

SPORTS



Ohio State linebacker Tuf Borland is the picture of dejection after Alabama's 52-24 victory over the Buckeyes in the College Football Playoff championship game on Monday night in Miami Gardens, Fla. KYLE ROBERTSON/COLUMBUS DISPATCH, ILLUSTRATION BY MARC JENKINS/USA TODAY NETWORK

IN ANOTHER LEAGUE

Ohio State overcame a lot this season, but couldn't match up with Alabama

Bill Rabinowitz Columbus Dispatch | USA TODAY NETWORK

MIAMI BEACH, Fla. — So, what to make of a bizarre Ohio State football season and a night when the Buckeyes' ultimate dream crashed against a clearly superior opponent?

It speaks to what they accomplished, and how far they still have to go.

There is no shame in losing the College Football Playoff championship game to Alabama, particularly this version of the Crimson Tide, which will be remembered as one of the best ever in college football.

DeVonta Smith, Mac Jones and Najee Harris are as good a skill-position combination as there has been. The supporting cast, including the defense, is virtually weakness-proof. It would have taken a near-perfect performance for Ohio State to have beaten Alabama, and even that might not have done it. The Buckeyes didn't come close in a 52-24 loss Monday night

at Hard Rock Stadium.

Perhaps the die was cast on the first play from scrimmage. Ohio State's best hope was to use late-blooming running back Trey Sermon to chew up chunks of yardage, take the load off a less-than-healthy Justin Fields and limit the number of Alabama possessions.

Sermon was injured on his first carry — shades of Ted Ginn Jr. being injured in the celebration of his kickoff return for a touchdown against Urban Meyer's Florida Gators 14 years ago in another title game that didn't go well.

Without Sermon, who got on a historic tear late in the season, the Buckeyes weren't the same offense. Fields couldn't duplicate his six-touchdown performance against Clemson. He missed some throws, but the pass protection wasn't as solid and receivers weren't as open as they were against the Tigers. Again, credit Alabama.

See OSU, Page 3C



52-24

"For the guys who were in the locker room who are going to be coming back, they have something to motivate them in the offseason, that feeling coming off the field. We felt that way coming off the field last year against Clemson. Now we feel that way coming off the field against Alabama. We're going to use that as a motivation."

Ryan Day
Ohio State football coach

MORE COVERAGE INSIDE

Injured Fields shows grit, toughness, **4C**

Buckeyes defense overpowered by Bama, **4C**

Scarlet & Gray matter, **5C**

Wade considers returning next season, **6C**

Saban adapts, and Alabama looks invincible, **6C**

Tide's offensive firepower just too much for Buckeyes



Rob Oller

Columnist
Columbus Dispatch
USA TODAY NETWORK

Sometimes you get beat because the other guy is just that much better.

Or in the case of Alabama, the other guys, plural — although for 30 minutes on Monday night in suburban Miami it appeared that Crimson Tide receiver DeVonta Smith might outscore Ohio State all by his lonesome.

Regardless, the better team won. The much better team. Play 10 times and the Buckeyes maybe win two. Three, if things fall exactly right. The Tide showed it is a worthy champion by clocking OSU 52-24.

There is no shame in Ohio State losing to Nick Saban — now with seven national titles overall — and an Alabama offense that ranks among the best ever. The Crimson Tide rolled up 389 yards the first half alone (and 621 overall), more than OSU totaled for the game (341).

Allowing 52 points is unacceptable, and for many scarlet and gray devotees depressingly depressing, but dropping chin to chest meant not seeing a performance as pretty in its perfection



Alabama is a top-of-the-line college program of these times: Play offense until the other team cracks. Ohio State cracked under the relentless pressure put on by running back Najee Harris (22) and others. KYLE ROBERTSON/COLUMBUS DISPATCH

as it was painful for those on the wrong end of it.

Regardless of allegiance, this was electric entertainment for those who relish high-octane offense — 60 minutes of Fast & Furious and silencing the old-school saying that defense wins championships. That notion no longer

holds, not when two teams with elite playmakers — and, in the case of Alabama, exceptional play-calling — show up to see which can hang half a hundred on the other.

Let's be clear, Alabama got the better of the Buckeyes not because Ohio State is overrated but because the Tide might

be underrated, even at 13-0. You will watch years of college football before finding another quarterback/running back/receiver trio that executes as well as Mac Jones, Najee Harris and Smith.

Smith was spectacular, catching 12 passes for 215 yards and three touchdowns. By halftime. And in case anyone thinks the Heisman Trophy winner is a one-man show, that without him 'Bama is merely human, the Crimson Tide scored 17 points after Smith injured his right hand 30 seconds into the third quarter and did not return.

Shudder to think what the score might have been had he played the entire game. Poor Tuf Borland. If there were a meme for what happened in Hard Rock Stadium it would be the Ohio State linebacker struggling to cover Smith on a 42-yard touchdown pass late in the first half. It was like watching an unnatural nature show in which the lumbering elk chases the wolves.

Certainly, OSU's pass defense needs work — it ranked 122nd among 127 Football Bowl Subdivision teams in yards allowed per game — mostly because it lacks both the NFL first-round pass rusher and lockdown cornerback it has been spoiled with the past six seasons.

See OLLER, Page 3C

SPORTS REPORT

ON THE AIR

MEN'S BASKETBALL
 4:30 p.m. - Notre Dame-Virginia, ACC
 6:30 p.m. - NC State-Florida St., ACC
 7 p.m. - Northwestern-Ohio State, BTN
 WBNS 97.1/1460
 7 p.m. - Arkansas-LSU, ESPN2
 7 p.m. - DePaul-Georgetown, FS1
 7 p.m. - Duquesne-Dayton, CBSSN
 7 p.m. - Auburn-Georgia, SEC
 8:30 p.m. - Louisville-Wake Forest, ACC
 9 p.m. - Texas Tech-Texas, ESPN2
 9 p.m. - Boise State-Wyoming, CBSSN

MEN'S SOCCER
 1 p.m. - BH Albion-Man. City, NBCSN
 3:15 p.m. - Tottenham-Aston Villa, NBCSN
NHL
 5:15 p.m. - Pittsburgh-Philadelphia, NBCSN
 8 p.m. - Chicago-Tampa Bay, NBCSN
 10:30 p.m. - St. Louis-Colorado, NBCSN
TENNIS
 12 p.m. - Delray Beach final, Tennis
 2:30 p.m. - WTA Abu Dhabi final, Tennis
WOMEN'S BASKETBALL
 4 p.m. - Ohio State-Iowa, BTN
 WBNS 1460
 7 p.m. - St. John's-DePaul, FS2

LOCAL SCOREBOARD

MEN'S BASKETBALL

Big Ten Standings

TEAM	W	L	Pct	W L Pct		
Michigan	11	0	1.000	10	0	1.000
Iowa	11	2	.846	11	2	.846
Wisconsin	11	2	.846	10	2	.833
Illinois	10	2	.833	10	2	.833
Ohio State	10	3	.769	9	3	.750
Indiana	10	3	.769	9	3	.750
Purdue	10	3	.769	9	3	.750
Northwestern	10	3	.769	9	3	.750
Minnesota	10	3	.769	9	3	.750
Rutgers	10	3	.769	9	3	.750
Michigan St.	10	3	.769	9	3	.750
Maryland	10	3	.769	9	3	.750
Penn State	10	3	.769	9	3	.750
Nebraska	10	3	.769	9	3	.750

Tuesday's games
 Wisconsin (9) at Michigan (7), late
 Rutgers at Penn State, p.pd.
Wednesday's games
 Northwestern at Ohio State (21), 7 p.m.
 Illinois (14) at Nebraska, 9 p.m.
Thursday's games
 Purdue at Indiana, 7 p.m.
 Michigan State at Iowa (5), 9 p.m.
Friday's game
 Wisconsin (9) at Rutgers, 7 p.m.
Saturday's games
 Ohio State (21) at Illinois (14), 12 p.m.
 Nebraska at Maryland, 12 p.m.
 Michigan (7) at Minnesota (23), 2 p.m.

WOMEN'S BASKETBALL

Big Ten Standings

TEAM	W	L	Pct	W L Pct		
Maryland	10	1	1.000	9	0	1.000
Michigan	10	1	1.000	9	0	1.000
Ohio State	10	1	1.000	9	0	1.000
Indiana	10	1	1.000	9	0	1.000
Iowa	10	1	1.000	9	0	1.000
Northwestern	10	1	1.000	9	0	1.000
Michigan St.	10	1	1.000	9	0	1.000
Nebraska	10	1	1.000	9	0	1.000
Purdue	10	1	1.000	9	0	1.000
Rutgers	10	1	1.000	9	0	1.000
Penn State	10	1	1.000	9	0	1.000
Minnesota	10	1	1.000	9	0	1.000
Illinois	10	1	1.000	9	0	1.000
Wisconsin	10	1	1.000	9	0	1.000

Wednesday's game
 Ohio State (15) at Iowa, 4 p.m.
Thursday's games
 Indiana (18) at Purdue, 4 p.m.
 Maryland (9) at Minnesota, 6 p.m.
 Michigan St. at Illinois, 7 p.m.
 Michigan (13) at Wisconsin, 8 p.m.
 Northwestern (22) at Rutgers, TBA
Saturday's game
 Ohio State (15) at Nebraska, 5 p.m.

MEN'S HOCKEY

Big Ten Records
 WINS-LOSSES-OW-OL (W-L-T OVERALL): Minnesota 9-1 (11-1 overall); Wisconsin 6-3-0-1 (6-6); Notre Dame 3-3-1-1 (5-6-1); Ohio State 4-5-0-1 (4-7-1); Michigan 3-6-1-0 (6-6); Michigan State 2-5-2-1 (5-5-2); Penn State 3-7 (5-7)

Friday's games
 Michigan State at Penn State, 6 p.m.
 Ohio State at Michigan, 7 p.m.
 Notre Dame at Minnesota, 8 p.m.
 Arizona State at Wisconsin, 8 p.m.
Saturday's games
 Michigan State at Penn State, 3 p.m.
 Notre Dame at Minnesota, 6 p.m.
 Ohio State at Michigan, 7 p.m.
 Arizona State at Wisconsin, 8 p.m.

