

'Forgotten' champs to be honored 1957 team won without great star power

Friday, October 19, 2007 3:35 AM
BY TIM MAY/THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

Quick, name Ohio State's five widely recognized national championship teams.

Time's up! How did you do?

The 2002 team, that was the easiest. The 1954 team, who can forget coach Woody Hayes' first juggernaut with "Hopalong" Cassady? And 1942, for a history buff, that is a required memory, because it was the first. The 1968 team and its "super sophs" of Rex Kern, Jim Stillwagon and company, they re-awoke the Buckeye nation.

But that's only four. The one most often forgotten, which for some reason isn't regarded with the same esteem, is the 1957 team.

"I know it isn't," said Don Sutherin, one of the heroes of that team. "Me and some of the guys, we've often talked about that."

Ohio State fans will have a chance to leave those fellows speechless Saturday when the '57 team is introduced between the first and second quarters as it celebrates its 50th anniversary. It also still has a chance to get lost in the shuffle of Ohio State's homecoming game with Michigan State, which will include a halftime salute to Kern, newly elected to the college hall of fame.

Sutherin and his teammates know one of the reasons their bunch slips through the cracks of Ohio State history. It was a lack of star power, at least at the time.

Jim Houston, Dick Schafrath, Jim Marshall, Bob White, Don Clark, Dick LeBeau, Sutherin, Aurelius Thomas, Dan James, Frank Kremblas and co-captain Galen Cisco found fame later, Cisco as a baseball player. But in '57, it was the group that got it done, Cisco said.

"This year's team reminds me of our team in that way, because every game it seems like somebody new steps up," Cisco said. "Ours was a well-rounded group, too. At that point, we didn't have any so-called superstars, but we had some guys who were real good football players.

"Like this year's team, nobody picked us to win anything, but like this year, we also had a great defense, and that's where it starts."

Actually, it was the start that put the '57 Buckeyes behind the eight ball. They lost at home to Texas Christian, 18-14. But at season's end, a 10-7 victory over Oregon in the Rose Bowl, they gained the distinction of being the only Ohio State team to lose its opener, then win out.

Like this year's team, the turning point came after a first-half struggle at Washington, which in '57 was game two. The scored was tied at 7, "and Woody read us the riot act. He used words I can't repeat," Sutherin said.

Sutherin got the message. In the third quarter, he took a punt back 81 yards for a

touchdown, igniting a 35-7 victory and setting the national championship season in motion, with Sutherin going on to kick winning field goals in a 16-13 victory over Wisconsin and in the Rose Bowl.

"We just put it all together, we kept getting better every game," Sutherin said. "That's basically what I see happening with this year's team, too."

Except now there is a champion after each season, the winner of the Bowl Championship Series title game. The '57 Buckeyes, voted No. 1 in the United Press International poll, had to share their title with Auburn, No. 1 the Associated Press poll.

Even Cisco said, "We were never the best team Ohio State ever had. But we got it done."

Fifty years later, they're ready to take another bow.

tmay@dispatch.com