely known as the top receiver recruiter in the country. He mentored Marvin Harrison Jr., the No. 4 pick in the NFL draft last spring. He coached current NFL standouts Garrett Wilson, Jaxon Smith-Njigba and Chris Olave. Then there's senior Emeka Egbuka, who had double-digit touchdown catches this season and should be one of the first receivers selected in the 2025 draft.

But Smith? He's something different—even more so than Harrison, whose

college career did not launch with anything near this velocity. Against Iowa in early October, Smith had four catches for 89 yards and a dazzling touchdown. It was the fifth straight game to start his career in which he had a score, a streak he would ultimately extend to seven. Some of the words used by Smith's teammates to describe the plays he made in his freshman year:

"Ridiculous," guard Donovan Jackson says.

"Stupid," quarterback Will Howard says.

During the regular season Smith had 10 touchdown receptions and three 100-yard games. He began the postseason with 103 yards and two touchdowns

On the One Hand

This four-yard touchdown against Iowa was one of many spectacular catches for Smith in 2024.





Fast Out of the Gate

Smith scored two TDs in the season opener against Akron (above) and the next week broke free for a long score against Western Michigan (opposite).

against Tennessee, and then he somehow topped that with 187 yards and two more scores against Oregon.

In addition to the kind of accomplishments that can be measured by numbers, Smith also led the free world in gasp-inducing, one-handed catches. The stunner at Iowa was but one example.

"I don't know how to explain it," Jackson says. "You see guys go up with one hand and it's like, 'Oh man, he's not

going [to be] coming down with it.' With JJ it's like, 'He's probably coming down with it.'

College football had an abundance of freshman receivers who made dazzling plays in 2024: Ryan Wingo (Texas), Nick Marsh (Michigan State), Bryant Wesco Jr. (Clemson), and Malcolm Simmons and Cam Coleman (both at Auburn). But the only one who even merited comparison to Smith was Alabama's Ryan Williams, who gained national fame for his balletic, 75-yard catch-and-run touchdown for the winning points in Alabama's victory over Georgia on Sept. 28. At age 17—a fact repeated ad nauseam on broadcasts of Crimson Tide games—Williams's upside is incredible.

Yet Smith was even more ready-made than Williams to dominate from the start. The Miami Gardens, Fla., native is a physical specimen—6' 3" and 215 pounds, weighing 10 pounds more as a freshman than Harrison did as a junior last season. The one-handed TD grab against Iowa came with Smith holding off cornerback Deshaun Lee with his left hand, then shoving him aside like a child. Lee is a good player on a good defense, but he was outweighed by 28 pounds in that matchup.

Smith arrived with an abundance of hype—he was the No. 1 recruit in the country, according to 247Sports, with the Buckeyes holding off every major program in Florida to land him. But not

every touted freshman is ready to get on the field immediately—sometimes they aren't ready physically, and sometimes the first taste of not being the best player on the field can rock them mentally. The competition can be especially difficult as a receiver at Ohio State, where the position is so stacked that simply breaking into the two-deep is a challenge.

Smith was different. He enrolled early, in January 2024, and it didn't take long for stories to emerge from Columbus about how good he was.

"Overall maturity," says Buckeyes head coach Ryan Day, explaining what put Smith in position to be an instant-impact player. "His physical maturity,

veterans at that point, but Day and offensive coordinator Chip Kelly are not two of them. On the first possession of the second half, facing a third-and-6 from their own 43-yard line, Howard fired deep down the right side for Smith. He simply ran away from double coverage to haul in the ball for a 53-yard gain.

The next play was his one-handed catch on a fade route for the score. After that, the rest of the game was a low-stress experience for Ohio State.

"He's got a lot of confidence and we have a lot of confidence in him, so we went right back to him," Day says.

Over the season, opposing teams came to recognize the challenge of covering

Smith. In the national semifinal against Texas, the Longhorns made him the focus of their defensive game plan and held him to one reception on three yards. But that was the definition of a Pyrrhic victory, as the rest of Ohio State's pass catchers took advantage of the way Smith distorted coverages, and the Buckeyes had 286 yards passing in the 28–14 Cotton Bowl win.

All year long Smith's teammates have recognized the privilege of having him on their team.

Before "Carmen Ohio" following that game against Iowa, fans streamed up to Smith on the field to get autographs and pictures. He granted all requests, then sang the song, slapped fives with Hartline's kids and headed to the locker room. There have been a lot of stars at Ohio State, but over the next two seasons Smith has a chance to make the short list of all-time Buckeyes. □

"You see guys go up with one hand and it's like, 'Oh man, he's not going [to be] coming down with it,'" says guard Donovan Jackson. "With JJ, it's like, 'HE'S PROBABLY COMING DOWN WITH IT.'"

he's big and strong, so that's important. The next thing is his emotional maturity—this is somebody who practices hard every day, he's avoided distractions up to this point, he stays disciplined. He's got a great coach in Brian Hartline and a great mentor in Emeka Egbuka, but he also came in with a great work ethic and a great mindset."

Smith had his freshman moment in the second quarter against Iowa—he caught a slant and darted for 23 yards, but a backside pursuer jarred the ball loose. The Hawkeyes recovered the fumble, and the Buckeyes went into halftime with an underwhelming 7–0 lead. For the first time this season, there might have been a ripple of unease in Ohio Stadium regarding a team expected to win the national title.

There are coaches who would have tilted the game plan more toward their



THE

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A Real Pick-Me-Up

Jack Sawyer's scoop-and-score elated teammates, finished off Texas and sent the Buckeyes to the title game.

**AFTER COMING INTO THE POSTSEASON AS THE
OFF FOUR CONSECUTIVE WINS TO CLAIM THE**



**NO. 8 SEED, OHIO STATE REELED
NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP**



CFP FIRST ROUND
Ohio State 42, Tennessee 17

ROCKING ROCKY TOP

Volunteers fans occupied a surprisingly large number of seats at the Horseshoe, but it was the Buckeyes who exerted complete control on the field

by
PAT FORDE

I

IN THE summer of 1863, smack in the middle of the Civil War, John Hunt Morgan led a Confederate raiding party of about 2,500 soldiers out of Tennessee. The unit traveled through Kentucky, across the Ohio River into enemy territory in the Midwest and, eventually, into Ohio. Morgan's Raid pushed well into the state before the soldiers were subdued and captured, but the brazen invasion spread panic through the Union for several weeks.

On a see-your-breath December Saturday in the heartland, there was a peaceful reenactment of Morgan's Raid.

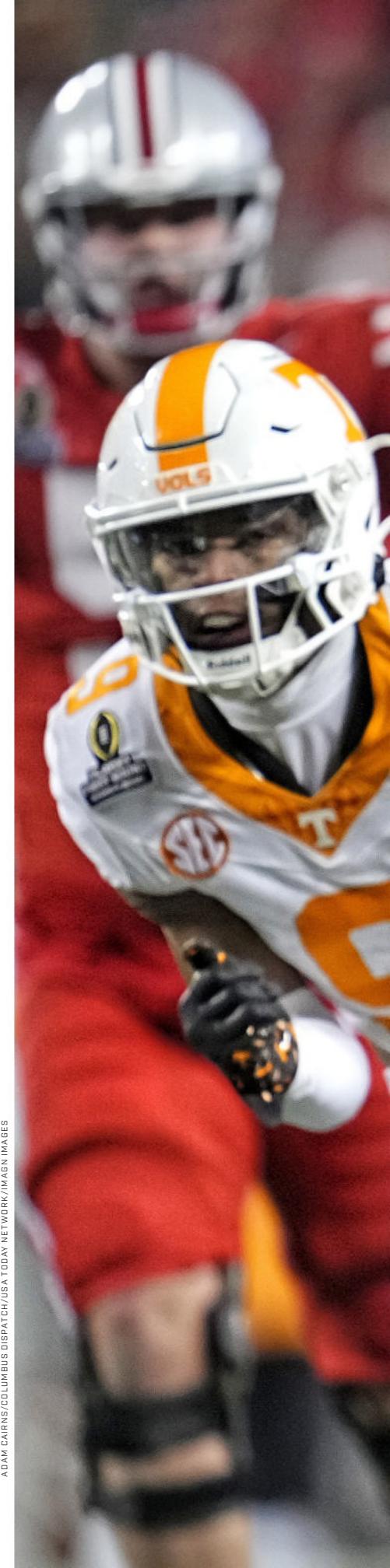
It, too, was ultimately unsuccessful for the folks from Tennessee, but unsettling at times to those who were being invaded.

Tennesseans streamed north, crossed the Ohio River and descended in shocking numbers upon the Midwest stronghold of Ohio Stadium. An estimated 40% of the crowd of 102,819 in the Horseshoe, home of the mighty Buckeyes, was dressed in Volunteers orange for their College Football Playoff first-round game. The much-discussed "Tennessee takeover" of the ticket market was real.

One of the legendary home field advantages in college football was sabotaged by apparent local apathy—or anger at another loss to Michigan—and a burst of Southern enthusiasm. Ohio State is widely considered to have the biggest fan base in America, and nearly half the usual home crowd had gone missing. It was a stunning scene that played out in increments over the hours before kickoff.

The blue Tennessee license plates were everywhere heading north on I-75 into Cincinnati, then northeast

ADAM CAIRNS/COLUMBUS DISPATCH/USA TODAY NETWORK/IMAGN IMAGES



Running Wild

Ohio State's offensive onslaught against Tennessee included two touchdown dashes from Henderson.



Shaking the Blues

Two TDs from Smith (below) and 1½ sacks from Jack Sawyer (opposite) helped fans put the Michigan loss behind them.

on I-71, through the flat farmlands, toward Columbus. They came from the most populous counties, of course—Davidson (where Nashville is) and Knox (Knoxville). But they also came from Cumberland County, where the seat is Crossville. And from Wilson County, outside of Nashville. And from Marion County, down by Chattanooga.

