

The Three-Year War

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Going back to their first meeting way back on October 9th, 1937, Ohio State and USC have met twenty-two times on the football field. Of teams that still play major-college football, only the Pitt Panthers have faced the Buckeyes more in non-conference play. It's been a long and storied rivalry, with great players and coaches on both sides. But it reached its apex in a three-year span in the early 1970's, when the Buckeyes and Trojans clashed in the Rose Bowl in a give-and-take series that featured some of the strongest teams, players and personalities college football has ever known.



Going back to their first meeting way back on October 9th, 1937, Ohio State and USC have met twenty-two times on the football field. Of teams that still play major-college football, only the Pitt Panthers have faced the Buckeyes more in non-conference play (Ohio State has played Ohio Wesleyan twenty-nine times, Oberlin twenty-six times, and Case Institute and Kenyon twenty-three times, all of those games taking place in the first half of the twentieth century.) Seven times Ohio State and USC have met in the Rose Bowl, with the National Championship on the line for one or both teams five times. It's been a long and storied rivalry, with great players and coaches on both sides. But it reached its apex in a three-year span in the early 1970's, when the Buckeyes and Trojans clashed in the Rose Bowl in a give-and-take series that featured some of the strongest teams, players and personalities college football has ever known.

January 1st, 1973

The USC team that rolled into Pasadena on the first day of 1973 was being hailed as one of the strongest in college football history- and for good reason. Five starters on this

Trojans team- tackles Pete Adams and Steve Riley, tight end Charles Young, fullback Sam "Bam" Cunningham and flanker Lynn Swann- would go on to become first-round picks in the NFL Draft. These big names were joined by quarterback Mike Rae, halfback Anthony Davis, defensive tackle John Grant, linebacker Richard Wood and defensive back Charles Phillips, forming the team that Keith Jackson [insists to this day](#) is the strongest he has ever seen at the college level.

Lightly regarded going into the 1972 season- the Trojans were ranked a modest eighth in the preseason polls on the heels of back-to-back 6-4-1 seasons in 1970 and '71- John McKay's team gave notice of its power to the rest of the nation in the season's opening week, when they went to Little Rock and clubbed fourth-ranked Arkansas, 31-10. They shot to number one after that game and stayed there for the remainder of the season, rolling through their schedule without breaking a sweat. Only Washington State coach Jim Sweeney [doubted their bona fides](#), and he did so in decidedly tongue-in-cheek fashion. "USC is not the number-one team in the country," Sweeney proclaimed after his Cougars had absorbed a 44-3 thrashing at the hands of the Trojans in November. "The [Miami Dolphins](#) are better."

Like USC, Ohio State was also coming off a sub-par 1971 in which they finished 6-4, including three losses in a row to end the season. '72 was the first season in which true freshmen were allowed to play on the varsity, and Woody Hayes took full advantage of the new rule, rebuilding his offense around first-year tailback Archie Griffin. In the season's second week against North Carolina, Griffin set a school single-game rushing record with 239 yards, and the Buckeyes were off and running. After winning their first seven games the Buckeyes were tripped up by Michigan State in East Lansing, but recovered to win their last two, including a [dramatic 14-11 victory over Michigan](#) to clinch the Big Ten Championship and a trip to Pasadena. Twice the Ohio State defense stonewalled the Wolverines at the one-yard line, including a fourth-quarter goal-line stand to preserve the win.

Also like USC, Ohio State was vastly talented, with eight players who would go on to become NFL first-round picks. But the Buckeyes were also a young team. Most of their top players were underclassmen, including freshmen Griffin, Tim Fox and Brian Baschnagel, sophomores Kurt Schumacher, Doug France and Neal Colzie, and juniors Rick Middleton, Randy Gradishar and John Hicks. Ohio State's greatness was in its future, while USC's was in the here and now.

The disparity between the two teams was reflected in their performance against common opponents. Ohio State and USC

had each faced California, Illinois and Michigan State during the 1972 regular season, and while the Buckeyes went 2-1, beating the Golden Bears and Illini 35-18 and 26-7 and losing to the Spartans 19-12, the Trojans had gone 3-0, beating Cal 42-14, Illinois 55-20 and Michigan State 51-6. The transitive property isn't a flawless measure of relative team strength, but in this case, it gave a pretty strong indication that USC was a more formidable team than Ohio State. That indication would be borne out in ruthless fashion on the afternoon of January 1st, 1973.

