In his fifth and final season as Ohio State's head football coach, Sam Willaman, himself a Buckeye letterman (1911 and '13), had his best campaign, going 7-1 (4-1 and third place in the Big Ten Conference). The year was 1933 and the lone loss was to archrival Michigan, 13-0. By most standards, Willaman's five-year record in Columbus of 26-10-5 would be more than sufficient to support his continuation as coach. But Ohio State had not won a conference championship since 1920, and Athletic Director Lynn St. John had become increasingly frustrated with Willaman's lack luster, unimaginative offensive coaching style, which failed to excite or inspire the Buckeye faithful. St. John called in his coach and, after reviewing the particulars, requested his resignation for the good of the program and the need to restore confidence. Willaman managed to secure the head coaching job at Western Reserve before resigning his post in Columbus on January 30, 1934.

Speculation on Willaman's replacement was typically wide spread, and such names as Gus Dorais, then Detroit U. coach, and Don Peden of Ohio University, were rumored to be under consideration. The favored successor was thought to be then University of Chicago coach and innovative T-formation specialist Clark Shaughnessy. The search process concluded on March 2, 1934, when Ohio State's Athletic Board officially agreed to the choice of Francis Albert (Aloysius, according to one source) Schmidt as the new coach. A Kansas native and University of Nebraska educated, Schmidt had won a football “N” in 1905 but was not, as one Ohio State football reference book declares, “one of the school's all-time greats” He went on to earn a law degree at Nebraska before starting his coaching career as a staffer at Tulsa (1915-16).

After Army service in World War I, Schmidt returned to Tulsa and was the head man from 1919-1921. His work started impressively, as his Tulsa squads won two Oklahoma Collegiate Conference championships in the first two seasons, and the 1921 team finished second. During his Tulsa tenure he won 24, lost three, and tied two. In 1922 Coach Schmidt changed jobs, moving on to Arkansas of the Southwest Conference where he remained for seven seasons, winning 42, losing 20, and tying three His best year was 1927, when the Razorbacks went 8-1-0, losing only to the conference champs, Texas A & M, 40-6. After the next season (1928) Schmidt didn’t have to move his furniture too far, when he accepted his third head coaching job, this one at Texas Christian of the same conference.

As coach of the Horned Frogs for half a decade (1929-1933), his very successful coaching skills produced a 46-6-5 (25-5-2 in the SWC) ledger and conference championships in 1929 and 1932. Had Schmidt stayed on at T.C.U., he would have had the services of college (and later pro) all-timer, “Sling-in” Sammy Baugh, who made new coach Leo “Dutch” Meyer’s job a lot easier. But for Coach Schmidt, a new challenge was at hand in Columbus, Ohio with Ohio State.
The Buckeyes had a good start under Schmidt in 1934, winning all games but one – a 14-13 loss to Illinois on the road which cost them a tie with Minnesota for the Big Ten championship. For his second season at Ohio State in 1935, Coach Schmidt had plenty of returning regulars: Merle Wendt and Trevor Rees (ends); Charley Hamrick and Gilbert Harre (tackles); Inwood Smith and Jim Karcher (guards); Gomer Jones (center and captain); Stan Pincura and William Henry Harrison “Tip” Dye (quarterbacks); Dick Heekin, Arthur “Frank” Boucher and John Bettridge (halfbacks); and Frank Antenucci and John Kabealo (fullbacks). Promising sophomores “Jumping” Joe Williams (halfback) and Gus Zarnas (guard) were to have fine seasons. With Schmidt’s razzle-dazzle offensive style, much optimism for potential national honors was being felt at OSU.

The 1935 season opener was against Kentucky at Columbus on October 5, and the game was, as has been described in other places, “much closer than the score indicated” The Buckeyes scored first in the opening period on a pass from Pincura to Bettridge, who merely had to stand in the end zone waiting for the ball. Pincura’s PAT attempt was blocked. Late in the third quarter Bettridge tallied once again – this time from a yard out. The third and final Ohio score in the 19-6 win was by Joe Williams from the one, and George Brungard kicked the point after. Kentucky was outplayed but held the Buckeyes to a rushing advantage of but 208 yards to 157 before the largest season home-opener crowd (56,686) in Ohio Stadium history – to that time.

