In the aftermath of Ohio State's third nationally-televised humiliation in three seasons against a top-five out-of-conference opponent, we're left to once again pick up the pieces and wonder what the hell went wrong. And this time we can't take solace in excuses. We can't say the Buckeyes were fat and overconfident (Florida), or that they were young and inexperienced (LSU). There are things amiss with this program, things that can't be airily explained away.

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They can't be explained by the usual mass-media boilerplate either- that the Buckeyes are hurt by their schedule (I don't like the schedule either, but it isn't the reason they're losing big games; Florida State and Miami played cakewalk slates in the late ‘90s and early ‘00s and it didn't seem to hurt them); that they're built for the "power football" Big Ten and can't adapt to the "speed football" of the SEC and Pac-10 (a theory undercut by LSU's power running game and USC's conventional pro-style offense). There's something else going on here.

Let's look at five issues that rise to the surface in damaging fashion whenever Ohio State runs up against one of the big boys.

Offensive line play

Remember when dominating play in the trenches was the rule at Ohio State? Hopefully you do, because at this point, a memory is all it is. The Buckeyes were flat-out embarrassed up front by USC, held to 71 yards rushing and a piddling 2.1 yards per carry. Take away Todd Boeckman's -27 yards on eight carries and the yards-per-carry is still a mediocre 3.8. Ohio State's longest play from scrimmage last Saturday was just sixteen yards. USC's defense is talented and experienced, but even Ohio U's defensive line manhandled the Buckeye offensive front at times the week prior. Granted, Beanie Wells didn't play in either game, but it's a rule of thumb that a great running back is great even with pedestrian blocking (see Payton, Walter or Sanders, Barry). The true caliber of Ohio State's offensive line is revealed when Beanie isn't out there, and the revelation hasn't been pretty: dumb penalties, blown assignments, and a general lack of forward movement.

Actually, OSU's line play hasn't been overwhelming at any point in the Tressel era. The Buckeyes have had some good lines under the Vest, but never any equivalent to John Cooper's mid-90s units that obliterated everything in front of them. Even the 2002 team was only average up front, made to look better by Maurice Clarett's brilliance and Craig Krenzel's ability to scramble and get away from pressure- and that team had all sorts of problems moving the ball when Clarett was hurt. There have good players- Olivea, Stepanovich, Sims, Mangold- on Tressel's lines, but for whatever reason, the sum has never quite been as good as the parts.

Bottom line- when your blockers are being shoved into the backfield by a MAC defense, you have problems up front.

Defensive line play

The single most important element to a great defense is the ability to bring consistent pressure on the quarterback with just the front four. It covers up deficiencies in the secondary, frees up the linebackers to make plays in space, and gives coaches the prerogative to blitz out of opportunity instead of desperation. Ohio State had that ability in 2002. They don't have it now. Jim Heacock has been criticized for his "soft zone" schemes, and rightfully so in the case of the Florida debacle, but he was suitably aggressive in bringing pressure against LSU, and the only result was open receivers running high, wide and handsome down the middle of the football field.

You *have* to be able to deliver pressure with the front four. An inability to do so creates a chain reaction that extends all the way to the back line of the defense. You can't keep your linebackers clean. Your defensive backs have to cover longer. You're forced to rob Peter to pay Paul by bringing pressure with the back seven, since your linemen aren't getting to the quarterback themselves. Blitzes go from a luxury to a necessity, a concession of weakness that can be ruthlessly exploited by savvy coaches and experienced quarterbacks.

Screw schemes. Give me Tim Anderson and Kenny Peterson caving in the line of scrimmage and blowing up plays in the backfield. That's what this team needs.

Not enough offensive diversity

2008: three catches, 48 yards, no touchdowns

2007: 29 catches, 233 yards, two touchdowns

2006: 15 catches, 156 yards, four touchdowns

Those paltry numbers represent the receiving totals from the tight end position at OSU over the last three seasons. Since 2006, Buckeye tight ends have a *total* of 47 receptions for 437 yards and six touchdowns. Small wonder Fred Davis decided to play his college ball 2,000 miles from home in L.A. instead of 150 miles south in Columbus. As a matter of fact, in his senior season at USC, Davis made more catches (62) for twice as many yards (881) and more touchdowns (eight) than all of Ohio State's tight ends combined over the last three years. The days of John Frank are long over. These days, the tight end position at Ohio State is akin to the flanker position in a Wishbone offense.