The green interstate sign on I-71 North marking the Columbus city limit had an orange “T” slapped on it by mid-afternoon. On campus, “Rocky Top” was blaring on repeat in parking garages and at tailgates. There was a nine-tent orange pre-party set up brazenly close to the Horseshoe, with fans flocking to it wearing orange checkerboard overalls.

The Tennessee fans were loud and festive despite the bitter 25° weather (colder with the windchill), sending out a rebellious vibe at a place where visitors normally are vastly outnumbered. The Vols had a majority of the seats shortly after the gates to the stadium opened, roaring through warmups, and it took a filling in of the Ohio State student sections before the Buckeyes had a clear majority of the fans.

“It made us feel some type of way, coming out of warmups and getting booed,” guard Donovan Jackson said. “We were like, ‘Wait a second.’ What were they calling it, Neyland North? Yeah, that was lame.”

If Buckeye Nation had a nasty, lingering hangover from the brutal 13–10 upset loss to the Wolverines on Nov. 30, the team clearly did not. Abandoned by a significant percentage of their fans for the first home playoff game in school history, Ohio State turned that into fury and stomped Tennessee, 42–17, treating the Vols like they were a Mid-American Conference opponent.

While the attendance might have at first seemed like a warning sign for



coach Ryan Day after four straight losses to the school's biggest rival, it was also the sort of hurt that could be cured by the kind of win his team delivered. At the end of the game, by all appearances, the Buckeyes were over it. Over the angst, over Michigan, over being booed off the same field three weeks earlier. They once again looked like the national championship contender they had been for the first 11 games of the season.

"For three weeks, everyone in the world was telling us we sucked," Jackson said. "Half the fan base was telling us we sucked. Almost every analyst, expert and anyone with a podcast was telling us we sucked. And so we took it personally. That's not how we were going to go out."

"We had nothing to lose. Our name was dragged through the gutter pretty much for a month."

The Buckeyes went from "gutter" to "great" in a single night. They struck a blow for themselves,

won the teams' Oct. 12 meeting by a point but couldn't have been relishing a rematch given what they saw OSU do to the Vols.

The game was a reminder that, when armed with a competent game plan and not actively panicking against a maize-and-blue demon, Ohio State has the top talent in the sport. It has the two best receivers, in freshman Jeremiah Smith (six catches for 103 yards and two touchdowns) and senior Emeka Egbuka (five

That talented core exploded out of the gate. The offense nearly went three-and-out on its first possession, but a face-mask penalty against Tennessee on a third-down sack cracked the door open for the Buckeyes to take off. They scored the first three times they had the ball and led 21-0 before the Volunteers completed a single pass, with Day and offensive coordinator Chip Kelly coming out of the strangely conservative shell in which they resided against Michigan.

"We called this game more aggressively, there's no question about that," Day acknowledged.

On those first three possessions, the Buckeyes hit plays of 40, 37, 21, 18 and 16 yards. They gouged holes in the

Tennessee defense and quieted down all those Vols fans. "They thought they were going to take over this place," Howard said. "We showed them pretty quick we weren't going to let that happen."

The Ohio State student section mockingly chanted "SEC! SEC!" at the visitors. But it rang a bit hollow after having allowed so many opposing fans to fill the seats for a massive home game. A lot of Vols fans paid big dollars in the ticket market to get in, but the closer it



[Tennessee fans] thought they were going to take over the place," said Howard. "We showed them pretty quick we WEREN'T GOING TO LET THAT HAPPEN."

but also one against the increasingly insufferable Southeastern Conference fans, who spent Friday night and much of the day Saturday declaring that other losing playoff teams didn't belong in the bracket ahead of SEC teams that were left out. Then the Vols fared no better than SMU, Indiana and Clemson had in their first-round games—and arguably did worse.

With the win, the Buckeyes set themselves up for a Rose Bowl quarterfinal against No. 1 Oregon. The Ducks had

catches for 81 yards). It has a relentless tandem in backs TreVeyon Henderson (134 yards from scrimmage and two touchdowns) and Quinshon Judkins (two TDs). It has a QB in Will Howard (24 of 29 passing for 311 yards and two scores, plus 37 yards on the ground), who is capable of great things when he limits his mistakes. It has a pass rush that produced four sacks, cover guys who broke up nine passes and run stoppers who limited Tennessee to 3.9 yards per carry.

got to kickoff, the more prices plummeted. Some Tennessee backers said they paid \$50 and \$60 on Saturday afternoon for lower-level seats.

By the middle of the fourth quarter, most of the orange had departed the Horseshoe. They were numbed by the cold and the thoroughness of the beating. Like Morgan's raiders, they dared to make a dramatic incursion across the Ohio River and the Midwest. And like Morgan's raiders, they were defeated in the end. □

CFP QUARTERFINAL
Ohio State 41, Oregon 21

WHO'S NUMBER ONE?

The Ducks were the top seed in the field, but the Buckeyes blew the feathers off them to avenge a regular-season loss and become the new title favorites

by
PAT FORDE

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OHIO STATE had started the 12-team playoff as the No. 8 seed, but after two blowout wins, that status was rendered obsolete. They were now the favorite. It had become the Buckeyes vs. the field, and the field was in trouble. Ohio State had become a runaway freight train looking for someone new to flatten.

The Buckeye' 41–21 demolition of previously undefeated Oregon, the top seed in the playoff field, was a tour de force that built upon its previous tour de force, when they destroyed Tennessee, 42–17. Ohio State was touring and de forcing like few teams in recent memory. After

jumping on the Vols 21–0 out of the gate, the Buckeyes came out even stronger at the Rose Bowl against the Ducks, going up 34–0 in the second quarter. Another highly anticipated showdown was quickly rendered a dud.

Those beatdowns were a reminder of the talent on this \$20 million roster and also reinforced the inexplicable nature of Ohio State's 13–10 loss to a middling Michigan team on Nov. 30. That shocking defeat, as a three-touchdown favorite, had been deemed the ruination of the Ohio State season. As it turns out, it was the salvation. Given three weeks to regroup and a Wolverine-free playoff bracket, everything flipped.

Against Oregon, the Ohio State staff coached better. The players performed better. The aura of uptight dread that suffused the Buckeyes in its rivalry debacle had been replaced by merciless aggression and towering confidence. The fan anger was deflected—or perhaps absorbed and turned into energy.

"At the end of the day, we wanted to

ADAM CAIRNS/COLUMBUS DISPATCH/USA TODAY NETWORK/MAGNIMAGES





Everything Came up Roses

Smith's 45-yard touchdown in the game's first minute set the tone for a day in Pasadena in which the Buckeyes could do no wrong.



The aura of uptight dread that suffused the team in its debacle against Michigan had been replaced with MERCILESS AGGRESSION AND TOWERING CONFIDENCE.

win a national championship, and the way that we got here wasn't what we expected. It wasn't what we planned for," said Ohio State coach Ryan Day. "But nonetheless, we had an opportunity to come back and play Oregon after we had already played them early in the season, and that's the only thing that mattered. And the guys have been doing a great job staying focused. The staff have stuck together."

For this second shot at the Ducks, OSU came out dealing in the passing

game. Quarterback Will Howard let it rip downfield, and did so with accuracy and verve, throwing for 269 yards and three touchdowns in the first half alone. Incandescent Jeremiah Smith showed why he's the best wideout in college football—as a teenager—by producing a school freshman-record 187 yards receiving, along with two TDs. Super-reliable senior Emeka Egbuka had a 42-yard TD. Tight end Gee Scott Jr. started the game with a 30-yard reception.

Imagine the advantage that can be



gained by getting the ball outside to those elite talents instead of slamming it up the middle in a fit of delusion. (The game plan against Michigan will clearly live in infamy) But, hey, against Oregon, Ohio State had success doing that, too, with running back TreVeyon Henderson peeling off a 66-yard touchdown run during that first-half onslaught.

Fact is, just about everything worked for the Buckeyes, turning what had been a sought-after rematch into a suspense-free rout. Their 8.8 yards per



play was the highest since averaging 10.0 on Sept. 21 against Marshall. And the defense delivered eight sacks against a Ducks line that had allowed just 12 entering the game.

For Oregon, this was a miserable performance when hopes were highest. The Ducks had beaten Ohio State in Eugene by a point in October, 32–31, and the expectation was for another tight contest. Being utterly dominated—rushing for minus-23 yards—might make this the most disappointing effort Oregon has

had in a big situation. The 13–0 Ducks never showed up.

But Oregon's troubles might also be an indication of the newfound knockout power of Ohio State. When a team this talented finds itself this locked in, it hardly matters what the opponent does.

When offensive coordinator Chip Kelly is dialing up plays like this, who can outscheme the Buckeyes? When Howard is given a clean pocket and superstar wideouts capable of making contested catches, who will slow this attack?

From Both Sides, Wow!

The dominant win included two touchdowns from Henderson (above) and eight sacks, including two by JT Tuimoloau (44, opposite).

When a previously inconsistent and injured offensive line is opening holes and controlling the trenches, who can bottle up Henderson and backfield mate Quinshon Judkins?

Maybe nobody. Probably nobody. □

CFP SEMIFINAL
Ohio State 28, Texas 14

GRAB AND GO

Jack Sawyer made a play for the ages when he sacked, scooped and scored—and sealed the win that sent Ohio State to the title game

by
BRYAN FISCHER

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AFTER THE snap, Jack Sawyer made a quick move and saw that there was nothing but open field between him and a familiar face.

Ohio State was up by a touchdown with 2:29 left in the fourth quarter, but Texas was threatening to tie the game, with a fourth-and-goal from the Buckeyes' 8-yard line. Sawyer, a senior defensive end, shed the block of Longhorns right tackle Cameron Williams and saw quarterback Quinn Ewers looking downfield, unaware of who was approaching from his blind side.

