Jesse Lamovsky first became a fan of Ohio State football at the tender age of nine, back in the autumn of 1984. It was a good year to jump on board - Earle Bruce's Buckeyes went to the Rose Bowl that season- and he's been hooked ever since, through lean times and fat. It's been a quarter of a century since he gave his college football loyalties over to the Scarlet and Grey, and in honor of this, um, "momentous" occasion, he's ranked the twenty-five seasons of his Buckeye fandom in order, from worst to first.

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25.) 1988: John Cooper's first Buckeye team was the only Buckeye team in my lifetime to finish with a losing record (4-6-1) and one of two to finish with a negative point differential, the other being the 1999 team. They picked up a couple of impressive non-conference victories over 10-2 Syracuse and 8-4 LSU, but offset those with blowout losses to Pitt (42-10), Illinois (31-12) and Indiana (41-7) as well as a home defeat against a hapless Purdue team. It was this team that John Cooper had in mind when he complained to the Upper Arlington Rotary Club that he had inherited "too many slow white guys" on arrival from Arizona State.

24.) 1999: In retrospect, it's surprising that John Cooper survived the '99 season. After several years of near-continual national-championship contention, the Buckeyes fell apart, going 6-6, missing out on a bowl game, and finishing with a negative point differential. Elements of this season of woe included a thumping at the hands of Miami in the Kickoff Classic, lopsided losses at the Horseshoe to Wisconsin (42-17) and Illinois (46-20), the knuckleheaded receiver duo of Ken-Yon Rambo and Reggie Germany, and the "Sophie's Choice" quarterback competition between Austin Moherman and Steve Bellisari.

23.) 1987: Bolstered by the likes of Eric Kumerow, William White and the great Chris Spielman, the '87 Bucks were solid defensively. But they were anything but solid offensively: Tom Tupa was a far better punter than quarterback, and when Cris Carter was ruled ineligible prior to the season for having contact with an agent the big-play ability of the offense went out the door with him. The 224 points scored by the 1987 team are the fewest by any Buckeye team since 1971, when there were just ten games on the schedule. The defense also gave up some big plays at inopportune times, most notably the game-winning score by Iowa's Marv Cook on a 4th-and-23 play. The result of this combined malaise was a 6-4-1 record and Earle Bruce's ouster as head coach.

22.) 1989: Don't be fooled by the halfway-decent 8-4 record. The '89 Bucks were not a very good football team. They got their clocks cleaned by every quality opponent on their schedule- 42-3 at USC, 34-14 at Illinois, 28-18 at Michigan, and 31-14 by Auburn in the Hall of Fame Bowl. The only team with a winning record that the Buckeyes managed to beat was 6-5 Minnesota, and they needed to rally from a 31-0 second-quarter deficit to do it. In all fairness, this season did contain what I believe is the greatest hit in the history of Ohio State football- Zack Dumas's hospital-shot on Stacey Danley in the Hall of Fame Bowl.

21.) 1990: Freshman running back Robert Smith was sensational, but the rest of the 1990 Bucks were not: they went a pedestrian 7-4-1, including several low points- a lightning-shortened home loss to a USC, a deadlock at Indiana in which Coop played for the tie in the final minute, a galling home loss to Michigan that cost the Bucks a Rose Bowl bid (Greg Frey on the option?) and perhaps *the* lowest point in the history of Ohio State football- the humiliation at the hands of Air Force in the Liberty Bowl.

20.) 1991: Another of John Cooper's lackluster early teams, the '91 Buckeyes went 8-4, lost to Illinois for the fourth straight year, lost their bowl game for the third straight year (the Hall of Fame, to Syracuse) and lost to Michigan for the fourth straight year, this time by a humiliating 31-3 score. The rout at the hands of the Wolverines was punctuated by Desmond Howard's famous Heisman pose , struck at the end of a punt return for the touchdown. Not a good day to be a Buckeye fan; not a particularly good year to be one either. The biggest blow came prior to the season, when Robert Smith quit the team after a dispute with offensive coordinator Elliott Uzelac.

