Thanks to some atypical performances by the defensive line and special teams, as well as some ... uninspired late play-calling to the Vest, Ohio State found itself in a battle for survival with a scrappy Iowa team that had no idea it wasn't supposed to win this game. It took some corresponding conservatism on the part of Kirk Ferentz, as well as a put-up-or-shut-up stand by the Ohio State defense in overtime, to pull the first Rose Bowl bid since 1996 out of the fire for the Buckeyes. In his "The Week That Was" column, Jesse looks back at the win, takes a closer look at the Rose Bowl drought for the Bucks, and touches on the rest of this weekend's college football action.

Well, roses *do* grow very well when you fertilize them with manure.

It might be exaggerating just a tad to refer Ohio State's 27-24 overtime victory over Iowa as crappy- or "disgusting" as the case may be. (And Gregg Doyel, if you're reading this- lose the wannabe tough-guy picture. It makes you look like a jackass.) But it was certainly weird, frustrating and downright scary. There was no good reason for the Buckeyes to cut it that close- not against an Iowa team down to its second-string quarterback and third-string tailback, and not after taking a two-touchdown lead in the fourth quarter.

But they did. Thanks to some atypical performances by the defensive line and special teams, as well as some... uninspired late play-calling to the Vest, Ohio State found itself in a battle for survival with a scrappy Iowa team that had no idea it wasn't supposed to win this game. It took some corresponding conservatism on the part of Kirk Ferentz, as well as a put-up-or-shut-up stand by the Ohio State defense in overtime, to pull the first Rose Bowl bid since 1996 out of the fire for the Buckeyes.

Hats Off to the Hawkeyes: I'll just go ahead and admit it- I underestimated Iowa. I knew their offensive line was superior to Penn State's but I really didn't think they would control Ohio State's defensive front the way they did for nearly the entire

game. I knew they had solid receivers but I didn't think they would be able to get open the way they did against Ohio State's secondary. I knew Iowa was a resourceful, resilient, well-coached team- but they were better than I thought they were.

I also badly underestimated James Vandenburg. The red-shirt freshman, making his first collegiate start at quarterback, performed like a seasoned veteran, coming up with clutch throws and making more big plays downfield than just about anyone has against the Buckeye defense. If not for a couple of crucial dropped passes, the kid from Keokuk might have pulled off the upset of the Big Ten season and sent Iowa to its first Rose Bowl since 1991.

About Those Drops: A pair of muffs by an Ohio boy might have made the difference between victory and defeat for the Hawkeyes. Trey Stross of Avon Lake was the unfortunate culprit. Stross couldn't handle what should have been a touchdown pass late in the first quarter, forcing Iowa to settle for a field goal and a 3-0 lead. On Iowa's opening possession of the second half Stross dropped a 3rd-and-goal pass at the Ohio State one-yard line, a miscue that led to a 22-yard Daniel Murray field-goal attempt that sailed wide right. Those two drops cost the Hawkeyes anywhere from seven to eleven points. It's hard not to feel badly for the young man; it was, after all, his first trip back to his home state in an Iowa uniform.

Stopped Cold: It became apparent very early in the game that Ohio State's defensive line would have a difficult time duplicating its magnificent performance against Penn State. Iowa's front wall was extremely effective containing Heyward, Gibson and Co., pocketing Vandenburg lovingly and giving him ample time to find receivers downfield- which he did with stunning success. On the few occasions Buckeye rushers did manage to reach Vandenburg, they made good things happen- both of his regulation-time interceptions took place under duress, as did his bizarre deflected completion to Tony Moeaki

during Iowa's game-tying fourth-quarter drive. But they didn't get to him nearly enough.

Put in "Chek:" No sense in mincing words: Chimde Chekwa did not play well at all on Saturday. The senior cornerback was repeatedly toasted by Iowa's Marvin McNutt, who beat him twice for touchdowns and another time for a 33-yard gain. Devon Torrance didn't exactly shine either, getting left in the dust on a 55-yard pass play from Vandenburg to Derrell Johnson-Koulianos early in the third quarter. We got a glimpse of Buckeye cornerback play in the absence of consistent front-four pressure... and it wasn't a pretty sight.