Sawyer was quite familiar with the

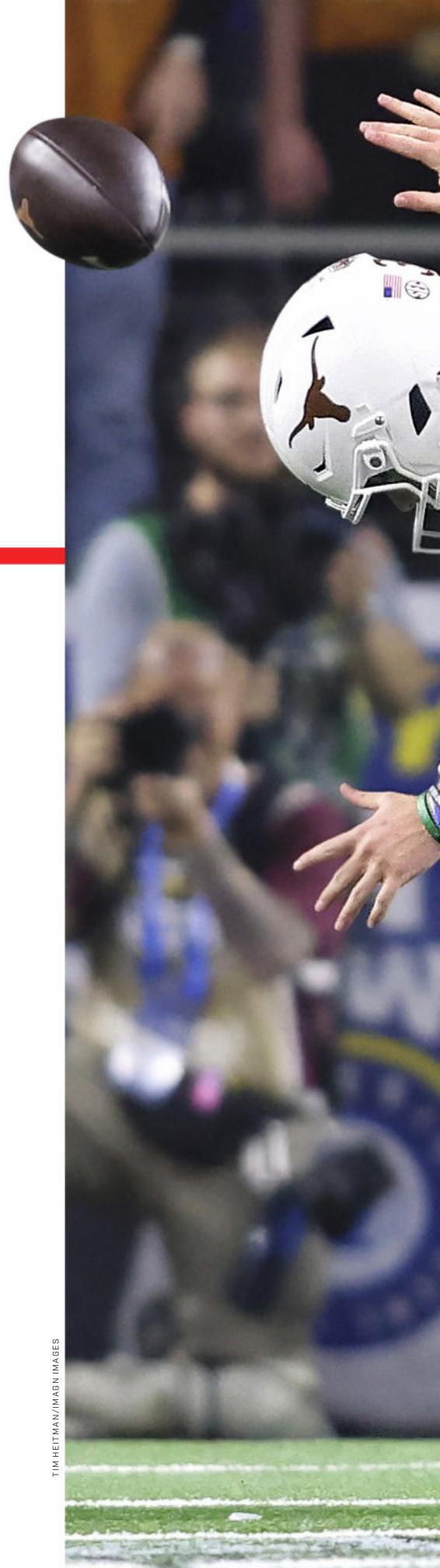
Texas senior. Ewers had spent a semester in Columbus as a freshman rooming with Sawyer and hoping he might one day lead the program to a national championship. But with C.J. Stroud and Kyle McCord ahead of him on the depth chart, Ewers transferred back home to Texas after seeing action in just one game. He became the Longhorns' starter and, three years after leaving Ohio State, here he was in the national semifinals, trying to thwart the Buckeyes' dreams.

Sawyer and Ewers had joked earlier in the week about exchanging pleasantries at some point during the Cotton Bowl. Neither could know that they would share a moment that will bind them forever in OSU football lore.

On that fourth-and-goal Ohio State likely only needed a defensive stop to secure the win. A simple sack between the former five-star recruits would have done the job.

Sawyer, though, took it further. Instead of just wrapping up Ewers and taking him down, Sawyer knocked the

TIM HEITMAN/IMAGN IMAGES





Hi, Roomie!

Sawyer delivered a hit on his former roommate as Texas threatened to tie the score on a fourth-and-goal late in the game.



Quick Response

Henderson took a screen pass and sprinted 75 yards for a TD at the end of the second quarter, just after Texas had tied up the game.

CFP/GETTY IMAGES



quarterback to the ground and swatted the ball out of his hands. The 6'5", 260-pound lineman then scooped the ball and raced 83 yards down an exuberant Buckeyes sideline with a convoy of teammates following. Sawyer's touchdown, followed by a Caleb Downs interception on Texas's next drive, sealed a 28–14 win that sent Ohio State to Atlanta to play Notre Dame for the national title.

"I blacked out there for a second," Sawyer said of the play after the game. Indeed, after reaching the end zone, he immediately had to make his way

Rush Hours

Quinshan Judkins (below) scored on OSU's opening drive, while Howard (opposite) ran for a key fourth-down conversion.

through throngs of teammates and toward some oxygen on the bench. "I felt like I was in quicksand," Sawyer said. "I just was glad that I got a block from the guys running behind me, and God blessed me with the ability to make a big-time play."

It was a fitting that Sawyer would make such a game-saving play, given that the team captain had been rallying his squad all season long. "I'm not surprised, by any means," said quarterback Will Howard. "That guy has been playing possessed the last month."

Of course, Howard came through as well, throwing for 289 yards and most crucially guiding his team on a 13-play, 88-yard touchdown drive that put Ohio State up 21–14 in the fourth. He made the biggest play on that drive with his legs when he converted

a fourth-and-2, running for 18 yards before tripping himself up on the turf. When Texas tried to answer, Howard had a hard time watching the play in which Sawyer saved the day. "I had my face in my towel when the ball was snapped, and I looked up and I saw him just strip, take the ball and go," Howard said. "I was like, *Oh, my God.*"

There was a lot of OMG-ing going on among the 74,527 in attendance at AT&T Stadium in a game packed with drama, especially compared to the stress-free blowouts Buckeyes fans had enjoyed in the earlier rounds against Tennessee and Oregon. The battle with Texas more resembled the type of close game Ohio State had been on the wrong end of a couple times in the 2024 season.

The first close loss this year came on Oct. 12 at Oregon, when Howard slid





that, I believe, will become legends in Ohio State history.”

Chief among them will be Sawyer, who played in every game since arriving on campus as the state’s top recruit out of Pickerington, in suburban Columbus. He is one of the veterans Day turned to in the wake of that loss to the Team Up North. Sawyer delivered, giving speeches when needed and making sure his teammates were using every bit of the added time between rounds to watch extra film to wring out every edge possible.

It paid off against the Longhorns. Sawyer was a constant thorn in Ewers’s

and sprinted through the Longhorns’ defense for a 75-yard touchdown.

Senior wideout Emeka Egbuka moved the sticks consistently with five catches for 51 yards and allowed sophomore Carnell Tate (a game-high seven receptions for 87 yards) to often come right off his hip on crossing routes. Both more than made up for a quiet night from freshman Jeremiah Smith, who had just one catch for three yards and was mostly used as a decoy that drew double—and sometimes triple—teams after he was dominant in the first two rounds of the playoff.

Afterward, as each of the older Buckeyes celebrated taking a third win-or-go-home game, they made it a point to find Day and embrace him. The words exchanged were simple but poignant, underscoring that for all the external

***Before the game, Day had talked to his team about leaving a legacy.
Afterward he said, “There’s some guys on this team
today that WILL BECOME LEGENDS in Ohio State history.”***

too late as he put the Buckeyes in field goal range, and the clock ran out in the one-point loss. Then there was the inexplicable 13–10 loss against Michigan that knocked Ohio State out of the Big Ten title race and threw the fan base into a funk that may have only truly been dispelled with Sawyer’s scoop and score.

Before that play, though, as things got tight on the scoreboard, fans worried about a fresh disappointment. But Sawyer and the Buckeyes put a full stop to the narrative in the same stadium where they last won a title a decade ago, giving Ryan Day’s team a shot at validation. “I believe that the resilience that we’ve had to show throughout the entire season and through some of these guys’ careers has led us to this opportunity to win this game and go play for a national championship,” Day said. “We talked before the game about how you leave a legacy is to become your own legend. There’s some guys on this team today

side and added three tackles (one for loss), one pass breakup and two quarterback hurries. Fellow edge JT Tuimoloau was equally dynamic, overcoming a first-half ankle injury to finish tied for second on the team in tackles, with seven, to go along with 1½ sacks.

Both were part of a wave of upperclassmen who returned after last season’s Cotton Bowl trip on which everything that could go wrong did in a dispiriting loss to Missouri. They returned for games like this.

The offense was fueled by returning veterans as well. Senior tailback TreVeyon Henderson led the team with 42 yards rushing and made his biggest splash before the end of the first half, right after Texas had scored to tie the game 7–7 with 29 seconds remaining. On the first play of Ohio State’s next possession, with seemingly too little time to accomplish anything, Henderson reeled in a screen pass from Howard

talk about their coach being on the hot seat after the Michigan loss, the players still believed in their leader.

“I love that guy so much,” Sawyer said. “He means so much to us on a daily basis. The things he’ll do for you, he goes to bat for all of us. He always has our backs.”

Day saved his warmest postgame embrace for his family members, who have had to watch as he dealt with the expectations that come with leading the third-winningest program in college football history. After the Michigan game, it seemed plausible the school might look for someone new to meet the high expectations in Columbus.

Now the coach and his Buckeyes had the Irish on the horizon and redemption in sight. “It’s not finished,” Day said at the postgame press conference. “We are not done yet.”

