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HATE: THE EARLY YEARS

It wouldn't be Ann Arbor if it weren't so freaking cold.

The calendar says November 21, 2003. Thanksgiving hasn't even arrived, but the late-night wind is making a February-like assault on any flesh that's foolishly been left exposed. It's a good night to be indoors, which works out well because that's where all the action is, anyway.

About halfway down a quiet street called Maynard, a bit off the beaten path and just behind the main drag, the tranquil mood changes as you approach a red brick building. It houses a bar called Scorekeepers. Even standing outside, you can hear a dull din, a hint of what's behind the wooden door.

Inside, Scorekeepers is a familiar-looking bar, with neon beer signs, watery drafts, and big TVs. In other words—if the name didn't already give it away—it's a sports bar. Just past the bouncer checking IDs up front is a large room that looks like a cross between a German beer garden and a ski lodge, with, of course, all the sports bar trappings. To the

right is a bunch of small tables, and a long wooden bar abuts the wall on the left. In the back, a set of stairs leads to a second floor that has another bar and a pool table.

But you'd be hard-pressed to make it that far. The place is packed and it's damn loud, thanks to the *Slippery When Wet*–era Bon Jovi that's being played at arena-level volume and all the sports fans trying to talk over the music. This is really nothing unusual. After all, it's Friday night, and this bar is usually crowded and noisy on Friday nights.

Yet tonight Scorekeepers feels different. It *feels* significant. For proof, you need look no farther than the man standing about 10 feet from the door. You can't miss him: beneath a warm, beer-fueled flush, his taut neck muscles bulge grotesquely, almost threatening to rupture. On any other night, this might indicate that something is terribly wrong. Tonight, given the circumstances, it's perfectly normal. This is what a person looks like when he is yelling, very loudly.

His rage is directed at another man standing directly in front of him. You can't miss this guy either. His lips are tightly pursed together, as if he's trying to inflate a balloon or worse, prevent his own head from exploding. The men stand just inches apart, the gap between them bridged by flying spittle and incoherent obscenities.

They look remarkably similar, though, almost as if they could be best friends or even brothers. Both are white, in their early twenties, with short-cropped, light-colored hair and muscular, athletic builds. Both are wearing blue jeans—and sweatshirts.

And in the sweatshirts lies all the difference either man—or anyone in this bar, town, and state—needs.

The "neck" is wearing a blue sweatshirt with yellow letters, and Mr. Lips is wearing a red sweatshirt with gray letters.

Although they'd never met before this evening, their sweatshirts alone were enough to drive a permanent wedge between them. They knew when they first laid eyes on each other that they hated what the other man stood for—or, more precisely, who he rooted for.

One man is a fan of the University of Michigan Wolverines. And the other loves the Ohio State University Buckeyes.

In a little over 12 hours, these two football teams will run onto a field and, for all intents and purposes, settle the argument going on between these two fans, the gist of which is: whose team is better?

Tomorrow's contest is a regular season college football game, but the stakes are enormously high. A conference championship, a possible invitation to the national championship game and—most importantly—bragging rights are all on the line. That's why both of these men are so worked up. That's what makes one grown man get in another man's face. And that's ultimately what makes those neck muscles strain and twitch and those lips press together so severely.

But that's not even the half of it.

Arguments about sports occur every second of every day. Guys in bars yell at each other all the time. Opposing fans tell each other how much they "suck" and how their own team will kick the other team's ass. This is why sports bars exist in the first place—to be a venue for such behavior. And if you think about it, that's pretty much the driving force behind all spectator sports.

But there is another reason why tomorrow is not just any other game. There's history here. Lots and lots of history.

When the rivalry between the Buckeyes and the Wolverines began, the game of basketball was only six years old. The first World Series wouldn't be played until six years later. Any whisper of the NHL was still 20 years away, and

the mighty NFL wouldn't come on the scene for another 24 seasons. In other words, their rivalry began in the sporting world–equivalent of the Jurassic period, and it would culminate when the teams meet tomorrow for the 100th time in 106 years. It will be the final piece in a century-sized collection of college football games, played between two perennially powerful opponents, and the renewal of the greatest rivalry in the world of sports.

How can this game make such a bold claim? Easily.