HIGH SCHOOLS

Boys basketball
Monday's game
 Hartley 73, Horizon Science 36
Tuesday's games
 Groveport at Lancaster; Canal Winchester at Franklin Heights; Olentangy at Thomas Worthington; Olentangy Liberty at Upper Arlington; Olentangy Orange at Dublin Coffman; Westland at Pickerington North; Westerville North; at Olentangy Berlin; Circleville at Amanda-Clearcreek; Bloom-Carroll at Hamilton Township; Teays Valley at Fairfield Union; Liberty Union at Logan Elm; Berne Union at Millersport; Fisher Catholic at Fairfield Christian; Miller at Grove City Christian;

Harvest Prep at Rosecrans; Bexley at Columbus Academy; Wellington at Whitehall; Heath at Utica; Lakewood at Northridge; Licking Heights at Watkins Memorial; Licking Valley at Zanesville; Elgin at Cardington; Highland at Danville; Clear Fork at Fredericktown; Smithville at East Knox; Tree of Life at Madison Christian; Oakstone Academy at Delaware Christian; Northside Christian at Granville Christian; North Union at Jonathan Alder; Benjamin Logan at London; Fairbanks at Greenview; West Jefferson at Catholic Central

Wednesday's games
 St. Charles at Hartley; DeSales at Dublin Jerome; Watterston at Ready; Hamilton Township at Franklin Heights; Westland at Patriot Academy; Granville at Johnstown; Trotwood Madison at Whitehall; Madison Plains at Springfield Cath. Central
Girls basketball
Monday's games
 Watterston 42, Whitehall 39
 Dublin Jerome 59, Logan 56
 Franklin Heights 29, Granville Chr. 28
 Grandview 55, Northridge 49
 Worthington Christian 56, CSG 12
 Bexley 72, Hamilton Township 27
 Fisher Catholic 49, Crooksville 47
 Harvest Prep 49, Madison Christian 37
 Wellington 24, Shekinah Christian 19
 Circleville 58, Chillicothe 25
 Sheridan 66, Liberty Union 46
 London 76, Springfield Shawnee 11
 Danville 60, Rosecrans 44
 Marion Harding 80, Bellefontaine 17

Tuesday's games
 Reynoldsburg at Newark; Lancaster at Groveport; Franklin Heights at Canal Winchester; Delaware at Westerville North; Westerville South at Big Walnut; Worthington Kilbourne at Dublin Scioto; Olentangy Berlin at Hilliard Darby; Thomas Worthington at Olentangy; Marysville at Dublin Jerome; Upper Arlington at Olentangy Liberty; Hilliard Davidson at Hilliard Bradley; Dublin Coffman at Olentangy Orange; Gahanna at New Albany; Pickerington North at Westland; Grove City at Westerville Central; Wellington at Westland; Harvest Prep at CSG; Columbus Academy at Tree of Life; Amanda-Clearcreek at New Hope Christian; Jonathan Alder at Mechanicsburg

Wednesday's games
 Canal Winchester at Hilliard Davidson; Lancaster at Logan; Bexley at Worthington Christian; Wellington at Columbus Academy; CSG at Whitehall; Grandview at Buckeye Valley; Berne Union at Trimble; Newark Catholic at Granville; Heath at Watkins Memorial; Johnstown at Zanesville; Northridge at Licking Heights; Utica at Licking Valley; Cardington at Danville; Gilead at Centerburg; East Knox at Northmor; Highland at Fredericktown; Madison Plains at Springfield NE; Urbana at Jonathan Alder; Springfield NW at London; North Union at Tecumseh; Greenview at Fairbanks; Greenon at West Jefferson

Boys Bowling
 Grandview 1,876, Westerville N. 1,596
 Gahanna 2,441, Hilliard Darby 1,853
 Marion Harding 2,513, Highland 1,949
Girls Bowling
 Grandview 1,551, Westerville N. 1,400
 Gahanna 1,976, Hilliard Darby 1,184
 Olen. Berlin 1,889, Highland 1,741
 Marion Harding 1,481, Highland 1,429

IN BRIEF

Alabama finishes No. 1 in Top 25 for 12th time

MIAMI GARDENS, Fla. - Alabama finished the season No. 1 in the AP Top 25 for the 12th time, extending its record by completing the program's first perfect season since 2009. The Crimson Tide were a unanimous No. 1 in the final poll, getting 61 first-place votes, after beating Ohio State 52-24 in the College Football Playoff championship game Monday night. Alabama was the pre-season No. 3, but when it started playing this strange season amid a pandemic in late September it moved up to No. 2. The Tide jumped to No. 1 in early November and finished as major college football's only undefeated team. The Buckeyes were second, followed by Clemson at No. 3. Texas A&M was fourth, finally passing Notre Dame for the Aggies' best finish in the AP poll since they won the national title in 1939. The Fighting Irish made the playoff but slipped to No. 5 after losing to Alabama in the semifinals. Big 12 champion Oklahoma finished No. 6, Georgia seventh and Cincinnati was eighth.

Conviction tossed for ex-NFL star's killer

The U.S. Supreme Court has thrown out the manslaughter conviction for the man who shot former New Orleans Saints star Will Smith to death in 2016. Monday's order in favor of Cardell Hayes had been expected. In December 2017, a jury convicted Hayes by a vote of 10-2 on charges of manslaughter and attempted manslaughter in the death of Smith and the wounding of Smith's wife, who was struck in the leg by gunfire. But the Supreme

Court has since ruled that such convictions must be unanimous. A state appeals court gets the case next but, ultimately, it will be up to the new district attorney in New Orleans, Jason Williams, to decide whether to put Hayes, 33, on trial again. Hayes is serving a 25-year sentence.

Masters plans for a limited number of fans in April

Some volume is returning to the Masters, just maybe not the head-turning roars. Augusta National Chairman Fred Ridley said Tuesday the club intends to allow a limited number of spectators for the Masters on April 8-11, provided it can be done safely, given the coronavirus pandemic. In other areas, the Masters in April will be a lot like the last one in November. Ridley said it will be conducted with similar health and safety standards. Those standards last fall included mandatory COVID-19 testing and masks being worn.

Bills sign RB Freeman, Moss on IR

ORCHARD PARK, N.Y. - The Buffalo Bills signed running back Devonta Freeman to their practice squad Tuesday to add veteran depth after placing rookie Zack Moss on injured reserve. Freeman is a seventh-year player who was released by the New York Giants last week. He joins Buffalo (14-3) after Moss suffered a season-ending ankle injury in a 27-24 wild-card playoff victory over Indianapolis last Saturday. Freeman is eligible to begin practicing this week, though it's unclear if he'll be up to speed in time for Buffalo's divisional-round game against the Baltimore Ravens (12-5) on Saturday.

- Wire services

SCOREBOARD

All times Eastern

NFL

Wild-card Playoffs
Saturday, Jan. 9
 Buffalo 27, Indianapolis 24
 Los Angeles Rams 30, Seattle 20
 Tampa Bay 31, Washington 23
Sunday, Jan. 10
 Baltimore 20, Tennessee 13
 New Orleans 21, Chicago 9
 Cleveland 48, Pittsburgh 37
Divisional Playoffs
Saturday, Jan. 16
 Los Angeles Rams at Green Bay, 4:35 p.m.
 Baltimore at Buffalo, 8:15 p.m.
Sunday, Jan. 17
 Cleveland at Kansas City, 3:05 p.m.
 Tampa Bay at New Orleans, 6:40 p.m.
Conference Championships
Sunday, Jan. 24

AFC

TBD

NFC

TBD

Super Bowl
Sunday, Feb. 7
 At Tampa, Fla.
 TBD, 6:30 p.m.

College Football

Monday, Jan. 11

College Football Championship
Miami Gardens, Fla.
 No. 1 Alabama 52, No. 3 Ohio St. 24

Amway Coaches Top 25 Poll
 The Amway Top 25 football poll, with first-place votes in parentheses, final records, total points based on 25 points for first place through one point for 25th, and previous ranking:

Rank	Team	Record	Pts	Pvs
1.	Alabama (60)	13-0	1500	1
2.	Ohio State	7-1	1432	3
3.	Clemson	10-2	1349	2
4.	Texas A&M	9-1	1317	5
5.	Notre Dame	10-2	1247	4
6.	Oklahoma	9-2	12	7
7.	Georgia	8-2	1219	9
8.	Cincinnati	9-1	1031	6
9.	Iowa State	9-3	997	12
10.	Northwestern	7-2	919	13
11.	Brigham Young	11-1	796	15
12.	Florida	8-4	766	10
13.	Indiana	6-2	762	8
14.	Coastal Carolina	11-1	649	11
15.	Iowa	6-2	606	16
16.	Louisiana-Lafayette	10-1	596	17
17.	North Carolina	8-4	538	14
18.	Liberty	10-1	476	23
19.	Oklahoma State	8-3	456	21
20.	Texas	7-3	402	24
21.	Southern California	5-1	400	19
22.	Miami	8-3	275	18
23.	Ball State	7-1	157	NR
24.	San Jose State	7-1	100	20
25.	Buffalo	6-1	51	NR

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7.	Georgia	8-2	1219	9
8.	Cincinnati	9-1	1031	6
9.	Iowa State	9-3	997	12
10.	Northwestern	7-2	893	15
11.	BYU	11-1	862	13
12.	Indiana	6-2	773	7
13.	Florida	8-4	764	10
14.	Coastal Carol.	11-1	725	9
15.	La-Lafayette	10-1	664	16
16.	Iowa	6-2	581	17
17.	Liberty	10-1	576	23
18.	North Carolina	8-4	532	14

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2.	Ohio State	7-1	1463	3
3.	Clemson	10-2	1378	2
4.	Texas A&M	9-1	1324	5
5.	Notre Dame	10-2	1279	4
6.	Oklahoma	9-2	1243	8
7.	Georgia	8-2	1144	11
8.	Cincinnati	9-1	1074	6
9.	Iowa State	9-3	1035	12
10.	Northwestern	7-2	893	15
11.	BYU	11-1	862	13
12.	Indiana	6-2	773	7
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18.	North Carolina	8-4	532	14

College Basketball

Tuesday's Men's Scores

MIDWEST
 Buffalo 85, W. Michigan 69
 N. Illinois 67, Akron 65

Men's Ferris Mowers Coaches Poll
 The Ferris Mowers Men's Basketball Coaches Poll, powered by USA TODAY Sports, is conducted weekly throughout the regular season using a panel of head coaches at Division I schools. Each coach submits a Top 25 with a first-place vote worth 25 points, second place 24, and so on down to one point for 25th. Records through Jan. 10.

Rank	Team	Record	Pts	Prv
1.	Gonzaga	12-0	797	1
2.	Baylor	11-0	771	2
3.	Villanova	8-1	722	3
4.	Texas	10-1	703	4
5.	Michigan	10-0	599	9
6.	Creighton	10-2	597	5
7.	Kansas	10-2	587	6
8.	Iowa	11-2	586	7
9.	Wisconsin	10-2	556	10
10.	Tennessee	9-1	535	8
11.	Houston	10-1	496	11
12.	Clemson	9-1	374	18
13.	Illinois	9-4	347	12
14.	West Virginia	9-4	272	16
15.	Texas Tech	10-3	255	19
16.	Missouri	7-2	243	13
17.	Oregon	9-2	205	15
18.	Louisville	8-1	192	25
19.	Minnesota	10-4	166	17
20.	Virginia Tech	9-2	162	20
21.	UCLA	9-2	148	NR
22.	Virginia	7-2	147	21
23.	Duke	5-2	124	24
24.	Saint Louis	7-1	114	23
24.	Alabama	9-3	114	NR

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OSU

Continued from Page 1C

The Buckeyes' defense looked powerless to stop Alabama's offense. Usually, it's Ohio State that has the clear speed advantage over opponents. The roles were reversed in this game.

Talent prevailed, and the Crimson Tide simply had more of it. Factor in that its coach, Nick Saban, might be the best in college football history, and that's how 52-24 happens.

Under Meyer and now Ryan Day, the Buckeyes have recruited at a higher level than ever. But one program has consistently recruited at a higher level — Alabama.

In recent cycles the gap has closed, at least on paper, and Monday's game should provide more incentive on that front.

As disappointing as the performance was for the Buckeyes, it doesn't erase all that was accomplished this season, starting with the fact that there was one.