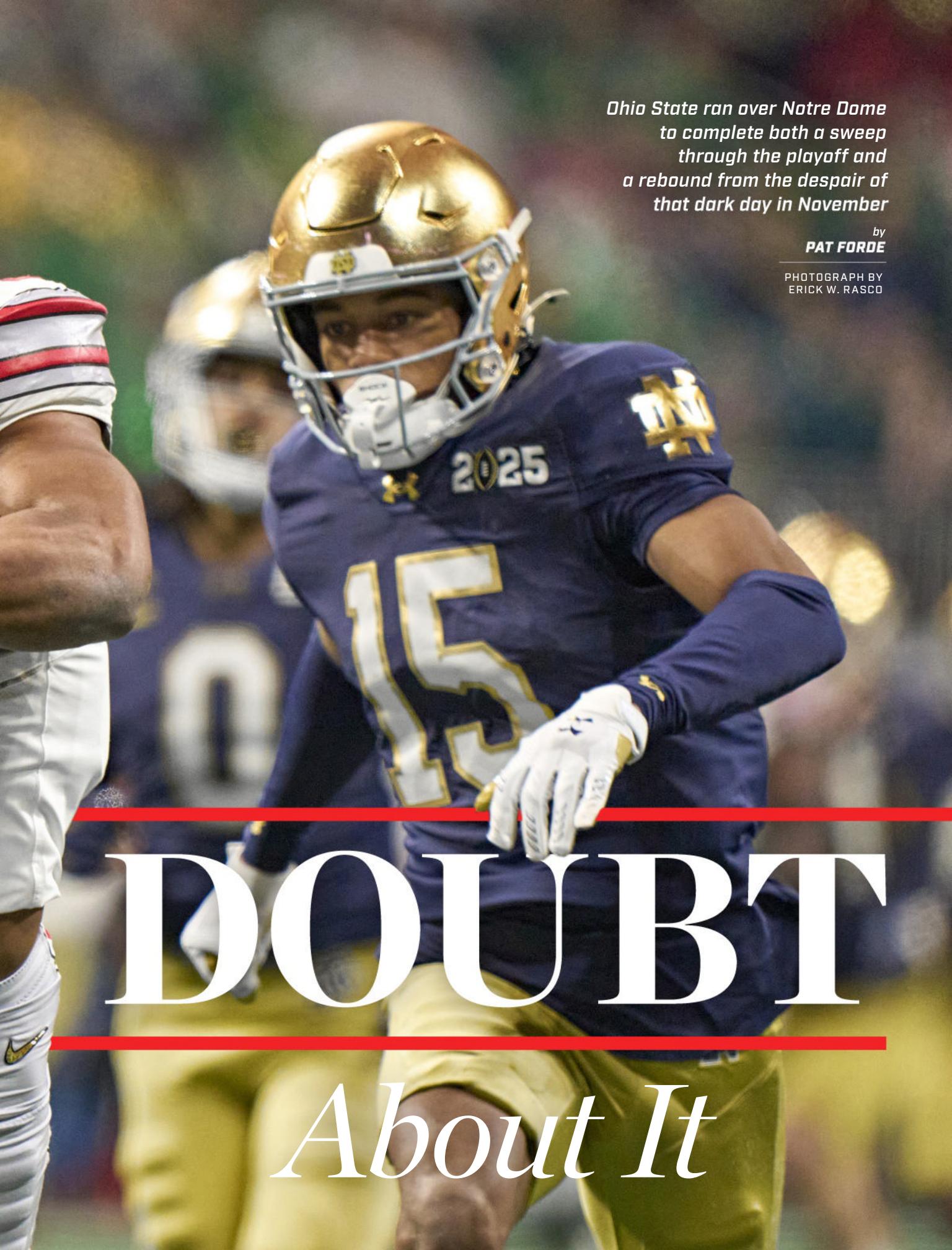
Sawyer, also sitting on the dais, was quick to add, “I second that.” □



Unstoppable

Judkins torched the Irish for 121 yards from scrimmage and had three TDs—two rushing and one receiving.

NO



*Ohio State ran over Notre Dame
to complete both a sweep
through the playoff and
a rebound from the despair of
that dark day in November*

by
PAT FORDE

PHOTOGRAPH BY
ERICK W. RASCO

DOUBT

About It

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AT 12:40 A.M. ET, after Ryan Day signed off from an on-field ESPN interview with Scott Van Pelt and finally headed toward the Mercedes-Benz Stadium locker room, it was time to ask the question. Time to ask the Buckeyes' coach about his profound act of celebration at the end of winning the national championship.

With the final seconds ticking down and victory secure against Notre Dame, Day set off at a half jog along the sideline. He pulled off his headset and yanked the equipment off his belt. He wound up and heaved the entire communication device—cathartically and perhaps defiantly—into the air like an Olympic hammer thrower. The device flew over the Buckeyes' bench and toward the stands. It was like Day was releasing himself from shackles. He never even bothered to watch where it went.

"Oh, that was nice," he said, with a laugh. "I wanted to smash it."

The headset is used for communication with his fellow Ohio State coaches during a game, of course. But symbolically it's also a refuge from the "outside noise" coaches so often talk about. And few, if any, wildly successful coaches have had to endure more outside noise than Day.

He's Coach Third Base. Can't beat Michigan. Can't win the big one. Should

CFP CHAMPIONSHIP

be fired (despite a 69–10 record before the title game). The criticism has been relentless over the course of a four-year losing streak to the Wolverines, and it was downright vicious when Michigan won in Ohio Stadium as three-touchdown underdogs Nov. 30.

The team had only one way to escape what happened. By coming back and winning the whole damn thing.

And so the Buckeyes did, authoring a four-game stampede through the first 12-team College Football Playoff and culminating it with a 34–23 victory over stubbornly game Notre Dame. Ohio State was utterly dominant for most of this playoff run, then resilient and poised in the few moments in which it was seriously challenged.

The average margin of playoff victory was 17.5 points against teams ranked No. 1 (Oregon), No. 3 (Texas), No. 5 (Notre Dame) and No. 7 (Tennessee). The Buckeyes made it look easy, even if it wasn't. For the head coach, the path through persecution was arduous.

"God made it hard for a reason," Day said. "This game can give you the highest of highs and the lowest of lows. It can take you to your knees some days as a player and as a coach. I've been there before."

"If you surround yourself with great people, you're resilient, and you believe in the guys around you, and you just keep fighting and keep putting one foot in front of the other, you give yourself another chance."

Ultimately, the traumatic fourth straight loss to Michigan became a launching pad, not a burial ground, for

Championship Focus

Day rallied his players before they took the field against Notre Dame, and then they went out and executed as well as they had in any game this season.



BRYCE FRANCE





Howard was indeed incredible, completing his first 13 passes and finishing with 231 yards while likely improving his draft stock.
“I don’t know why he doesn’t GET MORE CREDIT,” says Kelly.

the Buckeyes’ season. They were booed off their home field that day; now they’ll be welcomed home and celebrated as champions less than two months later. The team that emerged from the rubble was an absolute juggernaut, best in America by far.

Now Day can listen to the outside noise. The season is over, the title has been won, and the feedback has drastically changed in tenor.

“Now he’s a hero,” says Ohio State assistant athletic director for sports performance Mickey Marotti as he watched Day wave to the fans who saluted him postgame. Many of them undoubtedly were among the tens of thousands who viciously booed the team after the Michigan loss. The aura around the team was bad enough at that point that even the Buckeyes’ persecution-complex mantra was an understatement.

“We say ‘Ohio against the world,’ ” offensive coordinator Chip Kelly says. “At times, it was the ‘Woody Hayes Athletic Complex against the world.’ It was just us.”

The extent of the discontent was on startling display in Ohio State’s first-round game against Tennessee, the first time back in the Horseshoe after the Michigan mess. A good 35,000 Volunteers fans infiltrated the stadium



for that game, indicating the anger Buckeye Nation felt toward its own team.

But Ohio State was ready for its rebirth from the opening snap of the playoff. It blitzed Tennessee 21–0 in the first quarter, roared to a 34–0 lead on Oregon, and never trailed Texas.

Against Notre Dame, for the first time in the playoff, the Buckeyes briefly had to play from behind. The Irish mounted a service academy-style drive on the opening possession of the game, grinding out 18 plays over nearly 10 minutes, to take a 7–0 lead. Quarterback Riley Leonard was the engine, carrying the ball nine times himself, including the last run for a touchdown—after which he went to the sideline and threw up.

But the Ohio State offensive machine was ready for its opportunity against one of the best defenses in the country. The Buckeyes produced a time-consuming drive of their own that culminated on a clever play-action throwback touchdown from quarterback Will Howard to star freshman receiver Jeremiah “JJ” Smith. Those two would link up again for a decisive play later on.

Right on Target

A brilliant night by Howard (opposite) included an eight-yard completion to Smith that gave Ohio State its first score.

One Ohio State scoring drive then became two, and three, and four, and five. It wasn’t until the Buckeyes’ sixth possession of the game that they failed to put points on the board. Kelly’s play-calling wizardry was in full effect, Howard was making sharp reads and throwing darts, the skill-position guys were making plays and an offensive line that stepped up its collective game in the playoff stuffed the Notre Dame pass rush. Meanwhile, the Ohio State defense was tightening up and taking away the openings Leonard and the Irish had found on their first possession. It was crushing business as usual.

On the play that gave the Buckeyes the lead for good, Ole Miss transfer Quinshon Judkins took a handoff to the left end of the line of scrimmage. In a snapshot of both the game and the entire playoff, the running back baptized the unfortunate opponents who dared to get in his way.

Judkins was first encountered by Notre Dame linebacker Jaiden Ausberry, a redshirt freshman. The 219-pound Judkins placed his white-gloved right hand on the front of Ausberry’s shiny gold helmet and shoved him down, planting him in the turf at the 9-yard line—a stiff-arm of vicious beauty. Then Judkins proceeded to collide with freshman cornerback Leonard Moore at the 4-yard line, rampage through Moore’s body and carry him to the end zone.

That man-among-boys play made the score 14–7. An avalanche was underway. The stiff-arming of the 12-team playoff was seemingly complete. A massively talented and supremely focused team embodied one of its slogans—“Leave No Doubt”—while cleansing itself of the maize-and-blue stain on its soul.

“Overall, the game was called tremendously,” Day said. “I thought the game plan was excellent, and I thought the guys handled it really well.”

But Notre Dame made a valiant fourth-quarter comeback, trimming a 31–7 deficit to eight points in the final minutes. In the back of all Buckeye minds, dread started to percolate. The Michigan loss was its own brand of awful; blowing a 24-point lead in the

Strength in Numbers

After allowing a score on Notre Dame's long opening drive, the Buckeyes' defense clamped down on Leonard and the rest of the Irish attack.

national championship game would have been far, far worse. Cornerback Denzel Burke declared last March that the team's goal was "natty or bust," and this was starting to veer toward a bust of towering proportion.

Two conservative runs by Howard went nowhere, leading Ohio State to face a third-and-11 and the specter of giving the ball back for a tying score. Putting the game away necessitated one more great play from the Buckeyes—a daring call, executed to perfection.

Said Day: "I just thought to myself, 'Only one national championship. You only get one opportunity a year to do this. Let's just lay it on the line and put it out there and be aggressive.' And that's what we did."

Kelly sent Howard to the line of scrimmage with two plays. If the Irish defense was in a zone that bracketed Smith, the QB would throw a shorter and safer route to someone else. But if Notre Dame was single-covering Smith in man-to-man, Howard would go ahead and take the deep shot.

Needing only 11 yards for a first down, Howard took the deep shot. He dropped back and let the YOLO bomb fly. Smith blew past Irish cornerback Christian Gray—the hero of the Notre Dame's semifinal victory over Penn State with a late interception—and hauled it in for a 56-yard lightning strike. Game effectively over.

