

College Football



AP Photo/Bill Haber

Ohio State running back Ezekiel Elliott celebrates after the Sugar Bowl NCAA college football playoff semifinal game against Alabama, Thursday, Jan. 1, 2015, in New Orleans. Ohio State won 42-35.

Elliott's eyes on long run say it all for Buckeyes

Running back has run for over 200 yards in last two games

By RUSTY MILLER
Associated Press

COLUMBUS, Ohio — Ezekiel Elliott's eyes saw running room ahead. It was what was behind him that concerned him the most.

As the Ohio State back scissored through a hole around left end and broke into the clear down the sideline in the Sugar Bowl, he knew he had no one in front of him. Just in case, he glanced up at the gigantic video board above the end zone to make sure no one from Alabama was gaining on him.

"I'm looking up at the Jumbotron and seeing the guys behind me, if they're close enough so I could slow down a little bit," he said, grinning.

They weren't. Elliott's stunning run, covering 85 yards with 3:24 left, proved to be the padding the Buckeyes needed in a 42-35 victory that pushed them into the Jan. 12 national championship game against Oregon in Arlington, Texas.

It'll be hard for Elliott to spy on his pursuers at AT&T Stadium, because the video boards are overhead and not at the ends of the field.

But Elliott has a plan for that, too. He cites a reluctant running star (for Alabama) in a

legendary film.

"(I'm) just going to have to GO! Run, Forrest, run!" he said, laughing.

Odds are the millions at home and 108,610 fans in the Sugar Bowl watching Elliott's eyes staring at the video board didn't know much about the sophomore from St. Louis. Soft-spoken and self-effacing, the first-year starter will be much better known and more of a focal point when the Buckeyes meet the Ducks on Jan. 12.

He's more than a runner, too. He's also a great blocker, although few beyond his teammates even notice.

"Ezekiel Elliott plays as hard as any back I've ever witnessed without the ball," coach Urban Meyer said.

Taking over for the graduated Carlos Hyde and his 1,521 yards a year ago, Elliott has followed a get-to-know-you freshman year by rushing for 1,632 yards and 14 touchdowns — including a jaw-dropping 220 yards on 20 carries against Wisconsin in the Big Ten title game with 230 more again on 20 carries against the Crimson Tide. And he spent the year having trouble gripping the ball after breaking a bone in his left hand during August camp.

Only three Ohio State backs

have ever gained more yards in a season (Eddie George had 1,927 while winning the Heisman Trophy in 1995, Keith Byars had 1,764 in '84 and reversed two-time Heisman winner Archie Griffin had 1,695 in '74).

"He (reads blocking patterns) instinctively and then explodes into open seams," Ed Warinner, Ohio State's line coach and co-offensive coordinator said. "He loves football and plays every snap like it's his last."

Elliott's dad, Stacy, played football at Missouri, and his mom, Dawn, was a member of the track and field team. It seemed a foregone conclusion that the four-star prospect, who led his high school to the state title game as a senior while rushing for 2,155 yards, would go to nearby Mizzou.

But he visited Ohio State, fell in love with the campus and Ohio's passion for all things Buckeye. He never really looked back. His parents had no problem with the choice.

Now, Elliott's glance at the video board is prominent on Ohio State's athletic website — and could end up being the signature moment of the Buckeyes' season.

Bowl ratings up, attendance down

Associated Press

The new playoff era is drawing lots of college football fans to bowl game broadcasts. But it isn't necessarily bringing more fans into stadium seats.

ESPN announced that the Rose Bowl and Sugar Bowl semifinals in the College Football Playoff drew the largest two audiences in cable television history, with each game attracting over 28 million viewers. The two semifinals drew more viewers than any of the four BCS championship games broadcast by ESPN, which also will air Monday's title game between Ohio State and Oregon.

"That was a pleasant surprise," said Burke Magnus, ESPN's senior vice president of programming and acquisitions. "We're cautiously optimistic about Monday, but obviously the new format has resonated with fans."

ESPN spokesperson Keri Potts said that ESPN's bowl telecasts through New Year's Day drew an average rating of 3.4, whereas its average rating through all its bowl telecasts other than the championship last season was 3.2. Ratings represent the percentage of homes with televisions tuned to a program.