19.) 2000: The Buckeyes started out 5-0 but folded down the stretch, losing four of their last seven and getting embarrassed in the Outback Bowl by South Carolina, 24-7. The team imploded off the field as well, with Tyson Walter suing fellow lineman LeCharles Bentley and Matt Wilhelm calling out Ken-Yon Rambo for setting a poor example as a team captain. The only positive that came out of this mess was John Cooper walking the plank after the bowl loss. I hold no grudge against Coop- I've said before that his tenure was beneficial to the program overall- but it was time for him to go.

18.) 2001: Jim Tressell arrived on the scene and guided the Buckeyes to a 7-5 season that included the program's first win in Ann Arbor since 1987 and the second consecutive Outback Bowl loss to South Carolina, in which Ohio State rallied from a 28-0 deficit to tie the game, only to fall on a last-second field goal. Interspersed in this encouraging campaign were some bad losses- an ugly 13-6 setback at UCLA and defeats to Wisconsin and Penn State in which the Buckeyes blew 17-0 and 27-9 leads, respectively.

17.) 1992: Robert Smith returned to the fold for one more season before moving on to the NFL, and John Cooper avoided losing to Michigan for the first time since coming to Columbus when his Buckeyes tied the Wolverines 13-13. But he couldn't avoid his fifth straight defeat to Illinois or his fourth straight loss in a bowl game, a 21-14 defeat to Georgia in the Citrus Bowl. Overall, the Bucks finished 8-3-1, the first time since Coop took over in which they lost fewer than four games in a season.

16.) 1997: After going 22-3 in the previous two seasons, the Buckeyes went through a rebuilding year, going 10-3. They were 10-1 going into the Michigan game but lost to the eventual National-Champion Wolverines thanks to the heroics of Charles Woodson and the anti-heroics of Stanley Jackson, then were hammered by Florida State in the Sugar Bowl, 31-14. Joe Germaine sustained one of the worst beatings I've ever seen a Buckeye quarterback take in any game in that Sugar Bowl, as he was repeatedly leveled in vicious fashion by Seminole pass-rushers.

15.) 1994: After four losses and a tie, John Cooper finally beat Michigan , topping

the Wolverines 22-6 in Columbus. But once again, the Buckeyes lost at home to Illinois- their fourth consecutive defeat to the Illini in the Horseshoe- and once again they lost their bowl game, this time to Alabama in the Citrus Bowl, 24-17. The lowlight of the 9-4 season was a 63-14 evisceration at the hands of undefeated Penn State, the program's biggest margin of defeat since an 86-0 loss to Michigan in 1902. The nucleus of the 1994 Buckeyes would return to contend for the national championship the following two seasons.

14.) 2008: It was a season of unfulfilled expectations for the Buckeyes, who were expected to contend for a national championship but instead lost three games, including the 35-3 wipeout to USC and the Fiesta Bowl loss to Texas, the program's third consecutive bowl defeat. There were bright spots amid the frustration- namely, the emergence of Terrelle Pryor, the brilliance of Malcolm Jenkins, and the 42-7 beat-down of Michigan, the biggest margin of victory in the Game since Woody's 1968 National Champions destroyed the Wolverines 50-14. Overall though, it was perhaps the most disappointing season of the Jim Tressell era, when the preseason expectations are taken into account.

13.) 1985: Other than the upset of top-ranked Iowa - one of my all-time favorite Buckeye games- the '85 season was nothing to write home about. Earle's team went its usual 9-3, finished fourth in the Big Ten, lost to Michigan, and finished the season with a 10-7 victory over BYU in a horrifically dull Citrus Bowl. Saddest of all, Keith Byars had his senior season cut short by injuries, ruining any chance he had of winning the Heisman after his runner-up finish the year before.

12.) 2007: With the big playmakers from 2006 off to the NFL, the '07

Buckeyes overachieved (and benefited from a feeble schedule) to go 11-2 and reach the BCS title game for the second consecutive season. Beanie Wells emerged as one of the best backs in college football, and for the fourth straight season the Buckeyes defeated Michigan, sending Lloyd Carr on his way with a 14-3 victory. Despite the positives, the season ended on a sour note with the Buckeyes losing to LSU- the eighth loss without a victory against the SEC in bowl games. The loss in New Orleans, and the attendant further blow to the program's national reputation, took a good deal of the luster off what had been an unexpectedly successful campaign.