While we're on the subject of underutilized offensive players, Buckeye fullbacks have a total of 15 catches for 103 yards and one touchdown since 2006. USC's first touchdown last Saturday came on a 35-yard pass to a fullback streaking down the sideline. In one play, the Trojans got a third of the yards and as many touchdowns out of that position as Ohio State has gotten the last three years.

The serial neglect of the tight end or the fullback in the passing game makes Ohio State's offense far easier to defend than it should be. You simply don't have to worry about those two positions. Just key on the receivers and the tailback and go from there. And don't worry about the short pop to the tight end or the dump-off to the fullback; just blitz those five-and-seven-step drops to your heart's content, because there aren't any safety valves in *this* offense. Other teams utilize every non-lineman on offense as a potential weapon. Ohio State doesn't, and this lack of diversity hurts them against the better opponents.

Physicality- or lack thereof

The 2002 team had it in bunches: Matt Wilhelm, Mike Doss , Darrion Scott , Robert Reynolds,
Will Allen
, delivering kill-shots to opposing players. Ohio State's National Championship team had a defense that played with an edge of nastiness. They were mean, they were aggressive, sometimes they were out-and-out dirty- and they struck fear in

the hearts of offenses. Today's defense, while boasting some pretty good players, strikes fear in absolutely no one. There are no assassins lying in wait to take off the heads of unsuspecting receivers who stray across the middle. The Silver Bullets are dead.
This
defense, all too often, gets punched in the mouth.

Some of it goes back to the dearth of disruptive tackles, and some of it goes to the black hole that has been the safety position the last few years- the disappearance of the Mike Doss/Zach Dumas/Doug Plank-type thumpers that were formerly a Scarlet & Gray staple. Either way, that physical edge has been rounded off. Somehow, some way, if not this year, the Buckeyes need to re-sharpen that edge and rediscover the viciousness that made the Silver Bullets renowned throughout the land.

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Let's take another trip back to 2002; specifically, that season's senior class- Doss, Wilhelm, Peterson, Cie Grant, etc. Remember, prior to '02, that class was one of the least successful in recent Ohio State history, with a 21-15 record, 0-2 in bowl games. They'd gone through the tumultuous final two seasons of John Cooper's tenure and the halting first season of Jim Tressel's; the teammate-on-teammate lawsuits, the Homecoming loss to Minnesota in 2000, Ken-Yon Rambo as a team captain. Not many classes in the history of Ohio State football have dealt with the level of upheaval and adversity encountered by the class of 2002.

Yet that adversity seemed to give those seniors an extra dose of resilience that paid off handsomely during the harrowing, edge-of-the-seat ride that was the 2002 season. The upperclassmen, the Cooper recruits who had been through the tough times, set the tone. No matter the score, no matter the situation, that team never panicked, never dropped its head, and never lost its cool. Those guys had been in the kitchen. They'd felt the heat. And they were stronger for it.

Contrast that group with the present upperclassmen, the seniors of 2008- Laurinaitis, Jenkins, Boone, Boeckman, etc. When the heat is turned up, they melt. Against the tough opponents, they seem locked in a permanent state of waiting for the other shoe to drop, and when it does, when the snowball starts to roll, they can't stop it. 31 unanswered points against LSU; 35 unanswered against USC. This isn't intended to be a "diss" on Ohio State's upperclassmen. They're dedicated workers, solid kids, and good football players. But they're missing that quality of resilience that made the 2002 seniors so special. They don't have that "it."

It's as if this group was broken in a way by what happened in Glendale against Florida two years ago. Like a seed of doubt was planted that night, one that reaches full rancid bloom whenever they're challenged by another of college football's alpha dogs. Instead of coming out of that experience tougher and wiser, they seem to have been permanently weakened by it. When something goes wrong in one of these big games- the Robiskie drop and the blocked field goal against LSU, the two holding penalties and the missed field goal last week against USC- you can almost see them thinking, *"Here we go again."*

Sometimes adversity makes you stronger. In the case of the seniors of 2002, it did. The seniors of 2008? Not so much.

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The season is over from the standpoint of winning a National Championship, of course. But there is still a chance to accomplish some good things- a Big Ten title, a trip to the Rose Bowl and, given the possibility- or probability- of another loss or two down the line, a chance at redemption against the SEC in the Capital One or Outback Bowl. A successful end to this season can serve as a pretty effective mouthwash for the bad taste in the collective mouth of Buckeye Nation. By no means is this Ohio State fan washing his hands of the team. There is a lot of football to be played.

So all we can do is hope for the best for the remainder of 2008... and that the future of Ohio State football brings a resolution to the issues that have made this program a national punch-line.