For a little more than thirty minutes, however, the Trojans and Buckeyes battled to a standstill on the floor of the Rose Bowl Stadium in front of a record crowd of 106,869. USC opened the scoring late in the first period when Mike Rae hit Lynn Swann with a ten-yard touchdown strike. Ohio State wasted no time in coming back, as they drove down the field on their next possession and tied the score 7-7 on a one-yard touchdown run by running back Randal Keith. At halftime the score was still tied. But the floodgates were about to open.

USC broke the tie on its first possession of the second half, driving to a two-yard touchdown plunge by Sam Cunningham. Ohio State answered with a short field goal

by Brett Conway to cut the deficit to 14-10, but the Trojans were just getting started. They made it 21-10 on their next possession, getting their score on a twenty-yard burst by Anthony Davis, than upped the lead to 28-10 before the end of the third quarter on another touchdown by Cunningham. Two more touchdowns by Cunningham- his third and fourth of the half- gave USC a 42-10 lead in the fourth quarter, as USC scored on its first five possessions of the second half. A late touchdown by Ohio State's John Bledsoe served only to make the score slightly more respectable. USC's 42-17 victory gave the Trojans the undisputed National Championship.

The final statistics were as lopsided as the final score. USC out-gained the Buckeyes 471-287, getting more than two hundred yards both on the ground and in the air. Mike Rae toasted the Ohio State defense with eighteen completions on twenty-five pass attempts, while his counterpart Greg Hare completed just four passes on USC's stop troops. USC's 42 points were the most scored on Ohio State since Michigan rolled up 58 on the Buckeyes in the last game of the 1946 season. At the time it was the second-worst bowl defeat in the history of the Ohio State program, surpassed only by a 28-0 loss to California in the 1921 Rose Bowl.

Indeed, the hardest hit by the Buckeyes came prior to the game, and it was struck by none other than Woody Hayes. The irascible coach had carried on an energetic feud with the West Coast press for years, and he held up his end of the quarrel in style in 1973. Just before kickoff, Hayes belted a *Los Angeles Times* cameraman who had invaded his personal space, growling as he did, "That'll take care of you, you son of a bitch." Hayes didn't confine his ornery side to the press. Earlier in the week at the Rose Bowl luncheon, the Ohio State coach gave his pre-game speech, [than walked out on John McKay](#), telling reporters as he left, "I have to go to work. Put John's words on tape for me." The saturnine McKay chalked the snub up to mind games, but he took it in stride. "It was a stupid play to shake me up," he wrote later. "But he didn't have to tackle me- he had to tackle Anthony Davis."

January 1st, 1974

Ohio State entered the 1974 Rose Bowl with some scores to settle. With the underclassmen of 1972

one year older and one year better, the '73 Buckeyes might have been the finest team in the history of the program. They powered through their first nine games without a loss, winning each by twenty-four points or more and pitching four shutouts along the way. They were the nation's top-ranked team going into the annual battle with fellow unbeaten and fourth-ranked Michigan, and jumped out to a 10-0 halftime lead over the Wolverines. Then things went sideways. With Ohio State's offense stymied by a thumb injury to quarterback Cornelius Greene, the Wolverines owned the second half, outscoring the Buckeyes 10-0 and out-gaining them 209-91. Michigan had two chances to win the game in the final moments, but kicker Mike Lantry- [a figure of supreme pathos](#) in the Ten-Year War- missed a pair of field goals, preserving the 10-10 tie.

With the Buckeyes and Wolverines tied for the Big Ten title, it fell to a vote of the conference's athletic directors to decide which team would head to Pasadena and play in the Rose Bowl. The general

feeling was that Michigan would get the vote- after all, the Buckeyes had played in Pasadena the year before, and the Wolverines had dominated the late stages of the game between the teams. But that wasn't the way it worked out. Perhaps influenced by an injury to Michigan quarterback Dennis Franklin that would have kept him out of the Rose Bowl, the Big Ten athletic directors voted 6-4 to send Ohio State to Pasadena. The decision enraged Bo Schembechler, who was embittered to his dying day by the quirk of fate that kept his powerful team home. It delighted Woody Hayes and his team, which would have a chance to avenge their humiliation at the hands of USC in the 1973 Rose Bowl.