Next up was Drake from Des Moines, Iowa – coached by a former teammate of Red Grange’s at Illinois, Vivian J. Green. Because of Drake’s lower tier status and the likelihood of the outcome, the home crowd dropped to half that of the opener. To no one’s surprise, it wasn’t much of a contest as Coach Schmidt used his entire squad in rolling up an 85-7 score – inspiring the day’s nickname as the “Drake Relays” It was for such unrelieved offensive onslaughts as this that the coach acquired the moniker, “Close-the-gates-of-mercy-Schmidt,” and the Ohio State team came to be labeled as the “Scarlet Scourge.” As of the beginning of the 2002 season, the 85 points remains as the highest single game tally in Ohio Stadium history. Likely qualifying for their varsity letter “O” for this single outing would be Joe Williams (four touchdowns and the leading rusher); Frank Boucher (eight yards per carry); and Dick Beltz (seven yards per carry).

Next the Buckeyes hosted Northwestern in their season’s first Big Ten game. The outcome was determined in the first quarter, after the Wildcats’ Steve Toth launched an errant punt which rolled out of bounds at his own 40 yard line. Several pass plays and hand-offs later, senior halfback Dick Heekin carried it in from seven yards out for Ohio State, and Beltz made the point after. Still in the first period NU’s Toth again punted poorly, with the ball again going out of bounds at his own 40. After several plays Ohio was at midfield following a sack when quarterback “Tip” Dye passed to Williams who raced down the sideline to score. Early in the second quarter, Joe Williams, after several fine carries, scored on a jaunt of 35 yards, and Sam Busich’s conversion made it 21-0. Northwestern revived somewhat by crossing the goal line in the third quarter when halfback Don Heap took a Hugh Duvall lateral and scooted around Ohio State’s left end for their lone score of the day. A final fourth quarter Ohio State touchdown by Frank Antenucci on a pass from the ailing Pincura closed out the Buckeyes’ 28-7 win.

With an unbeaten string of nine games going back to the October 20, 1934 win over Colgate, the Buckeyes next traveled to Indiana to face the Hoosiers – who were also under a second year coach in Alvin Nugent “Bo” McMillin. Indiana was over-matched, but five minutes into the first quarter Hoosier quarterback Vern Huffman (the 1936 Big Ten MVP) connected on a pass to Roy Eads good for 49 yards and their only score. As the first quarter wound down, Indiana mishandled a center snap and Ohio recovered the loose ball on the Hoosiers’ 13 yard line. On a fourth down play Dye passed to Williams who carried it in, and Beltz converted for a 7-6 OSU lead that held up until the half ended. The Buckeyes turned on the power in the second half, scoring three more times (twice by Boucher and one by Williams) to round off the 28-6 win.
Indiana, out of desperation, passed almost non-stop but five were intercepted.

Next up was a game that has become fabled as one of the most memorable college football games of all-time, and has been discussed by followers of the sport for close to seven decades. At Columbus on November 2, 1935, Ohio State, now 4-0 for the year, would play Notre Dame for the first time – the Irish 5-0 and coached by former “four horseman” Elmer Layden. The clash was projected to be a likely battle for the national championship, and it was to be an encounter of dissimilar coaching styles Layden’s approach was tied in closely to that of his mentor, Knute Rockne, who would routinely make substitutions of the entire lineup. Schmidt had gained much success by way of trick laterals, a well-honed aerial game, and shovel passes to his ground gainers. He also made complete backfield substitutions, while leaving the line intact. Layden’s five consecutive wins were all pretty conclusive, save for a 96 squeaker over a strong Pittsburgh team. On the day of the game Coach Layden, reflecting a Rockne-esque trait, told the press he didn’t expect to do too well, and Ohio State was generally considered a slight favorite.

The scoring started in the first quarter when the Buckeyes’ Frank Antenucci intercepted a Mike Layden (the coach’s younger brother) pass. Returning the interception from the Ohio 24 yard line, Antenucci advanced the ball some ten yards and then lateralled to backfield mate Frank Boucher, who completed the 76-yard trip down the sideline for the TD. Dick Beltz then converted for a 7-0 OSU lead. Shortly after the start of the second quarter, Buckeye Stan Pincura intercepted another Irish pass and carried the ball to midfield. Coach Schmidt’s smoothly functioning offense moved the ball to the Notre Dame three, and soph Joe Williams then bullied over for the score. But the PAT was missed, and OSU led 13-0 at halftime.

It was felt that the Buckeyes would come out after the break and really start to pour it on. The OSU defense had shown it could stymie their physically smaller opponents, and the Irish seemed to be pretty well in check. The third stanza produced no scoring, but quarter number four would soon unfold as a “Day of Infamy” for the home team and most of the 81,000 spectators. Chicagoan Andy Pilney had entered the game in the third quarter as part of Coach Layden’s second team “shock troops,” and he returned an Ohio punt to the Bucks’ 13 yard line as the third quarter ended. Pilney then passed to Francis Gaul who was stopped at the Buckeye one, but fullback Steve Miller then bolted in for Notre Dame’s first score. Ken Stilley’s conversion attempt hit the cross-bar, and Ohio’s lead was 13-6 with about 14 minutes remaining.