Sick Kicks: Jon Thoma's up-and-down season hit another valley on Saturday, and it very nearly cost Ohio State the whole shooting match. Two horrendous Thoma punts, one a 26-yarder, the other a 31-yarder, helped set Iowa up for its first ten points of the game, and another shank, this one of 36 yards, put the Hawkeyes in a position to possibly win the game in regulation. The success or failure of Tressel Ball hinges on the punting game; when the punter is averaging 35.8 yards per kick, as Thoma did on Saturday, the entire strategy is nearly bankrupted. The "good" Thoma showed up in Happy Valley; he's going to need to show up in Pasadena on January 1st if Ohio State is going to have any chance of winning.

Big, But Not So Ugly: In a reversal of fortune unusual for this football team, while Ohio State's defensive line struggled, its offensive line, once again, excelled. The Buckeye ground game churned out more than 200 yards for the fourth consecutive game, and this time they did it almost exclusively with the

running backs. Brandon Saine rushed for 103 yards and two touchdowns while Boom Herron added 97 on a whopping 32 totes with a score. Other than Saine's 49-yard fourth-quarter touchdown that put Ohio State up 24-10, there weren't any big plays; but the Buckeyes gained consistently, chewing up yards and time and for the most part staying out of disadvantageous second-and-third-down situations.

Warrants Mentioning: There has been a lot of grumbling over the conservatism of Jim Tressel's play-calling on Saturday, and to a certain extent that grumbling is justified. The Vest really went into a shell late in the fourth quarter as Iowa made its comeback; in its last three possessions of the game, including overtime, Ohio State ran the ball twelve times and threw it twice for a net gain of zero yards. Tressel played for the field goal up 24-17, played for overtime when it was 24-24 and played for the field goal in overtime. He was fortunate that Kirk Ferentz played it just as cautiously when Iowa had the ball with a chance to drive down and win it at the end of the fourth quarter (more on that in a minute.)

Still, it's worth pointing out that Iowa's defense gets after thrown footballs better than anyone else in America. The Hawkeyes led the nation in interceptions going into Saturday, and that statistic is no fluke; they were fourth in interceptions last season as well. Iowa's pass defense is far stronger than Penn State's, and with the way the Buckeyes were running the football there was

simply no compelling reason to get pass-happy. Even with Tressel playing it close to the Vest Ohio State should have won the game going away- and would have, if not for a serious of bizarre plays that took place in the fourth quarter.

Bizarre Play #1: Early in the final period of regulation, with Ohio State leading 17-10, Ross Homan snatched a James Vandenburg pass and returned it to the Iowa 49-yard line. On the next play Brandon Saine burst through a hole and dashed down the near sideline for a touchdown. With a little over eleven minutes left it was 24-10, Buckeyes. Time to start smelling the roses, right?

Wrong. Derrell Johnson-Koulianos fielded the ensuing kickoff at his own one-yard line, initially bobbling it- and as it turned out, the flub was just what the doctor ordered for the reeling Hawkeyes. Ohio State's coverage collapsed, with players forgoing gap responsibilities for a crack at the momentarily free football, and with one quick move to the outside Johnson-Koulianos was free. 99 yards later it was 24-17- and now we had ourselves a football game.

Bizarre Play #2: Moments later, following a missed 47-yard field-goal attempt by Devin Barclay, Iowa had the football back, still down 24-17. Three plays into the Hawkeye drive on a 3rd

-and-4 play Thad Gibson picked off an errant screen pass and rumbled untouched for what should have been the clinching touchdown. But a yellow penalty flag was down. Nathan Williams had jumped off-sides, wiping out the score and giving Iowa a fresh set of downs. The shame of it was that the infraction had no bearing on the outcome of the play anyway. If you're going to commit a penalty, at least get your money's worth.