USC, meanwhile, faced no such drama as they coasted through the Pac-10 for the second consecutive year. Although the Trojans weren't as formidable as they had been in 1972- they had tied Oklahoma and lost to Notre Dame in South Bend during the regular season- they still had plenty of weapons, including quarterback Pat Haden and

returning stars Lynn Swann, Anthony Davis and Steve Riley on offense and Richard Wood and Charles Phillips on defense. USC had sat at the top of the polls until the tie with Oklahoma and was ranked seventh going into the Rose Bowl, while Ohio State had dropped to fourth after the tie in Ann Arbor.

Even after getting the benefit of the doubt from the Big Ten, controversy still swirled around the Ohio State camp as the Buckeyes prepared for Pasadena. Upset by the conservative play-calling in the Michigan game, Woody Hayes's assistant coaches reportedly threatened to stay home if the crusty old coach didn't open up the offense against USC. Many Buckeye players felt the same way as their coaches, and the team seethed with dissension as it headed for California.

As it turned out, they needn't have worried. Woody had every intention of opening up the offense in

Pasadena, and he did so, with results that were devastating to USC. After the Trojans took an early 3-0 lead, Ohio State powered down the field on the arm of Greene- a sophomore who had taken over for senior Greg Hare early in the season- and the legs of Archie Griffin and gained the lead on a one-yard dive by freshman fullback Pete Johnson. In the second period another Trojan field goal cut the lead to 7-6, then John McKay's son, wide receiver, J.K., surprised the Buckeyes with a touchdown pass to Anthony Davis that, along with a two-point conversion, gave USC a 14-7 lead. Ohio State quickly drove downfield for the equalizer, getting it on Pete Johnson's second touchdown of the afternoon, and at halftime the score was tied, 14-14.

USC started the second half as if they would dominate in the same fashion that they had the previous year. After recovering an Archie Griffin fumble, the Trojans drove 84 yards and took a 21-14 lead on Anthony Davis's one-yard run. At this point Coach Hayes revealed in full his unusually

expansive game plan. With the ball at the USC 43-yard line, Greene hit tight end Fred Pagac with a strike that carried down to the Trojan four. On the next play Johnson barreled over for his third touchdown. USC retained a narrow 21-20 lead after the extra-point attempt was blocked, but the tide had turned in Ohio State's favor for keeps.

Moments later, Buckeye defensive back and return specialist Neal Colzie made the most important play of the game. Fielding a punt at his own 38-yard line, Colzie weaved through the USC coverage unit for fifty-six yards before he was brought down at the Trojans' six. Greene took it in himself for the touchdown and Ohio State was out in front for good, 27-21. The Buckeyes poured it on in the fourth quarter. Fullback Bruce Elia blasted over from two yards out and Greene added the two-point conversion on a keeper to make it 35-21. Late in the period, following a USC failure to convert a fourth down, Archie Griffin broke free and dashed 47 yards for a touchdown to add a final dollop of frosting to Ohio State's redemptive rout. Final score: Ohio

State 42, USC 21.

The '74 Rose Bowl was almost a mirror image of its 1973 counterpart. Ohio State outscored USC 28-7 in the second half, compared to the Trojans' 35-10 margin in the second half the previous year. The Buckeye offense, so anemic in the Michigan game, battered USC's defense for 449 yards, including 320 on the ground. Cornelius Greene, who had gone 14-of-38 on pass attempts during the regular season, completed seven of nine for 129 yards, kept the Trojans off-balance with his running ability, and won game MVP honors. Archie Griffin piled up 149 rushing yards and Pete Johnson chipped in with 94 to go with his three touchdowns. For its part, USC moved the ball well on offense, with 406 total yards. But with the chips down, it was Ohio State that made all of the big plays, in every facet.

