

## Buckeyes Prevail In Overtime

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**CHAMPAIGN, Ill. (AP)** - Battered but still unbeaten after another scare on the road, Ohio State is one victory away from playing for its first national title since 1968.

And like always, Michigan is standing in the way.

"It's the biggest game of the year. It's our archrival, and if we win we, go to the Fiesta Bowl," linebacker Cie Grant said after Saturday's 23-16 overtime win over Illinois.

The second-ranked Buckeyes (12-0, 7-0 Big Ten) nearly lost that rare opportunity against the Illini, whose chance to spoil Ohio State's perfect season fell short when Illinois quarterback Jon Beutjer had his final pass batted down at the line of scrimmage in overtime.

Ohio State won the game on an 8-yard touchdown run by Maurice Hall, one of two backs who filled in for injured freshman Maurice Clarett.

The Buckeyes improved to 12-0 for the first time in school history, but to get into the national championship game on Jan. 3, they'll have to beat Michigan in Columbus next week. A victory would leave Ohio State and Iowa both unbeaten in the Big Ten - they don't play each other - but the Buckeyes would have the better overall record.

"Nobody said winning the Big Ten championship would be easy," Jenkins said.

Especially against Michigan. The Wolverines ended Ohio State's bid for perfect seasons in 1995 and 1996.

"We're going to get focused on Michigan, because we know if we lose that, none of this means anything," Jenkins said.

"This is the playoffs," Ohio State linebacker Cie Grant added. "Next week is the semifinals and if we win that we're playing in the finals."

Illinois (4-7, 3-4) came very close to sending the game to a second overtime, but Beutjer's third-down pass to Walter Young in the end zone was ruled incomplete when the official deemed that Young was bobbling the ball when he went out of bounds.

Replays appeared to confirm that officials made the right call. Of course, Ohio State agreed.

"The one on our sideline, he was bobbling it. It's a good call," Buckeyes coach Jim Tressel said.

Illinois sent the game to OT tied at 16 when John Gockman kicked 48-yard field goal on the last play of regulation. The ball started out left and stayed that way, barely falling inside the left upright. It was the third field goal of the game for Gockman, the Illini's long-range kicker who had just three field-goal attempts coming into the game.

It was the second straight week the Buckeyes had struggled on the road against a team with a losing record, only to pull out a win in the end. Ohio State trailed Purdue last week but won 10-6 when Michael Jenkins caught a 37-yard TD pass with 1:36 left.

"We stick together and keep fighting and find ways to win," Jenkins said. "Everyone in the locker room is happy right now. We're just glad to get out of here with a win."

The Buckeyes played without Clarett, who was in uniform but never got in the game. Clarett re-injured his left shoulder last month in a win against Penn State and has played little since. In last week's win over Purdue, he had 14 carries for 52 yards.

Clarett's absence was a surprise. Tressel said earlier in the week that Clarett probably would play, but the coach decided Saturday to only play the freshman if Hall and Lydell Ross faltered.

"We didn't know Maurice wasn't (starting) until game time. So I didn't have time to think about him not being out there," Hall said.

With Clarett standing on the sideline, Hall led the Buckeyes with 69 yards rushing on 17 carries. Ross, who started

in place of Clarett, had had 51 yards on 15 carries.

Ohio State kicker Mike Nugent had three field goals, the last a 27-yarder that put the Buckeyes up 16-13. Nugent later missed a 41-yard attempt into the wind with 5:31 to go. It was Nugent's second miss of the game, the only two he's missed all year.

Leading 6-3 at halftime, Ohio State gave up its first touchdown in a month when Beutjer threw an 18-yard touchdown pass to Young. Beutjer froze Ohio State's Dustin Fox on a pump fake, and Young ran past the defensive back and into the end zone.

Beutjer was 27-of-45 for 305 yards, but he was sacked six times and was hurried on several other plays by a defense that had been giving up just 12 points a game.

However, the Buckeyes came right back with a long pass of their own. And just like last week against Purdue, it was Craig Krenzel to Jenkins that helped the Buckeyes regain the lead.

After two runs and an incomplete pass, Krenzel threw a 50-yard touchdown pass to Jenkins, who turned to catch the ball moments before defensive back Michael Hall saw it coming.

"I couldn't see the ball. It got up in the lights and I said, 'I can't see it,'" Jenkins said. "Luckily, it fell right in my hands."

Jenkins had six catches for 147 yards and a touchdown.

Illinois needed a win over the Buckeyes to have a shot at making a bowl game, but those hopes are gone - just a year after winning the Big Ten championship and going to a BCS bowl.

"We fought real hard today. We put everything on the line," running back Antoino Harris said. "I think our defense played a tremendous game. They played the best game that I've seen all year."