

No. 7 Ohio State beats No. 10 Utah 48-45 in wild Rose Bowl

BY GREG BEACHAM

Associated Press
PASADENA, Calif. — C.J. Stroud and Jaxon Smith-Njigba put on a passing performance that obliterated a multitude of records during one of the biggest offensive days in Ohio State's storied history.

The Buckeyes still barely did enough to hold off resilient Utah and its backup quarterback in one spectacular Rose Bowl.

Stroud capped his record-setting offensive day by leading a 56-yard drive ending in Noah Ruggles' 19-yard field goal with nine seconds to play, and No. 7 Ohio State beat No. 10 Utah 48-45 on Saturday night, Jan. 1, 2022, in the wild 108th edition of the Rose Bowl.

Stroud passed for a school-record 573 yards and a record-tying six touchdowns for the Buckeyes (11-2), who won the Granddaddy of Them All for the second time in four years while topping one long-standing offensive record after another. Stroud's yards passing and touchdowns both are Rose Bowl records, and he finished 3 yards shy of the record for yards passing in any bowl game.

"It's emotional for me," said Stroud, from nearby Rancho Cucamonga. "It's like I'm dreaming right now. I was able to come home and win the Rose Bowl like this. ... This is the Rose Bowl, man. This is where the legendary games are being played."

Ohio State created a few more legends on this trip.

Smith-Njigba set the record for any FBS bowl game with 347 yards receiving while catching a school-record 15 passes and scoring three touchdowns. Marvin Harrison Jr. also caught three TD passes for the Buckeyes, who set a Rose Bowl and school bowl record with 683 total yards.

Yet the Buckeyes were the ones playing from behind for nearly all of the first three-plus quarters in Arroyo Seco until they summoned the will for three fourth-quarter scoring drives.

"Our team is built on fighting," Smith-Njigba said. "It doesn't matter if we're up, down. We were down the first half, but we just had to stay level headed and keep fighting."

Ohio State had to rally from



Joshua A. Bickel/Columbus Dispatch-TNS

Ohio State Buckeyes wide receiver Jaxon Smith-Njigba (No. 11) fends off Utah Utes cornerback as he races to the end zone for a touchdown during the second quarter of the 108th Rose Bowl Game between the Ohio State Buckeyes and the Utah Utes at the Rose Bowl.

10 points down late in the third quarter to get past the Pac-12 champion Utes (10-4), who got off to an electrifying 35-point first half in their first school's first trip to the Rose Bowl. They even stayed competitive after star quarterback Cameron Rising went down with an injury while getting sacked with 9:56 to play.

The Utes had to turn to backup Bryson Barnes, who grew up on a pig farm in central Utah and had never thrown a collegiate pass. He led them on a tying drive, capped by a 15-yard TD pass to Dalton Kincaid with 1:54 left.

Stroud coolly drove the Buckeyes back downfield in the waning seconds, and Ruggles hit his easy field goal. Ohio State kicked off to Britain Covey, who already had a 97-yard kickoff return for a touchdown earlier, but the Buckeyes smothered his cutback as time ran out.

"All we needed was 30 more seconds, if that," Barnes said. "Get down the field, tie it and head to OT. But we didn't get enough time. ... A lot of dudes are sad, but there's not a lot to hang our heads on. We've been through the lowest of lows and highest of highs, but we made Utah football history today."

In front of a raucous crowd dominated by Utah fans in the venerable stadium that opened in October 1922, the schools matched the 2012 Oregon-Wisconsin matchup for the highest-scoring first half in Rose Bowl history, combining for 42 points and 443

yards in the second quarter alone.

Ohio State trailed 38-31 entering the fourth quarter despite the pyrotechnics of its passing game, but the Buckeyes immediately stopped Utah on downs at the Ohio State 31, and tied it on Harrison's 5-yard TD catch with 10:12 left. After Rising's injury, Smith-Njigba made a 30-yard, over-the-shoulder catch for his third touchdown with 4:22 to play.

"To come out in the second half and play the way we did says a lot about this team," said Ohio State coach Ryan Day, who earned his second bowl victory. "We were short-handed, and for us to respond the way we did at halftime says a lot about the character of this team."

Rising passed for 214 yards and two touchdowns and rushed for 92 yards and a score while leading the Utes to a 35-21 halftime lead, but he left the game with an apparent head injury. Utah played without three of its top four cornerbacks, even forcing running back Micah Bernard to play defensive back for the first time since high school.