Bizarre Play #3: Two plays after the off-sides penalty Vandenburg got pressured for one of the few times in the game and threw a duck into double-coverage. Both Chimde Chekwa and Brian Rolle had a clean shot at the football; instead they collided, the ball popped into the air... and settled neatly into the arms of Iowa tight end Tony Moeaki at the Ohio State 30-yard line. First down, Hawkeyes. It was at this point I started to accept the possibility that the Buckeyes could lose the game. Too much strangeness was happening, and all of it seemed to favor Iowa. Four plays later Vandenburg hit McNutt in the corner of the end zone, Chekwa burned yet again, and it was 24-24.

Play of the Game (Maybe): It's a play that hasn't been talked about, yet merits mentioning- Dan Herron's

two-yard run on 2nd-and-one with just over two minutes remaining. It gave Ohio State a fresh set of downs and enabled the Buckeyes to bleed another minute or so off the clock before punting the ball back to Iowa with 52 seconds to play. Had the Buckeyes gone three-and-out on their last drive of regulation the Hawkeyes would have gotten it in pretty good field position with enough time to mount a legitimate drive for the winning score. In the final analysis, that one seemingly insignificant first down might have made the ultimate difference.

Kirk Tightened Up: This next bit isn't really meant as a comprehensive slam toward Kirk Ferentz, a fine football coach who has done superb work with the Hawkeye program. But he left himself wide-open to second-guessing with his handling of Iowa's final possession in regulation. After another poor punt by Jon Thoma, the Hawkeyes had the ball in decent field position at their own 33-yard line. They had 52 seconds on the clock and one timeout left. Vandenburg was hot- he'd completed all five of his attempts on Iowa's previous drive to tie the game. The Hawkeyes were on the road with a

chance to go to the Rose Bowl. Their receivers had been getting open against Ohio State's secondary all afternoon. And what did Ferentz do?

He ran out the clock and played for overtime.

Why not take at least one shot downfield in that situation? Even if it's intercepted Tressel is probably going to sit on the ball and let the clock run out anyway. If there was ever a time for the old offensive line coach to let his hair down, it was then. I can tell you, I was very relieved when Ferentz decided to sit on the football. He had the Buckeyes on the ropes and let them off.

Hero of the Day: I'll make a confession- prior to this season I wasn't a big Doug Worthington booster. I considered him a tweener- too slow to be an outstanding end; too light in the pants to be an outstanding tackle- and a prime culprit in the

underachieving defensive lines of the last couple of years.

Well, I was wrong. Doug Worthington has been terrific in this, his senior season. And in overtime, after Ohio State's front four spent three hours trying and failing to break the wall surrounding James Vandenburg, Worthington finally took matters into his own hands.

On the first play of Iowa's overtime possession Worthington blew up the pocket and, despite being blatantly held with no call, harassed Vandenburg into a hastily-thrown incompletion. On third down, after Austin Spitler had dropped Adam Robinson for a six-yard loss back to the Ohio State 31, Worthington blew into the backfield and sacked Vandenburg back at the 41, well out of Daniel Murray's range. Forced to throw a prayer on 4th-and -26, Vandenburg's end-zone pass was intercepted by Anderson Russell, his second pick of the day.

In perhaps the biggest game of his career, Doug Worthington stepped up- big-time. Sometimes being wrong feels pretty damned good. And credit also goes to Austin Spitler and Anderson Russell, another couple of seniors who made huge plays when they were needed the most.

Sick Kick (In a Good Way): A mere second-stringer to Aaron Pettrey for most of the season, 26-year old Major League Soccer veteran Devin Barclay found himself in what had to be an unexpected position- lined up with a chance to kick Ohio State into the Rose Bowl. He didn't let the opportunity slip by. Barclay's 39-yard try went right through the goalposts and into the net, and the Buckeyes were off to Pasadena.

It's Been Too Long: Almost exactly thirteen years ago, on November 16, 1996, Ohio State clinched a trip to the Rose Bowl with a 27-17 victory at Indiana (a game that, like Saturday's, was much tougher than it had to be.) Since then the Buckeyes have either won outright or shared the Big Ten Championship seven times... yet this will be the first time since 1996 that they'll play in that lovely old saucer in the foothills of the San Gabriel Mountains at 4:30 PM on New Year's Day.

