It could have been different, it just wasn't. And as a result, Ohio State finds itself again wondering how they let still another national championship slip away from them. On the morning after, Gary Benz takes a look at what could have been, and the defining moments from last nights 38-24 loss to the LSU Tigers.

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By this point everyone knows the story of the 2007 game in which an overconfident Buckeyes team was schooled by an upstart, hungry Florida Gators team on its way to a humiliating defeat. Monday night, the Buckeyes weren't overconfident. They weren't even favored. Thus the 38-24 loss to LSU wasn't necessarily humiliating. But after starting the game with so much promise, the Buckeyes went flat in virtually every phase of the game, allowed the LSU Tigers to find their composure, and ultimately took a series of more body blows to their own reputation, that of their coach and, ultimately, to that of the entire Big Ten.

But again, it could have been different, it just wasn't.

While the second half was essentially even, its story line was mostly secondary. Where the game was really lost was in the first half. While no one play exactly turned the tide in that first half, there were four plays in particular that made a huge difference in the outcome:

1. The Steve Rehring false start on second and five from the Tigers 10-yard line in the first quarter:

At the time the Buckeyes were leading 7-0 and poised to go up 14-0. Quarterback Todd Boeckman had just completed a 44-yard pass to freshman running back Brandon Saine, getting the ball to the Tigers' 15-yard line. On first down, running back Chris "Beanie" Wells gained five yards, setting up a second down and five at the Tigers 10-yard line. On the next play, Rehring, playing tackle, committed a false start. That play nullified the Wells run and put the Buckeyes into a second and 10. Boeckman got the five yards back on a scramble on second down, but when the Buckeyes couldn't convert the third-and-four, they settled for a 25-yard Ryan Pretorius field goal to go up 10-0.

It seemed like a great start and it was. But the fact that the Buckeyes weren't able to take a two-touchdown lead had an impact on the psyche of the Tigers defense, not to mention the Buckeyes game plan. It was early, certainly, but to that point the Tigers had no answer for whatever the Buckeyes were running and another touchdown would have put the Tigers defense on their heels even more than they already were. But the Rehring penalty, a mere five yards, altered the rest of the series dramatically. Two plays to make five yards instead of one are much better odds, particularly the way Wells was running. Holding the Buckeyes to a field goal was a significant psychological boost to a reeling Tigers defense, indeed to the entire Tigers team.

2. The no-holding non-call on the Jacob Hester 20-yard run in the first quarter on the Tigers second possession.

After the Buckeyes had gone up 10-0, the Tigers took over. An important play for the Tigers was the 10-yard Matt Flynn to Early Doucet pass for the Tigers first down that seemed to settle their offense dramatically after the near disaster of the first possession. And as important as this play was, it was the 20-yard run by Hester three plays later that seemed to get the Tigers offense rolling, a run that was aided greatly by when a Tigers player held linebacker James Laurinaitis as Hester sprinted by. Chalk this up if you want to sour grapes, but the hold was blatant. The Tigers player had Laurinaitis by the jersey and you could still see stretched jersey in his hand when Laurinaitis turned toward Hester as he was running right past him. Had the penalty been caught, it would have third down and 17 from the Tigers 26-yard line. Instead it was first and ten at the Ohio State 40-yard line. From there, the Tigers were able to get into field goal range and get on the board, closing the gap to 10-3.

3. The Buckeyes non-recovery of the Chad Jones fumble.

On the very next series, the Buckeyes were forced to punt from their own 42-yard line, a chance to pin LSU deep into its own territory. Punter A. J. Trapasso complied with a 50-yard punt that was fielded by Jones at the Tigers 8-yard line. A few missed tackles later and Jones was now at the Tigers 16-yard line, where he fumbled. Though several Buckeyes seemed to have the best opportunity to recover, it was the Tigers' Harry Coleman who did recover. It would have been a crucial turnover that at worse would have put the Buckeyes back up by 10.