Without the push by Ohio State and aided by Nebraska and Iowa, the Big Ten almost certainly wouldn't have reinstated the season after canceling it in August. The Buckeyes essentially put themselves in isolation for the season in an attempt to fend off COVID-19. It was only partly successful. Three games were canceled, though only the Illinois game was due to Ohio State cases.

Ohio State played its final four games without key pieces. Against Alabama, the Buckeyes were without defensive linemen Tommy Togiai and Tyreke Smith, as well as kicker Blake Haubeil. The uncertainty and stress of never knowing from day to day who would be available never abated.

Yet the Buckeyes never flinched. They were tested only by Indiana and Northwestern in Big Ten play, and then avenged the defeat that haunted them for an entire year. The 49-28 victory over Clemson in the CFP semifinals was proof of what this Buckeyes team could be.

Then Alabama showed the gap that still remains at the very top. The 2014 Ohio State team beat the Crimson Tide on the way to the inaugural CFP title, and the Buckeyes hoped they could repeat that magic.

The good news is that Smith, Jones and Harris and others are off to the NFL, and masterful offensive coordinator Steve Sarkisian is headed to Texas to coach the Longhorns. Alabama will re-



Ohio State seniors Jonathon Cooper (0) and Thayer Munford leave the field after the College Football Playoff championship game. KYLE ROBERTSON/COLUMBUS DISPATCH

main the team to beat, but it shouldn't be as imposing next season.

And hey, Saban is 69. He's not going to coach forever, though his expiration date, as Dabo Swinney might say, doesn't seem to be near.

Day is only 41, though this year felt like a dog year. The Buckeyes also will lose plenty from this year's roster. Fields is almost certainly headed to the NFL, as are

many of the other leaders on and off the field. Ohio State's four top linebackers are seniors.

Next year's quarterback — C.J. Stroud, Jake Miller or incoming freshman Kyle McCord — will not have thrown a collegiate pass entering the season. Day's quarterback-whispering skills will be put to the test.

For now, though, the most urgent

thing on the Buckeyes' agenda is nonurgency.

"We need a break," Day said. "We need to get away. We've already started to put together the schedule for the spring, but we all need to get away for a while. This has been a long, long road. Guys miss their families, and they deserve time to be with them.

"We'll unwind for a little while, have an opportunity to reflect on what the season has been, and then get back into it. But you can't just go back into work here. You need some time to rest and reflect."

When the Buckeyes do, they'll look back on an unprecedented season that no one would want to repeat, but one that ultimately showed the strength of the program, even if the final hurdle proved too high.

"What these guys have learned and what our coaching staff has learned and this whole program has learned about what our culture is all about, I'm very, very proud of that," Day said. "For the guys who were in the locker room who are going to be coming back, they have something to motivate them in the off-season, that feeling coming off the field."

"We felt that way coming off the field last year against Clemson. Now we feel that way coming off the field against Alabama. We're going to use that as a motivation."

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ALABAMA 52, OHIO STATE 24

Ohio State: 7:10; 7:0 – 24
Alabama: 7:28; 10:7 – 52
FIRST QUARTER - BAMA: N.Harris 1 run (Reichard kick), 8:07. OSU: Teague 8 run (Seibert kick), 4:55.
SECOND QUARTER - BAMA: D.Smith 5 pass from Mac.Jones (Reichard kick), 14:53. OSU: Teague 4 run (Seibert kick), 11:43. BAMA: N.Harris 26 pass from Mac.Jones (Reichard kick), 9:00. OSU: FG Seibert 23, 5:21. BAMA: D.Smith 5 pass from Mac.Jones (Reichard kick), 3:19. BAMA: D.Smith 42 pass from Mac.Jones (Reichard kick), 1:48.
THIRD QUARTER - BAMA: FG Reichard 20, 7:47. OSU: Wilson 20 pass from Fields (Seibert kick), 6:45. BAMA: Bolden 5 pass from Mac.Jones (Reichard kick), 2:52.
FOURTH QUARTER - BAMA: N.Harris 1 run (Reichard kick), 13:15.
A: 14,926.
Team Statistics
OSU:BAMA
First downs:19:33
Rushes-yards:29-147:38-157
Passing yards:194:464
Comp-Att-Int:17-33-0:36-45-0
Return Yards:3:31
Punts-Avg.:5-42.8:2-38.0
Fumbles-Lost:0-0:1
Penalties-Yards:4-29:6-44
Time of Possession:22:34:37:26
Individual statistics
RUSHING: Ohio St., Fields 6-67, Teague 15-65, Crowley 6-14, Sermon 1-2, (Team) 1-(-1). Alabama, N.Harris 22-79, Bri.Robinson 10-69, Mac.Jones 4-11, (Team) 2-(-2).
PASSING: Ohio St., Fields 17-33-0-194. Alabama, Mac.Jones 36-45-0-464.
RECEIVING: Ohio St., Olave 8-69, Wilson 3-50, Smith-Njigba 2-20, Ruckert 1-36, J.Williams 1-14, Crowley 1-4, Teague 1-1. Alabama, D.Smith 12-215, Metchie 8-81, N.Harris 7-79, Waddle 3-34, Bolden 3-16, J.Billingsley 2-27, X.Williams 1-12.

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Try as they might, Ohio State's offense and quarterback Justin Fields could never muster the magic against Alabama the way they did in a Sugar Bowl win over Clemson. KYLE ROBERTSON/COLUMBUS DISPATCH

Oller

Continued from Page 1C

But against most teams, including a not-too-shabby Clemson in the Sugar Bowl on Jan. 1, the overall defense was solid. Alabama's offense is simply that good.

"That's one of the better offenses in college football in a long time," Ohio State coach Ryan Day said, adding that trying to match Alabama point for point took a toll. "There's a feeling that if you don't score, the pressure mounts."

Oh, to have been a fly on the locker room wall at halftime as Ohio State defensive co-coordinator Kerry Coombs plotted a strategy to slow the Crimson Tide. The plan mostly failed, but to be fair it had to be like stopping a tsunami with one sandbag.

How is Buckeye Nation taking it? Already there is some harrumphing as fans see in this loss shades of the debacle in the desert after the 2006 season, when after posting a 12-0 record through the regular season the Buckeyes fell apart in losing to Florida 41-14 in the BCS championship game in Arizona.

Bah. Are there interesting similarities? Yes. Just as the Buckeyes lost Ted Ginn Jr. on the opening kickoff return for a touchdown against Florida, OSU lost tailback Trey Sermon on its first play from scrimmage against Alabama. Jus-

"That's one of the better offenses in college football in a long time."

Ryan Day

Ohio State coach, on Alabama

tin Fields did not look 100% following his hip injury against Clemson. Likewise, Troy Smith struggled following a Heisman hangover that saw his weight balloon as he made his way through the awards circuit. And the coaching strategy in both games seemed scattered.

But where the 2006 Buckeyes were favored by a touchdown against the Gators, the 2020 Buckeyes were 8½-point underdogs who would have needed to play like they did against Clemson to hang with Alabama. Hang they did — it was 21-17 with 5:21 left in the half — before the Tide hung 14 points on them to make it 35-17.

Some will make the excuse that Ohio State lost due to attrition, including Sermon and starting defensive linemen Tommy Togiai and Tyreke Smith, both unavailable for reasons thought to be related to COVID-19 testing.

Again, bah. Alabama was just better. And it has little to do with Ohio State playing only eight games to the Tide's 13. Tip your cap and be thankful the Buckeyes got this far in a season when a virus was the second-toughest opponent.

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COLLEGE FOOTBALL PLAYOFF NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP

BOTTOM LINE

Ray Stein
Columbus Dispatch | USA TODAY NETWORK

Ohio State believed it had figured out the formula to beating college football's best team in the national championship game. But when the Buckeyes started mixing ingredients, the concoction blew up in their faces. Bringing only a pinch of pass defense was a disastrous decision, but the offense left a New Coke taste on the tongue, too. Leaves are awarded on a zero-to-five basis. — Ray Stein

Offense (2 leaves)

For whatever reason — Justin Fields' lingering pain issues, Trey Sermon's fresh injury — the Buckeyes often looked as if they had worn construction boots to line up for a 100-meter dash. The speed wasn't there, the throws were a touch off, the line never developed any kind of earth-moving foundation on which to build a base. The offense had to be perfect to run with 'Bama, and it came up empty.

Defense (1 leaf)

Of course it didn't help that OSU was missing Tommy Togiai and Tyreke Smith up front, but the hard truth is that the Buckeyes' secondary has been an ugly baby all year whom everyone insisted was a cutie. No sir. Granted, Alabama has the best offense college football has seen since, well, LSU last year. Except for one Baron Browning play, this was an embarrassing mismatch from the drop.

Special teams (3 leaves)

Essentially moot. The absence of Blake Haubeil because of COVID pushed Drue Chrisman into triple duty — punter, holder and kickoffs. His work in the latter category was fine, though his boots looked more like 6-iron shots than 3-woods. Curiously, however, Alabama kick returners were willing to call fair catch and take the ball at the 25.

Coaching (2 leaves)

For sure there is a pick-your-poison nature to defending the three-headed hydra that the Alabama offense presents. But it's as if the Ohio State brain trust pulled the wrong lever every time, then watched money spill onto the Crimson Tide sideline. On the other side of the ball, the Buckeyes could never elicit the same magic they had enjoyed against Clemson in New Orleans. By halftime, they knew the deal.

Fun quotient (3 leaves)

On one hand, sure, watching Ohio State get its rear end kicked up to its shoulder blades always goes down like a plate of Alpo Bolognese to Buckeye Nation. But the clinical precision with which Alabama — especially DeVonta Smith and Mac Jones hooking up in the passing game — was in many ways impressive to watch and easy to respect. Besides, people need their sleep.

Opponent (5 leaves)

The Crimson Tide threatened to make a mockery of the five-leaf maximum rule in this space, such was the jaw-dropping domination it showed in a nearly flawless first half offensive performance. It wasn't merely the execution of the plays by the best players, but the creative schemes deployed by coordinator Steve Sarkisian, who was always three steps ahead of the Buckeyes — like Smith against Tuf Borland.

Officiating (3 leaves)

Blessedly, the officials were hidden figures throughout the decisive first half.



Answers for Ohio State on how to defend Alabama receiver DeVonta Smith in the first half of the national championship game: zero.
KYLE ROBERTSON/COLUMBUS DISPATCH

Injured Fields shows grit, toughness

Joey Kaufman
Columbus Dispatch | USA TODAY NETWORK

MIAMI GARDENS, Fla. — His shoulders slumped in defeat, Justin Fields walked toward the southwest tunnel at Hard Rock Stadium.

Confetti had fallen onto the grass, and Alabama players celebrated their 52-24 triumph in the College Football Playoff championship game Monday night as he trudged in the opposite direction toward the visiting locker room.

Fields tossed one fan a wristband and threw his headband to another before vanishing from sight. It was likely his last time on the field as Ohio State's quarterback, as he is widely expected to forgo his remaining college eligibility to enter this spring's NFL draft.

If it was the end of the road in scarlet and gray, the performance showed his mettle as a Buckeye. Dealing with the lingering effects from the bruising hit suffered 10 days before in a semifinal against Clemson, Fields forged ahead.