No other regularly scheduled game between any two teams in any sport is as consequential, as often. Since 1935, the year that Michigan and Ohio State moved their annual contest to the final week of the conference schedule, the Wolverines and the Buckeyes have decided the Big Ten championship between themselves—winner take all—19 times. Twenty-one other times, one of the teams going into the game had a shot for at least a share of the conference title. This means that on average, for two out of every three times that Ohio State and Michigan have faced off, the result has been huge. (Even the Yankees and the Red Sox have played some meaningless duds over the years.) And in the rare instance that one of the teams wasn't having a great season, that team relished playing the spoiler. In the last decade alone, one school has wrecked the other's championship hopes four different times.

And it's not just regional. Today the spotlight is on the Bowl Championship Series, and the OSU–UM game almost always shakes up the national standings. Since 1987, at least one (usually, both) of the teams has been ranked in the Top 15 of all Division I-A football teams in the country, when coming into their annual grudge match.

The best rivalry is one that is evenly matched, and this rivalry pretty much defines it. In the last 50 years, the

Michigan–Ohio State series has been deadlocked at 24–24–2. That's 24 wins by each team and 2 ties. You don't have to be a statistician to understand that this is not just evenly matched, it's an unambiguous dead heat.

While these statistics pertain to the outcome of the game, the rivalry has come to mean much more to both the players and the fans. Thanks to countless remarkable football games between these two huge schools, drawing hundreds of thousands of alumni and followers, the rivalry is now an enormous cultural event. Traditions have evolved specifically around this annual game. It is treated like a holiday, a family reunion, and the biggest party of the year, all rolled into one. It's so colossal, it doesn't even have to be mentioned specifically by name. Just say "the Game" in the Midwest or to either school's alumni or fans—or to any college football fan, for that matter—and everyone will know exactly what you're talking about.

This Game has taken root smack dab in the middle of the country, where football is actually more American than apple pie and young fans choose sides as soon as they're old enough to talk. The universities lie only 200 miles away from each other, and on that one particular Saturday near the end of November, friends, colleagues, neighbors, and even lovers can find themselves enemies for a day.

Since 1922, a mere 6,996,564 people have seen the Game in person. (The location alternates between Ann Arbor and Columbus each year.) It draws old friends and alumni back to the campus of their alma mater—to see the best game of the season and to party. And as new freshman classes arrive on both campuses new batches of fans claim their student tickets and circle the one game on the calendar that's an absolute can't-miss.

For fans who can't make the trip or aren't lucky enough

to get tickets to see the Game in person in either school's enormous stadium, there's always TV. The game airs nationally and is one of the highest-rated college football matchups of the year.

The action on the field is inevitably smashmouth, hard-hitting, heartpounding, highlight film–worthy college football played at the highest level. For the participants, the Game is the one they dream about while growing up, wanting nothing more than to play big-time college football. And long after they've left school, it's always the one they remember most vividly, and—win or lose—it's the one their college football careers are invariably measured by.

Tomorrow, now fewer than 12 hours away, the referee will blow a whistle and the annual slugfest will resume. For fans and players alike, hearts will relocate to throats, teeth will clench, palms will sweat, and voices will grow hoarse from yelling. In fact, the scene won't be dissimilar to the one inside Scorekeepers, which has become increasingly unbearable for any non-diehard. Even slipping outside into the night air isn't easy; you have to fight your way through the crowd and sidestep the feuds.

Back on the street, the scene has changed. A line has formed in front of the bar, composed of fans who are willing to stand in the freezing cold just for a taste of the excitement that's going on inside. Except one. A petite blonde in a big, puffy, white winter jacket stands near the door, waiting with the others but not nearly as cheerfully. The freezing air of the late Michigan night (by now, actually early morning) nips at her pink nose and ears. The sounds of arguments, boasts, cheers, and fight songs filter out of the bar and onto the sidewalk every time the door opens. She hears the excitement but just shrugs. She is impatient. She is cold.

"It's just a football game," she sighs, to no one in particular.

Just a football game? You've got to be kidding. This is a 100-yard war.

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And it started, as wars often do, with a border skirmish.