While ratings are slightly up across the board for bowl games, attendance has dipped.

The 38 bowl games this season have drawn an average announced attendance of 43,285, down 9.2 percent from the average of 47,659 for the 34 bowls last season that led up to the BCS championship game.

Those figures are skewed by the fact that all four new bowls that had their inaugural games this season drew fewer than 30,000 fans. But even if you throw those four games out of the mix, the average attendance for the remaining 34 bowls is 45,904, down 3.7 percent from last season.

Wright Waters, the executive director for the Football Bowl Association,

Bowl attendance trending lower

The 38 bowl games this season have drawn an average of 43,285, down 9.2 percent from the average of 47,659 for the 34 bowls last season that led up to the BCS championship game.

SEASON	BOWLS	AVERAGE
2013-14	35	48,989
2012-13	35	49,224
2011-12	35	50,435
2010-11	35	51,806
2009-10	34	52,055
2008-09	34	52,173
2007-08	32	54,074
2006-07	32	53,114
2005-06	28	51,115

*Includes championship games

notes that the attendance drops reflect regular-season trends. A CBSSports.com study showed that the average regular-season attendance for home games this year was 43,483, down 4 percent from last season and its lowest figure since 2000.

"It's not just a bowl problem," Waters said. "It's a college football problem that we've got to deal with."

The first season of the playoff era created plenty of uncertainty for all the bowl games. The old BCS format was replaced by the "New Year's Six," which featured the Fiesta, Orange and Peach on New Year's Eve with the two semifinals and the Cotton Bowl on New Year's Day.

That new format led to plenty of change. For instance, the Peach Bowl was formerly known as the Chick-fil-A Bowl and traditionally pitted a Southeastern Conference school against an

Atlantic Coast Conference program in a prime-time game. This year, the playoff committee arranged a matchup that had a 12:30 p.m. kickoff.

TCU trounced Ole Miss 42-3 in front of an announced attendance of 65,706, ending the bowl's string of 17 consecutive sellouts.

"Obviously it was a 12:30 game where in the past we were in prime time," Peach Bowl CEO and president Gary Stokan said. "We're going to study everything. I don't know if that had anything to do with it. We're studying everything because everything has changed for us. ... But how do you complain with (65,706)?"

Waters suggested that some bowls should try attracting more local fans who aren't affiliated with the two schools playing in the game each year. He cited the Sugar, Peach and Rose as three bowl games with exceptional community support.

"We've probably gotten comfortable with crowds coming from schools," Waters said. "Just as schools are having trouble with their attendance, we're going to have to get more active locally."

Waters said bowl games that have attendance increases generally have compelling matchups featuring regional opponents that are hungry for a bowl appearance.

The Texas Bowl had all those elements, as former Southwest Conference rivals Arkansas and Texas made the short trip to Houston for the Razorbacks' first bowl appearance since the 2011 season. Arkansas' 31-7 victory drew a sellout crowd of 71,115, more than double the announced attendance of 32,327 for the Texas Bowl's Syracuse-Minnesota pairing last season.

But there apparently weren't enough of those types of matchups this bowl season.

"You don't really see too many sellouts this year, and I don't think that's anything other than it's just one of those years," Cotton Bowl president and CEO Rick Baker said.



AP Photo/The Register-Guard, Chris Pietsch

Oregon quarterback Marcus Mariota, left, signs an autograph for Lynette Bassaw of Springfield, Ore. after practice in Eugene Wednesday.

Ducks, Buckeyes settle into 'weird' game prep week

By ANNE M. PETERSON
Associated Press

EUGENE — Oregon is treating this week like any other this season. And while that's more comfortable in a way, it also feels a little odd.

After all, the Ducks are preparing to face Ohio State in the national championship game Monday night at AT&T Stadium in Arlington, Texas. The two teams are the first to experience a season stretched out for one more game by college football's new playoff system.

Both teams have already had their bowl games and all the hoopla that goes with that, so this is more of a business trip, said Oregon senior safety Erick Dargan. A really important business trip.