"Justin has been unbelievable," coach Ryan Day said. "He's as competitively tough a player as I've been around. For him to go out there and play today really shows his toughness and how much he loves his brothers."

Day added that Fields was not 100% and absorbed some additional hits to his hip in the loss to Alabama.

It was not the heroic effort needed to upset the top-seeded Crimson Tide.

While the Buckeyes were plagued with more pressing issues by their defense, which allowed the second-most total yards in program history, it needed a spectacular offensive showing to stay competitive in a shootout.

Fields completed 17 of 33 passes for 194 yards and one touchdown, a modest stat line somewhere between the worst statistical game of his career in the Big Ten championship game and the Sugar Bowl, where he threw for career highs of 385 yards and six touchdowns.

He also ran six times for 67 yards against Alabama, seeking to give his offense a boost on the ground after running back Trey Sermon was injured on the first series.

In assessing his performance, Fields downplayed the limitations left by the recent injuries, which also included spraining his thumb in the conference championship game.

"At the end of the day I'm glad I was able to play," Fields said, "and we didn't get the job done. Of course I could have been healthier, but I was healthy enough. I was able to be out there."

At times, Fields felt pressured by Alabama's defense; he had been protected by a cleaner pocket against Clemson.



Ohio State quarterback Justin Fields heads to the sidelines after throwing an incomplete pass on fourth down in the fourth quarter of the championship game loss to Alabama. KYLE ROBERTSON/COLUMBUS DISPATCH

"They did a good job executing on defense," Fields said. "Of course they have great players, great athletes, and they have a great defensive coordinator, so they did a good job doing that."

But some of his throws were just off, timing between his receivers that seemed affected by some of the nagging pain.

When he missed an open Garrett Wilson in the end zone late in the second quarter, it cost the Buckeyes a potential touchdown that could have evened the score with Alabama at 21. Instead, facing fourth-and-goal at the 6-yard line three plays later, they settled for a field goal.

Fields missed another possible touch-

down when he was unable to connect with freshman Julian Fleming in the end zone on fourth down in the fourth quarter.

Fields missed some repetitions in practice in the leadup to the championship game. He said he was out early last week before making a return. His return showed toughness, an effort Day praised following the game.

"He was working through it and made some really good throws, made some gutsy plays, kept us in the game there for a while," Day said. "He's an unbelievable player, and I'm going to miss him."

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Buckeyes defense overpowered by Bama

Bill Rabinowitz
Columbus Dispatch | USA TODAY NETWORK

MIAMI GARDENS, Fla. — Ohio State's defensive strategy was the same as usual.

The Buckeyes' philosophy always starts with clamping down on their opponent's run game and then putting pressure on the quarterback when its approach becomes one-dimensional.

What works against most teams, however, proved futile Monday night against an Alabama offense that will rank among the most potent in college football history. The Buckeyes allowed 621 yards in their 52-24 College Football Playoff championship game loss at Hard Rock Stadium. Alabama scored touchdowns on five of its first six possessions to take a commanding 35-17 lead that wasn't threatened.

Wide receiver DeVonta Smith played like the Heisman Trophy winner he is. All of his damage came in the first half because of an injury on Alabama's first possession of the second half, but his 12 catches for 215 yards and three touchdowns in the first 30 minutes was a full night's work.

"Really, they just gave him the ball in open space and he made plays," Ohio State cornerback Shaun Wade said. "He's a great player and they had a great scheme. They just outplayed us today."

Quarterback Mac Jones was the conductor and offensive coordinator Steve Sarkisian the maestro with his play-calling. Of course, it helps to have the country's best offensive line and probably its best running back in Najee Harris. Ohio State's defense simply had no answer.

"We wanted to make sure we didn't change what we do fundamentally, but we also had to have some change-ups because if you just sit there, they're going to pick you apart," Ohio State coach



It didn't matter who tried to cover Alabama's DeVonta Smith, including Shaun Wade here, because Ohio State couldn't contain the Heisman winner, who had 12 catches for 215 yards and three touchdowns. KYLE ROBERTSON/COLUMBUS DISPATCH

Ryan Day said.

"But it's one thing to have some ideas. It's another thing to execute them. We didn't do that well enough. There was just obviously way too many big plays."

It didn't help that the Buckeyes were without defensive linemen Tommy Togiai and Tyreke Smith because of COVID-19 protocols. Togiai has been a force at nose guard, particularly against the run. Smith has emerged as perhaps the team's top pass rusher.

The Buckeyes seldom put pressure on Jones, who completed 36 of 45 passes for 464 yards and five touchdowns. Harris didn't run wild on handoffs, finishing with 79 yards on 22 carries. But he used his quick feet and power to get some key first downs and hurt the Buckeyes as a pass-catcher, including a 26-yard score.

Alabama was 6 for 11 on third down and converted both of its fourth-down

attempts. The only big play the Buckeyes defense made was a strip sack of Jones by linebacker Baron Browning, who recovered the fumble. Ohio State capitalized with a touchdown that made it 14-all early in the second quarter.

After that, the Buckeyes couldn't get stops when they needed them.

"A lot of credit to Alabama," defensive end Jonathon Cooper said. "They're a great team. We knew that coming in. They're coached very well and they have good players."

"We felt like we did a good job preparing all week. I feel like we didn't execute and didn't tackle as well as we should have, as a whole defense. (We) just had to be better."

"Unfortunately, we were not. They took advantage of that."
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COLLEGE FOOTBALL PLAYOFF NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP

SCARLET & GRAY MATTER

Joey Kaufman and Ray Stein

Columbus Dispatch | USA TODAY NETWORK

Observations on Monday's national championship game between Ohio State and Alabama, by Joey Kaufman and Ray Stein:

The game at hand

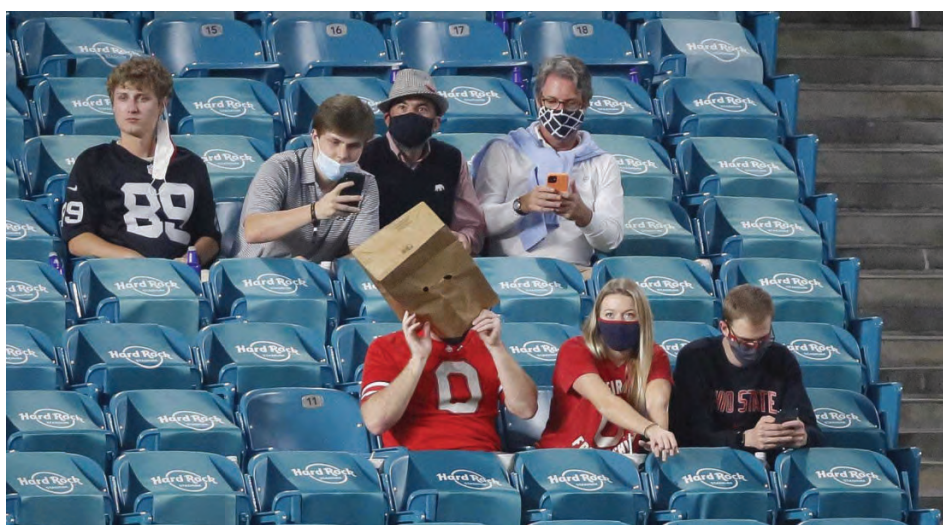
- **Short-attention span synopsis:** Tide comes in, knocks out Buckeyes. Question: Did Ohio State watch the Heisman Trophy presentation? Can't cover, can't tackle not a combination that will unlock many dead-bolts.

OSU should probably be thankful it received only a half a dose of DeVonta Smith. Every college football player loves television exposure, but maybe not to the degree Tuf Borland got. Look on the bright side, Buckeyes fans: They had a shot, and that's better than the August alternative.

- **Pregame buzz:** It had been six years since Ohio State last met Alabama, a classic playoff game decided when Ezekiel Elliott drove a stake through the heart of the South. The Crimson Tide has changed since then, however, and is now so offense-centric that it practically employs jet packs as part of the uniforms. Could Ohio State keep up and knock off No. 1 again, or would the Buckeyes get lapped? Beep-beep.

- **Spread the wealth?:** Gamblers must love seeing Ohio State as an underdog, considering that since 2012 the Buckeyes are 8-1 when not favored — and that's straight up, not against the spread. But not every 'dog has its day, and it became apparent in the second quarter against 8½-point favorite Alabama that OSU needed a tourniquet to stanch its bleeding defense but had only Band-Aids in its first-aid kit.

- **Strategically speaking:** Trailing by a touchdown late in the second quarter and facing a fourth-and-goal at Alabama's 6-yard line, Ryan Day called for a field goal. In settling for three points, the Buckeyes passed on the opportunity to even the score at 21, then watched the



Is that really an Ohio State football fan wearing a paper bag over his head, or is that simply how he eats his popcorn? KYLE ROBERTSON/COLUMBUS DISPATCH

Crimson Tide retake possession and build a two-score advantage, marching 75 yards to the end zone for a 28-17 lead. A fourth-down attempt might have ultimately failed.

The Buckeyes had stalled close to the goal line for a reason. But they had to be more aggressive to remain alive for an upset.

- **This week in vanity plates:** WHO GOT 6

The View

- **How the team sees it:** After our season was canceled in August, it's something that we even got a shot at the national title.

- **How the pollsters will see it:** Now you see why we had Alabama ranked as No. 1 in our rankings since Thanksgiving.

- **How Buckeye Nation will see it:** At least we finally beat Dabo.

Hey, what did Day say?

- **What he said:** "We needed to play our best game tonight against Alabama, and we didn't."

- **What it means:** "We needed the stars to align to beat this juggernaut."

They said it

- **Your turn/the channel:** The ESPN team of Chris Fowler and Kirk Herbstreit (also known as He Who Doesn't Let a Play Pass Without Comment — No, Comments) wasn't exposed to the degree of, say, the OSU cornerbacks. But nor was theirs a clean sheet. "There's a flag," Fowler said, when there wasn't. "A hat trick for Najee Harris!" Fowler shouted — after Harris's second TD. And then they both botched Wyatt Davis's leg injury, somehow thinking that Ohio State was on defense and that Antuan Jackson had been hurt. Herbstreit wins, though, for proclaiming that Chris Olave "got all three feet inbounds" on a sideline catch. Some trick!

Numbers for dummies

52: Points allowed by Ohio State, the sixth-most it has allowed in a game in school history.

621: Total yards of offense compiled by Alabama, the second-most a team has compiled against the Buckeyes.

1: Number of carries by running back Trey Sermon, who was injured on the opening series and ran for only 2 yards.

464: Passing yards by Alabama quar-

terback Mac Jones, setting a record for the College Football Playoff final.

2: Losses by Ryan Day in his two seasons as the Buckeyes' coach.

On tap

The pain of this tattoo is going to linger for a while, though the Buckeyes have been down this road enough to know that you can't win the big games unless you play in the big games. They'll be fine. That said, the 2021 season will open on a Thursday, Sept. 2, at Minnesota. Things will all be back to normal by then. Right? RIGHT?

Tweetharts

Reactions to the game on Twitter:
@DBellllll: Sermon going down is No Bueno

@TParker722: I'm not sure what Ohio State's game plan was to stop the Heisman Trophy winner but it appears to have been to just leave him open.

@Sophtaveus: Is there that big a talent gap between Ohio State and Alabama? No. But there is a coaching gap.