First, take a look at a map. Any map of the continental United States will do. Now find Michigan. It's the state near the top, right of center and surrounded by a bunch of big blue lakes. You can't miss it; it actually looks a bit like a human hand, and the people who live there actually do use their own hands as rudimentary demonstration tools to explain to out-of-staters exactly where their home is. As in "Grand Rapids? It's over here," people will say, while pointing to the left side of their palms.

Now let your gaze fall slightly downward and to the right—catty-corner, actually (to use an expression that's popular in the region). See the block below Michigan and to the right? That's Ohio. It doesn't have a cute shape. It can't really be likened to any part of the human anatomy (except maybe the pancreas).

The two states were not always so clearly defined.

In 1787, a piece of paper called the Northwest Ordinance set the southern boundary of the area that would eventually become the Michigan Territory. It was defined by a line drawn due east from the bottom of Lake Michigan to Lake Erie. This seemed very basic and sensible, but you don't have to be a surveyor to understand that the accuracy of this border line depends on knowing exactly where those lakes lie. Well, in 1787, Lake Michigan—all 22,300 square miles of it—was misplaced, was thought to be a bit farther

north than it actually is. As a result, the border line hit Lake Erie just north of the mouth of the Maumee River.

This didn't seem to be a problem until the 19th century, when a group of people living south of this line started calling that area part of the Ohio Territory. And when it came time to join the Union, the steadfast citizens of Ohio stuck with the old, inaccurate line that had been drawn by the Northwest Ordinance, and the territory officially became part of the United States of America on February 19, 1803.

A few years later, the folks living north of the new state of Ohio formally created the Michigan Territory, and they took a second look at that old border. A newly commissioned survey pushed Lake Michigan southward to where it rightfully belonged, and the redrawn line between Lakes Michigan and Erie put 468 square miles of land in question, including the mouth of this so-called Maumee River, which was being eyed as the future location for a port city to be named Toledo. The Michigan Territory then claimed this land for itself.

Nobody really cared about this claim until twenty-five years later, when Michigan petitioned the U.S. government to become a state and the issue of who actually owned the area called the "Toledo Strip" began to heat up. Michigan had quietly assumed control of the land, but Ohioans still felt it was rightfully theirs. Since Ohio was already a state at this time complete with representatives in Washington, it lobbied to block Michigan's acceptance into the Union until Congress acknowledged its version of the boundary.

In response to Ohio's defiance, the acting governor of the Michigan Territory, a brash young leader named Stevens T. Mason, advised the passage of a law that forbade any state to govern a piece of Michigan's territory. Ohio governor Robert Lucas then countered by mustering a volunteer

force of about 600 men—fully armed and equipped. He marched into the disputed region, met no resistance, and set up a new county that he named after himself. At the same time, Mason brought about 1,200 men outside present-day Toledo and waited. The interstate one-up-manship was obvious as the Ohio legislature voted to approve a $300,000 military budget and the Michigan Territory countered with a budget of $315,000. Adding to the pressure cooker was a whole lot of hype, as reports from the period suggest that the entire country was wild with excitement over a possible clash between the two states. Even the pundits weighed in, as former president John Quincy Adams, now a representative of Massachusetts, remarked, in support of Michigan, "Never in the course of my life have I known a controversy of which all the right [is] so clearly on one side and all the power so overwhelmingly on the other."

During the summer of 1835, authorities from Michigan harassed Ohio supporters and arrested any land surveyors who attempted to go back in and redefine the border to their liking. The Ohioan force intermittently retaliated with a show of force and sent Michigan supporters fleeing into the woods.

The only real action came in the fall of 1835. The Michigan militia arrested a man named Major Benjamin Franklin Stickney and tied him to a horse for transport to the nearest court. His son Two Stickney (not to be confused with his older brother, who was actually named One Stickney), took offense at his father's treatment, and the militia tried to arrest him, too. In the scuffle, Two got out a pen knife and stabbed a deputy sheriff named Joseph Wood. It was just a flesh wound, but blood was spilled.

At this point, President Andrew Jackson did not want to hear any more reports of fighting in the hinterlands, so he offered a solution that was quick *and* political. Ohio, which

already was a state and therefore had a valuable voting population, would get their way. (It was, after all, almost an election year.) The old inaccurate line would stand, and the Toledo Strip would remain in Ohio. As a sort of restitution, Michigan would be allowed to enter the Union, without this particular piece of land but with a huge piece of frozen tundra south of Lake Superior known as the Upper Peninsula.

