When Don Nehlen, the former West Virginia Mountaineers head coach, joked that Terrelle Pryor going to Michigan was probably more important than the Wolverines securing Rich Rodriguez as their next head coach, few figured at the time that it really was one of those "funny because it's true" kind of jokes. Now they know. Jim Tressel 1 Rich Rodriguez 0. Gary talks about it.

When Don Nehlen, the former West Virginia Mountaineers head coach, joked that Terrelle Pryor going to Michigan was probably more important than the Wolverines securing Rich Rodriguez as their next head coach, few figured at the time that it really was one of those "funny because it's true" kind of jokes. Now they know.

The news that Pryor, the all everything two-sport star from Jeannette, Pennsylvania has chosen Ohio State as the next stop on his athletic journey had to be a bit of a tough pill to swallow for both Rodriguez and for Wolverines athletic director William C. Martin, even if they won't say so publicly.

To say that Martin hired Rodriguez on the premise that Rodriguez would deliver Pryor to Ann Arbor may be a bit of an overstatement. But anyone who doesn't believe it wasn't a factor is being naïve. Rodriguez's pursuit of Pryor as the perfect specimen to execute the spread offense was relentless and that was before Rodriguez ran out on the Mountaineers when he suddenly decided he didn't like the color scheme in the locker room or whatever other trivialities he concocted to get out of one contract to sign another.

To gauge the importance that Rodriguez placed on getting Pryor, the only thing you really need to know is that it was Pryor whom Rodriguez first called with the news that he was heading to Michigan. Not his current players that he was abandoning. Not the Mountaineers president or the athletic director who had rewarded Rodriguez far more than he ever deserved. But an 18 year-old high school student in Pennsylvania. That may also be an indictment on how sordid and misguided athletic recruitment has become, but as surely as anything else it tells you something about Rodriguez and his priorities.

Maybe that's exactly what Pryor saw as well. And if that didn't have much of an impact on the young man, then maybe what Pryor saw was the three-ring circus that Rodriguez created by his rather messy departure from West Virginia. Maybe, too, Pryor figured that it might be kind of hard to get the ear of his new head coach when he's busy giving a deposition or attending a court hearing over his refusal to pay the Mountaineers the money he owes them. Ohio State head coach Jim Tressel doesn't come similarly encumbered and the contrast between the two couldn't be more striking.

Having thrown most of his eggs in that one basket only to see them break in the process, Rodriguez is now left to actually build a program without the quick fix he and Michigan so coveted. It's one thing to have to do that in Morgantown where the scrutiny will be less and the fans a bit more forgiving. Having to essentially start over under the white-hot glare of fans of a program with such a storied tradition is quite another. If Rodriguez really is the coach that Michigan thought it got, then in a few years his inability to sell his brand of snake oil to Pryor will be forgiven.

For now, though, there is a healthy group of fans of both programs that will see Pryor's decision as a continuation of Ohio State's recent dominance of Michigan. Even the Detroit Free Press headline was "Tressel 1, Rodriguez 0." It's a fun

thought to Buckeyes fans, but until Pryor actually puts on a uniform, makes some plays and wins a few games, that's all it will be.

As for the Buckeyes and Tressel, securing Pryor is only the first step in a far longer journey. Much work remains, starting with the fact that they will be dealing with a young and probably still immature athlete who already has attained a certain mythical status.

To date, the only athlete that came with the same level of hype out of high school and actually lived up to it has been LeBron James. For now and evermore, James will serve as the benchmark against which every other super-hyped athlete will be measured, not just in terms of performance but also in terms of ego management. For reasons as unexpected as they are joyous, James has become a global mogul and icon with the demeanor of someone who understands that he plays a team sport. Pryor says the right things right now, but the crush of everyday life will make it much harder to live up to the words.

To his credit, Ohio State athletic director Gene Smith already is fully aware of the challenge that Tressel and the team face in this regard. Smith told the Plain Dealer that the template they'll follow will be the one they had in place for Greg Oden last year. Said Smith, "we'll talk to him about decision-making. He's a pretty mature kid, more mature than people realize, so that conversation I think will be easy. And Jim [Tressel] is very good with making sure that someone like him surrounds himself with the right type of people. I think he's coming into a good environment where he'll be OK that way. But there's no doubt we have to do something at the front end to help him understand, when you go to a restaurant, when you go pump your gas, what it will be like, and I'm sure he knows it because he's going through it now."

That's a nice bit of proactivity, but the support system better be awfully strong.

Because college football players are denied the ability to get to the pro level as quickly as their basketball counterparts, the leaches and other assorted blood suckers that lurk in the shadows around every major program have that much more time to tempt a player to cross over to the dark side.

Any number of examples exist. Maurice Clarett, Reggie Bush, and Michael Vick come immediately to mind. But if Ohio State is of a mind to scare Pryor straight from the outset, it should probably bus in Art Schlicter from whatever outpost or prison camp he may be at these days. Schlicter was Pryor some 12 years before Pryor was even born. Schlicter was an amazing two-sport star at Ohio's Miami Trace High School; a big, strong-armed quarterback who would single-handedly modernize Woody Hayes' three yards and a cloud of dust offense.

In some ways, that ended up being the case, although Hayes wasn't around for most of that time. Schlicter played well enough for the Buckeyes and still owns a variety of passing records, something that is somewhat unimaginable actually given that era and what has come since. But Schlicter had demons at the outset that went undetected despite the warning signs that were conveniently ignored. How much that ultimately impacted his performance is hard to say but Schlicter never quite instilled in anyone complete confidence and he never did lead the Buckeyes to a national championship, even though he came close in 1979.

That's not to suggest in any way that Pryor has any similar demons or any demons whatsoever. But it is to suggest that whatever accomplishments they may have or whatever potential is yet to be realized, athletes suffer from the same human frailties as everyone else. And when you're a college kid like Pryor upon whose shoulder rests a considerable amount of pressure already, it's very easy for the coping mechanism to become dysfunctional.

Having already built an elite program, Tressel is free to operate at a higher level.

With the self-created mess he has at Michigan and a less than stable program that he inherited, Rodriguez has much more primal tasks to tackle. Tressel has the ability to work directly with Pryor in a more meaningful way than Rodriguez could initially have offered. It helps, too, that Tressel is uniquely qualified for that task while the jury is still out, literally and figuratively, on Rodriguez.

In the end, and stripping away all of the other reasons both real and invented, it's this difference that Pryor probably most saw when he placed that Ohio State ball cap on his head and declared his allegiance to the scarlet and gray.