Last May, former Tulsa, Arizona State, and Ohio State coach John Cooper was elected to the College Football Hall of Fame Class of 2009, an honor that elicited a rousing chorus of "WTH???" from most Buckeye fans. John Cooper? Couldn't win a bowl game Cooper? Couldn't beat Michigan Cooper? The man who never missed an opportunity to miss an opportunity? A Hall of Famer who couldn't win the Hall of Fame Bowl? Say it ain't so!

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But it is so. And the honor isn't as outlandish as you might think.

The downside of the John Cooper era at Ohio State is well-known. The 2-10-1

record against Michigan. The 3-8 record in bowl games. The three potential National Championships and four undefeated seasons that went up in smoke at the hands of the Wolverines and, most painfully, Michigan State . The chaotic end to his reign, when the Buckeyes melted in a puddle of teammate-on-teammate lawsuits , John Blutarsky-like grade-point averages , and the Outback Bowl rout at the hands of South Carolina that proved to be the final straw.

Believe me, I know all about the seamy side of the Cooper years. I lived them. I dreaded Michigan week, wondering how the other shoe would drop this year, knowing only that it would. I suffered through one hangover-ridden Citrus Bowl loss after another to one SEC opponent after another in the single worst time-slot for a bowl: noon on New Year's Day, when it was better to just sleep it off than to witness a performance that was invariably as flat as the half-filled Natty Lights left over from the night before. I watched stunned as the Buckeyes shamed themselves in the 1990 Liberty Bowl against Air Force (that loss- the Bucks loudly pissing and moaning about being sent to chilly Memphis to play a service academy, then getting flat-out dominated by an opponent with a tenth the talent and a hundred times the character- is the second-most embarrassing of my Scarlet & Grey fanhood, right behind the fiasco in Glendale in 2007). I winced when Gordon Gee described the 1992 tie with Michigan as "one of our greatest victories ever." I laughed hollowly as Coop's Buckeyes found ever-more inventive ways to lose to Illinois at the Horseshoe. I shook my head at the trash-talking and showboating which characterized those teams and always seemed to come back to bite them. Yeah, I remember those years very well.

But at a distance of almost a decade, with an undefeated season and a National Championship residing happily in this fan's memory- and on many Youtube clips whenever this fan needs that memory refreshed- it seems apparent that John Cooper played a large and vital role in re-making Ohio State into the elite power it is today. It's easy to say that now. 2002 made a great antacid for the heartburn of the ‘90s. But it's true in many ways:

He upgraded the talent: John Cooper didn't win any friends in his first season at Ohio State, when he told the Upper Arlington Rotary Club that he had "too many slow white guys" on his roster, but he was right as to the way the talent level in the program had atrophied. Never an enthusiastic recruiter, Earle Bruce had supplied diminishing returns in his last several classes. He also lost control of his own state to an extent, as schools like Notre Dame, Michigan, Penn State and Michigan State successfully raided Ohio for prime talent. It's no accident that the 1988 team, which finished with the only losing record the program has suffered since the mid-60s, was stocked mainly with Bruce's recruits.

It took quite a while to get things turned around. Ohio State didn't crack the AP Top Ten until 1993, Coop's sixth season on the job, and he didn't surpass the much-ridiculed perennial 9-3 mark of the Earle Bruce era until that same year. In his first five seasons, Coop's Buckeye teams were an uninspiring 35-21-3, with a 0-4 record in bowl games (including the aforementioned Liberty Bowl humiliation against Air Force), a 0-4-1 record against Michigan, and a 0-5 record against Illinois, a particularly nasty bugaboo in Cooper's early years. The only thing that sustained Cooper through this rough stretch was an administration afflicted with buck fever in the wake of the public-relations debacle that marked Earle Bruce's ouster.

But eventually the new coach hit his stride as a recruiter, and when he did, the talent spigot opened up like never before. Coach Cooper brought a new class of athlete into the program. Ohio State became Defensive Back U, producing the likes of Antoine Winfield, Shawn Springs, Damon Moore, Ahmed Plummer and Nate Clements. A once-stodgy offense opened up behind home-run hitting receivers Joey Galloway, Terry Glenn, and David Boston. Road-graders Korey Stringer and Orlando Pace starred up front. Eddie George powered his way to a Heisman Trophy. The defense was transformed by great front-seven players such as Big Daddy Dan Wilkinson, Andy Katzenmoyer, and Mike Vrabel. Cooper imported speed from exotic locales like Texas, Florida and California. He installed pro-style schemes and recruited future pros to execute them. From 1995 through '99, eleven Buckeyes went in the first round of the NFL Draft. By contrast, just one Ohio State player- Eric Kumerow- went in

the first round from 1987 through 1990. And once Coop's players reached the NFL, they generally panned out. The list of Cooper-era Buckeyes who enjoyed productive pro careers is a long and impressive one.