A rundown of those Rose-less titles:

1998: Finished as Big Ten Co-Champions with Wisconsin, who Ohio State did not play- Badgers got the Rose Bowl bid by virtue of not having made the trip as recently.

2002: Finished as Big Ten Co-Champions with Iowa, who Ohio State did not play- Buckeyes received an invitation to the BCS Championship Game in Tempe.

2005: Finished as Big Ten Co-Champions with Penn State- Nittany Lions got the Rose Bowl bid by virtue of their victory over the Buckeyes during the season.

2006: Finished as outright Big Ten Champions- Buckeyes received an invitation to the BCS Championship Game in Glendale.

2007: Finished as outright Big Ten Champions- Buckeyes received an invitation to the BCS Championship Game in New Orleans.

2008: Finished as Big Ten Co-Champions with Penn State- Nittany Lions got the Rose Bowl bid by virtue of their victory over the Buckeyes during the season.

Three times in this decade Ohio State went to the BCS Championship Game instead of the Rose Bowl, which would have been the destination prior to the BCS era. Obviously I preferred to see the Buckeyes play Miami in the '03 title game instead of a re-match with Washington State in Pasadena, and the title match with Florida was the right outcome for the 2006 team, even given the disastrous result.

2007 kind of stuck in my craw, though. Then and now, I would have rather the Buckeyes gone to Pasadena and played USC instead of

getting shipped off to New Orleans to play a virtual road game against Louisiana State in an absurdly confabulated "Championship Game" between teams with a combined three losses. I like National Championships as well as the next Buckeye fan. But beating a two-loss team in a hyped-up version of the Sugar Bowl does not a National Champion make.

At any rate, the drought is over. The Buckeyes are Rose Bowl-bound. It feels awfully good to say that.

Oh, and One More Thing: Holly Rowe is still one babe-alicious little Mormon. That is all.

Around the Nation

Game of the Week- Ohio State/Iowa: Seems I've covered this thriller somewhat already. Shall we move on?

The Notre Dame/Michigan Situation: Two storied programs, rich with tradition; two head coaches with feet firmly held to the fire. The Notre Dame Fighting Irish and Michigan Wolverines continue to disappoint, and as the losses mount for both programs, so does the pressure on Charlie Weis and Rich Rodriguez. Notre Dame dropped to 6-4 with a 27-22 loss at Pitt, while Michigan fell below .500 at 5-6, 1-6 in the Big Ten, with a 45-24 walloping at Wisconsin. For the Irish, dreams of a BCS bowl are dust in the wind; for the Wolverines, any bowl bid whatsoever will go up in smoke should they lose to Ohio State next Saturday at the Big House.

Coach Weis is in major trouble. There's a good chance he'll lose prized quarterback Jimmy Clausen to the NFL after this season, and thus far he has 16-19 record in three years with Clausen at the controls. From a competitive standpoint he has basically wasted Clausen's career in South Bend. The defense is still as slow, un-athletic and awful as it was when Weis showed up five years ago. For all his vaunted recruiting classes, Weis still hasn't distinguished himself in terms of results from his much-maligned predecessor Tyrone Willingham. Worse yet, at least from Weis's standpoint, is the success Brian Kelly is having at Cincinnati. Kelly, a Midwesterner and a Catholic with years of success at multiple levels of college football, would be a near-perfect fit in South Bend.

Rodriguez's situation is a little bit different. He's only in his second season at Michigan and has

almost completely revamped the philosophy in Ann Arbor, which might buy him some time. Rich Rod's problem is that things seem to be regressing for his program. The Wolverines are in danger of finishing with a worse Big Ten record this year than last. The defense stinks to high heaven, Brandon Graham is gone after this season and there don't seem to be many young impact players on that side of the ball. The team lacks depth and power in the trenches and has appeared overmatched by teams the Wolverines once handled with ease. Michigan hasn't suffered back-to-back losing seasons since 1962-63, but a loss to the Buckeyes would give Rodriguez 3-9 and 5-7 records in his first two seasons. That's unacceptable for such a proud program.