It was a gutsy call, though Kelly downplayed it. "Just throw it to your best player and let him run by them," he quipped. "JJ is special, and Will was special all game."







Good as Gold

After Jayden Fielding's 33-yard field goal with 26 seconds left sealed the win, Sawyer and the Buckeyes enjoyed their championship moment.

Howard was indeed incredible, completing his first 13 passes and finishing the game 17 of 21 for 231 yards with two TDs and no interceptions. He also ran it a team-high 16 times for 57 yards. His four-game playoff performance may appreciably change his middle-rounds NFL draft stock. “I don’t know why he doesn’t get more credit,” Kelly says.

Howard was part of the strategic building of the Ohio State roster that led to this day—this title was won in no small part a year ago. In the wake of the hated Wolverines capturing the 2023

national championship, the Buckeyes launched a copycat campaign to retain many of their best players for a glory run of their own.

In early January 2024, eight veterans who would have been draft picks instead chose to stay in school. Combined with three star transfers—Howard, Judkins and safety Caleb Downs—the roster was one of Ohio State’s most talented in history.

That added to the pressure weighing on the Buckeyes all season. The Michigan loss looked like it might crush them, but Day didn’t see it that way.

“It wasn’t like at the end of the year we were broken,” Day said. “It wasn’t that way. We had an awful day. I don’t know how else to describe it. We had an awful day, and we just said we could never do that again.”

The advent of the 12-team playoff provided Ohio State a do-over that wouldn’t have been available in the CFP’s former four-team era. All previous postseasons would have ended with the Buckeyes in an anticlimactic bowl game and watching someone else win the national championship. The new playoff was exactly what the Buckeyes needed—a chance to redeem themselves and show their mettle.

“We had to stick together because we knew we were in the playoffs,” said Jim Tressel, who coached Ohio State to the 2002 national title and is now the president of Youngstown State. “That’s the beauty of it. They did a masterful job of keeping that team together. Now we’re living large.”

On the award stage after the game, Day’s family stood at the back beaming as confetti fell and cheers echoed around the stadium. On Nov. 30, Day’s two daughters were portraits of despair on the sideline, tears streaming down their frozen cheeks, knowing the abuse that would be heaped upon their father.

Day said, “You only get one opportunity a year to do this. Let’s just LAY IT ON THE LINE and put it out there and be aggressive. And that’s what we did.”



FROM LEFT: BRYCE FRANCE; KEVIN D. LILES

Four transformative games later, those same girls and their older brother were overjoyed while Day’s wife Nina was crying happy tears as she embraced family members.

Day joins Tressel, Urban Meyer, Woody Hayes and Paul Brown in the select fraternity of national champion coaches at Ohio State. No one can ever take that away from him, no matter what his record is against Michigan. He rounded third base on a Monday night in Atlanta and made it all the way home. Ryan Day took the burden he’d been carrying and threw it away, hurling it off like his headset and walking away a winner. □

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OHIO STATE'S **GLORIOUS PAST** INCLUDES PLUCKY
MOST ACCOMPLISHED PLAYERS IN THE HISTORY



Sound Familiar?

In January 2015 Ohio State broke in a new college football postseason format—that one with four teams—by topping Oregon in the title game.

PHOTOGRAPH BY
ROBERT BECK

**TITLE TEAMS AND SOME OF THE
OF COLLEGE FOOTBALL**



BUCKEYES' BEST

The greatest Ohio State team ever may have been the undefeated 1968 squad, which Woody Hayes called the most impressive that he had coached

T

by
DAN JENKINS

PHOTOGRAPH BY
WALTER IOOSS JR.

Ready to Romp

The fiery Kern, one of the many sophomores who played key roles on the '68 team, was MVP of the Rose Bowl that season.

HE CHRONICLES of college football say Chick Harley's running built that old prison of Ohio Stadium in Columbus as surely as Jackie Onassis is going to build the next Parthenon, but if the Buckeyes play the game for 100 more years—long enough for the place to be double-domed in memory of Rex Kern and Jim Otis—Ohio State will not spend a more ecstatic Saturday than it did when the teenage tyrants of Woody Hayes folk-rocked Michigan 50–14.

Ohio State is accustomed to good football teams, and Hayes in his 18 stormy years as coach had produced three of the best. He turned out the Hopalong Cassady team of 1954, which was 10–0, the Bob White team of 1957, which was 9–1, and the Bob Ferguson team of 1961, which was 8–0–1. Each was rewarded with a mythical national championship of one kind or another, but last week Woody was showing off the team he insists is the best of the batch.

By the time a few thousand hysterical youngsters had stopped doing the boogaloo around the stricken goalposts of Ohio Stadium and had marched off to seize downtown Columbus instead, there was no reason to doubt him. The Buckeyes may have to whip USC in the Rose Bowl to get the national championship Woody thinks they deserve, but against Michigan they looked capable of taking on several dozen John Waynes out there in Pasadena and surviving. At the very least O. J. Simpson vs. Woody's rebels with a cause will be something to stay sober for on New Year's Day. [Editor's note: Ohio State beat USC, 27–16.]

This Buckeyes team is unlike any of the other memorable ones, and not just because it throws passes, uses reverses and revels in fakery—things that Hayes used to think belonged in basketball. What it brings to the football field is the maniacal enthusiasm that only youth can have, combined with a

confidence that stems more from the optimism of immaturity than from the experience of age.

Ohio State went into its gray concrete edifice containing 85,371 people—an OSU attendance record—with five 19-year-olds on the starting offensive unit and five more on defense. Of the top 22 players, 10 were sophomores. This entire Kiddie Korps had been wound up so tight by Hayes that it was ready to do what a banner in the crowd commanded: KILL.

And kill it did, not just in the final score but in terms of what one team can do to another with repetitious hitting and ball-hogging. The Buckeyes tackled with a ferocity that would have made Bear Bryant tip his hat, and when Michigan needed the ball to try and catch up, Ohio State simply kept it.

1968 CHAMPIONS

said Hayes, who is thriving on military quotations and allusions these days.

The thing one likes best about Kern, aside from his ability to mend, is his gall. One of the high points of the Michigan game came when he ran out of bounds on a keeper, got blasted groggy by a linebacker—who drew a well-deserved 15-yard penalty for the assault—and wobbled back to the huddle, where he ignored a play sent in by Hayes, called his own signal and gained 14 yards before bouncing into the same linebacker. Later, when he should have been enjoying the role of invaluable star, Kern was the first

To start things off, Otis plowed for six, nine and three yards on the first three plays. He turned it over to another fellow for one play, and then squirted through the middle for 11 yards. He ultimately carried the ball nine times in a 17-play drive for 46 of 86 yards, including the final two yards over right tackle for the touchdown that put Ohio State ahead to stay.

After each of his four touchdowns Otis went slightly berserk, jumping up and down, hugging anything near him dressed in red, turning in circles, raising his clinched fists and, once, trying to

***The Buckeyes tackled with a ferocity THAT WOULD HAVE
MADE BEAR BRYANT TIP HIS HAT. As hard as
the Buckeyes are on defense, they are just as exuberant on offense.***

As hard as the Buckeyes are on defense, they are just as exuberant on offense. The player who epitomizes their attitude is quarterback Rex Kern, another of those 19-year-olds. Kern is a redhead, sweet-faced sophomore with a silver bullet for a heart. He stands in there calmly, faking as if he had an hour or two to run a play. But when he rolls out he gathers momentum and, finally, just before he is tackled, he hauls off and bashes into the defenders as if he is trying to find out how many bones he can crack—his and theirs, combined. Through nine regular-season games Kern has managed to sprain his ankle, almost fracture his jaw, suffer muscle spasms in his back and get knocked cold twice. But he keeps coming back, and he was certainly there against Michigan, even though he had missed three workouts during the week while being patched together, a fact that Woody had kept a secret. “A good general always makes you search for his weaknesses,”

man who dashed off the bench and across the field to try and add his weight to a rousing fistfight. He is, in sum, enough to make Woody Hayes forget his collection of General Patton quotes.

While Kern looks like the model football player in his scarlet and gray at six foot and 180 pounds, Jim Otis, the fullback, looks like the model golf cart. Another of the offensive hitters, he is listed at six foot and 208 pounds, but he is so broad in the shoulders that he seems more like 4'9" and 260. Despite his cement-block build, Otis is a quick starter, and he butted his way relentlessly into the heart of Woody Hayes and into the bellies of Michigan as he tore through the Wolverines for 143 yards and scored four touchdowns. It was Otis and his hammering on a crucial second-period drive that turned the game into a certain Buckeyes victory. Kern later described that drive as Ohio State’s best of the season.



throw the ball into the Olentangy River. But it is doubtful that he or any of the Buckeyes was more revved up than Hayes himself. The older a man gets, the more precious a big victory becomes, it seems, and Woody’s case was special even beyond that. He had not had a nationally acclaimed winner in seven years, even though he had been favored to have a couple, and he had not been to the Rose Bowl in 10 years. He had seen his ranks depleted by higher academic requirements and a no-redshirt rule.



And he had witnessed a change in the game toward high-powered offenses, a trend that did not suit his own football philosophy. Worst of all for a giant in the trade such as himself, he had heard it whispered that football, just possibly, had passed him by.

For all of these reasons, Hayes stood in his dressing room afterward, an American Beauty rose clutched in his hand, and called this Michigan win his "greatest ever." He said again, with Hopalong Cassady right there beside him

Hit Parade

Linebacker Michael Radtke and the defense, under the direction of Hayes (opposite), gave up just 15.0 points per game.

to nod agreement, that this was the best Ohio State team he had ever had—yes, even better than Hoppy's in '54.