Coach Cooper never could get this galaxy of stars to align quite properly in Scarlet & Grey. But he made Columbus an attractive destination for some of the best talent in the nation, making for a series of enormously entertaining teams, teams that exploded with big plays and big players, at least until the third Saturday in November.

He made Ohio State a national program again: During most of the 1980's, Ohio State ceased to be a factor in the National Championship race. Aside from 1979, Earle's first year, when he went 11-0 in the regular season with a roster largely consisting of Woody Hayes's recruits, the Buckeyes were never in the running for college football's grandest prize, and usually they were out of it early. Earle won a lot of games, went 5-4 against Michigan, and coached in a bowl game every season but 1987, the year he was fired, but his Buckeyes weren't a part of the national-title conversation. In fact, 1979 was the only year under Coach Bruce that Ohio State was still undefeated as late as the third week in October.

That changed under John Cooper. Four times- 1993, '95, '96, and '98- Ohio State was undefeated and in the thick of the title hunt well into November. Twice the Buckeyes finished the season ranked second in the polls, whereas only two of Coach Bruce's post-1979 teams finished in the AP Top Ten. They didn't win any National Championships under Coop, and in fact the near-misses would become a millstone around his neck, but the program had again become part of the elite, and that in itself was a big step up from the ennui of the Earle Bruce era.

He raised expectations: During the 1980's, as Ohio State struggled to stay in the top half of the Big Ten, the buzzword was "parity." Due to scholarship limits and improvement in the other conference outposts, the lofty standard set by Woody Hayes didn't apply anymore, so the theory went. It was unrealistic; it was said, for fans to expect old-style dominance in the new day and age. Some

dissenters saw through this line; when once asked by a reporter if the rest of the Big Ten had risen to Ohio State's level, Buckeye fullback Vaughn Broadnax is alleged to have replied *, "No- we've sunk to theirs."* But not everyone thought so.

John Cooper's teams blew the parity argument to smithereens. The conference had indeed improved since the "Big Two-Little Eight" years of the ‘70s: the addition of Penn State, the ascension to power of Wisconsin under Barry Alvarez, the meteoric rise of Northwestern under Gary Barnett, and the conference's 7-3 record in Rose Bowls during the ‘90s served as evidence that Big Ten football was deeper, stronger, and more wide-open than before. But even among this fast company, the Buckeyes were a two-ton heavyweight. From 1993-98, their Big Ten record was 39-8-1, with three conference co-championships and three second-place finishes, and their overall record in that span was 62-12-1. So much for parity- and so much for reduced expectations.

The success of Cooper's mid-90's juggernauts whetted the appetites of fans that hadn't seen a Buckeye team rule the college football world since 1968. Big Ten championships weren't enough anymore- everyone had gotten a glimpse of the mountaintop, and having seen it, they wanted it. Eventually, Cooper would become a victim of the increased expectations. But at least he'd allowed Buckeye fans to again dream of National Championships, even if those dreams inevitably turned to nightmares.

The 1997 Rose Bowl: For all of the sorry performances Cooper's teams put on in late November and January, the '97 Rose Bowl stands as probably *the* redeeming day of his entire tenure. Without question this was the most significant bowl game the Buckeyes played during the Cooper years. It was the Rose Bowl, the Granddaddy, a game Ohio State hadn't won in over two decades and hadn't played in since 1984, and it was against an undefeated Arizona State team that would lock down a National Championship with a win.

And the Buckeyes came out and played great football. They flew around on defense. They hit. They made big plays, timely plays, came through in crunch time and beat an outstanding opponent in just about the most dramatic fashion possible. They looked nothing like the flat, tentative team that had lost so many times to Michigan and to SEC opponents in the Citrus Bowl. Sure, they gave up some costly plays, but those can be chalked up less to Buckeye letdowns than to Jake Plummer and his teammates stepping up like champions at various points in one of the greatest games I've been privileged to see as a fan of the Scarlet & Grey.