Fair? At the time, it didn't appear so to the people of Michigan, and what became known as the Toledo War left a very bitter taste in the mouths of residents of both states. Michiganders felt that they'd been shafted, and Ohioans didn't like the way they were preyed upon. In fact, according to many historians, the people of Michigan (and later the University of Michigan football team) got the nickname Wolverines from Ohioans at this time.

The wolverine is a feisty 25-pound member of the weasel family ferocious enough to fight off bears and wolves that lived in the region at this time. Ohioans thought that Michiganders, like the animal, were pretty ruthless and aggressive. It was no term of endearment, but the nickname stuck, nonetheless. While the issue of the Toledo Strip was officially dead, interstate animosity had only just begun.

Sixty-two years later, the forces of Michigan and Ohio clashed again, but this time the disputed territory in question had hash marks. At first, the game didn't exactly resemble the one played today from Portland to Miami every fall weekend, but things were changing fast.

Football's earliest ancestor was a free-for-all played by the ancient Greeks, in which an unlimited number of players attempted to move a ball over a goal line by kicking, throwing,

or running with it. The "sport" eventually evolved into the Brits' rugby. (A game that, in the United States at least, is probably best known for the shirts with wide stripes that share the name, rather than for its similarities to football.)

The version of football that first gained popularity in the United States was a mix of the British rugby and what Americans call soccer, and it also included a rule that allowed players to advance the ball by punching it with their fists. Odd, yes, but considered fun—especially by young men at college. Two universities in New Jersey, Rutgers and Princeton, played the first competitive intercollegiate game of what they were calling "ballown" on November 6, 1869.

Harvard and Yale then played a seminal game on November 13, 1875. Featuring 11 men on a side, it more closely resembled modern football and was finally called football, although hyphenated as *foot-ball*—presumably so that it was clear that you'd need both a *foot* and a *ball* to play. Soon foot-ball clubs were popping up all over the place, including at the University of Michigan.

The school was one of the largest in the country at that time, although still very young by Harvard standards. UM was founded in Detroit in 1817 and was originally named Catholepistemiad of Michigania, before, thankfully, the name was changed. In 1837, it was moved to its permanent home in Ann Arbor.

Appropriately, this burgeoning university had its own football club. After students got bored of scrimmaging among themselves on campus for a few years, the club formally accepted a challenge from Racine College in Wisconsin, and the University of Michigan Wolverines played their first intercollegiate football game on May 30, 1879, at White Stocking Park in Chicago, Illinois.

That very first game was a defensive battle until Wolverine Irving Pond ran the ball into the end zone for the game's first and only touchdown. The team captain, Dave DeTar, added a field goal, but the victory was officially recorded as 1–0; the touchdown was worth 1 point, and the kick was kind of "extra point." Details, like scoring and rules, were still being worked out, but a dominant football program was born.

In 1870, the same year that Michigan played its first organized football game on campus, a new college almost exactly 200 miles due south of Ann Arbor, in the capital of Ohio, opened its doors for a small group of students. The Ohio Agricultural and Mechanical College, soon to be rechristened the Ohio State University, quickly expanded from its original student body of about two dozen, and in no time these male students were doing what male students of the day did: they were playing football.

In 1890, the OSU team competed in its first official intercollegiate game against Ohio Wesleyan University in Delaware, Ohio. About 700 people showed up to witness Ohio State win 20–14. A second Midwest athletic power was now on the map.

Once the calendar turned 1897, the world of college football was never the same. And yet by all accounts, it was a pretty ordinary year—as ordinary as life could be near the dawn of the 20th century. If you were looking for a gift for your sweetheart, you could pop into the local pharmacy and buy some chocolates, and it would have cost you about 60 cents a pound. If you wanted to be a gentleman and spend Saturday at the theater with your girl, you could take her to a matinee performance in Ann Arbor for a mere 25 cents. Cheap, perhaps, but you would have been forced to sit through Alexandre Dumas's *The Three Guardsmen*. This

Three Musketeers retread—think *Jaws 2*—was pretty much all the entertainment there was to choose from in Ann Arbor in October 1897. Still, life, for the most part, was good, and girlfriends and wives still had their men to themselves on Saturdays. That didn't last long.

