

The Bowl That Was: Curse is Over

Written by {ga=hermanfontenot}

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... And just barely, too.



Even as Ohio State bombed its way to a three-touchdown first-half lead in Tuesday night's 31-26 Sugar Bowl win over Arkansas, there was a feeling (at least on the part of Yours Truly) that the Razorbacks were capable of getting back into the game- and a feeling that the Buckeyes were equally capable of letting them back in it.

Both wound up happening. Ohio State led 31-13 late in the third quarter. The Hogs devoured most of that margin like barnyard slop, and for much of the fourth quarter they seemed on the verge of eating it all. But Jim Heacock's defense, led by a rampaging Cam Heyward, made every big play it had to make in the roller-coaster final moments- and the result is the end of a very annoying streak. For the first time ever the Buckeyes have conquered an SEC opponent in a bowl game. It took every member of the "Tat Five," some help from the opponents and a gut-check fourth quarter to do it.

September 24, 1988: That day, when Ohio State overcame a 33-20 deficit with 4:29 remaining [to stun LSU](#)

, was the last day the Buckeyes defeated an SEC opponent. Since that day there are more members of God's Conference that have beaten Ohio State (seven) than those that haven't (five.) As it happens, 1988 was the only losing season for Ohio State in its last forty-four seasons of football.

Great Start: Yours Truly suspected that the controversy surrounding "Tat-Gate" would not hinder the performance of the Buckeyes in New Orleans; that indeed, the rhubarb might just

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sharpen their focus all the more. They certainly looked ready to go as the game began. After holding Arkansas to three-and-out on its opening possession (aided greatly by Joe Adams's drop of what might have been an eighty-yard touchdown pass, the first of a bunch of killer drops by Hog receivers) Ohio State rolled 74 yards in eight plays to a touchdown and a 7-0 lead. It was the fifth straight time the Buckeyes had scored first in a BCS game.

Sign of Things to Come: Given the aforementioned recent history the quick first strike was no surprise. Nor was the fact that Dane Sanzenbacher scored the touchdown; Dane has been on chummy terms with the end zone all season. The method, however, was unconventional. On third-and-nine from the Arkansas 37-yard line, Pryor took the first of several high shotgun snaps, scrambled right, broke a couple of tackles and got all the way inside the ten before being stripped of the football. Two Razorback defenders had a point-blank shot at the oblong but knocked each other off of it and it rolled into the end zone, where Sanzenbacher recovered for the score.



Offense Doesn't Rest: Ohio State's opening drive set the tone for the first half. After Arkansas tied the score on Ryan Mallett's 17-yard scoring fade to Joe Adams (one of the few balls Adams managed to catch) the Buckeyes ripped off 21 unanswered points on three long scoring drives. They followed the Razorback score with a seven-play, 68-yard march that took less than two-and-a-half minutes. Boom Herron raced through a gaping hole for a nine-yard touchdown and it was 14-7 Ohio State at the end of the first quarter. It was the team-leading sixteenth touchdown for Herron, who finished with 1,155 rushing yards.

The offense continued to hum in the second period. Following a failed fourth-down attempt by Arkansas from the Ohio State 30, the Buckeyes rambled 70 yards in eight plays, finishing the drive on Pryor's fifteen-yard third-down scoring strike to a diving Dane Sanzenbacher. It was the twelfth touchdown of the season for Lil' Dane, who finished a remarkable season with 55 catches for 948 yards.

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Late in the first half Ohio State went 68 yards in six plays, scoring on Pryor's 43-yard bomb to DeVier Posey. It was now 28-7 with less than two minutes remaining in the first half. Arkansas salvaged a little momentum with a quick drive to a field goal but the Buckeyes, thanks to their big-play offense, remained in control at 28-10 as the teams repaired to the locker room.

Numbers: Ohio State put up plenty of them in the first half. The Buckeyes racked up 338 total yards in the first thirty minutes, converting six-of-eight third downs along the way. Like last season's Rose Bowl win, they went against tendencies on offense. The Buckeyes caught Arkansas off-guard with a hurry-up attack and did something else they rarely do- utilize the tight end. Jake Stoneburner and Reid Fragel combined on four catches for eighty yards in the first half, with Fragel's [42-yard catch-and-run](#) setting up the score that made it 21-7.

The Buckeyes also did what they haven't done with enough regularity under Jim Tressel- they finished drives with touchdowns. All four of Ohio State's first-half scores were seven-pointers, although Devin Barclay did miss a fifty-yard field-goal attempt in the second period. The ability of the offense to close out drives with touchdowns instead of field goals gave the Buckeyes a sizeable halftime cushion- a cushion that would be badly needed by the end of the night.

