Nowadays, Ohio State fans think of postseason play almost as an afterthought- and no wonder. The Buckeyes went bowling in every season of the old decade and have started the new decade in the same fashion with an invite to take on Arkansas in the Sugar Bowl on January 4. It's the sixth consecutive trip to a BCS bowl for Ohio State and the eleventh consecutive bowl trip overall. And it's just another day at the office for one of college football's most consistently successful programs.

It wasn't always that way. On the afternoon of January 1, 1990, most Buckeye fans probably didn't care that their team wasn't in one of the premier bowl games. They were just happy to see their team play holiday-season football again. It had been three years since Ohio State played in a bowl and in that span a lot of momentous things that happened to the program, not many of them good: the firing of Earle Bruce, the hiring of former Arizona State head coach John Cooper to take his place, and the trauma of 1988- Ohio State's first losing season in more than twenty years.

By 1989, however, Ohio State was ready to go bowling again. After struggling to a 2-2 start the Buckeyes ran off six straight wins to clinch a postseason berth and nudge into the polls for the first time in two years. They finished the regular season with a record of 8-3, 6-2 in Big Ten play, a ranking of twenty-first in the AP poll and an invitation to play ninth-ranked Auburn in the Hall of Fame Bowl at Tampa Stadium on New Year's Day afternoon. It wasn't exactly a return to the glory of the Woody Hayes era, but it sure beat getting run off the field by the likes of Indiana .

It was also likely an invitation proffered more for the sake of getting Ohio State's massive fan base down to Tampa than a reward for the accomplishments of their team. The Buckeyes weren't exactly an impressive 8-3. They had been routed by an average score of 31-12 in their only three games against bowl qualifiers and had beaten only one team with a winning record- 6-5 non-bowl qualifier Minnesota (and it had taken a record comeback from a 31-point deficit for the Bucks to win that game.)

Their bowl opponent was no Minnesota. The Auburn Tigers had gone 9-2 against a rugged schedule, finishing tied for first place in the Southeastern Conference. Their only two losses were to Tennessee and Florida State teams that finished the season ranked in the top five, and both were close. The Tigers had also beaten unbeaten and second-ranked Alabama in the first Iron Bowl played on the Plains. With an offense anchored by dual-threat quarterback Reggie Slack and one of the stingiest defenses in college football, Auburn would be a handful for an Ohio State team that hadn't looked very good against anyone with a pulse.

At the time the Buckeyes didn't have an "SEC problem." They had been routed by Alabama in the 1978 Sugar Bowl, but relative conference strength wasn't an obsession at that time. There were no message boards, no blogs and no glory-whoring Vanderbilt grads bragging about their conference on them. Ohio State's defeat was written off as simply a bad loss to a superior team. The year before meeting Auburn in Tampa the Buckeyes had actually defeated an SEC opponent when they came from behind to shock LSU at the Horseshoe.

And problems were not something Ohio State had as the 1990 Hall of Fame Bowl opened in front of more than 68,000 fans at the Big Sombrero in Tampa. Auburn was not itself. The historic defeat of Alabama at Jordan-Hare Stadium had been an emotionally draining experience and Pat Dye's team came out for the bowl game flat and tentative, unable to match the high they'd achieved against the Crimson Tide.

Ohio State, meanwhile, came out smoking, showing little awe of its heavily favored opponent. Piercing the vaunted Auburn defense with seeming ease, the Buckeyes took an early 7-0 lead on Carlos Snow's one-yard touchdown plunge. After the Tigers answered with a field goal, Ohio State answered right back on its next possession. A 68-yard completion from Greg Frey to

flanker Jeff Graham set up the second Buckeye touchdown, which came on Frey's nine-yard strike to Brian Stablein with 13:36 remaining in the half. It was now 14-3 in favor of the Buckeyes, who were dominating the game on both lines of scrimmage.

Then came the play which changed the course of the game- and, seemingly, the course of history when it came to Ohio State and the SEC. It came on Auburn's possession immediately following the second Buckeye touchdown. Facing third-and-four at his own 36-yard line, Reggie Slack skated back in the pocket, looked downfield, saw no help there, and looked to his right at tailback Stacy Danley swinging out of the backfield.

Slack wasn't the only one who saw Danley. Ohio State's safety Zack Dumas did too and was on his way to the receiver even as Slack released the football. A senior from Deptford Township, New Jersey, Dumas was one of a long line of Buckeye hit men in the secondary, a line that included names like Jack Tatum, Tito Paul and Michael Doss. On this play Dumas would lay a shot that would have made all of those men proud.

The pass wasn't a thing of beauty. It was a lazy, looping toss that forced Danley to open up his body for the catch. The ball, Stacy Danley and Zack Dumas arrived in the same place at about the same time; Dumas was moving the fastest and with the nastiest intent . The crack reverberated throughout Tampa Stadium, bringing an audible gasp to the near-packed house in attendance. The ball spun harmlessly to the turf. Danley stayed down. True to form for a Cooper-era player, Dumas preened and pointed while his fired-up teammates (including #48, Dumas's fellow safety Mark "Bo" Pelini.)

"Hardest hit I've seen in years," intoned NBC play-by-play man Don Criqui, who in a quarter-century of broadcasting had seen no shortage of hospital shots.

It took four minutes for Stacy Danley to peel himself off the grass. But as foggy as he might have been in the wake of the Shot Heard Round the Sombrero, his teammates had quickly and suddenly been roused from their own slumber. Zack Dumas had forcefully reminded them that they were in a football game.