By the time they squared off against each other, both the University of Michigan and the Ohio State University had been separately dabbling in the young sport of football for a while. UM had 18 years of playing experience and a combined record of 68–26–3, while OSU had been at it for only 7 years and was a more modest 28–27–3. Regardless of the dramatic difference in their records, the Wolverines reportedly took the first meeting against the Buckeyes seriously.

Two days before the game, Michigan's student newspaper, *The Michigan Daily*, printed a story that read "Saturday's game with the Ohio State University will be another close contest if the reports [sic] of their preliminary work is a criterion." That was fancy-pants 1897 language for "OSU's supposed to have a pretty good team." Football at this time was already being prominently covered by the school's paper, even getting front-page attention, but intercollegiate sports were still a relatively quaint endeavor. In fact, a tennis tournament scheduled for the same day was canceled because of a "dearth of tennis balls." Even a multibillion dollar industry like college sports had to start somewhere.

No one at Regents Field on October 16, 1897, could have possibly known that the first meeting between these two football teams would inaugurate a series of unforgettable games, one of the greatest rivalries in sports, and a century of drama that would play out over the next hundred years and beyond. But what the fans who packed into the 4-year-old athletic field down on South State Street did know was this: Michigan kicked Ohio State's ass.

Michigan's Frederic Hannan, primarily a fullback, kicked off, and the first Game was underway. (The squads were small—about 20 on a side—and kicking duties were shared by all.) The ball was downed on the Michigan 25 and Ohio State's quarterback Harry Saxby went two-and-out (there were only three total downs then) and he was forced to hand the ball over to the team's captain, Harry Hawkins, for a punt. The punt landed near midfield, and the Wolverines began their march. The backs James Hogg, George Stuart, and Hannan each found large holes in Ohio State's defense, and Michigan's very first drive against OSU culminated in a 10-yard run by Hannan into the end zone. Hogg kicked the extra point, and after 6 minutes the score was 6–0. (The forward pass would not be legal until 1906, and at this point, touchdowns were worth 4 points, extra kicks now 2 points, and field goals also 4 points.)

Before halftime, Stuart added three TDs, Hogg and Hazen Pingree one each, and Hogg kicked 5 successful extra points. The game was already in the bag at 34–0.

What must the Ohio State footballers have been thinking? They mustered absolutely no offense against the Wolverines, and any defense they threw at the opposing team was immediately overwhelmed. And when OSU came out in the second half, they were in for an even bigger surprise: disrespect.

Michigan not only took out their starting players but they proceeded to punt the ball on first down on just about every possession. The next day the newspaper justified Michigan's actions by saying they needed to give their defense some practice. Even if that were true, it was still impertinent. Michigan treated their opponent like a scrimmage squad, and they just handed OSU the ball back and dared them to try and do anything with it. Unfortunately,

even with all the chances, OSU managed nothing more than a 5-yard gain in the rest of the game, and Michigan coasted on the points they accumulated in the first half. The game was called by the coaches before the allotted 20 minutes of the second half was even reached. Both sides had obviously seen enough. The final score was the same as the halftime tally: 34–0.

The best thing that the Ohio State newspaper, *The Lantern*, could say about the game was that it "was hard fought from start to finish and entirely free from slugging and objectionable features." Great, there was no dirty play, but what the 19th-century writer, who clearly had too much decorum, wanted to say was, Ohio State was pissed. They were 1–1 when their brand-new coach, Dave Edwards, brought his optimistic Buckeyes to Ann Arbor. They had promise, and they felt like they had a good shot at beating their northern neighbors, but they were embarrassed. And it only got worse. Ohio State went on to lose their next 6 games and finished the year a meager 1–7–1, the worst season of Buckeye football before or since. After only one year as coach, Edwards was dismissed. There was no doubt that the Buckeyes would remember the Wolverines, and it wouldn't be with warm and fuzzy thoughts.

Michigan, for its part, did nothing to help make the games between these two neighboring opponents into anything that remotely resembled friendly competition. Over the next 22 years, through 15 games, Michigan usually beat up on Ohio State, especially in 1902 (86–0), 1903 (36–0), and 1905 (40–0). The press had called the two squads enemies from their first meeting, and these lopsided victories could only have aggravated the sentiment—at least on the part of Ohio State.