@HT_BK: DeVonta Smith: 45 catches, 987 yards tonight.

@Htownbuckeye: 2021 is officially canceled. 2022 needs to get here immediately.

@CoolHomeyP: Pretty sure the Bucks can pull this out if Saban decides to put in Roethlisberger

@BretHoovler: I love recruiter Kerry Coombs. I love him as the hype guy. I do not love him as the DC.

@mbatcheck: The only salve for my OSU wound is watching how miserable Saban seems even when he wins it all

@TravisDCarter: Buckeyes hanging a sign in the locker room all offseason that's says 52-24?

Horseshoe haiku

Roll Tie as 'Bama
Pouns Buckeyes into the irt
Wait, where is the D?

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COLLEGE FOOTBALL PLAYOFF NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP

Wade considers returning next season

Joey Kaufman and Bill Rabinowitz
Columbus Dispatch | USA TODAY NETWORK

MIAMI BEACH, Fla. — Cornerback Shaun Wade left open the possibility for a return to the Ohio State football team for a fifth season.

Speaking with reporters following Monday night's loss to Alabama in the College Football Playoff championship game, Wade said he planned to mull a decision in the coming days.

"I do want to come back and everything," Wade said. "It is upsetting that we got here and didn't accomplish the goal. And that's been my goal, winning a national championship and winning big games like this. I'll just go back with my parents, go talk to them and go from there."

The deadline for underclassmen to enter the draft is Monday, leaving Wade with less than a week to finalize his future plans.

When asked if the Alabama game was his last game with the Buckeyes, he said, "I really can't say."

Wade previously contemplated turning pro last January following his redshirt sophomore season and declared for the draft in September while Ohio State's season was in limbo. He opted back in once the season restarted.

His parents had previously thought he should enter the draft, but Wade wanted to remain in school to complete his undergraduate degree and contend for a national championship. He graduated with a sport industry degree in August.

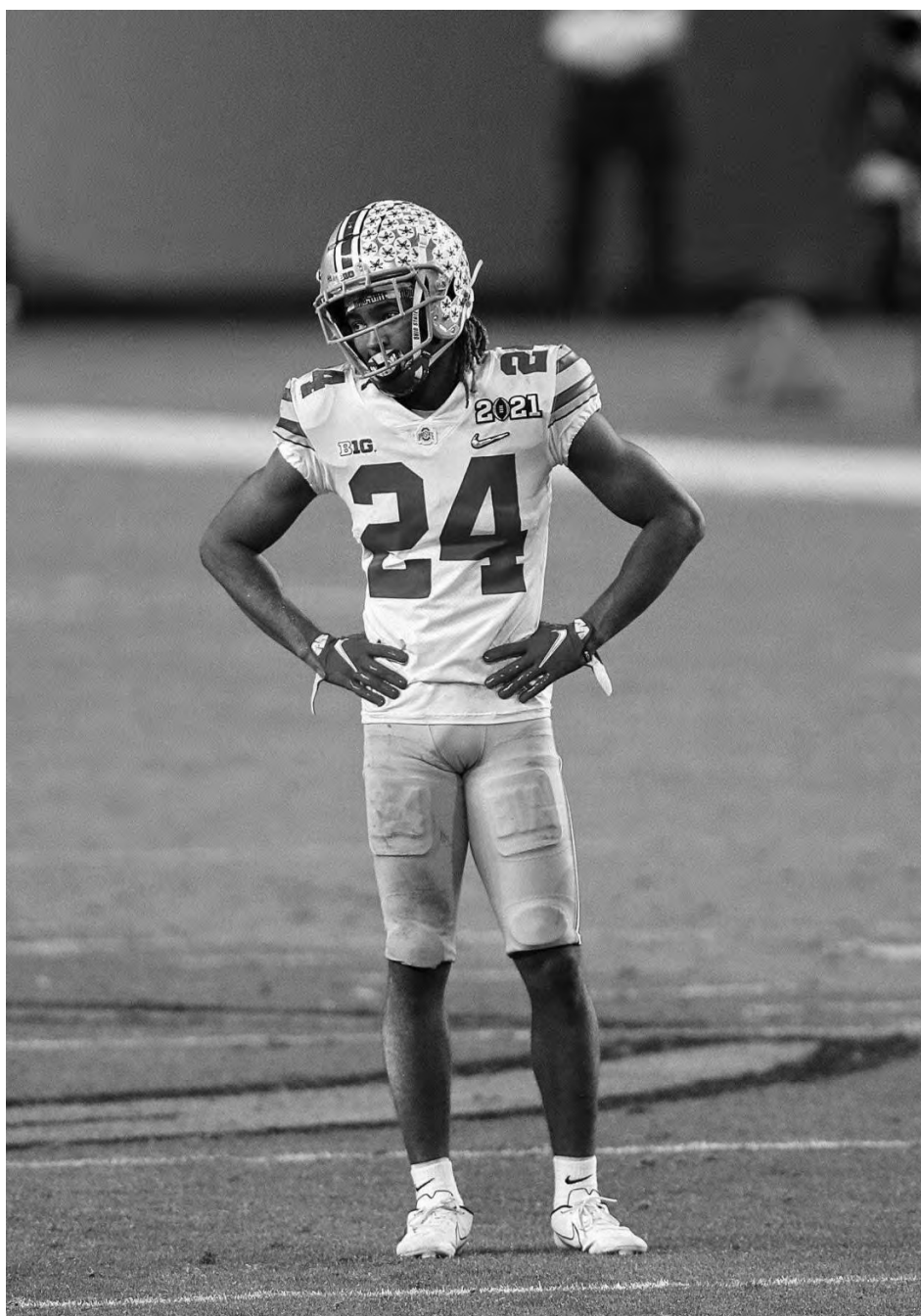
At times, he struggled with a move to outside corner, after lining up in the slot and at safety earlier in his college career, before seeing enough improvement late in the season to be named the Big Ten's defensive back of the year.

Wade broke up a pass against Alabama, but was a part of a secondary that struggled to slow down Heisman Trophy-winning receiver DeVonta Smith, who caught 12 passes for 215 yards and three touchdowns, all in the first half. Smith missed most of the second half with a dislocated finger.

Mom: Trey is OK

The injury that knocked Trey Sermon out of the title game is not a serious one, his mother said Tuesday.

Sermon was hurt on a 2-yard carry on Ohio State's first play from scrimmage. He was taken to the locker room and then to a local hospital. As he left the field, he



A decisive loss to Alabama in the national championship game was not the way Ohio State cornerback Shaun Wade had wanted to end his Buckeyes career, so he is considering a return next season. KYLE ROBERTSON/COLUMBUS DISPATCH

seemed to be favoring the area near his left collarbone or shoulder.

"Trey is fine, his injury is not serious and he is headed back to Columbus," Sermon's mom, Natoshia Mitchell, told The Dispatch. She declined to specify the nature of the injury.

Sermon did not accompany the team on its plane flight back home, she said. But he will return to Columbus soon and then head to Pensacola, Florida, to train for the NFL combine.

Sermon came to Ohio State as a graduate transfer from Oklahoma. After a slow start, Sermon played a huge role in Ohio State reaching the CFP final. He ran for a school-record 331 yards in the Big Ten championship game victory over Northwestern. Sermon followed that with a 193-yard performance against Clemson in the CFP semifinals.

Ohio State needed Sermon to have another big game against Alabama. Instead, it was a short night.

"It was definitely a huge loss, especially how productive he's been these last couple of weeks," tight end Jeremy Ruckert said.

Master Teague III replaced Sermon and finished with 65 yards on 15 carries with two first-half touchdowns.

Davis hurts knee

Right guard Wyatt Davis reinjured his left knee late in the second quarter against Alabama and watched the second half in crutches.

"I'm not sure what the diagnosis is," coach Ryan Day said. "We'll have to check with our doctors. But he's sore. He's certainly in pain."

Davis had been hampered by the knee injury in previous games, prompting it to be looked at by the team's medical staff, but he never missed a game.

Without Davis available for the second half against the Crimson Tide, sophomore Harry Miller filled his spot at right guard.

Miller started at left guard this season until a positive COVID-19 test sidelined him for the Sugar Bowl, and he was replaced by Matthew Jones. For the title game, Jones held onto the starting spot at left guard.

Kick is good

Freshman kicker Jake Seibert made his first career field goal late in the second quarter when he pushed a 23-yard attempt through the uprights. He had missed his only previous field-goal attempt, from 44 yards in November against Indiana.

Seibert handled place-kicking duties in the absence of Blake Haubeil, who announced he tested positive for the coronavirus. Walk-on kicker Dominic DiMaccio also was unavailable. Punter Drue Chrisman replaced DiMaccio on kickoffs.

Poll position

Ohio State was ranked second in the season's final Associated Press poll, its highest postseason ranking since winning the national championship in 2014.

The Buckeyes had finished at No. 3 in the past two seasons.

Alabama, which was atop the poll, received all 61 first-place votes.

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Coach Saban adapts, and Alabama looks invincible

Dan Wolken
USA TODAY

MIAMI GARDENS, Fla. — Eight years ago, Alabama brought one of the most talent-laden teams in the modern history of college football onto this very field and needed all of a quarter to humiliate Notre Dame in a national championship game.

If you had been in Hard Rock Stadium that night, the suggestion that Alabama would be back here eight years later with an even more terrifying team might have seemed absurd. Nick Saban, in winning his third national title in four years then, seemed to have this sport figured out in a way nobody had ever really figured it out. How much better could it really get?

You couldn't even envision such a thing.

Until it happened.

Alabama 2.0 arrived as a championship product Monday, reasserting itself as the best program in college football, toying with a very good Ohio State team and inspiring a relapse of that familiar heartburn opponents felt a decade ago when nothing short of perfection would be good enough to compete.

With Monday's 52-24 win, Saban's reinvention of Alabama football from a python that squeezes the life out of opponents to a rampaging cheetah that cannot be caught is now complete.

With national title No. 6 secured — and Saban's seventh overall, which gives him more than any major-college coach in history — Alabama has never seemed more untouchable.

"I think we're the best team to ever play," quarterback Mac Jones said.

If Saban's first decade proved what can be done when combining Alabama's resources with elite talent and a head coach's maniacal drive — Saban once famously complained that playing in the national-title game cut into his recruiting time — the final chapter of his career is going to show us how thoroughly he has hacked this sport.

With an otherworldly offense that made everything look easy — not only



Alabama coach Nick Saban has been doused with Gatorade before Monday's soaking after a national championship win over Ohio State, and it's likely that he'll experience the icy thrill again. DOUGLAS DEFELICE/USA TODAY SPORTS

Monday but all season — Alabama hasn't just gotten back on top. It's reopened a sizable gap on the small handful of programs that have enough talent to win a national title in the first place.

Once again, the Ohio States and Clemsons and LSUs are going to have to figure out a way to catch up. It won't be easy.

Because of all of Saban's gifts as a coach, his greatest has now been revealed. At age 69, after spending decades trying to grind opponents to dust, he has embraced a frenetic, hyper-aggressive offensive style as the best way to win championships.

He's not the first coach to arrive at that conclusion, but once he did, he executed it better than anybody, pairing the best skill with a system designed to squeeze every play possible out of it.

Good luck, everyone.