"At some point, we have to play defense," Utah coach Kyle Whittingham said. "We didn't play very well all night long on defense. It wasn't our usual. Not sure we'd be able to get a stop."

Jaxon drive

With two top Buckeyes receivers opting out, Smith-Njigba had a landmark day that included TD receptions

of 50 and 52 yards made 30 seconds apart — albeit with Covey's TD return in between.

He broke Cris Carter's 1985 school record of 172 yards receiving in a bowl game in the first half alone. He snapped Keyshawn Johnson's 1996 Rose Bowl record of 216 yards receiving and then Terry Glenn's 1995 single-game school record of 253 yards after halftime. Smith-Njigba finished his season with 1,606 yards, blowing past David Boston's 1998 school record.

Old man strength

The 24-year-old Covey's sensational 97-yard romp through the Buckeyes' coverage unit was the first kickoff return for a touchdown in Utah's entire bowl history. Covey, who also caught a 19-yard TD pass for the Utes' first points, arrived at the school in 2015.

Down state

The Buckeyes' loss to Michigan in November knocked them out of the national title picture, four key starters opted out to preserve their health for the NFL draft: Receivers Chris Olave and Garrett Wilson, starting left tackle Nicholas Petit-Frere and defensive tackle Haskell Garrett.

The takeaway

- Ohio State: A win in Pasadena is always never taken for granted by a Big Ten power. The Buckeyes overcame the instinct to relax after their national title dreams died, and they put on a performance that showed Day's program has tenacity.

- Utah: The Utes were agonizingly close to their third New Year's Six victory during their two-decade transformation from a mid-major overachiever to an elite Power 5 program. Despite the loss, the impressiveness of their fight and the size of their traveling fan base confirms Utah has arrived.

COLLEGE FOOTBALL NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP

Championship QBs: Former 5-star recruit vs. former walk-on

BY STEPHEN HAWKINS

Associated Press

ARLINGTON, Texas — Bryce Young is a former five-star recruit who won the Heisman Trophy in his first season as Alabama's starting quarterback. Stetson Bennett is a former walk-on who became the starter at Georgia and never really lost the confidence of his teammates.

They will meet again in the national championship game after both threw three touchdowns in College Football Playoff semifinal games, only four weeks after Young and the Crimson Tide beat Bennett and the previously undefeated Bulldogs for the Southeastern Conference title.

"It's been a long journey," Bennett said, referring to his entire Georgia career, not just the gap between two crucial interceptions in the SEC title game on Dec. 4 and his offensive MVP performance in the dominating 34-11 Orange Bowl victory over second-ranked Michigan on New Year's Eve. "But like coach (Kirby Smart) said, this game was just so we could play the next game."

That game is scheduled for Jan. 10 in Indianapolis, where the top-ranked defending national champion Crimson Tide and No. 3 Georgia meet in the final game for the second time in five seasons. Both teams are 13-1.

Bennett was a scout team quarterback during the 2017 season when Georgia won the semifinal Rose Bowl before losing in overtime to Alabama in the national championship game. He left to play a season in junior college before returning to the Bulldogs as a backup, then started half of their games last year and the past 10 this season.

Young sealed the first Heisman Trophy for a Tide quar-

National Title Game

Monday, Jan. 10
Georgia vs. Alabama
5 p.m.
TV on ESPN

terback by setting SEC title game records with 421 yards passing and 461 total yards in a 41-24 win over previously undefeated Georgia. That came a week after the 20-year-old sophomore led a late, game-tying 97-yard TD drive in the regular-season finale, a four-OT win at Auburn that kept the Tide in the national championship hunt.

In a 27-6 win Friday, Dec. 31, 2021, over Cincinnati in the CFP semifinal Cotton Bowl, Young had a season-low 181 yards while completing 17 of 28 passes. But the Crimson Tide had 301 yards rushing against the Bearcats, the first non-Power Five team to make the four-team playoff.

"We want to do what's best for us offensively," said Young, whose 4,503 yards and 46 passing TDs are both single-season 'Bama records. "So for me, being able to hand the ball off, just clapping and hand the ball off to (Brian Robinson Jr.) or Trey (Sanders) and have the production we had, it's amazing to have a night like that."

Bennett completed 29 of 48 passes for 340 yards and three touchdowns in that SEC title game on Dec. 4, but his two interceptions stood out.

After Young's 55-yard TD pass to All-America receiver Jameson Williams to open the second half for a 31-17 lead, Georgia drove inside the 20 before Bennett's first pick. Alabama's Jordan Battle then returned an interception 44 yards early in the fourth quarter for a three-touchdown lead.



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