Cam Crazy: On paper, at least, Cameron Heyward was not the overpowering force in 2010 that he was throughout 2009. And he hadn't had a mindboggling individual effort to match the one-man-wrecking crew performance against Penn State in Happy Valley last season.

But in his last game as a Buckeye, playing in the same Superdome his daddy called home, the Son of Ironhead was the stuff of legend. He demolished all comers on the Arkansas offensive line, caving in the pocket, snuffing out screen passes and dropping Ryan Mallett to the artificial surface with frequency. He did so despite being held and [cheap-shot](#) all night long- once even by Mallett, who put Cam's arm in a wrap with a sore-tempered kick during Arkansas's frustrating first half.

Dexter Larimore was almost as good, sacking Mallett twice in the first half alone, one of which killed off a promising Razorback drive that had reached the Buckeye 40-yard line. John Simon also made himself a frequent uninvited guest in the Razorback backfield. Ohio State's defensive front took over the game in the second quarter, snuffing out the volatile Arkansas offense and giving the Buckeye attack an opportunity to blow the game open- which it did.

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Thank God for the D-Line: Ohio State needed every bit of pressure it got up front. An already depleted secondary got even thinner early in the game when senior cornerback Chimdi Chekwa, the anchor of the unit, went down with a serious wrist injury. With Travis Howard on the bench for much of the second half with cramps, the Buckeyes put redshirt freshman Dominic Clarke and true freshman Christian Bryant on the firing line against one of the nation's most prolific passing attacks.

“Go for Tressel Ball- I repeat, we are go for Tressel Ball”- The green light for everyone's favorite coaching tactic came with just over four minutes remaining in the third quarter, when the Buckeyes ran three straight times from the Arkansas 34 and settled for a 46-yard Devin Barclay field goal and a 31-13 lead. It was clear from here on out that Ohio State was going to spend the rest of the night basically falling on the football.

This stuff is all thought out. They have 19 minutes to make up an 18-point deficit. They need to score at least three times to win the game. If you get some first downs, don't turn the ball over and are solid in the kicking game and on defense they won't have enough time to come back, even if you don't score. It's safe, simple and, judging by Jim Tressel's overall record usually works.

The death of Tressel Ball is bad field position, turnovers and problems in the kicking game. The Buckeyes experienced all of those in the fourth quarter (with the safety being equivalent to a turnover.) By the midway point of the period they weren't winning as much as hanging on for dear life against an aroused opponent in a building where every man's hand seemed against them. Arkansas's comeback would be remarkable not only for itself, but for how Ohio State

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managed to withstand it.

The Comeback Begins: The Arkansas revival began immediately after Barclay's field goal, when the Razorbacks used Mallett's arm and the pounding legs of Knile Davis to march 75 yards to their second touchdown. At one point it looked as if Ohio State had stopped the drive when Devon Torrence stripped Davis and Dominic Clarke seemingly recovered at the Buckeye 36. But after a long scrum the officials ruled that Arkansas had retained possession. Two plays later the Razorbacks were in the end zone, courtesy of Mallett's perfect 22-yard back-shoulder fade to Jarius Wright. After a successful two-point conversion it was 31-21 and when a fired-up Razorback defense stuffed the Bucks on three plays to close the period the game had turned.

Safety Last: Following a poor Ben Buchanan punt Arkansas took over at midfield early in the final period, seemingly poised to cut further into Ohio State's ten-point lead. But the Buckeye defense wasn't having it. Heyward and Larimore combined to sack Mallett and kill the drive, forcing a punt. Dylan Breeding, who had a wonderful game, pinned Ohio State back on its four-yard line. One play later Boom Herron was nailed at the two, forced into the end zone, and after briefly breaking free was gang-tackled by a host of Razorback defenders. Forward progress? Nope- safety and a one-score game at 31-23 with nearly twelve minutes still to play.

I know a lot of Buckeye fans were unhappy about the safety call, noting that Herron's forward progress had actually been stopped within the field of play. Fair enough. But what if Boom had slipped that first end-zone tackle, gotten outside and motored thirty yards up the sideline? Would everyone still want the quick whistle in that scenario?

Buchanan's free kick was as poor as his previous punt and Arkansas took over at its own 44-yard line. (This would turn out to be their worst starting field position of the period.) The Hogs quickly drove to a 47-yard Zach Hocker field goal, making it 31-26 with 8:55 left. They now needed just one touchdown to go ahead, and they had more than half the quarter to get it. Their next chance at that touchdown would come swiftly.

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