The reality for the rest of college football is this hellacious team that averaged just shy of 50 points per game is merely a culmination of what Alabama had been building for the past three years. From

the moment a relatively unknown freshman receiver named DeVonta Smith caught a pass against Georgia three years ago to win Saban's last national title, this was the destination. Now the fun begins.

"Ball has changed. It's more wide open, more spread, and this team has adapted and we've changed with it," Saban said. "Our offense was the key to the success of this team. We were an OK defensive team. We played well enough and got enough stops. The offense was dynamic, and that's what made the difference."

As always, there will be change at Alabama.

Offensive coordinator Steve Sarkisian, who pretty much pitched 13 perfect games this season, is headed to Texas. Smith leaves as a monster of a Heisman Trophy winner, whose first half alone against Ohio State — 12 catches, 215 yards and three touchdowns — would have been considered an all-time great performance in a championship game.

There will be offensive linemen who

need replaced, a couple of high-level running backs who depart. Quarterback Mac Jones, who has been chronically underrated until completing 36 of 45 passes for 464 yards and five touchdowns against Ohio State, is likely gone as well.

So what.

In December, Alabama signed three of the top eight receivers in the class of 2021, got a commitment from the top-ranked running back and has last year's top quarterback recruit in Bryce Young waiting in the wings.

Saban has always recruited great players, but once he committed to a spread offense that was going to let them put up big statistics along with their championships, what advantage does any other program have?

"I think it's made a significant difference," Saban said of the philosophy change that now allows his skill players to compile video game numbers.

Of course, Alabama isn't going to win every game until the end of time. Nobody does. But for as much talent as they've compiled at Ohio State and as much winning culture as they've built at Clemson and as much excitement as they've got with a new coach at Auburn and as much momentum as Texas A&M built, how does anyone realistically catch up with this?

At least with the old Alabama, you could hope for missed field goals and turnovers. With this version, the margin for error seems endless.

"There's a feeling of, if you don't score you're going to get down and the pressure mounts," Ohio State coach Ryan Day said.

Even under the best of circumstances, this was going to be a heavy lift for the Buckeyes — and these were far from the best circumstances. But would it have really mattered?

Alabama never really went away the past couple of years, but the Crimson Tide is emphatically back on top of the sport. And just like it did eight years ago in this stadium, the horizon for its dominance once again seems limitless.

Injuries dog Ohio State PGs

Adam Jardy

Columbus Dispatch | USA TODAY NETWORK

The No. 21 Ohio State men's basketball team is preparing to host Northwestern without possibly two of its primary point guard options.

On Tuesday, coach Chris Holtmann confirmed that fifth-year senior CJ Walker will miss his second straight game with torn ligaments in his right hand. His status going forward is unknown, as is that of Walker's replacement, Jimmy Sotos, who suffered a right shoulder injury with roughly four minutes to play in Saturday's 79-68 win at No. 15 Rutgers.

"Jimmy continues to be evaluated," Holtmann said. "No definitive word right now on him, but CJ will be out again."

The status of Sotos and Walker, who have played a combined 222 Division I games, could mean a larger role for early high school graduate Meechie Johnson Jr.

After reclassifying to the 2020 recruiting class, graduating early from Garfield Heights and joining the Buckeyes in mid-December, Johnson just began practicing last week leading into the Rutgers game.

He made his debut against the Scarlet Knights and played four minutes without otherwise recording a statistic.

"You're looking at all options at this point," Holtmann said. "I've got confidence in Meechie. It's a lot to ask a young man who just joined your program to step in and play a Big Ten game of this caliber, but we do expect him to play for sure."

With the Buckeyes leading 67-55 on Saturday, Sotos had the ball poked away in the backcourt, and in an attempt to retrieve the ball made a full-extension dive and landed on his shoulder with his right arm outstretched. He immediately rolled over in pain and, after play was stopped, was helped to his feet and went directly to the locker room with the help of the team's training staff.

After the game, Sotos met with Holtmann on the court and spoke with him for a moment with a towel covering his head and the coach repeatedly patting him on the back. In his postgame news conference, Holtmann didn't share much of an update on Sotos' status other than to say he would be evaluated and that the team would know more "in a few days."



Ohio State guard Jimmy Sotos, left, played a season-high 28 minutes in a win over Rutgers on Saturday before departing in the final minutes with an apparent shoulder injury.

VINCENT CARCHIETTA/USA TODAY SPORTS

Northwestern at Ohio St.

When: 7 p.m. Wednesday

TV: Big Ten Network

Radio: WBNS-FM/AM (97.1/1460)

On Sunday, Sotos posted a photo to his Instagram page of himself wearing a hospital gown. Monday, Holtmann said Sotos was still being evaluated and described him then as a "game-time decision" for the Northwestern game.

His injury-shortened appearance against the Scarlet Knights was Sotos' most impactful game of the season. He played a season-high 28 minutes, twice as much as any game this season, and scored a season-high six points with four assists and just one turnover.

He's the third Ohio State point guard to go down at some point this year. In addition to Walker's hand injury, Utah State graduate transfer Abel Porter's career came to an end when he was diagnosed with a heart disorder during pre-season workouts.

Holtmann said the Buckeyes have been given multiple timelines for when Walker, who led the team in minutes played at the time of the injury, could potentially return this season.

"I don't think he'll come back until he feels comfortable that it's healthy enough to, and I completely understand that," Holtmann said. "But he's anxious to come back. He knows we need him."

If Sotos can't go, expect junior Duane Washington Jr. to handle more responsibilities at the point.



Iowa is led by freshman guard Caitlin Clark (22), who is second in the Big Ten in scoring at 25.6 points per game. JOSEPH CRESS/IOWA CITY PRESS-CITIZEN

OSU women will try to contain high-scoring Iowa

Jacob Myers

Columbus Dispatch | USA TODAY NETWORK

The Ohio State women's basketball team has resettled a bit after a long period of no games. Now the Buckeyes will face their best opponent yet on the road against the Iowa Hawkeyes at 4 p.m. Wednesday.

"They're very talented. They can really score the ball," coach Kevin McGuff said. "It'll be a real challenge for us on the defensive end."

Ohio State (6-0, 2-0 Big Ten) and Iowa (8-2, 4-2) last met in the quarterfinals of the Big Ten tournament in the spring, an 88-67 victory for the Buckeyes that ended Iowa's season due to the cancellation of last year's NCAA Tournament. The Hawkeyes lost two of their top three scorers from last season, but return second-leading scorer Monika Czinano and added star freshman Caitlin Clark.

Clark, a five-star prospect, leads the Hawkeyes and ranks second in the conference with 25.6 points per game.

"We know they're going to make a lot of shots," forward Aaliyah Patty said. "We just have to prepare for what they do individually and try to stop that. We're going to have to score."

Ohio St. at Iowa

When: 4 p.m. Wednesday

TV: Big Ten Network

Radio: WBNS-AM (1460)

Ohio State hasn't played since last Thursday, a 78-55 win against Illinois. Its home game against Rutgers on Sunday was postponed because of positive COVID-19 tests in the Scarlet Knights program.

Since returning from a 25-day break between games caused by their own COVID-19 outbreak, the Buckeyes still are without Dorka Juhasz, Rebeka Mikulasikova and Rikki Harris. McGuff did not say if they would be available against Iowa.

Despite missing Juhasz, the team's best rebounder, the Buckeyes have held their own on the glass in two conference games. That task will be more important against a high-scoring team such as Iowa.

"I think we can get on the boards offensively and defensively and try to control the game on that end," Patty said.

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The following matters are the subject of this public notice by the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency. The complete public notice, including any additional instructions for submitting comments, requesting information, a public hearing, or filing an appeal may be obtained at: <http://www.epa.ohio.gov/actions.aspx> or Hearing Clerk, Ohio EPA, 50 W. Town St. P.O. Box 1049, Columbus, Ohio 43216. Ph: 614-644-3037 email: HClerk@epa.ohio.gov

Final Approval of Plans and Specifications
Jefferson W&SD
6455 Taylor Rd. Blacklick, OH 43004
Facility Description: Community Water System
ID #: 1399584, 1399619
Date of Action: 01/04/2021
This final action not preceded by proposed action and is appealable to ERAC.
Detail Plans for PWSID:OH2504012 Plan No:1399584 Regarding Reynoldsburg New Albany Rd 12" Waterline Extension Plan and Plan No:1399619 Regarding The Farms at Jefferson Phase 7, 8 & 9.

Final Action for a Water/wastewater Certified Operator
Haitham Khalil
PO Box 63, Mayville, NY 14757
ID #: OPCT-20190748
Date of Action: 01/04/2021
This final action not preceded by proposed action and is appealable to ERAC.
Ohio Class 1 Wastewater Treatment certification through reciprocity with the state of Arizona has been granted and will expire 12/31/2022.
1/13

Public Notices

NOTICE TO BIDDERS

The Ohio Department of Natural Resources, through the Division of Parks and Watercraft, pursuant to and in accordance with the provisions of Section 1501.10 of the Ohio Revised Code proposes to lease for the operation of the marina concession at West Branch State Park, Portage County, Ohio.

The lease will be for a term of eight (8) years from lease execution to December 31, 2028. Said lease may be renewed at the option of the Director for a period not to exceed four (4) years. The Division of Parks and Watercraft will provide the following: One marina concession building including snack bar, bait shop, storage area, 30 dock spaces for rental boats and visitor tie-ups, gas service dock, and gas tanks with dispensers; operating equipment as enumerated in the bid package, and all water and sewage treatment necessary for the operation of the concessions. The Concessionaire will furnish all other equipment, merchandise, materials, supplies, utilities, and labor necessary to operate the facility to approved standards during the season of operation and daily hours as defined in the lease specifications. It shall be the intent of the lease that the minimum season of operation will be from May 1 through October 1.

Sealed bid proposals will be received in the office of the Division of Parks and Watercraft until 2:00 p.m., February 3, 2021. Bids will be publicly opened thereafter by the Chief or his authorized agent. The right is reserved to reject any and all bids. Bid proposal packages are available online at ohiodnr.gov. Any questions in reference to this bid, please call (614) 265-6545.

MARY MERTZ, Director
1/6, 13, 20, 27.

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Rivals clash in divisional round

Mike Jones USA TODAY

Let's just call it Rivalry Week. When the NFL's divisional round of the playoffs kicks off Saturday, old rivalries will be renewed while others begin to bud, and history will be made.

From future Hall of Famers Tom Brady and Drew Brees to young draft classmates Lamar Jackson and Josh Allen, two of the most marketable stars in Patrick Mahomes and Baker Mayfield to longtime friends-turned-foes Sean McVay and Matt LaFleur, the coming weekend offers it all.

The stakes are high, which only makes these matchups all the more compelling, and so this round has the potential to go down as quite a memorable weekend.