The statement merely repeated what he had obviously felt before his Bucks

leveled Michigan. The night before the game, at a party at John Galbreath's Darby Dan Farm, Hayes had talked about the fact that he coaches as hard now as he ever did. "Coaches used to say the hay's in the barn after a Thursday workout, but that's wrong. You have to keep thinking through Friday, right up to game time, in fact. You have to consider emotions. Just like today, for instance. Our kids were tight, I thought. Worried. They are young, and this is their biggest test. I said to 'em, 'You all just clinch your fists for 10 seconds as hard as you can, and then take a deep breath. After that 10 seconds is how you're supposed to feel when you go into a football game. Relaxed, confident, but determined.'"

When this latter-day Woody Hayes gets to talking, he often keeps on, and one subject leads him into another at mid-paragraph, with quotations mostly from generals and admirals flying out like the confetti from the Ohio Stadium rooting section. Somebody remembered how once, a while back, Hayes was on television talking to one of his tackles, explaining why he had worked his team out in the cold and rain. It was because they were going to Wisconsin, where he expected the weather to be foul. "As Admiral [Nimitz] said, 'If you're going to fight in the North Atlantic, you've got to train in the North Atlantic,'" Woody told the tackle. To which the player replied, "I'd rather fight in Florida, Coach." Everybody laughed, and now Woody began talking again, saying how this is his greatest team.

"I think we deserve to win," he said. "I think we've proved we can win. I think we have the right attitude to win, and athletes who know how to win. I'll tell you something. We will win!"

Somewhere in all this, while Hayes was winning that Friday night, he paused to quote Walt Disney—Admiral Disney, right?—to sum up the way he has coached these players of his who have brought to him more talent than he's ever had. "It's what you do with what you've got," Woody said the quote went. Which was his way of saying an old coach doesn't always gather moss in glass houses. □

FRENZIED FIESTA

Thanks to a late flag and a crafty quarterback, the Buckeyes toppled defending champ Miami in double overtime to win the 2002 season title

I

by
AUSTIN MURPHY

PHOTOGRAPH BY
DAMIAN STROHMEYER

F YOU LISTENED closely, you could hear the bottle calling out: *Pop my cork—you've earned it!* Someone had left some Moët in the ice bucket in Room 6414 of the Princess Resort in Scottsdale, Ariz. Even as the hundreds of Ohio State fans at the hotel—and the rest of the red-clad horde that had descended by the tens of thousands on the Valley of the Sun for the Fiesta Bowl—swung into full party mode, neither Will Smith nor Darrion Scott seemed much interested in champagne.

"It hurts to move," Smith said. Like Scott, he is a starting defensive end for the Buckeyes. And like his linemate, he was too banged-up and exhausted, physically and emotionally, to celebrate Ohio State's dramatic 31–24 victory over heavily favored Miami.

Six feet stood between the Hurricanes and a chance to extend the game to a third overtime, their winning streak to 35 games and their reign as national

champions to two years. It was first-and-goal at the 2-yard line, and Miami must have liked its chances.

In Ken Dorsey the Hurricanes had a senior quarterback with a 38–1 record. In Andre Johnson and Roscoe Parrish they had two wideouts ticketed for the NFL. In Kellen Winslow Jr. they had a tight end who had outplayed everyone else on the field. On top of all that, they had an offensive line touted as among the finest in the land. But the Hurricanes also had this small problem. "Their offensive line was overrated," said Ohio State linebacker Matt Wilhelm.

"They couldn't move the ball on the ground against us," added Scott. "We knew it, and they knew we knew it."

Captain Clutch

The cool Krenzel led Ohio State to five fourth-quarter comebacks during the 2002 season.





Tough Stuff

Krenzel had this one-yard TD dive in the first half and another one in OT to set up the Buckeyes and Tressel [opposite] for a trophy celebration.

Smith sacked Dorsey on Miami's first play from scrimmage. The Buckeyes got him three more times and knocked him down on 10 other occasions. By the middle of the second quarter, the Hurricanes had abandoned their man-blocking schemes on passing downs and resorted to slide protection. This was a stunning concession to a defensive line that it could not handle.

Nor could Miami get anything going on the ground. Before he left the game in the fourth quarter with torn ligaments in his left knee, All-American tailback Willis McGahee had carried

20 times for just 67 yards. Now, on first-and-goal in the second overtime, his replacement, Jarrett Payton (son of the late Walter Payton), scratched out a yard. On second down Dorsey had tight end Eric Winston open in the end zone, but, feeling pressure from his left, rushed the throw. Incomplete. The Canes ran fullback Quadtrine Hill into the line on third down. No imagination, no gain.

In the huddle safety Mike Doss sought calm. "Everyone, get your composure," said the senior All-American. "This is our season right here." From the sideline came the signal for a blitz called Tight Will Tulsa. "That means I'm coming off the edge," explained outside linebacker Cie Grant. "I'm bringing the juice."

Grant, a converted corner with serious closing speed, caught Dorsey with one arm, grabbed him by the collar and spun him around as he released a desperation

throw. When that homely pass fluttered to the turf, the Miami quarterback sank to his knees while the Ohio State celebration erupted around him.

Hadn't we just seen this movie? The first overtime had ended, or so it had seemed, with a failed throw from Buckeyes quarterback Craig Krenzel. His fourth-down pass to flanker Chris Gamble had fallen incomplete and been followed by a spectacular display of Fiesta Bowl-sponsored pyrotechnics, a tidal wave of Hurricanes players and fans flowing onto the field—and a yellow flag thrown by Terry Porter, the back judge. Porter waited four Mississippi before reaching for his back pocket because, he later explained, he wanted to go over the play in his mind. Three plays after the critical pass-interference penalty, Krenzel sneaked the ball in for the tying touchdown.

JIM TRESSEL, who in his second season at Columbus awakened a sleeping giant and delivered to the Buckeyes their first national championship since 1968, has a style that is quaint and retro: Players must memorize one another's names and the words to the school fight song, "Carmen Ohio," which they are required to sing while standing before the band following each game. (In the joyous anarchy on the field after the Fiesta Bowl, there was Buckeyes offensive tackle Shane Olivea, herding his teammates toward the end zone: "Coach says we can't do anything before we sing.")

Star running back Maurice Clarett, despite being bottled up much of the

time by the Miami defense, which held him to 47 yards on 23 carries, found ways to leave his mark on the game. Every bit as important as his two rushing touchdowns was the defensive play he made in the third quarter. After safety Sean Taylor had picked off Krenzel in the Hurricanes' end zone, Clarett stripped Taylor of the ball on the return, leading to a Buckeyes' field goal.

That outrageous sequence was the signature play of a game in which emotions and momentum whipsawed. Whenever the tension seemingly could be ratcheted any higher, it was. After enduring two Ohio State timeouts with three seconds left in regulation, Miami kicker

rise was an unexpected twist in a surprising Buckeyes campaign. When he won the starting job the previous fall, it was widely assumed he would merely be keeping the spot warm for redshirt junior Scott McMullen or highly touted freshman Justin Zwick. But Krenzel has a nice arm and is a good runner, as Miami discovered. The 6'4", 215-pound QB rushed for a game-high 81 yards, taking advantage of the Hurricanes' man-to-man coverage to pull the ball and scramble for solid gains. Mostly, though, Krenzel is smart—a molecular genetics major who pulled straight B-pluses in his three fall courses: Molecular Genetics 608, Molecular Genetics 701 and Microbiology. "Those are graduate-level courses," says his brother, Brian, a medical student at Louisville who played strong safety at Duke. Brian is fiercely proud of his little brother but saves his praise for when Craig is out of earshot.

Back judge Terry Porter waited four Mississippi before reaching for his flag because, he later explained, he wanted to go over the play IN HIS MIND.



Todd Sievers drilled a 40-yard field goal to send the game into overtime. Winslow, who would finish with 11 receptions for 122 yards, capped the Hurricanes' first OT possession with a circus catch on a seven-yard TD. Miami had momentum.

But back it swung to the Buckeyes with the flight of Porter's flag, the signal to the Hurricanes that their celebrations were premature. Obscured by that bizarre turn of events was the gutsy play four snaps earlier that had made it possible. On fourth-and-14 from the 29, with the season on the line—and with his mother, Debbie, in the stands saying, "Time to throw it to Mikey"—Krenzel took a three-step drop and hummed a 17-yard strike to wideout Michael Jenkins at the right sideline.

Buckeyes fans are used to this—Krenzel led Ohio State to five fourth-quarter comebacks this season, and his

Long after many other Buckeyes had left for home, the Krenzel brothers and their uncle Stan played a round of golf at a public course in Phoenix. Stan is a lifelong Michigan fan who pulls for his nephew during the football season but makes him pay when it's over.

"Watch Stan. He'll spend the whole round talking during Craig's backswing, trying to screw him up," said Brian, himself not above attempting to sabotage his brother's game. Both uncle and brother had parred the first hole when Craig bent over a five-foot par putt.

"This is where his game falls apart," said Stan.

"Awful quiet, isn't it Craig?" said Brian.

"Don't look now, but it's fourth-and-1," said Stan, who was silenced by the clattering of his nephew's ball dropping into the cup. □

A Step Above

Elliott ran for 246 yards and four touchdowns, including this nine-yarder in the third quarter, in the 42-40 win over Oregon.



AGAINST ALL ODDS

After turning to its third-string quarterback deep in the 2014 season, Ohio State went on to win the first national college football title determined by a playoff

H

by
ANDY STAPLES

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
ROBERT BECK

E HAD already shattered the stereotype that a Big Ten back couldn't outrun an SEC team in the Sugar Bowl on Jan. 1. Now, with slightly more than 30 seconds left in the first College Football Playoff championship, Ezekiel Elliott waited for one final carry in the palace Jerry Jones built in Arlington, Texas. Everyone in scarlet screamed Elliott's name.

Zeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeke!

The Ohio State sophomore tailback crouched to the left of the third-string quarterback, Cardale Jones. They lined up behind the Slobbs, an offensive line that had struggled to replace three players who started as rookies in the NFL. None of this seemed possible. Had anyone suggested in August that these players would be outracing, outpassing and outmuscling Oregon for the national title, Buckeyes strength coach Mickey Marotti wouldn't just have laughed. "I would have told them to take a drug test," he says.

