



All year we've been waiting for the NCAA Hammer to fall on Ohio State, and very soon it will. A one-year postseason ban taking effect for 2012 is probably the worst-case scenario, and for an OSU athletic department on a roll with the hiring of Urban Meyer, and a top-ranked basketball program, the Hammer is starting to look more like a speed bump. It's springtime come early in Columbus.

President Gordon Gee and A.D. Gene Smith have been dancing with the NCAA for months, and at times have not looked very nimble doing it, but it appears now that the OSU program will get no more than a one-year ban, if that...and possibly some additional scholarship losses on top of the five (over three years) that they've self-imposed, plus multiple years of probation, etc.

If that sounds like a light sentence given all the nefarious conduct in Columbus, consider it alongside the punishment already meted out...the 12-1 season wiped out, a star player jettisoned, multi-game suspensions for half a dozen players, and of course ridding college football of the menace that was Jim Tressel. Count me in the camp that thinks Ohio State has already paid dearly for their failure to report non-criminal rule-breaking by players.

As cold and bleak as the Ohio State football landscape looked just six months ago though, the sun is now rising on it in the form of Urban Meyer. A year's worth of anguish and embarrassment has been almost instantly extinguished by a tide of optimism and excitement. It's too soon to tell if Gee or Smith will survive in their positions in the long term, but the landing of Meyer appears to get the university over this hurdle like Renaldo Nehemiah in the 110-meter highs.

Luke Fickell has taken most of the bullets for OSU, and he was thanked profusely as Meyer was riding in on his white horse. The bar was set impossibly high for Fickell to succeed, and when the euphoria about Meyer subsides, OSU fans will realize that matching the Tressel track record will be just as challenging for the new guy. But don't interrupt the revelry of the people dancing in the streets of Columbus just yet to remind them of that. It's been a long year, and the hire of Urban Meyer really is worth celebrating. In fact it's already paying off in a variety of ways.



The Meyer Effect

Urban Meyer to Ohio State was a match so obvious and sensible that two months ago, as a way to reassure nervous Buckeye fans, a veteran of the OSU media corps wrote that “even Ohio State couldn't screw this one up”. [And they didn't](#) .

For lots of reasons, we are asked to play along with the story that Gene Smith called Meyer a week ago Sunday to explore the potential match, and by Wednesday they had worked out the details of a [multi-year contract](#) for him to become the next coach of the Ohio State Buckeyes. That is patent nonsense of course, but please play along.

Meyer deflected questions at his introductory [press conference](#) about when the first feelers went out to him. Reportedly the contacts had been going on for months, with Meyer's friend and mentor, former OSU coach Earle Bruce along with some former OSU players acting as intermediaries with the Board of Trustees. By early October, rumors were rampant that a deal was effectively done, and all that was left was to orchestrate the coronation.

All of that is yesterday's news though, and the impact of the Meyer hire has been immediate and powerful. For example...

Positive Momentum - As much as anything else, the Meyer hire changes the subject when Ohio State football comes up in conversation. It's a huge feel-good for a program and a school that desperately needed one. And it cushions the landing when the sanctions hit sometime within the next week or so. Boulders become speed bumps.

Buzz - Tradition fills stadiums and winning creates fans...but excitement is what spurs alumni donations. And excitement is what is in the air these days in Columbus. The Meyer hire will be a financial bonanza for Ohio State, and after all, that's what makes the world go 'round.

Recruiting - It was reported that following the 5:15 p.m. Monday press conference, Meyer sent 450 text messages to 2012 and 2013 recruits before quitting for the night. And he hasn't slowed down since. Within 48 hours of being named head coach at Ohio State he had several 5-star recruits on the phone and was generating sincere interest with kids that OSU had no chance of even getting on campus for a visit a couple of days before. With 16 players already committed, Meyer has only about 5-6 openings in the 2012 class, barring transfers and/or injury redshirts etc., but it's already apparent that the top recruits in the country are taking his phone calls...and listening with interest

About Those Sanctions...

We may be about to find out if and how Gene Smith's longstanding relationship with the NCAA Committee on Infractions will help soften the landing for Ohio State. I'm not exactly sure how we would know, but his continued employment might hinge on the answer. It sure appeared to me as though the Meyer hire was presented to him by the Board as more or less a *fait accompli*.

Smith has been getting the dreaded vote of confidence from the administration lately, so maybe he has reason to worry.

If a one-year ban comes down in time to make it effective this season, I've got to believe they'd like to get it out of the way. But I'm hearing that the athletic department holds out hope there will be no bowl bans at all, after examining precedents similar to OSU's violations. It makes sense, at least to me, that if they thought they were getting a ban, they would already have self-imposed one for this year.