"It's just like a regular week. I think that actually plays more to our advantage than having a lot of time," Dargan said. "We're back in our groove."

The Ducks (13-1) routed Florida State 59-20 in the Rose Bowl, while the Buckeyes (13-1) beat Alabama 42-35 in the Sugar Bowl on New Year's Day, paving the way for the championship 11 days later.

Upon arrival for the game in Pasadena, second-seeded Oregon was involved in all the customary Rose Bowl activities, including the obligatory visit to Disneyland for the photo op with Mickey Mouse.

They had essentially already done their work: There had been 26 days between the team's regular-season finale and the Granddaddy of Them All. That gave the Ducks plenty of time to scheme for the Seminoles and quarterback Jameis Winston.

The fourth-seeded Buckeyes were similarly prepared upon arrival in New Orleans, giving them time for events like a dinner that featured entertainment from a couple of alligators and a python.

Adding the national championship as a 15th game presents some unique challenges for coaches and their players — like guarding against fatigue or injury.

"I was talking to someone earlier and they said it's been like 25 weeks. I guess it is just part of the grind. Part of our job is taking care of your body and making sure you're ready to go when you're number is called," said Ohio State senior receiver Evan Spencer.

Buckeyes coach Urban Meyer led a former team, Florida, to national championships in 2006 and 2008. There wasn't a lot of comparison he could offer.

"Practices are a little different. Those ones, we had 37 days to prepare. I remember in '06 it was 37 or 47, some ridiculous number; '06 was the first one removed from the traditional bowl date," he said.

This one, Meyer said, "is a one game shot that really, you have four practices in shoulder pads."

Oregon was keeping everything the same as during the regular season. Same practice times, same meeting schedule. The Ducks, like the Buckeyes, leave Friday for the Dallas area.

DUCKS: Familiarity antidote for high-powered offenses

Continued from 1B

These minds think alike. Kelly, now coach of the Philadelphia Eagles, was at Ohio State's Pro Day this year and the coaches hung out a lot. Kelly told reporters in Philadelphia this summer that Meyer is still one of the guys with whom he talks football.

"It's plays, it's schemes, it's what are you doing off the field, it's everything," Kelly said in August, according to csnphilly.com.

Again, Kelly isn't at Oregon anymore. But he's the godfather of the Oregon way, and his fingerprints will be all over this game, on both sides. Because it took a while for Meyer to come around.

Meyer at Florida sent then offensive coordinator Dan Mullen to study up-tempo offenses elsewhere, then

chucked the idea a few practices after Mullen returned. Meyer said players lost their technique, coaches were more concerned with signaling plays than coaching and he hated everything about it, including what might happen in a game when that style of offense doesn't work.

"The risk of tempo offense, which I debated for years, you three-and-out them and 24 seconds you just took off the clock. And you're playing a good team, that's not good," Meyer said. "So there's plus and minus."

By the time he was hired at Ohio State, after spending some of his year away from coaching visiting Oregon and observing how that program worked, Meyer felt he didn't have a choice.

"It's an advantage for the

offense," Meyer said. "And if you don't take it, then that's fine. But even I know Alabama is moving in that direction. Is it full speed all the time? We're not. But certainly that gives us an advantage at times."

At the moment, the teams will hope to nullify that offensive advantage, at least a bit, with defensive familiarity. Meyer can tell the Ohio State defensive coaches how the Oregon offense thinks by telling them how the Ohio State offense thinks.

"I know I've gone in there and told our defense what we don't like and what bothers us, and I'm sure they are doing the same thing," Meyer said. "They see it every day in practice. And there are some things they do much better than we do on the perimeter and there's things we

do a little better than them.

"So it's not exactly the same, but similar philosophy. So I'm sure there's a lot of conversation between the two staffs (at each school). More than normal games."

The Buckeyes will practice against the Buckeyes and the Ducks will practice against the Ducks and when the game kicks off Monday, each defense will have a good idea of what's coming.

"We practice it all spring and summer. We go against a decent number of tempo teams during the season," Ohio State defensive tackle Michael Bennett said. "That seems to be the new thing, because I think tempo makes good teams great and great teams even better."

This game is proof of that. Looks like Ohio State and Oregon were both right.