Here's a look at the biggest rivalries on tap:

Buccaneers vs. Saints

Sunday in New Orleans (6:40 p.m. ET, Fox)

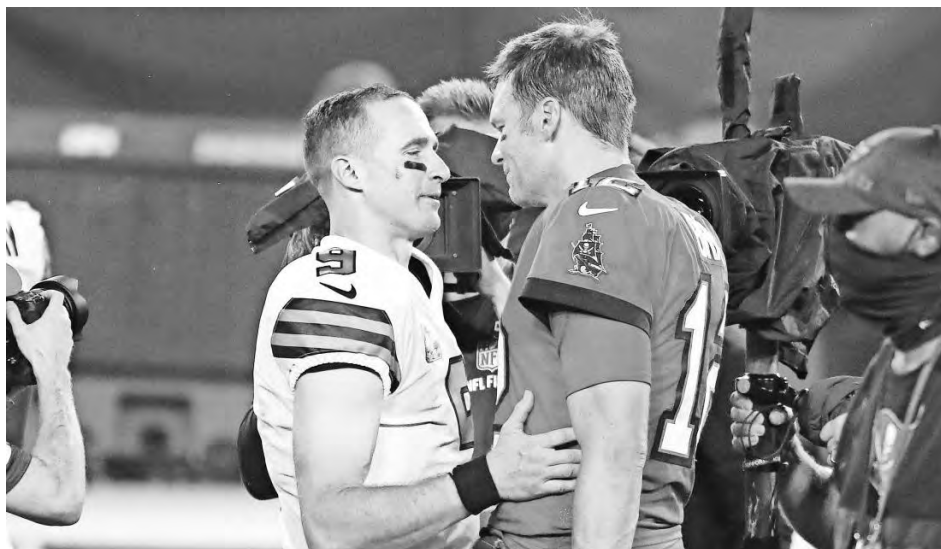
You can't have a conversation about greatness without including the 43-year-old Brady and the 41-year-old Brees.

For the last 20 years, they have dominated this league while serving as the gold standard of quarterbacks. Brady boasts six Super Bowl rings to Brees' one. Brady and Brees have each led the league in touchdown passes four different times. Brees boasts an NFL-record seven passing titles while Brady is a three-time MVP.

Head-to-head, Brees holds the edge, having won five of their seven meetings, including two this season now that they're divisional foes.

With each trying to stave off Father Time long enough to secure one more Lombardi Trophy, they meet again. But this is the first time that they will meet as playoff opponents.

"I guess it was inevitable," Brees said Sunday when asked about the showdown. "Listen, the minute that he signed with the Bucs and came in the division, you felt like that was gonna be a team to contend with. That was gonna be a team



Saints quarterback Drew Brees, left, and Buccaneers quarterback Tom Brady meet after the teams' game Nov. 8 in Tampa, Fla. KIM KLEMENT/USA TODAY SPORTS

that had playoff aspirations and beyond, just like us."

Brady and the Buccaneers hope the third time is indeed the charm. Brady had two performances he very much would like to forget: a two-touchdown, two-interception season opener, and then a zero-TD, three-interception outing in Week 9.

It's hard to beat a team three times. But don't tell that to the Saints. They enter the week as four-point favorites and will try to complete the sweep and take one more step toward that Lombardi Trophy.

Ravens vs. Bills

Saturday in Orchard Park, N.Y. (8:15 p.m. ET, NBC)

The sun certainly has begun to set on the careers of Brady and Brees, but the NFL appears to be in good hands because of the strong crop of quarterbacks taken in the last several years.

On Saturday, two members of the 2018 draft class will face off. Buffalo selected Allen with the seventh pick and Baltimore took Jackson 32nd overall.

Jackson and Allen each reflect the evolution of the quarterback position.

The prototypical, statuesque quarterback appears headed for extinction, and in his place is a more athletic, well-rounded quarterback, capable of doing just as much damage with his legs as with his arm.

Jackson, the reigning NFL MVP, is coming off his second 1,000-yard rushing season. He ran for seven touchdowns while throwing for another 26. Meanwhile, Allen tallied eight rushing touchdowns while posting career passing numbers (4,544 yards, 37 touchdowns) and placing himself in this year's MVP conversation.

Both quarterbacks are coming off the first playoff victories of their careers after disappointing losses in 2019.

Browns vs. Chiefs

Sunday in Kansas City, Mo. (3:05 p.m. ET, CBS)

Insurance companies will have a field day with this matchup. Who will cram more commercials of their spokesman into the broadcast: State Farm and Mahomes, or Progressive and Mayfield?

On the field, the defending Super Bowl champs and Mahomes (the 2018 NFL MVP and reigning Super Bowl MVP) re-

turn to action after receiving a bye, and they'll face a red-hot Browns team led by a much-improved Mayfield and an aggressive defense.

Mahomes and Mayfield will renew their college rivalry, meeting for only the second time since their epic 2016 shootout.

In that game between Oklahoma and Texas Tech, Mayfield threw for 545 yards and an Oklahoma-record seven touchdowns, and Mahomes racked up 734 passing yards and five touchdown passes. Mayfield and the Sooners won 66-59. Could similar fireworks be in store for the Chiefs, who boast one of the most prolific offenses in the league, and the Browns, who just hung 48 points on the Steelers?

Rams vs. Packers

Saturday in Green Bay (4:35 p.m. ET, Fox)

The year was 2010, and two-time Super Bowl-winning head coach Mike Shanahan was forming his coaching staff in Washington. His quarterbacks coach was LaFleur. McVay started out as an offensive assistant before getting promoted to tight ends coach.

The two young coaches formed a close friendship, and seven years later, when McVay accepted the Rams' head coaching position, he hired LaFleur as his offensive coordinator.

Now, they'll face off for the first time as opposing coaches.

LaFleur, in his second season as head coach, and his Packers received a bye in the opening round of the playoffs because they earned the NFC's top seed. They return to action as 6 1/2-point favorites. But the Rams aren't to be taken lightly.

This is a showdown of the No. 1 scoring offense against the No. 1 scoring defense in the league, and McVay and LaFleur know each other's tendencies so well that it's going to be interesting to see which play-caller can win the war of wits.

The difference-maker could be Aaron Rodgers, the leading MVP candidate.

NBA being plagued by blowouts

Tim Reynolds ASSOCIATED PRESS

Amid the coronavirus pandemic, the NBA is also seeing a blowout epidemic.

One can only wonder if the two are related.

Games are turning into runaways far more than usual throughout the first three weeks of this NBA season. Maybe it's because there are no fans in most arenas, maybe it's because teams are tired from playing with a bit less rest than they've gotten in recent years or maybe it's because the strains of a COVID-19 world are weighing heavily on players.

It's probably a combination of all that and more.

But the numbers are also quite a bit overwhelming: The average margin of victory right now in the NBA, about 12.3 points per game, is on pace to be the largest in league history. And the rate of teams going up by 30 or more points – it's happened in 20% of games played so far – smashes what has been the norm even in this 3-point-wild, faster-paced era of NBA play.

"This is going to be the craziest NBA season ever," Brooklyn coach Steve Nash said. "We've already seen some incredible scores and oddities and so I think just trying to just be adaptive and continue to work through things and learn through your games as much as anything rather than practices is just essential."

Last season, one NBA team took a 30-point lead on the other 10% of the time. The season before that, 2018-19, that rate was 11%.

The year before that, 9%.

Milwaukee has played 11 games and held 30-point leads in four of them; the Bucks only got to a 25-point margin in their win over Orlando on Monday. The Los Angeles Clippers have played 11 games; they've either led or trailed by at least 20 points in eight of those, including the biggest deficit in the NBA so far this season – 57 points against Dallas on Dec. 27.

The only teams in the NBA that haven't led by even 20 points yet this season? Chicago, Minnesota, Oklahoma City and Sacramento. The only team that hasn't been down by 20 yet? Indiana. Every other team has been in a very, very deep hole at least once so far this season – and Pacers guard Malcolm Brogdon isn't shy about calling first-year coach Nate Bjorkgren a great one. Say this much for Bjorkgren: He's had the Pacers in every game, no small feat in this era.

"I think this organization has been slept on for years now," Brogdon said last



Bucks forward Giannis Antetokounmpo goes to the basket past Magic center Mo Bamba on Monday. Milwaukee won the game 121-99. The Bucks have played 11 games and held 30-point leads in four of them. REINHOLD MATAY/USA TODAY SPORTS

month. "I think it's time for people to wake up."

It's not like every night this season has been nothing but blowouts.

Monday was the 20th day of games this season; of those days, nine have seen multiple games decided by three points or fewer, most recently a pair of such games Sunday. A glaring exception, though, was the five-game showcase lineup on Christmas Day – where the closest final margin was 13 points. That was the first time since 2006 that the NBA had no single-digit games on Christmas, and it must be noted that year had Miami's 16-point win over the Los Angeles Lakers as the lone game on the Dec. 25 slate.

And games have tightened up a bit in recent days; in the week from Dec. 29 through Jan. 4, 15 of the 56 NBA games had one team enjoying a 30-point lead, and in the week that followed and ended Monday, only eight of 53 games had such a margin at any point.

Maybe that's a sign that teams are getting into better shape, a real possibility after a truncated training camp and shortened preseason.

"When you keep that competitive spirit up, it spreads throughout the group," San Antonio guard Patty Mills said. "It's contagious."

Who knows where the scoring will go in the next few days and weeks, amid the pandemic that has forced the NBA to postpone several games that were on the schedule for this week.

The ripple effects of contact-tracing results will be felt in Dallas, Miami and other cities for the next several days at least.

Like Nash said, the craziest NBA season ever awaits.

Belichick chooses legacy over medal



Nancy Armour
Columnist
USA TODAY

There are some calls that are obvious. That doesn't make them any less significant.

Citing the insurrection at the U.S. Capitol last week that left five people dead and our democracy shaken, Patriots coach Bill Belichick announced Monday that he will not accept the Medal of Freedom. While putting country first might not seem particularly noble, it's more than NFL owners and the league have done.

A lot of members of Congress, too.

"I am an American citizen with great reverence for our nation's values, freedom and democracy," Belichick said in a statement, reported by ESPN's Adam Schefter.

Belichick is one of the shrewdest coaches there is, with six Super Bowl titles to prove it. (He has another two from his days as a defensive coordinator with the Giants.) He had to know both that President Donald Trump was trying to use the Medal of Freedom presentation as a smokescreen and that his reputation would never recover if he went along with it.

Imagine trying to explain himself to his players, about 70% of whom are Black. Belichick would never again be able to command the respect of his locker room, and the tightfisted control he has wielded so successfully for more than two decades would evaporate.

This isn't simply a matter of differing opinions. Athletes and coaches navigate those all the time, and Belichick's past support of Trump is hardly a secret. Nor is the fact some NFL owners have been among Trump's most ardent backers – which might explain the deafening silence of both the league and the team owners.

But this is no longer about politics. The invasion of the Capitol last Wednesday, and the reluctance of some of our leaders to condemn it, has damaged the very foundation of this country.

The images of mostly white Trump supporters vandalizing the Capitol, beating a police officer as he lay face down, and threatening to kill Vice President Mike Pence and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi are horrifying. That it was



Patriots coach Bill Belichick looks on during a game against the Chargers on Dec. 6. KIRBY LEE/USA TODAY SPORTS

incited by the president, because he simply cannot bear the idea that he lost the election, is appalling.

A majority of Americans want Trump removed from office, even if there are only a few more days until Joe Biden is inaugurated. Corporations are rushing to distance themselves both from Trump and the toadies still doing his bidding. It is not a time for smiling photo ops. The Medal of Freedom is this country's highest civilian honor, previously awarded to American icons such as Muhammad Ali, Bill Russell and Michael Jordan. No doubt Belichick would have been proud to accept it under different circumstances.

