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Ohio State's 2002 championship season in review

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By **Nakia Hogan**
Staff writer

COLUMBUS, OHIO -- The magical 2002 championship season for the Ohio State Buckeyes didn't begin with some long touchdown pass or a bone-shaking tackle.

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It started in a meeting room with Coach Jim Tressel giving each of his players a homework assignment.

Tressel ordered his players to find out the first and last name of each of their teammates, their high schools and their jersey numbers.

Initially, the Buckeyes frowned upon the request. It was too much work to get to know the backgrounds of their teammates.

But the players had no choice.

Tressel warned that any player who failed his test would run after practice. For each missed question about a teammate, the miscreant had to sprint across the field in a set time limit.

In the heat of two-a-day workouts, nobody wanted to suffer this punishment, so off the players went.

Seniors introduced themselves to freshman. Running backs met with defensive linemen to talk about each other's hometowns. Defensive linemen kept close a roster, making certain they knew

the jersey number of the backup kicker.

Occasionally there were slip-ups, but not many.

"That really benefited us because we got to know our players outside of football," former Ohio State running back Maurice Hall. "And that translated onto the football field because the more you know about a person the easier it is to trust a person, the easier it is to help a person out.

"We always believed in the next person on the field. We also believed the next person was going to step up and make a play."

The project served the Buckeyes well.

Throughout the season, the players took comfort from knowing their teammates knew something about their lives outside of football. It also helped the team grow closer for all those tested moments on the field that would arise in September and November.

"The thing that was most special was the interaction between the players," Hall said. "With 105 guys on a team, typically you get a lot of cliques between team members where this group of teammates hang out with each other and that group of teammates hang out with each other. But it wasn't like that."

Ready for battle

Even with their newfound bond, the Buckeyes weren't sure how the season would turn out.

Coach Tressel was entering his second season at the helm, and the Buckeyes, coming off a 7-5 season, were ranked No. 13 in the preseason polls.

Predicting the Buckeyes' success would have been difficult, even with players like Mike Doss, Michael Jenkins and Will Smith returning and with a coach like Tressel, who had led Youngstown State to four Division I-AA national titles.

Even as Ohio State prepared for the title game in 2003, Tressel admitted that he would have had a tough time penciling in his squad for so much success so quickly.

"I didn't think out that far," he said. "We never put a time sequence together as to when we'd be wherever.

"We wanted to one day deserve to be Big Ten champions," Tressel told the media. "We wanted to one day deserve to play for the national championship, and one day deserve to win the national championship. But as to when we thought it would be, we never gave it a moment's thought."

But all along, the coach planned to be ready. That's why Tressel gave his assistants some extra work as well.

In the spring leading up to their championship season, he sent his assistant coaches all over the country to gain tips on how to get the Buckeyes to the next level.

They observed coaches from prominent college programs and took notes at NFL minicamps.

If the Buckeyes were going to fail in 2002, it wouldn't be because they weren't prepared, the coach reasoned.

Season to remember

When the season kicked off, there wasn't much talk of Ohio State winning the national title.

Heck, there wasn't much talk of it beating Michigan or winning the Big Ten title. After all, the Buckeyes did have to replace standout running back Jonathan Wells, star center LeCharles Bentley and three-year starting quarterback Steve Bellisari.

"Going into that season we had a lot of question marks, myself being one of them being a first-year starting quarterback," former quarterback Craig Krenzel said. "But we were excited about it going into the year.

We felt we had the opportunity to go out and do something special, but I believe every team thinks that at the beginning of the year."

Somewhere along the way, though, the Buckeyes dream of making it to the title game was becoming more than just some fairy tale.

In the first two weeks of the season, the Buckeyes smoked Texas Tech 45-21 and Kent State 51-17. But the observers were far from jumping on their bandwagon.

A win in Week 3 would be more impressive. By then, Ohio State had climbed to No. 6 in the polls and were preparing to host tenth-ranked Washington State.

After falling behind 7-3, the Buckeyes -- behind their new star, freshman running back Maurice Clarett -- stormed back for a 25-7 victory. Suddenly, the Buckeyes were on the radars of analysts after Clarett gained 230 yards and two touchdowns on 31 carries.

Soon, though, Tressel's off-season homework assignments for his players was tested, as the Ohio State players would have every reason to become unraveled as their championship guile would be tested.

The Buckeyes played their way to a perfect season. But it certainly wasn't easy. There were hiccups along the way.

-- The first came in a 23-19 victory over unranked Cincinnati. Ohio State needed a late touchdown run by Krenzel to seal the win.

-- Then there was the 19-14 win over unranked Wisconsin in which Krenzel's 4-yard touchdown pass to Ben Hartsock provided the winning points.

-- Another was the 13-7 nail-biter against No. 18 Penn State, in which the Buckeyes' only touchdown came on a 40-yard interception return for a touchdown by Chris Gamble.

-- The biggest scare came once the Buckeyes had moved to No. 3 and traveled to unranked Purdue. Krenzel completed a 37-yard scoring pass to Michael Jenkins to help Ohio State sneak out with a 10-6 victory.

-- The following week, Ohio State, which had moved up to No. 2, needed overtime and an 8-yard touchdown run by Hall to get by Illinois 23-16.

-- In the regular-season finale against archrival Michigan, the Buckeyes used another fourth-quarter comeback, scoring on a 3-yard run by Hall with 4:55 remaining to win 14-9.

"We were a team that was defined in that season by a number of special plays," Krenzel said. "As I

look back, it was a lot of fun. It was a lot of hard work. The best thing was being a part of that whole experience with a group of guys that really cared about winning football games and doing things the right way."

Still doubters

Hall can't remember the number of times he heard the Buckeyes had no chance of winning the national title once they arrived in Tempe, Ariz. to play Miami in the Fiesta Bowl.

Although the Buckeyes were 13-0, it seemed no one thought they had what it took to snap Miami's 34-game winning streak.

Hall read it in the papers. He heard it on the radio. He watched it on television.

"Everybody was doubting Ohio State, saying Ohio State shouldn't be in the game," Hall said. "But we were 13-0, and we had played more games than anybody in the country that year, and we hadn't lost in any. Yet people still said Ohio State didn't deserve to be on the same stage as the University of Miami, which on paper was probably true.

"But it was just another obstacle that we had to overcome to win 14 games. Practice every day was a constant reminder while we were down there in (Tempe, Ariz.) of what we had to do."

Exactly what Ohio State "had to do" was find a way to slow a speedy and ultra-talented Miami football team, led by star running back Willis McGahee, tight end Kellen Winslow, receivers Andre Johnson and Roscoe Parrish, linebacker Jonathan Vilma and defensive tackle Vince Wolfork.

The list of stars went on and on.

But just as it had all season, in doing the improbable and sometimes what seemed the impossible, the Buckeyes found a way.

In double overtime, Ohio State used a 5-yard scoring run by Clarett for its winning points in its 31-24 victory. The win was sealed when on fourth-and-goal from the 1, former Saints linebacker Cie Grant blitzed, forcing Miami quarterback Ken Dorsey to throw a pass that Ohio State safety Donnie Nickey batted to the ground.

The sequence set off a wild celebration, both in Tempe and in the state of Ohio, where its flagship school had won its first national title since 1968.

"Most of the people that are Ohio State fans now weren't alive or were very little the last time Ohio State won a national championship," Hall said. "It was so exciting when we got back to the city. I feel like the city made more money from the time of January to March than they had made in a long time because everybody was so happy."

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Nakia Hogan can be reached at nhogan@timespicayune.com or (504) 826-3405.