"The moment Stacy got hit, it pumped us up," split end Greg Taylor said afterward . Linebacker Quentin Riggins

concurred
. “When we saw that hit and what it did to Stacy, it woke us up.”

Did it ever. The momentum changed when Zack Dumas laid out Stacy Danley- and it changed to the advantage of Auburn. The Tiger defense reverted to regular-season form, slamming the door on Ohio State’s offense. Slack threw the first of three touchdown passes with eleven seconds to play in the half, cutting the deficit to 14-10. Auburn then dominated the second half, scoring touchdowns on its first three possessions. Facing an elite defense without Jeff Graham, felled by a groin pull, the Buckeyes had no chance. The final result was decisive- Auburn, 31-14.

Since that game- or more precisely, since that hit- Ohio State’s fortunes against the Southeastern Conference have been, to put it mildly, checkered. The Buckeyes have met SEC opponents seven times in bowl games since that 1990 Hall of Fame Bowl. At times they were the favorites, at times they were the underdogs, and at least once it was too close to call. All seven times the final result has been the same- a loss.

The list of bad breaks and misfortunes is long and distinguished. To wit:

1993 Citrus Bowl: Ohio State is driving for the go-ahead score midway through the fourth quarter against favored Georgia when Kirk Herbstreit fumbles the ball away in the red zone. The Bulldogs immediately drive 86 yards for a touchdown and win, 21-14.

1995 Citrus Bowl: Despite giving up nearly 500 total yards the Buckeyes are tied with

once-beaten and heavily favored Alabama late in the second half. Then, with less than a minute to play, Sherman Williams takes a short pass from Jay Barker and goes fifty yards for a touchdown. Tide wins, 24-17.

1996 Citrus Bowl: The game in which everything went wrong. Tennessee packs illegal cleats for footing in monsoon-like conditions in Orlando.
Bill Duff stuffs Eddie George
at the goal line when Ohio State threatens to go up 14-0 early.
Jay Graham goes 69 yards for a touchdown
on a play in which the Volunteers were simply trying to run out the first-half clock. Tennessee wins, 20-14.

2001 Outback Bowl: Or maybe this is the game in which everything went wrong. Ohio State enters whirling in a maelstrom of player-on-player lawsuits , John Blutarski-esque grade-point averages
,
team captains called out by underclassmen
and a head coach (John Cooper) on the verge of oblivion. The Buckeyes then
roll over
for a South Carolina team that went 0-11 the year before. Ohioan Ryan Brewer, who didn't get an offer from John Cooper, runs all over the team he grew up rooting for.

2002 Outback Bowl: This time the Buckeyes, under first-year coach Jim Tressel, are the underdogs against South Carolina. They fall behind the Cocks 28-0, stage a miraculous comeback to tie the game and seem on the verge of a win when they intercept a pass near midfield with less than a minute left. But Ohio State is flagged for unsportsmanlike conduct, destroying their field position, than Steve Bellisari destroys their chances by throwing a horrible interception to Sheldon Brown. South Carolina wins it on a field goal that gets over the crossbar by about a coat-and-a-half of paint.

2007 BCS Championship: Check that- *this* is the game in which everything went wrong. Troy Smith's In-n-Out Burger diet, Ted Ginn's foot, Florida's pass rush, 41-14. Need I say more?

2008 BCS Championship: Ohio State goes up on LSU 10-0 and then gives up 31 unanswered points. Five personal-foul penalties, reports of players fighting in the locker room at halftime- it's another disaster for the Buckeyes against the SEC, as Leslie the Hat's team wins comfortably,

38-24.

Now, there are explanations for these outcome a good deal more prosaic than a curse. Ohio State was a decided underdog against Georgia in 1993, Alabama in 1995 and LSU in 2008 and the lower-ranked team in the rematch with South Carolina in 2002. The Buckeyes were ranked in the top five going into the 1996 Citrus Bowl, but so was Tennessee in what would surely be a BCS game these days. They wouldn't have beaten anyone in a bowl game the first time they lost to South Carolina. John Cooper lost bowl games to teams from the WAC, Big East and ACC in addition to those SEC defeats; it's not as if that conference held the key to beating ole' Coop during the holidays.

Now, 2007 was a bit strange. The Disaster in the Desert came out of nowhere. But teams don't lose by 27 points out of happenstance. Florida was way better than anticipated and Ohio State wasn't quite as good as advertised. Ginn's injury was huge, but it's doubtful the Buckeyes would have won even with him. The better team won that night, and more often than not the football game is won by the better team. Nothing cursed about that.

Really, these nine games, counting the '78 Sugar Bowl, should not even be linked together. Each loss exists in its own universe, not tethered to the other. Only the accident of affiliation links Reggie Slack, Garrison Hearst, Sherman Williams, Jay Graham, Ryan Brewer, Jarvis Moss, Jacob Hester and all of the other Southern tormentors of Ohio State football. Ohio State versus the SEC is fodder for unimaginative writers and message-board trolls, nothing more.

Or is it? Maybe Zack Dumas's shot on Stacy Danley knocked the football universe just a tiny bit off its axis. Maybe that big hit doomed the Buckeyes to a fate even the lowliest of their Big Ten brethren have managed to avoid . Maybe Ohio State won't just be playing Arkansas in New Orleans on January 4. Maybe they'll be tangling with forces larger and mightier than just the Razorbacks. And if that's the case we might need Dane Sanzenbacher to take one of his patented big hits over the middle, just to see what happens.