11.) 1995: The most explosive Ohio State team of my lifetime (and yours) the '95 Buckeyes won their first eleven games behind a combustible offense triggered by quarterback Bob Hoying, flanker Terry Glenn, tight end Rickey Dudley, Lombardi Award-winning tackle Orlando Pace and Heisman Trophy-winning tailback Eddie George. The offense scored a school-record 475 points. But ultimately the Buckeyes were done in by a weak run defense that collapsed completely in the regular-season finale at Michigan, yielding a whopping 313 yards by Wolverine tailback Tim Biakabutuka. Ohio State then went on to lose a rain-soaked Citrus Bowl to Peyton Manning and Tennessee. It was a bitterly disappointing end to what had shaped up as a vintage season for the Bucks.

10.) 2006: Speaking of bitterly disappointing ends; no Ohio State team had a bigger one than the 2006 team. Winners of twelve straight games on the season- nineteen in a row overall- and ranked number-one all year, the Buckeyes steamrolled into the BCS title game against Florida as heavy favorites, and three hours later left humbled and deflated after

a 41-14 loss. The ugly defeat wiped out nearly all of the good feeling that had accumulated during a campaign that included not only a 12-0 regular-season but Troy Smith's Heisman Trophy run, the seventh time a Buckeye player had been so honored. One game really can ruin a season.

9.) 1984: Led by the solid play of quarterback Mike Tomczak, freshman sensations Cris Carter and Chris Spielman, future NFL stars Jim Lachey and Pepper Johnson, and Heisman runner-up Keith Byars, the '84 Buckeyes survived painful losses to Purdue and Wisconsin to take the Big Ten title and the automatic bid to the Rose Bowl. They clinched their trip to Pasadena by beating Michigan 21-6 at the Horseshoe behind three touchdowns from Byars. Unfortunately, Coach Bruce's second trip to the Rose Bowl ended much like his first, with a narrow loss to USC.

8.) 1993: John Cooper's breakout year in Columbus. The Buckeyes won their first eight games and broke into the top five in the polls for the first time in Coop's tenure. Leading the way were Big Daddy Dan Wilkinson on defense and the sensational Joey Galloway on offense, along with Raymont Harris, Korey Stringer, and the quarterback tandem of Bob Hoying and Bret Powers. Unfortunately, the perfect season was ruined by a tie at Wisconsin and destroyed by a 28-0 shellacking at Michigan, but Coop did get his first bowl win, a 28-21 edging of BYU in the Holiday Bowl. The ending wasn't what anyone had in mind, but for the first time in a long time, the Buckeyes were back in the conversation when it came to National Championships- and with the exception of a few years, they haven't been out of it since.

7.) 2004: This season was redeemed by its final two games. The 2004 Buckeyes started out a mediocre 6-4, losing three consecutive games at one point, and were hamstrung by a terrible offense and an unsettled quarterback situation. Then, from out of nowhere, the offense exploded. First Troy Smith put on maybe the greatest performance by a Buckeye against Michigan, passing for 241 yards and running for 145 more in a 37-21 upset of the Wolverines. A few weeks later, with Smith suspended for taking money from a booster, the Buckeyes steamrolled Oklahoma State in the Alamo Bowl, 33-7. Just like that, a season of frustration had been transformed into a season of enormous promise. It seems odd to have an 8-4 record this high in the rankings, but that win over Michigan *ruled*. Might be my all-time favorite edition of the Game.

6.) 2003: I believe that were it not for the suspension of Maurice Clarett, this team would have won Ohio State's second consecutive National Championship. As it is, the '03 Buckeyes went 11-2 despite an inconsistent offense and beat Kansas State fairly handily in the Fiesta Bowl. The Clarett imbroglio, the misfiring offense, Jim Tressell's only loss to Michigan, and the fact that the Buckeyes were stuck with an unappealing match-up in Tempe with K-State instead of a re-match with Miami in the Orange Bowl, all combined to cast a pall over 2003. But 11-2 is nothing to scoff at, and this season did contain one of the greatest regular-season games in Buckeye history- the triple-overtime thriller at the ‘Shoe against Phillip Rivers and N.C. State.

