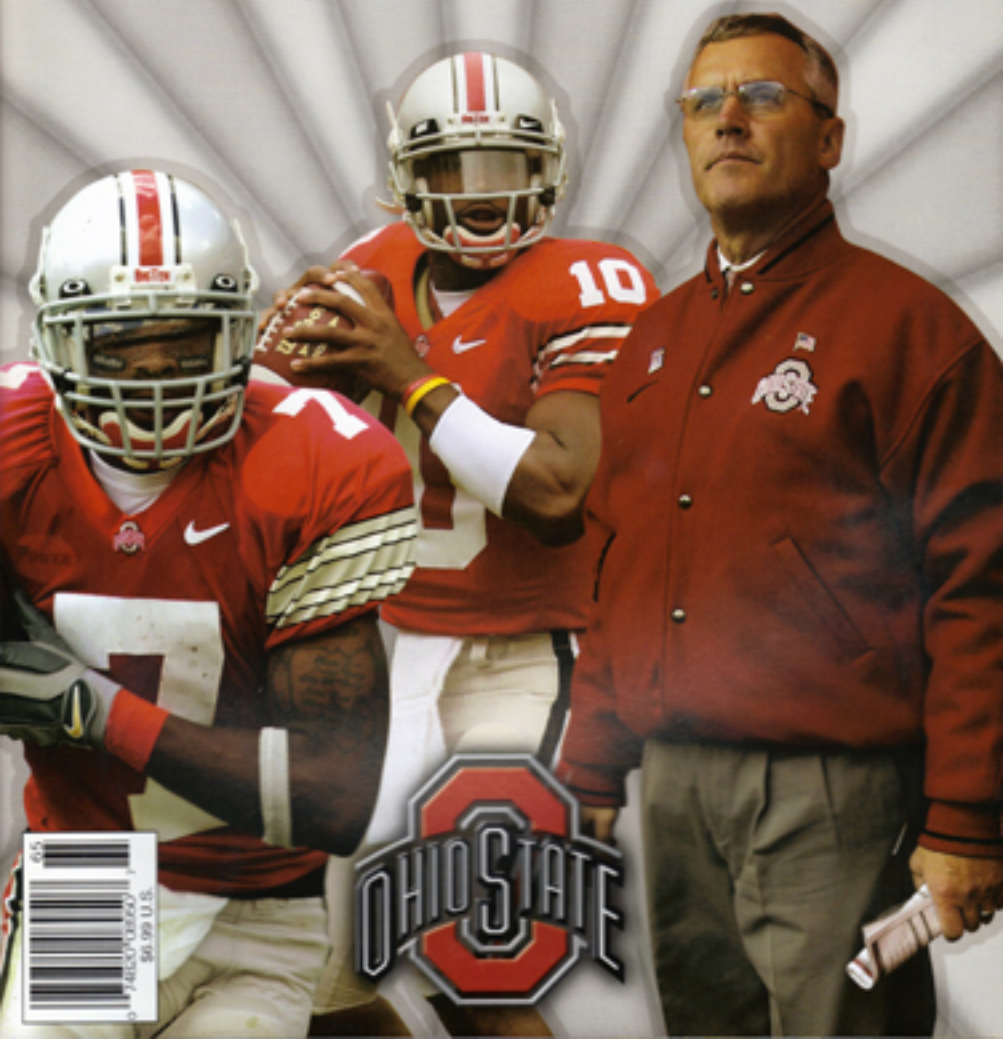


THE BATTLE FOR NO. 1 • BUCKEYES VS. GATORS • 8 PAGE PREVIEW

LINDY'S SPORTS PRESENTS

A CHAMPIONSHIP SEASON



OHIO STATE

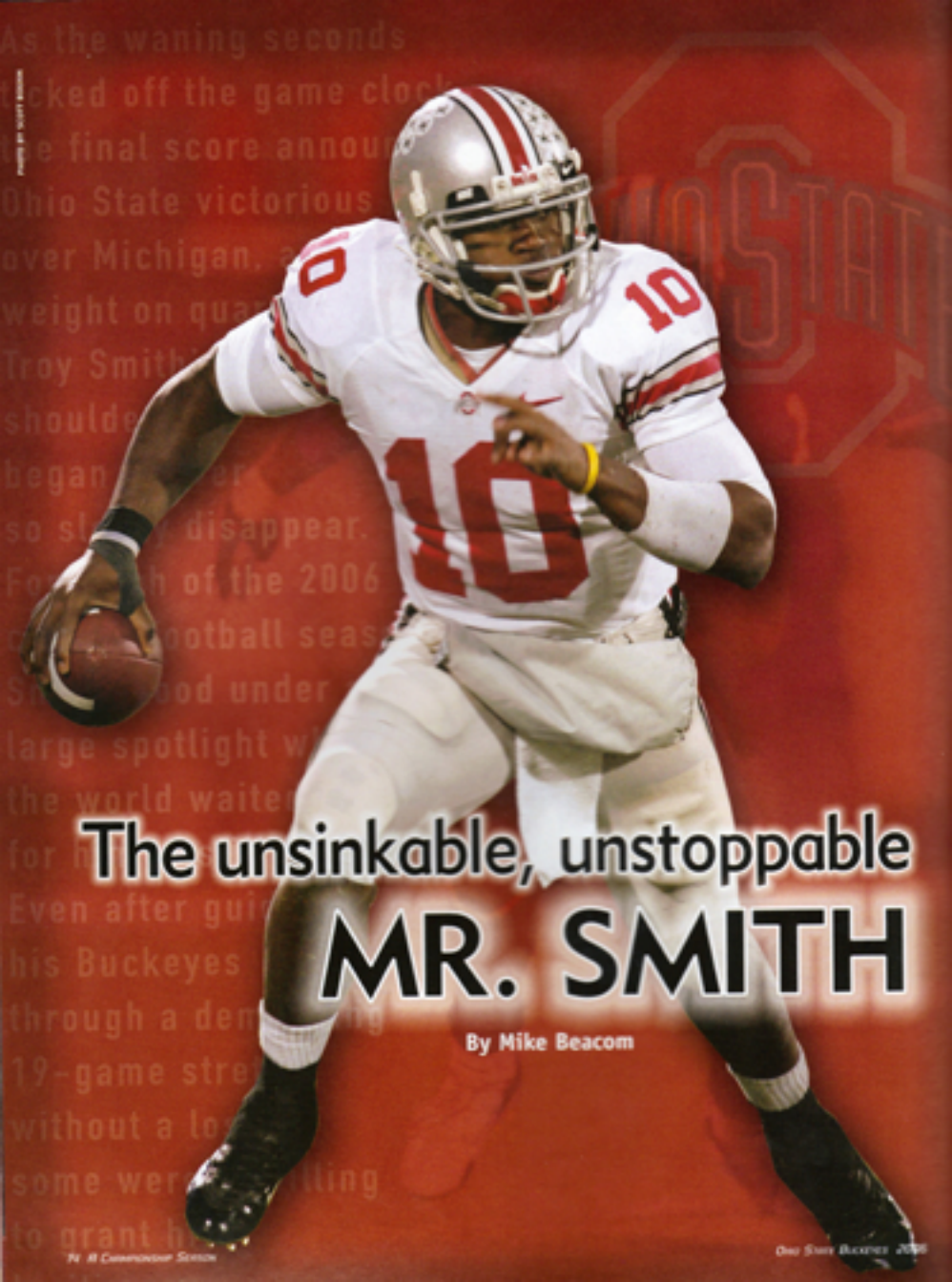


PHOTO BY SCOTT KAMRIN

The unsinkable, unstoppable
MR. SMITH

By Mike Beacom

As the waning seconds ticked off the game clock, the final score announcing Ohio State victorious over Michigan, a weight on quarterback Troy Smith's shoulders began to ever so slowly disappear.