If only one of these two coaches gets canned after the season, it'll be Weis. He's had five seasons to wake the echoes at Notre Dame

and has only a Hawaii Bowl win to show for it. Rodriguez's job is probably safe regardless of what happens next week against Ohio State. Frankly, though, both coaches deserve to go. Weis has had plenty of time to get Notre Dame out of the doldrums and hasn't done it. As for Rodriguez, you can argue that he needs more time to firmly put his stamp on the Michigan program... but there is no excuse for back-to-back losing seasons in Ann Arbor. Even John Cooper got Ohio State to the Hall of Fame Bowl in his second season.

It's like poker. If you're dealt a two-seven off-suited you don't keep betting in hopes of eventually turning your poor hand into a winner. You muck that sucker as fast as possible and you move on. Weis can go back to the NFL and be a successful assistant; Rich Rod can find a mid-major program that's more suited to his style of coaching- like, say, Tulane, where he

was an assistant under Tommy Bowden in the late ‘90s. Either way, both Notre Dame and Michigan need fresh cards from the deck. And they need them now.

Busy Beavers: Forgotten somewhat in the implosion of USC and the meteoric rise of Oregon and Stanford is another outstanding season in Corvallis, Oregon. Mike Riley, college football's most underrated coach, has the Oregon State Beavers in a prime position to grab the program's first Rose Bowl bid since 1964. At 5-2 in the Pac-10 and with a win over Stanford in their satchel, the Beavers can set up a showdown for the conference title with Oregon, provided they take care of business against Washington State next Saturday in Pullman. It's easy to forget that Oregon State was one of the worst programs in all of college football for a good three decades before the turn of the century. Mike Riley's transformation

of the Beavers from sad sack to consistent winner can't be praised enough.

Murfreesboro Magic: Flying even further under the radar than Oregon State is Middle Tennessee State, which has experienced a revival under fourth-year head coach Rick Stockstill. The Blue Raiders are 7-3, 5-1 in the Sun Belt Conference and can lock down their best win total since 2001 with a win over Arkansas State on Saturday. The catalyst for MTSU's renaissance is quarterback Dwight Dasher. The pint-sized (5'10") junior with the appropriate name has thrown for 2,248 yards, run for 792, and led his team to four straight victories.

A Wake for Wake: Some teams rise; other teams fall. It's a yearly story in college football.

This year's most notable team-in-decline is Wake Forest, which at 4-7 will finish with its first losing record since 2005. The Deacons just haven't been able to close out tight games this year; five of their seven losses are by three points or less, including three defeats in either the final two minutes of regulation or in overtime. It's been a rare off-year for Jim Grobe, who usually does more with less than just about any coach in the game.

They're Playing Their Guts Out: North Carolina's heartbreaking loss to Florida State on October 22
nd

dropped the Tarheels to 4-3, 0-3 in the ACC, and could have sent them into a season-destroying tailspin. Instead Butch Davis's team has rallied with three straight wins, including upsets of Virginia Tech and Miami, and can clinch at least a .500

conference record with a win over slumping N.C. State next Saturday in Raleigh. The Butcher hasn't quite gotten UNC into the national elite, at least not yet- but he's got his boys playing some good, resilient football down in Chapel Hill.

Winners of the Week

Georgia Tech: The Jackets clinched the ACC Coastal Division Championship, their first since 2006, by crushing Duke in Durham, 49-10. With a win over archrival Georgia in two weeks Paul Johnson's team can put itself in position to possibly garner an at-large BCS berth in the event of a loss in the ACC title game.

Texas Christian: Another week, another lopsided victory. The Horned Frogs moved to 10-0 by burying Utah, 55-28- their fifth consecutive wins by 27 points or more. With Wyoming and New Mexico remaining on the schedule Gary Patterson's team is probably home free for an undefeated regular season and, at the very least, a BCS berth. Funny- TCU spent decades as a members of the Southwest Conference- yet (with respect to Dutch Meyer's Depression-era powerhouses) it took a demotion out of big-time college football to turn the Horned Frogs into a big-time college football program.