But to do so now would be seen as an expression of support for Trump and his monstrous actions, and that association would taint Belichick forever. It also would make a farce of the NFL's social justice efforts, including the \$95 million in grants the league awarded just last week – a point not lost on Belichick.

"One of the most rewarding things in my professional career took place in 2020 when, through the great leadership within our team, conversations about social justice, equality and human rights moved to the forefront and became actions," he said in his statement. "Continuing those efforts while remaining true to the people, team and country I love outweighs the benefits of any individual award."

Belichick is not a man of many words. With this principled stand, he spoke volumes. If only others – in the NFL, in Congress – had the courage to do the same.

NHL set for unique, chaotic '21

Mike Brehm
USA TODAY

The NHL has had two seasons shortened and another canceled because of labor disputes. Last season was paused in March because of a pandemic and eventually ended in late September.

This season, the NHL will try to navigate another shortened season amid a surge in the COVID-19 pandemic. If the league can pull it off, a 56-game regular season will start Wednesday and end May 8, with the Stanley Cup being awarded by July 9.

"We have to be ready to adjust and adapt to anything that may happen," Commissioner Gary Bettman said in a conference call. "We're going to have to make judgments in real time."

What will be unique about this season:

There will be COVID-19 disruptions: There already have. Last week, the NHL announced that six Dallas Stars players and two staffers tested positive for the coronavirus.

Instead of opening the season on Thursday, the Stars are looking at Jan. 19, meaning three games will have to be rescheduled.

The playoffs were virus-free because they were played in a bubble. But this regular season will be played at home arenas, increasing chances that a player could be exposed. Unlike the 2020 playoffs, the NHL will divulge the names of players if they test positive during the regular season.

The divisions are realigned: The closing of the U.S.-Canada border to non-essential travel necessitated the formation of an all-Canada division. That required shuffling the other divisions.

It was mostly based on geography, but St. Louis and Minnesota will play with California teams.

Most rivalries were maintained and the Chicago-Detroit one was re-established. Teams will play solely within their division, facing each opponent eight times in the U.S. divisions and nine to 10 times in the Canadian one. In-



Vancouver Canucks center Adam Gaudette, left, checks center Bo Horvat during a training camp practice Monday. DARRYL DYCK/CANADIAN PRESS VIA AP

cluding playoffs, it's possible a Canadian team could face an opponent 17 times this season.

Playoff changes: It's always conference vs. conference in the Stanley Cup Final. Not necessarily this season. The first two rounds will be played within the division.

The division winners will advance to the semifinals, but seeding will be based on points rather than geography. So two traditional East teams or two traditional West teams could end up as opponents in the Final.

Taxi squads: To help teams deal with potential positive cases and contact tracing, they will have a taxi squad of four to six players who will practice and be ready to step in if needed.

Commercial opportunities: NHL teams will have no fans or a limited number of fans at the beginning of the season.

The league is stepping up with sponsorship opportunities so teams don't have to refund money. Each division will include the name of a corporate sponsor. And more than a dozen teams will include a sponsor name on their helmets.

Schedule anomalies: The league is trying to limit travel, so many teams will spend two games in a city before going to another city or heading home. Canadian teams will sometimes play three games in a city if making a cross-country trip.

The Sharks will open with eight games on the road because Santa Clara County rules bar them from playing there. There is no All-Star Game or Winter Classic, but the league will play two outdoor games at Lake Tahoe Feb. 20 (Vegas vs. Colorado) and Feb. 21 (Philadelphia vs. Boston).

Sloppy play early? Training camps were short, and there were no preseason games, only scrimmages. Seven teams have not played a game since March. Positive tests and contact tracing could limit practices during the season. That could have an impact on the quality of play.

Familiar faces in new places: Players move all the time, but this offseason had some surprising changes. Joe Thornton, who played 15 seasons with the Sharks, decided to chase a Stanley Cup in Toronto.

The Bruins passed on bringing back

longtime captain Zdeno Chara, and he signed with the Capitals. Longtime Blues defenseman Alex Pietrangolo got the big-money contract he sought from the Golden Knights. Braden Holtby, who won a Stanley Cup and Vezina Trophy in Washington, is now in Vancouver.

Missing faces: Goalie Henrik Lundqvist needed heart surgery and will miss the season.

Two-time Stanley Cup winner Corey Crawford, who signed with the Devils, announced his retirement before playing a game with New Jersey. Blackhawks captain Jonathan Toews is on leave as he deals with symptoms that leave him "drained and lethargic."

Missing voices: NBC Sports play-by-play legend Mike Emrick retired after calling his 22nd Stanley Cup Final. The network is not bringing back analyst Mike Milbury, who made an "insensitive" comment during last season's playoffs.

Penguins radio voice Mike Lange, 72, known for phrases like "Scratch my back with a hacksaw," won't go into the booth at the start of the season as he waits to get a coronavirus vaccination.

Trades could be difficult: The trade deadline is April 12, and in recent years, most of the bigger deals have been made before the final day.

This year, trades will be difficult because players switching teams in the United States face a seven-day quarantine if they fly commercially to their new city. Players traded from a U.S. city to a Canadian city face a potential 14-day quarantine. In a shortened season, that will be a long time without access to a player.

Expansion draft looms: NHL general managers must decide who they'll make available for the Seattle Kraken's expansion draft.

Some in-season moves will be made with that in mind. The deadline for submitting the list is July 17 and the draft is July 21.

Ideally, GMs would like to avoid having their former players become stars as they did during the Vegas Golden Knights' expansion draft.

Blue Jackets want Domi to take a shot

Brian Hedger
Columbus Dispatch | USA TODAY NETWORK

It's not easy to alter a hockey player's instincts.

Some are natural shooters. Others are born passers. Some are in between, which is where the Blue Jackets hope Max Domi lands for them this season after acquiring him in October via a trade with the Montreal Canadiens for Josh Anderson.

"You can't change too much of who you are as a player," said Domi, who describes himself as a pass-first center. "I've been like that since I was a little kid. (But) if you can establish that shot mentality, and all of a sudden other stuff opens up, that's how you can grow your game. So that's where I'm at personally, for trying to understand there's a right time to shoot — and a shot is definitely not a bad play ever."

It certainly wasn't for the Canadiens in 2018-19, the first of Domi's two seasons in Montreal. While centering a top-six line, he finished with career highs in goals (28), assists (44) and shots (203), ranking second only to Brendan Gallagher among teammates in the latter category.

That worked out to a blistering 13.8% shooting percentage, also a career high, but his success didn't carry over to last

season. Despite averaging slightly more shots per game last season, Domi's shooting percentage dipped to 9.5% and he finished with 17 goals and 27 assists in 71 games.

Along the way, the 25-year-old also was bumped to the wing and demoted to the Canadiens' fourth line in the NHL's summer postseason, which stung, he acknowledged.

That fueled him with motivation for this season in Columbus, but Domi's focus now is trained on beating those who literally stand between him and another great offensive output — the goalies.

Blue Jackets goaltending coach Manny Legace has already been in Domi's ear about how best to beat them, and he's encouraging more of a shot-first mentality.

"I mean, we've got the best (goalie) tandem in the league, as far as I'm concerned," Domi said of facing Joonas Korpisalo and Elvis Merzlikins in practices. "Both of those guys, if they start to realize I'm going to be a pass-first guy, it's much easier to play against that when they know (I'm) going to pass the puck."

So the goal is to go against his instincts and shoot more often, something he continues to practice daily. Domi's shot might come in handiest during power plays, which have vexed the Blue Jackets the past three seasons.



The Blue Jackets want center Max Domi (16), here passing through the legs of defenseman Seth Jones (3) during a training camp scrimmage last week in Nationwide Arena, to think about taking his shot as much as setting up his teammates. ADAM CAIRNS/COLUMBUS DISPATCH

"Sometimes in the past, I've been known to maybe pass a little too much, and this year I'm really going to focus on getting the puck on net and making that simple play of just shooting the puck," he said. "It doesn't necessarily have to go in the first time, but the second and third time is how you score goals now in the NHL, especially on the power play."

There should be plenty of chances to dish it, especially with Nick Foligno and Cam Atkinson as wingers. Foligno is a hard-driving forechecker, and Atkinson is a natural scorer who attacks seams to

find good production areas.

"He seems like a pass-first guy, which always gets me excited — even though he can score a lot of goals," Atkinson said of Domi. "He can slow the game down and he wants the puck. It gives me a chance to get lost (in the offensive zone), and I know that he's going to be looking for me all the time."

Looking for teammates is part of Domi's makeup, which, he said, has tugged at him throughout his career. The trick will be going against his hockey DNA to fire one off on occasion.

BLUE JACKETS NOTEBOOK

Jackets seek approval to have fans at games this season

Brian Hedger
Columbus Dispatch | USA TODAY NETWORK

The wheels are officially in motion.

The Dispatch has confirmed that the Blue Jackets have applied with state health officials for approval to host a limited number of fans this season at Nationwide Arena — similar to what the Ohio Department of Health has approved for the Cleveland Cavaliers.

The application process will include the Franklin County Health Department and does not include a set timetable for a decision, despite NHL deputy commissioner Bill Daly telling reporters Monday that fans in the Columbus and Pittsburgh markets might "soon" be able to attend games.

The 2021 season, which has been reduced to 56 games, will begin Wednesday amid the COVID-19 pandemic, which

has shown no sign of relenting in the United States. Most of the NHL's 31 teams plan to start out with no fans in attendance, but the Arizona Coyotes, Dallas Stars and Florida Panthers will allow a limited number of spectators.

The ODH initially approved the Cavaliers to host 300 fans per game and then increased it to 10% of Rocket Mortgage FieldHouse's capacity with a Dec. 29 variance, which went into effect Monday and clears the way for up to 1,944 fans per game.

That is about half of the number the Cavaliers hoped to get approved, after initially seeking permission to allow 4,596 into the building.

Nationwide Arena's capacity for hockey games is 18,500, which means 1,850 fans per game could attend if the ODH were to apply the same 10% cap on attendance.

The Cavaliers' ODH approval also stipulates that no more than six fans may sit together and must be part of the same family or group — all seated 6 feet apart. The same applies to those in suites. The variance said the use of plastic barriers will be considered as an alternative measure for the 6-foot mandate.

Rocket Mortgage FieldHouse was required to raise the height of its concourse ceiling by 3 feet, and ODH director Stephanie McCloud noted its "state-of-the-art" HVAC air-filtration system. Nationwide Arena has a similar HVAC system, but it's unknown whether the facility will need any physical changes to gain approval.

The Blue Jackets open the 2021 season Thursday in Nashville. Their home opener is slated for Jan. 21 against the Tampa Bay Lightning, the reigning Stanley Cup champion.

Up for grabs

The competition for a role on the Blue Jackets' third defense pairing is wide open.

Coach John Tortorella said he's still looking for players to stand out among a group that includes Dean Kukan, Andrew Peeke, Scott Harrington and Michael Del Zotto, a veteran offensive defenseman who used a professional tryout to earn a one-year, two-way contract.

"I don't think anybody has separated themselves, as far as claiming that (fifth and sixth defenseman) spot, so we'll have the discussions prior to our first game, see what happens," Tortorella said. "But that, to me, is still a position that could be moved in and out as each game goes by, depending on what happens in (each) game."

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