For much of the 2006 college football season, Smith stood under a large spotlight where the world waited for him to slip up. Even after guiding his Buckeyes through a demanding 19-game stretch without a loss, some were unwilling to grant him legitimacy.

Consider that this preseason, many of the Heisman voters polled preferred Notre Dame's Brady Quinn, even though only a few months before Smith had beaten Quinn's Fighting Irish clan in the Fiesta Bowl. Many prognosticators picked Smith's No. 1-ranked Buckeyes to lose to Texas in September. And many more picked Smith and Ohio State to fall to Michigan in November. But all through his senior season Smith never faltered, never stumbled. If ever a quarterback was perfect, or near perfect anyhow, it was Smith, who completed a remarkable 67 percent of his passes and threw just five interceptions as compared to 30 touchdowns, a new single-season school record.

And by beating Michigan, Smith's critics had no choice but to finally concede the goods he rightfully deserved — respect, the Heisman Trophy, and a date in the BCS National Championship Game.

"Troy Smith's a great quarterback," Michigan's Chad Henne told reporters after the game, "and he proved that today."

One thing his biggest adversaries and critics can agree on is that Smith has come a long way since he landed the last of Ohio State's scholarships in 2002.

Originally enlisted for his natural athletic gifts — he comes from a Cleveland family that has produced a few college football players — Smith was not supposed to be the team's starting quarterback. Soon, though, it was clear that he had more potential than recruiting classmate Justin Zwick, and after accepting a one-game suspension over a rules infraction at the start of the 2005 season, Smith has made strides in each game since.

With one game remaining in his collegiate career, Smith ranks among the Buckeyes' best ever to line up behind center — that includes guys like Rex Kern, Art Schlüchter, Bobby Hoying and Joe Germaine. Smith's 25-2 record as a starter, and his exceptional athleticism probably earn him a spot among the Big Ten's all-time greats at the position.



A magnificent passer and athlete, Smith has become a winner by putting his team first.

But what has made Smith truly remarkable has been his play on the grand stage. In three career meetings with Michigan, Smith completed 68 percent of his passes, averaged 286 yards, threw seven touchdowns (just one pick), and collected 194 rushing yards and two scores. And, oh yeah, Ohio State won all three games. In highly anticipated road trips this season to Iowa and Texas, Smith completed 65 percent of his throws with six touchdown passes and not a single interception in the two games combined.

Smith doesn't mind the limelight and he can sure handle the pressure.

Said Texas coach Mack Brown of Smith, "... he has the ability to scramble and get out of a bad situation and then he has the ability to look down field and throw accordingly or he can run and make a first down with his feet. It is really hard to keep him on the ground."

A well-balanced passer and runner, Smith has proven he can beat defenses in a variety of ways. But perhaps his greatest football attribute is toughness.

"What I always value in a quarterback, where I start my assessment of a quarterback, is his toughness, and (Smith's) extremely tough," said Michigan coach Lloyd Carr before the big game. "If you watch him over the course of his career, he's proven he can take punishment and get up and compete.

I think he's an outstanding quarterback, there's no question about that."

In an era in which players are coached on what to say to the media, one can't help but believe Smith is being genuine when he tells reporters his individual success is the result of the efforts of the other 10 guys lined up on offense around him.

"I think the Heisman Trophy is a team award," said Smith. "I don't care who you are, you can be hands-down the most electrifying player in college football and lose two or three games and you're out of that. It's a team award first and foremost because our team is 12-0. I owe them everything in the world."

Added teammate Ted Ginn, Jr., who was a popular Heisman pick until Smith stole away all of the gusto, "He deserves it for all the work he has done, coming in every day and being a leader. Like Troy said, 'It is a team award,' but I think since they have to give it to one guy, it should go to him."

Smith's team-first mentality is one reason why Ohio State earned a spot in the national title game, and why Smith's name was called at the Heisman Trophy presentation ceremony.

Has there been a more gifted or more entertaining Heisman winner in recent years? Perhaps. A more humble winner? Probably not. ■

Mike Beacom is the Big Ten football editor for *Lindy's*.