Nebraska: It hasn't always been picturesque, but after defeating Kansas the Cornhuskers are one win away from

clinching the Big 12 North title and can salt away the division with a win over Kansas State in Lincoln next week. The offense is still offensive and actually winning the Big 12 Championship Game and garnering the program's first BCS bowl bid since 2002 is probably a pipe dream, but Bo Pelini is making steady progress in the land of the Big Red.

Southern Methodist: What a job June Jones has done in his second season in University Park. The Mustangs are now bowl-eligible at 6-4 after defeating Texas El-Paso and are alone in first place in the C-USA West Division at 5-1. If SMU wins out against Marshall and Tulane- and they should beat Tulane at the very least- they'll be in the title game with a chance to play in

the Liberty Bowl. Even if they don't, they're a near shoo-in to play December football. And this program has serious growth potential. There are plenty of brains in Coach Jones's head, plenty of talent in the state of Texas, and plenty of well-heeled "friends of the program" with a keen interest in seeing SMU back in the upper reaches of the college football stratosphere.

Rice: After nine losses to open the season, most of them blowouts, the Owls are finally in the win column courtesy of a come-from-behind 28-20 conquest of Tulane. Three winless teams remain in the FBS: Eastern Michigan, Western Kentucky and New Mexico, which threw a scare into BYU on Saturday before falling, 24-19.

Losers of the Week

USC: A rebuilding job seemed to be likely for the Trojans at the outset of the season, but no one could have predicted the disaster that has ensued in the last three weeks. Pete Carroll's team gave up a program-record 55 points in a beat-down at the hands of Stanford, their second loss in a row to the Cardinal at the L.A. Coliseum. Jim Harbaugh even tried a two-point conversion with his team leading 48-21 in the fourth quarter. Who would have imagined *Stanford* running up the score on USC in their stadium?

Miami: Any chance the Hurricanes had to

grab a BCS at-large berth is gone after their error-plagued 33-24 loss to North Carolina and former coach Butch Davis. Jacory Harris's four interceptions were the difference for Miami, which looks to be headed to the Gator Bowl and a possible match-up with old Catholics-versus-Convicts rival Notre Dame.

Tennessee: Last Thursday three of Lane Kiffin's prized freshmen were arrested for armed robbery outside a Knoxville convenience store. On Saturday his team was ripped for 282 rushing yards and four touchdowns by Ole Miss tailback Dexter McCluster in a 42-17 rout at the hands of the Rebels. Other than that it was a vintage week in

Volunteer Country.

Kansas: The Jayhawks fell to 5-5, 1-5 in the Big 12 with their fifth consecutive loss, 31-17 to Nebraska. The Kansas defense is a sieve, which was to be expected; what wasn't expected was the lackluster performance of an experienced offense led by senior quarterback Todd Reesing. In their last four games the Jayhawks have scored an average of just over 15 points- not nearly enough considering the problems on the other side of the football. There isn't much of a chance for the swoon to end next Saturday, when Kansas heads down to Darrell K. Royal Stadium to take on Texas.

Washington State: If you can't hang with UCLA at home, you've got serious problems. So it goes for the Cougars, who were blasted on the Palouse by the mediocre Bruins, 43-7. One of the weakest offensive teams in the country, UCLA rolled up 556 total yards in handing Wazzou its seventh consecutive defeat, the last four by scores of 49-17, 40-14, 48-7 and 43-7. Head coach Paul Wulff is now 3-20 in two years and has lost seventeen times by more than 21 points.

Next Week: It's Michigan Week. The Buckeyes head to Ann Arbor for a high-noon showdown with the Wolverines, in hopes of picking up their record sixth consecutive win in the series. Dan Wismar and Yours Truly will talk about the game

that was and the Game that will be on the Buckeye Friday podcast.