Ohio took the following kickoff but couldn’t pick up a first down, and then punted to Pilney who ran it to his own 46 before going out of bounds. The Irish, finally solving the Buckeye defense, once again got to the one yard line but Miller fumbled and OSU’s Jim Karcher recovered it in the end zone for the touchback. Ohio’s offense again stalled and was forced to punt, the ball going out of bounds on the Irish 20 with about four minutes remaining.

Early in the fourth quarter, Coach Schmidt had made what, certainly in hindsight, was a major
tactical miscalculation: he had removed his regular backfield and, under existing rules, a player
taken out of a game could not return in the same quarter. Since players then played both offense
and defense, a liability in the OSU secondary evolved. The replacement players, plain and simple,
were not as quick, as experienced, or as tall. Now, with the ball on their own 20, Andy Pilney of
the Irish passed to Wally Fromhart who carried the ball to the Ohio 33. Several more pin-point
Pilney passes covered 18 more yards to the 15. Then, with his fourth straight completion Pilney
connected with Mike Layden for the score to make it 13-12 as Fromhart missed the PAT.

Pilney’s following attempt at an on-side kick didn’t work, as Ohio’s Charley Gales picked up the
ball and moved it to the Buckeye 47 with close to a minute left on the clock. On the next play,
OSU’s Dick Beltz attempted a run off-tackle but fumbled, and as the ball rolled toward the
sideline Notre Dame substitute Henry Pojman managed to touch it just as it went out of bounds.
Pilney then backed up to pass, but, with his receivers covered, ran 32 yards to the Ohio 19. But
on the tackle Pilney was injured and had to be carried off on a stretcher. His replacement was
a senior from Staten Island New York, named Bill Shakespeare.

Shakespeare’s first pass was short and nearly picked off by Beltz, who would have been
transformed from goat to hero had he been able to intercept the errant throw. With 30 seconds
left Coach Layden sent in Jim McKenna with the play that turned out to be one of the truly most
memorable of all-time. Shakespeare took the snap and lofted the ball toward Wayne Millner, who
leaped and caught the ball in the end zone for the dramatic game-winner. Down 13-0 Notre Dame
had scored three times in the fourth for the 18-13 win that left the majority of Ohio Stadium
speechless – and devastated. Hopes for an Ohio State national championship were now in shreds.

Three games remained for the now diminished “Scarlet Scourge,” and the team next took on
Chicago, which was led by the first winner of what became the Heisman Trophy, Jay Berwanger,
at Stagg Field. It was a rain-soaked field, and the Buckeyes, no doubt still demoralized from the
prior week, fell behind 13-0 midway through the third period. An 85-yard dazzling jaunt by
Berwanger, which was said to “seal the verdict” for winning the Heisman, accounted for Chicago’s
second score. Coach Schmidt’s Buckeyes finally got things together and won the game 20-13, as
Heekin (one yard), Wendt (30-yard pass from Pincura), and Williams (15-yard run) scored for the
Buckeyes. Still unbeaten in the Big Ten Conference, the Buckeyes were then back in Ohio
Stadium to face Illinois on a cold, drizzling day for Homecoming. The game’s lone score came in
the opening quarter when “Tippy” Dye, the shortest and lightest member of the Ohio State
squad, returned an Illinois punt 63 yards to paydirt. The 6-0 win kept Ohio State even with
Minnesota which also was 4-0 in the conference.

Ohio’s 1935 season-ender was against Michigan at Ann Arbor the following Saturday. The
Wolverines, under former star Harry Kipke, were in the midst of lean times with sub-par seasons
from 1934 through 1937, following which Herbert “Fritz” Crisler replaced Kipke. At this point
in 1935 the Wolverines were 4-3-0 and not prepared to give Francis Schmidt’s team much of a
test. It turned out to be: Ohio State 38 Michigan 0, the worst Maize and Blue defeat in 32 years
of competition between the arch-rivals. Since Bernie Bierman’s Minnesota team also won their
final game (337 over Wisconsin), the Golden Gophers finished tied with the Buckeyes for the
Big Ten Conference title. Ohio State finished the 1935 season with an overall record of 7-1-0,
along with a #7 national finish in the Dickinson Ratings. Five of the Buckeyes received All-
America mention for 1935, highlighted by Gomer Jones who was the co-consensus A-A center.

Francis Schmidt, flamboyant and as energized as a coach could aspire to be, led the Buckeyes
for five more seasons – winning the Big Ten again in 1939. The legendary Paul Brown would
take over in Columbus in 1941, and in the second of his three seasons (1942) Ohio State would
finally win the national championship.