



For weeks I've been dying to ask an Ohio State fan - any Ohio State fan - one burning question:

Why are you excited about this season?

For good reason, lovers of college football always get a little twitchy this time of year. The game they love emerges out of the ether like a monarch butterfly after an eight-month chrysalis stage. It's fun and exciting and I get that.

But that only goes so far. Usually to the end of the first weekend.

So why would an OSU fan's excitement last longer than that?

To be sure, the Buckeyes are talented, and that always warrants some excitement. Indeed, lack of talent is a big reason most sports fans have a hard time getting riled up for the start of a new season. When your team of choice isn't capable of winning more than a third of its contests, there's no sports Viagra out there to - ahem - supplement your excitement.

But Ohio State football is at the opposite end of the spectrum. This is a team capable of delivering both enjoyment and satisfaction. And yet, over the next three months, it will do neither. And, amazingly, that's part of its plan.

The Buckeyes are loaded, undoubtedly one of the top 5 teams in the country. And yet no one will ever know for sure, at least not until early January, and maybe not even then.

For between now and then, Ohio State will play a schedule that St. Ignatius is chuckling at.

It's easy to just shrug your shoulders and say, "They have to play the majority of their games against Big Ten opponents. Nothing they can do." The sickly state of the Big Ten is a topic for another day, but knowing the conference's dwindling football reputation - which is getting worse every year - there's a school of thought that suggests that OSU should beef up its non-conference slate to confirm the Buckeyes' claim to national prominence: 'Our conference may have jumped the shark, but we're still Fonzie.'

To its credit, Ohio State has strategically ignored that line of thinking because it does them no good. Why play a game in which there's a chance you could lose?

With cunning, guile, and a sprinkle of Machiavellian manipulation, the Buckeyes have got the system figured out. And because of it, they clinched a spot in the national championship game the day the preseason rankings came out.

OSU scanned the battlefield and correctly assessed the situation. Whatever your opinion of it, the SEC is the best thing college football has got going. In any given season, the SEC contains at least three serious contenders for the national title. And there's a better than even chance that the national title game will pit two SEC teams against each other.

While there's been much hand-wringing and party-bunching over the SEC's preferential treatment by the television networks and the NCAA itself, the one thing you can't dispute is that it's the best. Not only because of the talent within the conference, but because whoever emerges as its best team each year has proven it six ways to Sunday.

In a minimum of four games this fall (and likely more), each team in the upper tier of the SEC

will engage in a colossal battle against another behemoth, which is also considered one of the top 10 programs in the nation.

Meanwhile, Ohio State will be playing Florida A&M and Purdue.

That's not to criticize Ohio State for cowardice (though it's painfully easy to make that point). But rather to applaud their ability to make a flawed system work for them.

Big Ten proponents have complained for years that the SEC has an unfair advantage when it comes to recruiting. Rather than complaining, OSU simply changed the rules of the game. Their formula was simple: turn its two primary obstacles into advantages.

The Big Ten is as rickety as a crackhouse staircase. Yet, thanks to little more than fond memories, it still has a good reputation. With strong coaching and good recruiting over the past decade, Ohio State has avoided the sinkholes other programs within the conference have sunk into and managed to remain head and shoulders above everyone else in the Big Ten.

So when the Buckeyes run the table by winning each of their conference games by an average of 26 points this fall, that still looks good. You hear "Big Ten champion" and you think not of today's sorrowful programs, but of Woody Hayes of the 1960s and the great Michigan teams of the 1930s and 1940s. You conclude that a dollar today is equivalent of what a dollar was in 1953.

With obstacle one averted, OSU's other problem takes care of itself. The SEC is more powerful, more entertaining, and more respected. As a result, the competition within it is far greater. Thereby, it is virtually impossible for an SEC team to go through the conference slate unbeaten.

OSU is like Jimmy Cagney orchestrating a bank heist in a 1930s gangster movie: let your opponents kill each other off, wait for the shooting to stop, then stroll into the vault and take the money without getting any dust on your tuxedo.

Cynical? Probably. Effective? Absolutely.

The only suspense in Ohio State's season occurred the day the preseason rankings were released. When Ohio State landed at No. 2 in both the Associated Press and *USA Today* polls, there were likely flutes of champagne being quietly clinked together along Woody Hayes Drive. Their quest was over - they'd earned a spot in the national championship.

If you don't lose a game (a farcical concept to anyone who's taken even a casual glance at Ohio State's schedule), you generally don't drop in the rankings. And while Alabama looks to be fantastic once again, the odds are good that one of the four-or-five quasi-NFL teams the Crimson Tide will play this year will trip them up at some point.

By November, the top 10 will be peppered with SEC teams, all of which may be better than Ohio State. But the Buckeyes will likely be the No. 1 team in the nation. And even if not, after cruising through a 13-0 season in which their smallest margin of victory is 14 points, the Buckeyes are certain to clinch a spot in the BCS title game.

That's exciting. But it's also a done deal. It's a murder mystery you already know the ending to.

So again, I ask any Ohio State fan, why are you excited about the season? Once the initial glow from the return of the college football wears off, September, October, and November Saturdays become nothing more than light practice sessions for January 6. And while it's always fun to watch your team win, at what point do you become bored by watching an investment banker take money from a kindergartner?

Ohio State has put itself in a position to win a national championship in one night. Perhaps things even out that night and the Buckeyes wind up looking as silly as Notre Dame did against Alabama last year. But perhaps not - maybe it'll be 2002 all over again, when an underdog Buckeye team caught Miami on a bad day and was crowned national champions.

All of this will change a bit next year when the playoff system is implemented. It's far more difficult to beat two SEC-caliber powerhouses than just one - particularly when you've gone

through your entire season playing Buffalo, Minnesota, and Indiana.

But that's next year's problem. And if you capture a national title this season, that will satiate Buckeye Nation for at least a few years - long enough for OSU to come up with Plan B.

When the Buckeyes officially clinch their spot in the national championship after their blowout victory in the Big Ten championship game, some will say they haven't earned it. I'd argue they have - just not on the field.

To me, while incredibly impressive, that just isn't exciting.

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