Despite the impressive victory over USC and a 10-0-1 final record, Ohio State didn't win the

National Championship. That honor went to Notre Dame, which [squeezed by Alabama 24-23 in the Sugar Bowl](#) on New Year's Eve. The Buckeyes finished second in the final AP poll. John McKay was in a better position than anyone to judge the nation's best, having faced top-ranked Notre Dame, Ohio State, and third-ranked Oklahoma during the 1973 season, and there was no doubt in his mind as to who had the best team in America. With nary a trace of his trademark sarcasm, McKay stated unequivocally, "Ohio State is the best team we've played all season.""

January 1st, 1975

Unlike the previous two years, neither USC nor Ohio State was undefeated going into their Rose Bowl rubber match on the first day of 1975. Arkansas upset the Trojans in Little Rock in the season's opening week, and John

McKay's team was later tied by the Steve Bartkowski-led California Golden Bears in November. Ohio State was unbeaten and ranked number-one until a [bizarre loss to Michigan State](#) in East Lansing on November 9th

. With the Buckeyes trailing 16-13 and time running out, fullback Champ Henson was dubiously ruled short of the goal-line, and a last-play quarterback sneak by Cornelius Greene was waved off as coming after the clock hit 0:00- but not until forty-five minutes after the game had ended. Infuriated by the way the officials had handled the last frantic moments Woody Hayes shoved Big Ten Commissioner Wayne Duke outside the locker room, growling at him, "Tell my team they got (expletive.)"

Nevertheless, both teams entered the Rose

Bowl on a high note. In a battle for the Big Ten crown the Buckeyes toppled third-ranked Michigan 12-10, bouncing back from an early 10-0 deficit on four field goals by Tom Klaben and surviving yet another last-second miss by [beleaguered Wolverine kicker Mike Lantry](#).

USC's 55-24 win over Notre Dame in the season finale was one for the history books. Trailing 24-0 late in the first half, the Trojans scored to cut the deficit to 24-6, then, galvanized by Anthony Davis's 102-yard return of the second-half kickoff, [racked up 49 points in the final thirty minutes](#)

to blow the Irish right out of the Coliseum.

The third-ranked Buckeyes and fifth-ranked Trojans each had an outside shot to claim

the National Championship with a win in the Rose Bowl. Top-ranked Oklahoma was on probation and not playing in a bowl, second-ranked Alabama was set to play Notre Dame in the Orange Bowl that night, and fourth-ranked Michigan was idle, stymied by the Big Ten's policy to allow only the conference champion to play in a bowl. A win by either Ohio State or USC, combined with a loss by Alabama, might at least split the vote among pollsters reluctant to give a team on probation the title. In addition to the national ramifications, the game was also billed as a duel between two of the nation's best running backs- Heisman Trophy winner Archie Griffin and Anthony Davis, who finished second in the balloting. Bolstered by Davis's amazing performance against Notre Dame, in which he scored twenty-six of his team's first twenty-seven points, not a few USC fans and other

observers believed the Heisman had gone to the wrong running back.

Aside from Griffin and Davis, both teams featured stars aplenty. Ohio State came armed with the multi-talented Corny Greene, bull-elephant fullbacks Champ Henson and Pete Johnson, fleet wingback Brian Baschnagel and All-American linemen Kurt Schumacher and Steve Myers on offense, and All-Americans end Van Ness DeCree and cornerback Neal Colzie on defense. USC had Rhodes Scholar quarterback Pat Haden, split end J.K. McKay- the coach's son- plus hard-running fullback Ricky Bell and All-American guard Bill Bain, as well as defensive standouts Gary Jeter and Richard Wood. It was the most evenly-matched of the three Rose

Bowls, and it played out just that way.

Both the 1973 and '74 Rose Bowls had started out as tight, low-scoring games and degenerated into second-half routs. The 1975 Rose Bowl [started out tight and stayed that way](#) . USC dominated early on, with the high-stepping Davis and the pounding Bell ripping off yards in chunks. But stymied by mistakes, the Trojans couldn't get into the end zone. They led 3-0 early in the second quarter when Ohio State drove downfield and took the lead on a two-yard run by Champ Henson. At halftime it was 7-3 in favor of the Buckeyes, and it stayed that way until a breathless fourth quarter.