Jacoby Boren, a runt of a center at 6'1", 285 pounds, snapped the ball to Jones, who handed it to Elliott. The Slobbs manhandled the Ducks' defensive line one final time, and Elliott covered the last of his 246 yards rushing and scored his fourth touchdown. When he came to the sideline, LeBron James hugged him. The Buckeyes would win 42–20 and claim the school's sixth championship, the first for the Big Ten since 2002 and the third for coach Urban Meyer, who took two at Florida in '06 and '08.

Meyer envisioned a scene similar to this as he watched Alabama and Notre Dame play for the BCS title two years earlier. After the game he sent a text to the entire team: "The chase is on." The chase ended in a fashion no one, least of all Jones, would have imagined. "Long story short," he says, "we weren't supposed to be here."

He definitely wasn't. The Buckeyes' starter in 2014 was supposed to have

been Braxton Miller, but he injured his shoulder in August. Next up was J.T. Barrett, who did not start the season looking like a quarterback who would break school and Big Ten records. On Sept. 6, Virginia Tech dared Barrett, in his second start, to win the game through the air. He completed only 9 of 29 passes and threw three interceptions in a 35–21 loss.

But in the next four games Barrett passed for a combined 17 touchdowns and one interception in wins over Kent State, Cincinnati, Maryland and Rutgers. He threw for only 74 yards in an ugly 31–24 double-overtime victory at Penn State, but he ran for a touchdown in each OT. The Buckeyes grew up that day, and they took control of the Big Ten East Division on Nov. 8 with a 49–37 win at Michigan State. The team, with its confidence soaring, now believed it could beat anyone.

But what happened next could have shattered the team's newfound belief. As Ohio State nursed a seven-point lead early in the fourth quarter against Michigan in Ann Arbor, Barrett stretched for extra yardage, and his lower right leg got trapped beneath Wolverines junior defensive end Mario Ojemudia. Barrett's ankle was broken. He would miss the remainder of the season.

Fortunately, Jones had been getting his mind right all season. A three-star recruit from Glenville High in Cleveland, he had seen the way Kenny Guiton had prepared as Miller's backup in 2013, watching how the offense flowed seamlessly when Guiton replaced an injured Miller for three weeks. Jones had tried to emulate Guiton's mental preparation since becoming the backup following Miller's injury in preseason practice.

Ohio State showed it could thrive with Jones at QB by blasting Wisconsin 59–0 in Indianapolis for the Big Ten title. Elliott ran for 220 yards and two touchdowns, while Jones completed 12 of 17 passes for 257 yards and three scores.

When Jones woke up the next morning, he couldn't help firing off a tweet: "Soooooo Last Night Wasn't A Dream. Holy S---." Jones might have gotten in trouble for his language had he not

2014 CHAMPIONS

expressed the precise sentiment of everyone who had seen the game.

The rout of Wisconsin convinced the CFP selection committee that the Buckeyes deserved the fourth spot in the playoff bracket. It was clear that the injuries to Miller and Barrett hadn't stopped the Buckeyes; they had revealed how much talent they had.

"While you're busy worrying about [the receivers], you've got Ezekiel Elliott

and the Slobs," Ohio State freshman linebacker Darron Lee said. "Then you've got a 6'5", 250-pound quarterback who can run and has a rocket launcher for an arm. You've got your work cut out for you."

In the Sugar Bowl against Alabama, Lee's side would get its due. Ohio State's defense was facing a Heisman finalist, Alabama wideout Amari Cooper, who represented the kind of test the Buckeyes had failed in the past. In Meyer's previ-



Party Time

Jones [above] threw for 242 yards and a TD, leading to a Gatorade bath for Meyer [middle] and confetti angels from defensive tackle Chris Carter.

ous two years the defense had stopped the run but surrendered huge plays in the passing game: In an Orange Bowl loss to Clemson after the 2013 season, Sammy Watkins torched the Buckeyes for 227 yards and two touchdowns. In '14, Meyer wanted his defensive unit to work from the back forward. The linebackers would drop into coverage more often because Meyer believed a line featuring senior tackle Michael Bennett

and sophomore end Joey Bosa could slow the run and generate pressure without help. The plan worked. Ohio State improved to 16th in the nation against the pass. Cooper accounted for 71 yards and two touchdowns in the Buckeyes' 42–35 Sugar Bowl win, but he was held 52 yards below his average.

In previous years confetti would have rained at the end of that bowl game, and

hold the Ducks to their lowest point total of the season and stuff them on a second-quarter goal line stand that changed the dynamics of the game. “If we didn’t have the College Football Playoff, you wouldn’t have realized how good a team we became at the end of the season. I think this is a great idea.”

Ohio State handed the Ducks four turnovers, but Heisman Trophy win-

children and three national championships. Shelley couldn’t pick a favorite child, but this might be her favorite title. “This one was a little different,” she says. “Because even I doubted it. I should never have doubted it.”

Jones completed 16 of 23 passes for 242 yards and a touchdown. He converted eight of 15 third downs—Mariota was just two for 12—and all

“If we didn’t have the College Football Playoff, you wouldn’t have realized HOW GOOD A TEAM WE BECAME at the end of the season,” Bennett said. “I think this is a great idea.”



the season would have ended. Had the BCS title game still decided the national champion, as it did from 1998 to 2013, Ohio State wouldn’t have had a chance to play for the title. It still would have faced Oregon but in a Rose Bowl devoid of stakes. Now the Buckeyes had an opportunity and took advantage of it.

“The number four team just won the national championship,” said Bennett, after he had helped Ohio State’s defense

runner Marcus Mariota could muster just 10 points from them. “Any other day,” says Oregon junior defensive lineman Alex Balducci, “we make that 28.”

As she stood outside the locker room waiting to go celebrate with her husband, Shelley Meyer looked back on the sheer improbability of this Buckeyes season. “The third-string quarterback won the national title,” she said. “Do you get that?” The Meyers have three

three chances on fourth down. Trailing by seven and backed up to his own five in the first quarter, Jones completed a 26-yard pass to Corey Smith on third down that kick-started a 97-yard TD drive.

Barrett knew Jones could do it all along. “[Cardale] didn’t have to do anything crazy,” Barrett said. “That’s the great thing about this team. Nobody is alone.” □

ALL-TIME TEAM

*From acrobatic receivers to fearsome pass rushers,
SPORTS ILLUSTRATED chooses the very best Buckeyes
to have ever thrilled the fans in Columbus*

WIDE RECEIVER

Cris Carter
1984 to '86

The first Buckeye receiver to be named an All-American could make acrobatic, highlight-reel plays as well as keep the chains moving. In 1986, he had 69 receptions for 1,127 yards.

PHOTOGRAPH BY
CHUCK SOLOMON



LINEBACKER

James Laurinaitis

2005 to '08

The model of a middle linebacker, Laurinaitis was a three-time All-American, a two-time captain and the only Buckeye ever to win Big Ten Defensive Player of the Year twice.



ALL-TIME TEAM

DEFENSIVE END

Chase Young

2017 to '19

In 2019, Young, despite missing two games, had 16½ sacks, including a record-tying four in one game against Wisconsin, and won the Nagurski and Bednarik awards for top defensive player.



JOHN BIEVER/LAURINAITIS; SMITH; JEFF HAYNES (YOUNG)

QUARTERBACK

Troy Smith

2003 to '06

A landslide winner of the Heisman Trophy after leading Ohio State through an undefeated 2006 regular season, Smith also went 3-0 against Michigan, topping 300 yards in the last two of those starts.



DEFENSIVE BACK

Jack Tatum

1968 to '70

Named the nation's defensive player of the year in 1970, the physical cornerback set the tone with his fierce tackles on teams that went 27-2 when he was in the starting lineup.



TONY TOMSID (TATUM); HEINZ KLUETMEIER (GRIFFIN); JEFF HAYNES (BOSA)

RUNNING BACK

Archie Griffin

1972 to '75

The only player ever to win the Heisman Trophy twice (in both 1974 and '75), Griffin ran for more than 100 yards in 31 consecutive games and still holds the Ohio State career rushing record with 5,589 yards.



DEFENSIVE END

Joey Bosa

2013 to '15

The first in a string of terrifying pass rushers that would include his brother Nick (2016 to '18) and Chase Young, Bosa was a two-time All-American and had 26 sacks over three seasons.