It wasn't a blowout, though, that defined the fierce

competition that would become a hallmark of the Rivalry. On November 24, 1900, the universities met for the second time, again on Regents Field in Ann Arbor, only this time there was a lot more excitement in the stands, thanks to the 900 OSU supporters who had made the trip from Columbus to see two teams with identical 7–1 records square off.

The fans boarded special trains at 6:00 A.M. in Columbus and paid a $2.40 fare for the 400-mile round trip. According to the *Detroit Free Press*, "The whole university, co-eds and all, apparently followed the team into the enemy's country, and made a demonstration which was the feature of the game. They had songs and yells and, led on by official yell-masters, fairly took the breath of the home crowd away, for there has never been such a large number of outsiders at a game played at Ann Arbor." It was only 1900, and Ohio State versus Michigan was already not just any game.

Michigan's team was favored that miserable, snowy day, *largely* because its front line outweighed Ohio State's by 20 to 50 pounds per man. But this only underscored how, in the Rivalry, expectation and "favorite" status are usually less important than what's being served at the concession stand.

Ohio State actually outplayed Michigan that Saturday, gaining almost twice as many yards as the Wolverines did. Unfortunately, neither team could get the ball in the end zone of the snow-slicked field. In the first half, OSU's James Westwater and James McLaren both had gains of more than 20 yards, but the wet field and Michigan's defense put an end to what would wind up being the longest drive of the day. The game ended, and the final score was 0–0. It may not have been the most scintillating football to watch, but the undermanned, underappreciated, underweighted Buckeyes held their own against the Wolverines. The OSU supporters who had made the trip went home with smiles

on their faces, presumably a fair share of whisky in their bellies and, most important, a moral victory against their newly minted rivals. The 1897 game was the first game, but the 1900 game was the first classic.

And at the start of every season thereafter, each team hopes that this season's Game—and their win—will make for yet another classic.

It's hard to look at a modern college football player—big, strong, athletic, sculpted by nutrition and training, and covered in pads made of synthetic materials that utilize the latest advances in materials science—and see even a shadow of that inchoate game, with its sweaters and bare heads and occasional deaths on the field—but it's in there. More than a hundred years have passed, and you probably couldn't find a single player on the 2003 University of Michigan or Ohio State football squads who could tell you what happened in either of the teams' first two matchups, but the legacy—an unwavering desire to beat their rival—has been passed on from player to player and from coach to coach. It's a lot like DNA. You can't see it, but it's in there. It's in their blood. And in the muggy heat of a midwestern summer, it's in their sweat, too.

Or perhaps that's just the acrid smell of the season's first practice.

In 2003, the Buckeyes hit the field for the very first time on a Wednesday morning, August 6. The team worked out at the Woody Hayes Athletic Center, a complex named for their immortal coach, who won 13 Big Ten championships and cultivated a tradition of winning that every OSU team is expected to live up to, year in and year out.

The general feeling was that the 2003 team should not disappoint. Expectations were high for both OSU and UM, as had been the norm for both programs for decades. And to reach their goals—to win the Big Ten conference, to play in the Rose Bowl, to win a national championship—there was, and always would be, one common obstacle: each other. In three and a half months, on the last day of the teams' 2003 regular college football season, Michigan and Ohio State would face off and if history was any indication, it would likely be winner take all—again.

Every player on the two squads knew this, from the red-shirt freshmen to the few Heisman hopefuls. Every player who had ever worn a Wolverine or Buckeye jersey has known this since the day he arrived on campus, and usually years before, when he watched Michigan battle Ohio State at the stadiums or on TV. But before November 22 arrived, there was a lot of work to be done.

The Buckeyes came saddled with extra baggage in 2003—some of it good, some of it bad. To begin with, they were the reigning national champions. They came from almost nowhere the year before (their 2001 record was 7–5) and managed to finish 2002 a remarkable 14–0. They not only beat Michigan 14–9 in the annual slugfest—a tight contest that came down to the very last play of the game—but they played for the national championship in the Fiesta Bowl in Tempe, Arizona. And in another nail-biter, the Buckeyes beat Miami 31–24 in double overtime to become the first Ohio State team to win a national championship since 1968.

