It started out as badly as you'd want to imagine- and then it got worse. Staggered by a return for a touchdown of the opening kickoff and driven against the ropes by a flurry of shots from Wisconsin's power offense, Ohio State was never in control in its 31-18 loss to Wisconsin Saturday night in Madison. The fired-up Badgers jumped out to a 21-0 first-half lead and, after a Buckeye rally cut the margin to three, finished with an authoritative flourish.

Going into Saturday, Ohio State had been beaten on the scoreboard three times after the 35-3 loss at USC in 2008. But the Buckeyes hadn't been beaten physically since that night in Los Angeles- until Saturday, when Wisconsin mauled them on the line of scrimmage, whipping Ohio State's heralded defensive front. There were weaknesses we've seen out of the Buckeyes- atrocious coverage units, offense that struggles in scoring position- and ones that were unpleasant surprises.

It all added up to a National Championship run that is over in mid-October.

It Was Over When: Wisconsin's David Gilreath took the opening kickoff right up the middle, made one quick cut and was gone for an untouched 97-yard touchdown . Ohio State made it interesting late but never really recovered from that devastating start. Once again the coverage unit was horrendous. Gilreath just ran right through the entire squad with pretty much no resistance whatsoever.

Special Nightmare: The problem began with “long-distance specialist” Drew Basil, who was unable to reach the end zone on any of his four kickoffs. A touchback prevents the opposing return team from making a play and protects against the swift shift in momentum that might result from such a play. The problem continued with Ohio State’s coverage unit, which is irresponsible of lanes and slow of pursuit. A blown lane assignment by Nate Ebner sprung Gilreath and the rest of the Buckeyes were unable to catch up.

It’s one thing to give up free touchdowns at home to an undisciplined, mistake-prone Miami team. It’s another to give them up against a tough, physical opponent in their place. It was only a matter of time before this problem proved lethal.

Gashed: Ohio State’s inability to handle the Wisconsin offensive front manifested itself on the Badgers’ first series. Taking the ball at their own 42, Wisconsin bulldozed 58 yards in six plays, 51 of those on the ground. Running through gaping holes, John Clay continually reached the second level of the defense before even being touched. The big junior finished the drive and gave Wisconsin a 14-0 lead by blasting 14 yards for a touchdown.

You Like That? Here’s Some More: Wisconsin put a stamp on its physical dominance on its second series. Starting at their eleven, the Badgers launched an epic 19-play, 89-yard masterpiece, converting four third downs and a fourth down and controlling the ball for more than ten minutes. Clay applied the capper by vaulting over the stack for a one-yard touchdown, making the score 21-0. After their first two possessions the Badgers had more rushing yards (118) than Ohio State had given up on average going into the night (78.) Wisconsin simply wiped out the Buckeyes up front, Badger blockers easily reaching the linebackers and forcing them out of the running lanes.

Good Scott: With the Badgers dominating the line of scrimmage quarterback Scott Tolzien could stay clean and pick his spots. Throwing in optimum down-and-distance situations, Tolzien completed his first five attempts on the way to a 13-of-16, 152-yard performance. He did make one mistake, throwing an interception to Andrew Sweat late in the first half, but Ohio State was unable to capitalize. Tolzien’s favorite target was the Son of Al, Nick Toon, who made six catches for 72 yards while repeatedly beating Chimdi Chekwa.

Blown Chances: A 21-point deficit with nearly three quarters to play is not insurmountable, and nor was it for Ohio State on Saturday. But the comeback was hindered by offensive inefficiency and squandered opportunities. The Buckeyes got into Wisconsin territory three times in the first half but came away from those thrusts with just three points and a 21-3 halftime deficit. Ohio State settled for a field goal after having first-and-goal at the three and missed a field goal after Andrew Sweat's late-first half interception set the Buckeyes up at Badger 23.

Pryor's Line: 14-of-28 passing for 156 yards and an interception; 18 carries for 56 yards. Taking away the three sacks he incurred gives Pryor 77 yards on 15 totes. Wisconsin played zone for most of the game, dropping seven into coverage; there was running room available to Pryor if he wanted it. Surprisingly, Wisconsin was playing Ohio State to pass. Pryor was not at his most accurate and had to sift through a maze of zone coverage against a defense that, with a lead, had no need to play him honest. He didn't get much help from DeVier Posey, who couldn't get open and finished with four catches for 38 ineffectual yards.