Early in the final stanza USC finally got into the end zone when Pat Haden hit tight end Jim Obradovich, who had beaten Neal Colzie, with a nine-yard scoring strike. The Buckeyes came right back, taking a 14-10 lead on Cornelius Greene's three-yard keeper, and upped the lead to 17-10 when Tom Klaben drilled a 32-yard field goal. Late in the fourth period, still trailing by a touchdown, the Trojans took over at their own 17-yard line. Mixing the run and the pass, they drove to a fourth-and-one at the Ohio State forty, where reserve tailback Alan Carter fought for a two-yard gain and a first down. On the next play, USC went for the throat. Protected beautifully by his offensive line Haden faded to his right and went deep for J.K. McKay, who had badly beaten Ohio State cornerback Steve Luke. McKay brought in the long pass in the right corner of the end zone and leaped into the

stands. The score was now 17-16 in favor of the Buckeyes.

Confronted by a choice- kick the extra point and settle for a tie, or go for two and the win- Coach McKay made it without hesitation. "We didn't come here to play for the tie," he said later. In came the play call: a run-pass option for Haden, who could either keep it himself or look for McKay in the end zone. As it turned out, he did neither. Haden rolled right and with Buckeye defenders closing in, threw a jump pass to flanker Shelton Diggs in the back of the end zone. Digg's diving catch made it 18-17 USC with 2:08 to play. Under enormous pressure from a blitzing USC defense, Greene drove his team to the Trojans 45-yard line. But Tom Klaben's

62-yard field-goal attempt fell short, and the rubber match went to John McKay's team, in thrilling fashion.

Despite the pre-game hype, the anticipated duel between Archie Griffin and Anthony Davis never really materialized. Griffin was held to 76 yards rushing- the first time in twenty-three games he had failed to reach the 100-yard mark- and fumbled twice inside the USC ten-yard line. Davis, after slicing through the Buckeye defense for 71 first-half yards, was knocked out of the game with broken ribs and didn't play in the second half. Surprisingly for a game between such well-accomplished, well-coached teams, this Rose Bowl was notable for its mistakes and sloppy play. Each team failed to capitalize on multiple

chances deep in enemy territory and USC was plagued by a faulty kicking game, including a blocked punt that set up Ohio State's first touchdown. Nevertheless, when big plays were needed, it was the Trojans that made them.

The Three-Year War was over. The following season USC sank to 8-4 and failed to win the Pac-10 title for the first time since 1971. Ohio State, meanwhile, went undefeated in the regular season but suffered a stunning Rose Bowl loss to UCLA that cost the Buckeyes the National Championship. In 1976 John McKay moved on to coach the expansion Tampa Bay Buccaneers. Woody Hayes's last three teams failed to make it to the Rose Bowl, and he was fired after the '78 season when

he [decked Clemson linebacker Charlie Bauman](#) late in Ohio State's Gator Bowl loss to the Tigers.

Since the end of the Three-Year War the Buckeyes and Trojans have met twice more in the Rose Bowl. In 1980, Ohio State entered the game undefeated, ranked number-one and heavy underdogs to a loaded USC team that featured Heisman winner Charles White, Paul McDonald, Marcus Allen, Raymond Butler, Anthony Munoz, Dennis Smith, Joey Browner and Ronnie Lott. Fighting bravely, the Buckeyes held a 16-10 lead late in the fourth period, but with Charles White slashing his way to a Rose Bowl-record 247 rushing yards, the Trojans came back to win in the final minute, 17-16. Five years later the

Buckeyes and Trojans met again in Pasadena. Thanks in large part to four Ohio State turnovers, USC held on for the upset, 20-17.

Though they have played three times in the regular season, including last season's 35-3 USC romp, 1985 represented the last time the Buckeyes and Trojans met in the Rose Bowl. One hopes that, barring an Ohio State appearance in the title game, the drought will end this season, and that we see a renewal of the classic match-up under the setting sun in the Arroyo Seco on New Year's Day, 2010. That's the way Woody Hayes and John McKay would want it.