Maybe the challenge of playing his old employer motivated Cooper in a way all of those Citrus Bowls and Liberty Bowls didn't. Maybe the 1996 Buckeyes were simply too good to fold. Whatever the reason, Ohio State rose to the occasion in a huge way in this game. A Rose Bowl championship is something special, and John Cooper, in his one opportunity, pulled it off. A lot of fans remember this game as an anti-climactic coda to another blown National Championship, a mere consolation prize after the most inexplicable Michigan loss of Cooper's tenure- the Shawn Springs Slip . But as a devotee of the Rose Bowl, I'm appreciative of the fact that Coop was able to take the Buckeyes to Pasadena and come home with a win.

The Class of 2002: Jim Tressel gets and deserves the credit as the man who guided Ohio State to the perfect season. But he won the National Championship with a team backboned by John Cooper's recruits. Nine starters on that team's great defense- Mike Doss, Cie Grant, Donnie Nickey, Matt Wilhelm, Robert Reynolds, Tim Anderson, Darrion Scott, Will Smith and Kenny Peterson- had been lured to Columbus by Coach Cooper, as had offensive starters Craig Krenzel, Michael Jenkins, Alex Stepanovich, Shane Olivea, Bryce Bishop, Ivan Douglas, Adrien Clarke, and punter Andy Groom. Coach Tressel supplied the leadership, and defensive coordinator Mark Dantonio supplied the schemes. But it's about the Jimmies and the Joes as much as it's about the X's and the O's, and the bulk of 2002's Jimmies and Joes were bestowed on the program by John Cooper.

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In the end, John Cooper's resume is one most coaches would be proud to have. He won nearly seventy percent of his games, led three different schools to conference titles, and won Rose Bowls at two different schools- the only man to accomplish that feat. As far as Ohio State's program is concerned, he lifted it to a new visibility in the eyes of the college football public, graced it with splendid performers, and, never afraid to delegate, brought in progressive thinkers on both offense and defense, literally and figuratively bringing the program into the 21st century. Without question, he left the program in better shape than when he arrived.

And while glaring, his foibles weren't unique, even among great coaches. Bo Schembechler's bowl record was a dismal 5-12. Bear Bryant went winless in eight consecutive bowl trips in the middle of his Alabama career. Tom Osborne lost seven straight bowl games in the late ‘80s and early ‘90s and in his first decade on the job was owned by Barry Switzer and Oklahoma every bit as thoroughly as Coop was owned by Michigan. Even Saint Woody fumbled away three sure National Championships with season-ending losses to inferior opponents- 1969 at Michigan and the 1971 and '76 Rose Bowls against Stanford and UCLA.

None of that matters to the average Buckeye fan. An Ohio State coach is judged almost solely by how he fares against Michigan. That's the way it is and the way it's always been. And Cooper fared disastrously. He lost to Michigan when he had the inferior team- 1988-91, 1997. He lost to Michigan when he had the superior team- 1993, 1995-96. He went 0-6 in Ann Arbor, where Jim Tressel has already won three times. And it wasn't just something in the water of the Olentangy- he went 0-2-1 against Arizona while at Arizona State. If Cooper coached at Kent, he would have had trouble with Akron. If he coached at Yale, he would have had trouble with Harvard. If he was Gladstone, he would have had trouble with Disraeli .

There was just something about the sight of an archrival that brought out the flop-sweat on the brow of the drawling Tennessean.

Even given his Michigan nightmare, it can be surmised that Coach Cooper fell just one game short of being a Buckeye legend. Imagine how his tenure would be perceived had he beaten the Wolverines in 1993, *or* in ‘95, *or* in ‘96, or, had his team protected that 24-9 third-quarter lead against Sparty in ‘98. Winning any one of those four games would have made all the difference between a saint's laurels and a dunce's cap. Keith Jackson said of Doug Flutie's Hail Mary in Miami, "One play- a life it makes." In Coop's case, it's one game- a legacy it breaks.

But one game shouldn't be enough to completely negate John Cooper's honorable place in Ohio State annals, or in the annals of college football. All his flaws aside, Buckeye football is better off for Coop having been a part of it- even if he won almost every game but the games he had to win. Perhaps history shouldn't exactly beam upon his legacy. But a smile is more than warranted. Along with a Hall of Fame induction that might just be well-deserved.