Great Dane: Ohio State's passing problems did not extend to Dane Sanzenbacher. The little receiver made six catches for 94 yards and hung onto the football despite getting repeatedly belted by Wisconsin defenders. His head-over-heels snag of a Pryor floater on third down kept alive Ohio State's second touchdown drive, which cut the margin to 21-18 early in the final period.

Checkmate: With 11:38 remaining in the game Wisconsin looked to be in a spot of trouble. Ohio State had owned the second half to that point, outscoring the Badgers 15-0 and holding the ball for all but three-and-a-half minutes. The Buckeyes had just driven 94 yards on Wisconsin's defense, and the Badger offense had gone three straight possessions without a score. Another empty possession might prove fatal.

Wisconsin's offense responded by re-asserting its will. The Badgers marched 73 yards in ten plays, the biggest Tolzen's twenty-yard hookup with Toon on a third-and-three play from the Wisconsin 34. Tolzien completed four of his five passes on the drive, which ended with James White's clinching touchdown run from twelve yards out.

Whenever it wanted, Wisconsin's offensive line dictated the game to Ohio State's defense. The front four was unable to pressure the quarterback, unable to stop the run and unable to keep the linebackers clean. The Buckeyes are fast defensively. But their speed was no match for good old-fashioned Big Ten power. Not having Ross Homan for the entire second half didn't

help either.

Bright Spots and Not So Much: Dan Herron rushed for 91 yards on 19 carries with both Buckeye touchdowns and repeatedly found room to operate running out of read-option sets. Sanzenbacher played a courageous game, sacrificing his body on each of his six receptions. On defense, Andrew Sweat had his best performance of the season, making some nice plays against the run and intercepting Scott Tolzien late in the first half.

But the list of underachievers is longer and more distinguished- especially on defense. Dexter Larimore, whose job is to anchor the middle of Ohio State's run defense, was manhandled all night. Nate Williams and Cameron Heyward didn't make plays. Brian Rolle was ineffective. Chimdi Checkwa came out badly in his dual with Nick Toon. Other than Sweat's interception, momentum-changing plays by the defense were non-existent. And when the Silver Bullets needed one more stop to get their offense the ball with a chance to tie or take the lead, they couldn't get it.

The coaching staff wears the goat horns as well. Adjustments to counter Wisconsin's strength advantage- like, say, the insertion of space-eating tackle Jonathan Hankins- were not made. The coverage units have not been repaired in terms of personnel or execution. The offense continues to not involve the tight ends or execute properly in scoring territory. The Buckeyes did not match Wisconsin's intensity at the outset, and that's on the coaching staff.

Where From Here? With the loss the Buckeyes suddenly find themselves in fifth place in the Big Ten standings. Winning out virtually guarantees at least an at-large BCS berth, with the Rose Bowl dependant on what Wisconsin and Michigan State do from here on out. Another loss- say, at Iowa- might be fatal to Ohio State's BCS hopes altogether. With Michigan State, Iowa and Wisconsin all setting a mean pace, two conference losses likely means a ticket to Orlando and the Outback Bowl or Tampa and the Capital One Bowl- and a match-up with a representative of God's Conference.

But some defects have to be addressed for the Buckeyes to make their sixth consecutive BCS appearance. The defensive line has to get more pressure on the quarterback, protecting an injury-marred back seven. The big negative plays in special teams have to be eliminated. And this team has to get better at finishing drives the right way.

Around the Nation

Game of the Week- Kentucky/South Carolina: It's known as " the Chicken Curse ," the bizarre malady that has long plagued the South Carolina

football program. In 118 years of competition the Gamecocks have won just a single championship of any kind: the 1969 ACC title. They didn't win a bowl game until January of 1995 . The only thing they've succeeded in doing consistently is puncturing the hopes of their fans in unique and painful ways. But in the wake of South Carolina's toppling of top-ranked Alabama, Cocks boosters had reason to believe that, this season, the Chicken Curse would be consigned to the dustbin of history.

