

The Magnificent Six : #6 - The 1961 Ohio State Buckeyes

Written by {ga=hermanfontenot}
Saturday, July 04 2009 7:00 PM -

Six times since the beginning of World War II, the Ohio State Buckeyes have gone through a season without a single loss. As the 2009 campaign approaches, we're counting down those six seasons - 1944, 1954, 1961, 1968, 1973, and 2002- in order of greatness, from #6 to #1, the greatest season in the history of Buckeye football. We start with season #6- 1961.



In college football, the greatest accomplishment a team can claim is an undefeated season. Six times since the beginning of World War II, the Ohio State Buckeyes have gone through a season without a single loss. As the 2008 campaign approaches, we're counting down those six seasons- 1944, 1954, 1961, 1968, 1973, and 2002- in order of greatness, from #6 to #1, the greatest season in the history of Buckeye football. We start with season #6- 1961.

The forgotten great season of Ohio State football, 1961 featured both the highest heights of on-field triumph, and the lowest depths of off-field travesty. The powerful Buckeyes shredded just about every opponent between the white lines, but another opponent, one within their own campus, proved too tough to handle.

6.) 1961

Record: 8-0-1 (6-0 Big Ten)

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Big Ten Conference Champions

Texas Christian (3-5-2) T 7-7

UCLA (7-4) W 13-3

Illinois (0-9) W 44-0

@ Northwestern (4-5) W 10-0

@ Wisconsin (6-3) W 30-21

Iowa (5-4) W 29-13

@ Indiana (2-7) W 16-7

Oregon (4-6) W 22-12

@ Michigan (6-3) W 50-20

After struggling to a 3-5-1 record in 1959, the Buckeyes bounced back to 7-2 in 1960 and were loaded for '61. The power gear of Ohio State's offense was its backfield- quarterback Joe Sparma (later a pitcher for the Detroit Tigers), fullback Bob Ferguson, Maxwell Award winner and Heisman runner-up to Ernie Davis, and the sophomore halfback tandem of Paul Warfield and Matt Snell. The heart of the

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offensive line was its tackle combo of Bob Vogel and Darryl Sanders, both of whom were first-round picks in the following year's NFL draft. The defense wasn't as heralded as the offense, but it was fast, aggressive, and smart, led by linebacker Gary Moeller, later the head coach at the University of Michigan. The man Moeller succeeded in Ann Arbor, one Glenn "Bo" Schembechler, was a Buckeye assistant in 1961.

The only blemish on Ohio State's schedule was an inexplicable opening-day tie with TCU, the same school that had deprived the 1957 National Championship team of an undefeated season with an 18-14 upset in Columbus. (Despite their substandard record, the '61 Horned Frogs were quite the giant-killers- they also handed third-ranked Texas its only loss of the season, in Austin.) The Buckeyes rolled through the rest of the campaign, including wins over Pacific Eight Conference champion UCLA and 18th-ranked Wisconsin in Madison.

Ohio State saved its best for the season finale against Michigan. Going into the game, the Buckeyes needed a win and a loss by Minnesota to secure the Big Ten title. They handled their end of the deal with relish, rolling up 512 yards of offense and annihilating the Wolverines 50-20 in front of an apoplectic crowd in Ann Arbor. Ferguson battered the U-M defense for 152 rushing yards and four touchdowns, while Warfield provided the most spectacular highlight with a 69-yard scoring sprint in the second period. After battling to a 21-12 lead after three quarters, the Buckeyes blew the game wide open, scoring four touchdowns in the final fifteen minutes.

It was late in the game, with the matter long decided, when Woody Hayes put his penchant for mercilessness toward the Maize and Blue on vivid display. With 34 seconds remaining and Ohio State leading 42-20, the Buckeyes took possession on their own twenty-yard line. A softer soul would have fallen on the football and called it a day. Woody was not that soul. He ordered up a bomb, and Sparma hit Warfield

down the left sideline for a 70-yard gain. Three plays later, OSU scored on another pass to make it 48-20. Not yet satisfied, Hayes went for a two-point conversion, which was successful.

As if running up "half-a-hundred" on The School up North wasn't sweet enough, Woody got more good news after the game. Minnesota had lost to Wisconsin, giving Ohio State the outright Big Ten title. The agreement between the conference and the Rose Bowl had expired a year earlier, but that didn't seem to be a problem; Minnesota had played in the game in 1960 after the lapse of the contract, and sure enough, soon after the Buckeyes had finished off their destruction of Michigan, the invitation from Pasadena was proffered. OSU prepared for a re-match with UCLA in Pasadena.

They never made the trip. Three days after the Michigan game, the Ohio State University faculty council voted 28-25 to turn down the Rose Bowl invitation. The faculty was concerned that football was becoming too big at Ohio State; that it was superseding the true mission of the school, and something had to be done to put the program in its proper place. Big Ten runner-up Minnesota would go to Pasadena instead. In an added hypocritical twist, the council voted to accept the university's share of proceeds from the Rose Bowl, which it deigned to not let its own team attend.

The reaction was violent. Students rioted on campus and marched on the state capitol, and the *Columbus Dispatch* railed against the vote and printed the names and addresses of those responsible for the outrage. Woody was in Cleveland when he heard the news. After taking a long walk around the city to cool off, he returned to a speaking engagement and said of the faculty members who had voted to deprive

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his team of the trip to Pasadena, "I don't agree with those 28 'no' votes, but I respect the integrity of the men who cast them, if not their intelligence. I would not want football to draw a line of cleavage in our university. Football is not worth that."

The ramifications of the vote would linger. Ohio State would slip to mere above-average status over the next several years, as opposing coaches used the betrayal by the faculty to bludgeon recruits into staying away from Columbus. The program wouldn't fully recover until 1968, when the Super Sophomores spearheaded Ohio State's drive back into the game's elite.