5.) 1986: With the exception of the 1979 team- which was stocked mainly with Woody Hayes's recruits- the '86 Buckeyes were Earle Bruce's finest team. They got off to a terrible start, dropping the Kickoff

Classic to Alabama and getting bombed 40-7 by Washington, but rebounded to win nine straight before losing a 26-24 heartbreaker to Michigan in Columbus. The Buckeyes then ended the season with one of their finest bowl-game performances ever, ripping favored Texas A&M in the Cotton Bowl, 28-12. The Cotton Bowl victory and the combined brilliance of Cris Carter and Chris Spielman (my all-time favorite Buckeye) vault this team into my personal top five.

4.) 2005: In terms of pure talent, the 2005 Buckeyes were probably Jim Tressell's best team to date. Six starters- Santonio Holmes, Ted Ginn, Nick Mangold, A.J. Hawk, Bobby Carpenter, and Donte Whitner- were eventually taken in the first round of the NFL Draft, along with slot receiver Anthony Gonzales. Quarterback Troy Smith would go on to win the Heisman Trophy in 2006. When this team was on, it was almost unbeatable. Unfortunately, this team *was* beaten- twice, first by National Champion Texas in a thriller at the Horseshoe, and then by Penn State in Happy Valley. Those two defeats tinge the 2005 season with a "what-if" flavor. All that talent... and at the end, only a Fiesta Bowl beating of overmatched Notre Dame to show for it.

3.) 1996: This should have been John Cooper's first National Championship team. The '96 Buckeyes were awesome, especially on defense. Led by Mike Vrabel, Greg Bellisari, a monstrous freshman named Katzenmoyer and the sensational secondary of Shawn Springs, Antoine Winfield, Damon Moore and Rob Kelly, Ohio State gave up 131 points in 1996, the lowest total for any Buckeye team on this list. But as the defense had let down the side against Michigan the previous year, so too did the offense in '96. Facing the 17-point underdog Wolverines

at home, the Buckeyes jumped out to a 9-0 halftime lead, repeatedly settling for field goals- and the failures to capitalize would be costly. Electrified by a 69-yard Tai Streets touchdown at the beginning of the second half, Michigan came back to stun the Buckeyes 13-9, once again ruining their dreams of a National Championship. Ohio State came back to beat undefeated Arizona State in a dramatic Rose Bowl and settled for Number Two. It was a great season with a really great ending, but the Michigan loss- the most inexplicable of John Cooper's tenure- marred the whole thing.

2.) 1998: And *this* should have been Coop's second National Championship team. The 1998 Buckeyes, with an explosive offense led by Joe Germaine and David Boston and a shutdown defense led by Andy Katzenmoyer and Antoine Winfield, began the season at Number One. They ripped through their first eight opponents by an average score of 35-9. They couldn't lose. And then they *did* lose- at home, to a .500 Michigan State team, when they blew a 24-9 third-quarter lead thanks to fumbles and Bill Burke throwing jump balls to Plaxico Burress in 3rd-and-long situations. After the loss, Ohio State won their final three and easily defeated Texas A&M in the Sugar Bowl, becoming Coop's first and only team to beat Michigan and win its bowl game. But the result was another second-place finish in the polls. Coach Cooper never really recovered from the disaster against Michigan State. The downfall of his regime began that night in Columbus, November 7, 1998.

1.) 2002: Of course. This is the team that got it right. Superb on defense and special teams, and just resourceful and timely enough on offense, the 2002 Buckeyes simply didn't lose- ever. No season was more successful, and no season was more nerve-wracking, more stomach-churning, more just plain fun to watch. Not only did the Buckeyes win every single game, they won nearly half of them in classic, heart-stopping fashion, right down to their double-overtime conquest of fellow unbeaten Miami in the Fiesta Bowl. And they did it the right way, the smash-mouth way. Give me those 10-6 and 13-7 and 14-9 slobber-knockers; my kind of football. It was a decade 's worth of great moments crammed into one fourteen-game masterpiece. There will be more National Championships at Ohio State; more undefeated seasons. But there will never be another 2002.