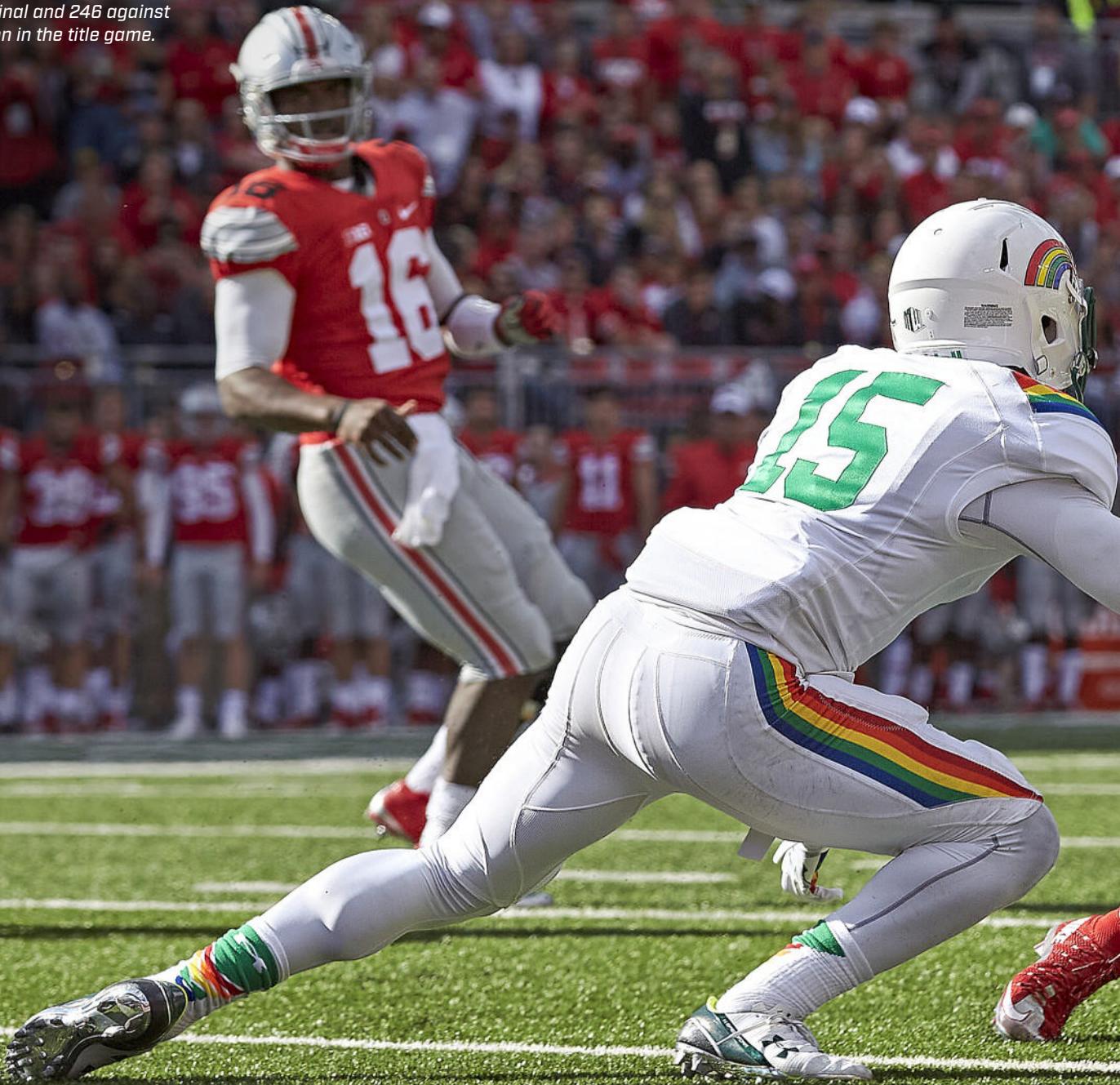


RUNNING BACK

Ezekiel Elliott

2013 to '15

Elliott has two of the top four rushing seasons in Buckeyes history, and in 2015 he helped OSU win the College Football Playoff with 230 yards against Alabama in the semifinal and 246 against Oregon in the title game.





OFFENSE

- QB TROY SMITH**
2003 TO '06
- RB EZEKIEL ELLIOTT**
2013 TO '16
- RB EDDIE GEORGE**
1992 TO '95
- RB ARCHIE GRIFFIN**
1972 TO '75
- WR CRIS CARTER**
1984 TO '86
- WR MARVIN HARRISON JR.**
2021 TO '23
- OL ORLANDO PACE**
1994 TO '96
- OL BILL WILLIS**
1942 TO '44
- OL JOHN HICKS**
1970, '72 AND '73
- OL JIM PARKER**
1954 TO '56
- OL CHARLES BENTLEY**
1998 TO 2001

DEFENSE

- DL JOEY BOSA**
2013 TO '15
- DL JIM STILLWAGON**
1968 TO '70
- DL MIKE VRABEL**
1993 TO '96
- DL CHASE YOUNG**
2017 TO '19
- LB TOM COUSINEAU**
1975 TO '78
- LB JAMES LAURINAITIS**
2005 TO '08
- LB CHRIS SPIELMAN**
1984 TO '87
- DB MIKE DOSS**
1999 TO 2002
- DB MALCOLM JENKINS**
2005 TO '08
- DB JACK TATUM**
1968 TO '70
- DB ANTOINE WINFIELD**
1995 TO '98

SPECIAL TEAMS

- K MIKE NUGENT**
2001 TO '04
- P TOM TUPA**
1984 TO '87
- KR-PR TED GINN JR.**
2004 TO '06

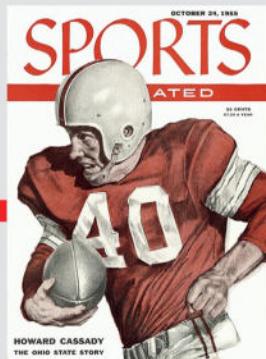
COACH

- WOODY HAYES**
1951 TO '78

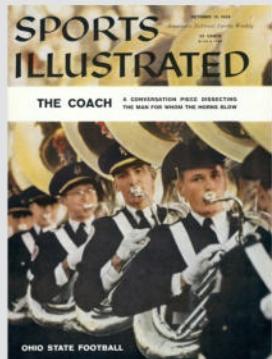
To purchase reprints of any of these SI covers, go to SICovers.com

FRONT RUNNER

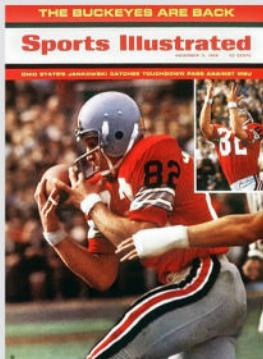
The Buckeyes won their second national title in 1954, the year SI debuted. Since then the football program has appeared on 29 covers



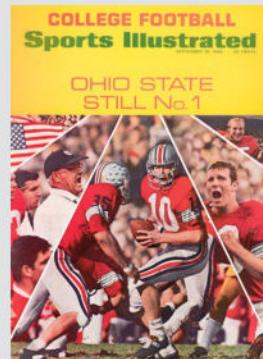
OCTOBER 24, 1955



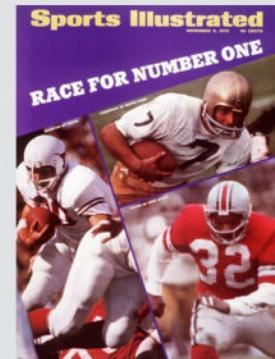
OCTOBER 13, 1958



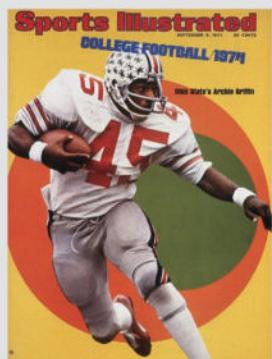
NOVEMBER 11, 1968



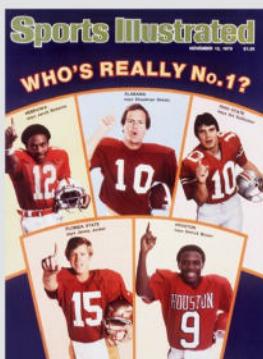
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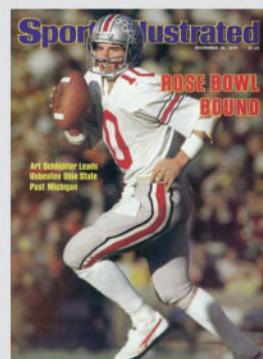
NOVEMBER 9, 1970



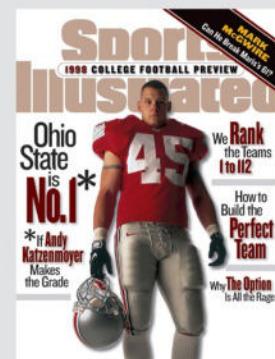
SEPTEMBER 9, 1974



NOVEMBER 12, 1979



NOVEMBER 26, 1979



AUGUST 31, 1998



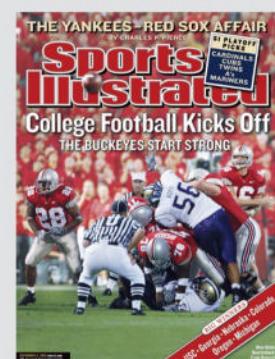
DECEMBER 2, 2002



JANUARY 13, 2003



AUGUST 11, 2003



SEPTEMBER 8, 2003

FROM TOP LEFT TO RIGHT: ROBERT RIGER; JERRY COOKE; ART SHADY; GEORGE LONG; ART SHADY AND WALTER DOSS JR.; ERICK SCHWEIKART; HENZ KLUETMEIER AND WALTER DOSS JR.; NEIL LIFER; RICH CLARKSON; LYNN PELHAM; JOHN KENNEY; RUCAPAK AND SHELLY KATZ; WALTER DOSS JR.; BRIAN LANKER; AL TELEMAN; DAMIAN STROHMEYER; DAVID BERGMAN; AL TELEMAN

FROM TOP LEFT TO RIGHT: DAMIAN STRONMEYER; PETER READ MILLER (2); BOB BOSATTO; PETER READ MILLER (2); GARY S. VAZQUEZ/US PRESSWIRE; SCOTT T. STUART/ZUMA PRESS; JAMIE SABAU/GETTY IMAGES; ANDREW WEBER/USA TODAY SPORTS; JAMIE SABAU/GETTY IMAGES; JEFF HAYNES; ANDREW HANCOCK; ROBERT BECK; ANDREW TEAP; JAY LARKE/TEP; ROBERT BECK; ANDREW HANCOCK; JEFF HAYNES; JAMIE SABAU/GETTY IMAGES



SEPTEMBER 12, 2005



AUGUST 21, 2006



SEPTEMBER 18, 2006



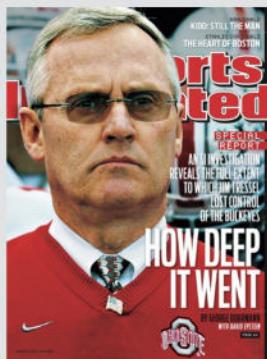
NOVEMBER 27, 2006



AUGUST 11, 2008



AUGUST 16, 2010



JUNE 6, 2011



MARCH 4, 2013



AUGUST 19, 2013



DECEMBER 9, 2013



AUGUST 18, 2014



DECEMBER 29, 2014



JANUARY 19, 2015



AUGUST 10, 2015



DECEMBER 12, 2016



AUGUST 14, 2017

NOT IN KANSAS ANYMORE

Will Howard, who transferred in from K-State, was named offensive MVP of the title game against Notre Dame.



THIS PAGE: ERICK W. RASCO; BACK COVER: BRYCE FRANCE