So, what would they do for an encore? Well, they'd go out there and try to win another one. But anyone could tell you that wasn't gonna be easy.

Head coach Jim Tressel started informing his troops in

the spring that they would have a big fat bull's eye on their backs come fall. But his team could do it. The Buckeyes could be the first team to repeat as national champions since the 1994–1995 Nebraska Cornhuskers. Why not? Ohio State had 18 returning starters, including a more-than-dependable quarterback named Craig Krenzel, who began the 2003 season with a 15–1 record as a starter.

In field houses across the country, the image of smiling Buckeyes kissing the championship trophy still lingered in the minds of opposing players and coaches, and OSU began the season ranked number 1 by several esteemed prognosticators, including *Sports Illustrated*, and was picked to repeat as champion. But expectations, coupled with the fact that everyone and his brother would be gunning for them, equals pressure. The players admitted that they felt it, but they planned to try to use that pressure to motivate themselves to work even harder—at least, that was the company line.

"We're going to have to step it up a notch if we want to have another great season," the 6-foot-4-inch, 300-pound senior center Alex Stepanovich told the media just prior to that first practice. "Everyone wants a piece of what we had last year and we want it again."

After the drills of the very first fall practice, lunch, and then showers, the players reassembled for the 2003 team photo and talked at length with the media for the first time that season. Most guys echoed Stepanovich's words, while trying to downplay the dreaded P word.

"There may be focus but no pressure," said senior safety Will Allen. And junior defensive end Simon Fraser added, "We're ready to take on the task. We're looking forward to it."

But there was a problem.

In fact, everyone was thinking about a certain 230-pound problem, even if they weren't talking about him. The focus of picture day was not on the players whose pictures were being taken; it was on the one guy whose picture was not being taken.

His name was Maurice Clarett. And along with a stingy defense, he had helped carry the Buckeyes to Arizona. A true freshman in 2002 (the first freshman to start for the Buckeyes at tailback since 1943), Clarett rushed for 1,237 yards and scored 16 TDs, even while missing 3 entire games and a large part of 2 others because of injury.

In the Fiesta Bowl, Clarett spun off a 5-yard TD run in the second OT that put the Buckeyes on top for good. And well before the last beer toasting the 2002 championship was chugged, OSU fans were dreaming of what a full season with Maurice Clarett might be like and about the very real possibility of another Heisman Trophy winner from Ohio State.

Then, over the summer, the wheels came off.

In fact, it all started with a car. Not just any car: a 2001 Chevrolet Monte Carlo with two TV monitors and an ass-kicking stereo in the trunk, along with 300 CDs, about $300 worth of clothing, and somewhere in the neighborhood of $800 in cash—allegedly. This dream ride was taken by Clarett to a workout at the very same Woody Hayes Athletic Center in April, was parked in the university lot, and was broken into. Clarett's car—well, not actually his car, but the car he was borrowing for an overnight test drive from the Car Store in Columbus—was looted of its rap star–worthy kitty. That much was fact. But the six-million-dollar question became: what was the true value of the stolen stuff?

That was what the police and the NCAA investigators wanted to know. When the details of the police report

surfaced, the running back admitted to "exaggerating" the losses in the robbery. Clarett's motivations were unclear, but Tressel and OSU Director of Athletics Andy Geiger decided on July 29 that the furor surrounding the incident was enough to keep Clarett (for the time being) out of practice, workouts, and team meetings.

The running back already had a history of needling his coaches and fans. During the 2002 season, he told a writer from *ESPN the Magazine* that he would consider challenging the NFL's rule that a player must wait three years after high school before being eligible for the draft. And right before the Fiesta Bowl, he denounced Ohio State for not allowing (or paying for) him to fly home for a friend's funeral. He later accused school officials of lying, when they said he hadn't filled out the necessary application for emergency financial aid to pay for the flight. He even complained about play calling during the season. He gave 'em a lot of yards, but he also gave 'em some headaches.

When Coach Tressel began his press conference, at the end of a long day he knew exactly what the topic of conversation would be, and he allotted 20 minutes to answer the inevitable questions. In a nutshell: Coach Tressel was not sure how the NCAA would rule on the Clarett case. Yes, perhaps he could have handled the situation differently, although he wouldn't elaborate. And he had never seen the police report and did not know if it was accurate.