On the flip side of that argument is one that says missing the 3 or 4 weeks of bowl practice hurts a young team like these Buckeyes. And if Meyer were to be running the practices, it might be a good argument. But Smith says Meyer won't be involved in bowl game coaching duties, concentrating instead on recruiting players and hiring assistants. I find it hard to believe they won't be picking Meyer's brain in bowl preparations, but if it's strictly the outgoing offensive staff preparing for a Gator Bowl date, if I'm OSU, I might take a pass and start fresh with Meyer in April. That is, if I could be sure I was putting all the punishment in the rearview mirror by doing so.

In the meantime, they wait, and take the confident approach, say they're preparing for a bowl game, and hope the NCAA throws them a bone for all their cooperative self-reporting and their warm Columbus hospitality.

Brace Yourself For the Coverage

Regardless of the severity of the eventual Ohio State sanctions, there will be much preening and posturing from the national pundits that they are not severe enough. That's the standard journalistic fare, and is to be expected. Most of them will disregard the fact that OSU conducted themselves the way the NCAA suggests...with self-reporting, red carpeted co-investigations, cooperation to the point of prostration, and contrition just short of shameless begging. In other words, they've been the anti-USC.

The university seems to be figuring that all this cooperation and self-flagellation counts for something. And every other school in the FBS is watching too...to see if it counts for anything...so they can plan accordingly. The NCAA should be mindful of that reality in their decision on OSU's sanctions.

Maybe the media has been granted some perspective too, since their mid-year orgy of Ohio State coverage, by events since in Miami and Eugene and State College, among other places. Because players trading jerseys for tattoos is not the same as a school writing a \$25,000 check to a street agent for the delivery of a prized recruit. All violations are not created equal. There are real differences of scale and of kind in these matters. Penalties should not be decided by which school got the most *Outside the Lines* episodes or *SI* covers. That is not to suggest that the NCAA isn't influenced by public opinion, as shaped by the media...just that it shouldn't be.

Loose Leaves:



Talk about positive OSU momentum...Thad Matta's [2nd-ranked Buckeyes](#) (7-0) are kicking in their share of it. They [demolished Duke](#) on national TV Tuesday night without playing their best game. A deep team gets deeper when another of Matta's freshmen, [LaQuinton Ross](#), becomes eligible Dec. 9 after missing fall quarter to get his academic work straightened out. Ross hasn't been practicing with the team, and so he won't see game time for a while, but he

could help them before the year is out. He's a 6' 8" wing player, a 2-3 swingman with a smooth shooting stroke and a gliding running style, probably comparable more to Buford than anyone else on the current roster. I've got links to some highlight video of him (and the other freshmen)

[here](#)

Braxton Miller was [named the Big Ten Freshman of the Year](#) this week. The kid Urban Meyer can't stop talking about finished the season with 695 net yards rushing with 7 rushing TD's, one of those an 81-yard run that set a record for a run by an Ohio State quarterback. He completed exactly half of his passes (67 of 134) through 11 games (he didn't play vs Toledo) for 997 yards and 11 TD's, with 4 interceptions. (This seems like a good place for a Joe Bauserman joke....but I got nothin')

I don't do much OSU Lady Buckeyes stuff around here, but Jim Foster's 2012-13 just-completed recruiting class is notable for a couple of reasons. First is [Caitlin Craft](#), the most recent signee, and the sister of Buckeye sophomore point guard Aaron Craft. The younger Craft is said to have a similar, if not identical game to that of her brother, and [her statistics](#) would seem to bear that out. In winning the Div III Player of the Year award as a junior, leading Liberty Benton to the state championship, Craft averaged 21.1 points, 7.5 rebounds, 3.9 assists and 5.4 steals a game. If anything could get me to watch women's NCAA hoops, a player resembling Aaron Craft might just be it.

Ohio's Ms. Basketball, [Ameryst Alston](#) from Canton McKinley, will also be joining Foster's Buckeyes next fall. This would be good news, but hardly fodder for this column, except that Alston is in a relationship of sorts with one Se'Von Pittman, a 4-star defensive end from McKinley who turned down an OSU offer earlier this year amid the OSU turmoil, and verbally instead to Michigan State. Pittman is now said to be receptive to Urban Meyer's overtures, and will probably make an official visit to OSU. With Urban Meyer and his girlfriend both in Columbus blowing in Pittman's ear, I like the Buckeyes' chances.

About the only thing I predicted right this year was Wisconsin and Michigan State winning their respective divisions of the Big Ten. By the time you read this they'll be playing in the inaugural [Big Ten Championship Game](#) for the Stagg - Paterno Trophy, and since I'd prefer the Spartans, I'll pick the Badgers to get revenge for the MSU Hail Mary back in October.

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