Perhaps buoyed by their good fortune, the Tigers moved the ball down right down the field assisted in no small measure by two Buckeyes personal fouls-the late hit out of bounds by Donald Washington, which looked questionable on the replay, and a Laurinaitis face-mask on receiver Demetrius Byrd that took the ball down to the Buckeyes 13-yard line. Immediately following the Laurinaitis penalty, the Tigers completely fooled the Buckeyes by sending four receivers out right and then throwing to tight end Richard Dickson on the left, who was completely unguarded, for a 13-yard touchdown. Suddenly, a game that the Buckeyes could have been leading by 10 was now tied.

In a way, the failure to recover the fumble was similar to the Browns Daven Holley failing to recover the fumble on the opening kickoff against the Cincinnati Bengals in the Browns second to last game. In each case, a turnover deep in the opponent's territory at that particular moment easily could have sent those opponents reeling. Instead they were both missed opportunities that would haunt each team-Ohio State and Cleveland-well after the final gun sounded.

4. The dropped touchdown pass by Brian Robiskie.

Immediately following the Tigers touchdown, the Buckeyes appeared to have re-grouped. Wells peeled off a 29-yard run, Boeckman completed a 19-yard pass to Robiskie and in two plays the Buckeyes already were at the LSU 28. On the next play, Brian Hartline committed a personal foul that took the ball back to the LSU 43, but Boeckman hooked up with Saine for a 22-yard play that made it third down and three yards to go from the LSU 21. Eschewing a chance for the first down, Buckeyes head coach Jim Tressel called for a pass down the left side to Robiskie. It was the right call. Boeckman lobbed the ball in perfectly to the usually sure-handed Robiskie. But in what was probably the signature play for missed chances, Robiski lost the handle on the ball and so too did the Buckeyes on an opportunity to go back up by seven.

The situation was further exacerbated when Pretorius' 38-yard field goal was blocked on the next play. The Tigers recovered at their own 34-yard line and immediately went down the field and scored on a 10-yard Flynn to Brandon LaFall touchdown. In but a few minutes time, the Buckeyes went from possibly being up by seven to being down by seven. It was from this 14-point turnaround from which the Buckeyes didn't recover.

There were a host of additional plays thereafter that also could have made a difference but didn't, either. Two plays come immediately to mind. First, after the LaFall touchdown was there anything more predictable than the Boeckman interception that followed on the next series? It was the perfect bookend to a momentum swing that had been officially completed. But the aggravating aspect

of that interception wasn't so much Boeckman's throw as it was Ray Small's failure to fight the Tigers' Chevis Jackson for the ball. It appeared that both players had their hands on it but it was Jackson who clearly wanted it more than Small at that point. At the very least, Small should have broken up the play.

The other came early in the second half. The Tigers took the opening kickoff and were moving it until defensive lineman Vernon Gholston sacked Flynn on second down. The 15-yard loss, which included an intentional grounding penalty on Flynn, made it third down and 23 yards to go. The Buckeyes held but on the punt, reserve linebacker Austin Spitler broke through and was in position to block the punt, only to miss and run into the kicker. The personal foul gave the Tigers the ball back, another personal foul, this time on Cameron Hayward, gave the Tigers good field position and they went down and scored, pushing the game to 31-10. At that point, whatever glimmer of hope remained for the Buckeyes was quashed.

Losses are always the sum of their parts and Monday certainly was no exception. And while the media will excoriate the Buckeyes, Tressel and the Big Ten, the truth is that the Buckeyes lost not because they were slower than their SEC counterparts or even because they were necessarily outcoached. It's not even clear that LSU is a superior team, the final score notwithstanding. The Buckeyes lost not because they were dominated statistically (they weren't), but because they failed to execute when it mattered most-in those seemingly few small plays that end up defining a game.

For now and again it's back to the drawing board for the Buckeyes. They'll recover from the loss, mainly because at its core the Buckeyes program is as solid as it's been at any time in their long, storied history. But unless the Buckeyes can go undefeated next year, or even the year after, which would mean wins against USC during the regular season, they won't come close to sniffing another national championship game unless every other team in the country has at least three losses. Even then it's questionable. But they have only themselves to blame. It's what happens when you're given the national stage twice and squander it.