End of story? Not quite.

Clearly, this was something that would nag at the Buckeyes all year. And the big game against Michigan in three months was now buried somewhere in a big pile of crap. Coach Tressel was probably just praying that his team got to their first game against the University of Washington Huskies intact.

But if Tressel was looking for a little empathy, he could have always called University of Michigan head football coach Lloyd Carr.

On the field, in the weight room, at the training table, perhaps even in the library: these are places a coach would like to see his star cornerback and Big Ten preseason defensive player of the year. Probably topping the list of places a coach would not want to see that player is the chambers of Michigan 14th District judge John Collins. And that's too bad, because that's exactly where Wolverine star Marlin Jackson was on August 13, 2003. They had a conversation that included this disturbing question and answer:

Collins: Did you punch him in the eye?
Jackson: Yes.

They should have been talking about football. About how the number 7–ranked Wolverines had 15 returning starters from the previous year and how they had a proven core of offensive skill players that would give them one of the most dynamic offenses in college football. They could have talked about how Coach Carr was going to move Jackson from corner to safety, in order to get his 11 best athletes on the field at the same time.

They could have even talked about the Buckeyes. After all, OSU was voted number 1 in the conference at the Big Ten's annual media day in July, and the Wolverines were voted number 2—meaning, their November 22 showdown was already a hot topic of conversation in the preseason. But, instead, the talk was about a plea agreement. Coach Carr publicly stood by his man, but he could not have been pleased.

What Jackson pled guilty to was punching 26-year-old civil engineering student Shahin Farokhrny outside a party

in Ann Arbor in June. According to Farokhrny, Jackson hit him with a glass—a felonious assault punishable by a maximum sentence of four years in prison. But Jackson wound up pleading guilty to just one count of aggravated assault, a much lesser crime, thanks to a request by the victim (a self-professed UM football fan). This was certainly a smudge on Michigan's preseason, but perhaps not a full stain.

If you take the Jackson situation out of the equation, there was a lot to be excited about when the Wolverines convened for their annual fan photo and media day at Michigan Stadium on August 9th.

Fifth-year senior quarterback John Navarre was smiling as he signed autographs in the sun and he had to be smiling on the inside too. During the off-season, Navarre and Heisman had been mentioned in the same breath, and with good reason. The QB had set school records for attempts, completions, and yards in 2002. With teammates like running back Chris Perry and wide receiver Braylon Edwards on his side of the ball, the Wolverines would attempt to put an end to the inconsistency that plagued them in 2002 (they finished the season 10–3) and would perhaps find themselves in the national championship picture come November.

The players knew they had a lot of talent, and they also know that talent alone would not get it done. "I really think that the only person that can beat us is ourselves," said senior wide receiver Calvin Bell to the media later that day. "If we can just execute, we'll be really good."

The 2003 season had not even begun, but the subject of the Ohio State game in a few months had already come up. Last year's Wolverine loss to the Buckeyes propelled OSU to the national championship game and a title. That loss was still on the minds of this year's Michigan players.

"That motivated me throughout the whole off-season," said Perry. "Everywhere you go you see the Ohio State championship T-shirts and commercials. So, of course, knowing that we had a really good chance to beat them and we let it slip away, it keeps the whole team motivated."

No Michigan team had lost three straight years to Ohio State since the early '60s—the mere mention of that fact could wipe the smile right off Navarre's face, even as he signed an autograph for another young Wolverine fan. The QB was dogged by questions about his ability to win big games since he first started for Michigan, and with an 0–2 record against Ohio State, he would have to brace himself for a hailstorm of criticism in the coming months. The game, scheduled for November 22, would likely be the biggest of his college career and would in essence define his legacy as a Michigan quarterback, a group that included well known names like Tom Brady, Elvis Grbac, Jim Harbaugh, and Brian Griese.

It was no different for any of the Wolverines and the Buckeyes. Every one of the guys, on both squads, knew deep down, even if he wouldn't say it publicly now, that the final game on the schedule was destined to be the biggest game of his life. And any doubters should brush up on their history—all 99 chapters of it.