It took seven days for those beliefs to be shattered. Saturday in Lexington started out looking like a South Carolina romp, as the Cocks sailed out to a 28-10 third-quarter lead over Kentucky. Then freshman sensation Marcus Lattimore left the game with an injured ankle- and things began to slip away. First Kentucky converted four third downs in a 95-yard touchdown march that cut the deficit to 28-17. Early in the fourth quarter the Wildcats converted a third down and a fourth down in a 76-yard scoring drive that made it 28-23. Still trailing by five, Kentucky took possession at its own 32 with 7:31 left. Once again the Cocks were unable to get the key stop, as the Wildcats went 68 yards in 12 plays and scored the go-ahead touchdown on Mike Hartline's fourth-down touchdown pass to Randall Cobb with 1:15 remaining . South Carolina had one last chance to at least force overtime but Stephen Garcia was picked off on a pass from the Kentucky 20-yard line. Wildcats 31, Cocks 28.

On its final four possessions of the game Kentucky went 7-of-10 on third downs, 2-of-2 on fourth

downs and scored three touchdowns. South Carolina managed just minus-two yards rushing after Marcus Lattimore and his 212 total yards were forced from the game. With Florida losing again the Cocks had an opportunity to take complete command of the SEC East- and they couldn't do it. The Chicken Curse, it appears, is alive and clucking in Columbia.

SEC Least: The eastern half of God's Conference is a mess of biblical proportions. No East team has fewer than two conference losses while Florida, Georgia and Tennessee- which have won every division title since the conference expanded to twelve teams in 1992- have three. Meanwhile, the SEC West is loaded. Frontrunners Auburn, LSU and Alabama are a combined 19-1, 11-1 in the conference. The combined conference record of the West is 15-7, while the East is 8-16.

The winner of the West is relatively easy to predict: it's going to be whoever does the best in the round-robin of games between the Tigers, Tigers and Tide. The East is completely up in the air. South Carolina still appears to be in the driver's seat, but after their loss to Kentucky the Cocks simply can't be counted on to deliver. Florida is still breathing despite its three-game losing streak: all three losses have come to SEC West schools and the Gators have South Carolina in Gainesville on November 13th.

Either way it appears that whoever comes out of the East will do so with three losses in conference play and at least three overall. It's likely that no SEC team will finish the season unbeaten, meaning there's a reasonable chance that, for the first time since 2005, God's Conference will get shut out of the BCS Championship Game altogether. The mess in the East is representative of a down year for the dominant conference in college football.

And Then There Were Ten: Ten is the number of undefeated teams remaining after seven weeks. Missouri, Oklahoma and Oklahoma State out of the Big 12; Michigan State out of the Big Ten; Auburn and LSU out of the SEC; Oregon out of the Pac-10; TCU and Utah out of the Mountain West and Boise State out of the WAC. Several of these teams stand to knock one another from the ranks of the unbeaten: Oklahoma-Oklahoma State; Missouri-Oklahoma; Auburn-LSU and TCU-Utah. The knockouts begin next Saturday when Auburn hosts LSU and Oklahoma travels to Columbia for a prime-time match-up with Missouri.

Sycamore Surge: With a record of 2-54 from 2005-09, Indiana State was probably the worst program in all of Division I, FBS and FCS alike. But there's been a rapid turnaround in Terre Haute, one led by new quarterback Ronnie Fouch.

Originally a Washington Husky, Fouch transferred rather than spend his career as Jake Locker's understudy, and the move has worked out both for him and for Indiana State. The junior from Redlands, California has thrown eleven touchdown passes to one interception the last three weeks, and the Sycamores have won all three to move to 4-2 on the season, 2-1 in the Missouri Valley Conference. Saturday's 38-35 overtime win over Missouri State provided a good example of what Fouch has meant to the Indiana State program. With the Sycamores trailing 35-21 in the fourth quarter Fouch fired two touchdown passes in two-and-a-half minutes to tie the game and force overtime.

Indiana State has already doubled its win total from the previous five seasons combined, but Fouch, and the Sycamores, are stalking bigger game: a berth in the FCS playoffs for the first time since 1984. The hunt continues next Saturday in the Fargodome against North Dakota State, opening-week vanquishers of Kansas.

And Best Wishes: Go out to Rutgers defensive tackle Eric LeGrand, who was paralyzed from the neck down making a tackle late in his team's overtime victory over Army. There is the possibility of a somewhat normal recovery- Kevin Everett suffered a similar injury in an NFL game in 2007 and was walking within a few months- and hopefully LeGrand's recovery follows the same path. This is a brutal, violent game and the men who play it, even at this level, are a special breed.

Winners of the Week

who was fired