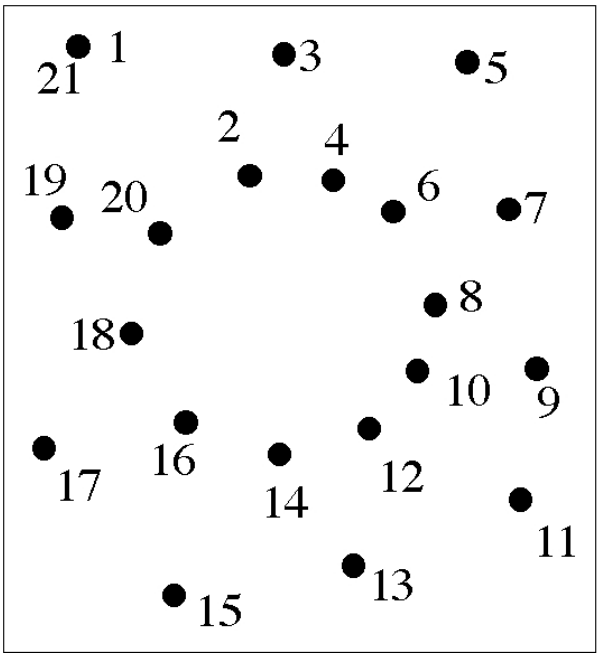

The Ohio State Buckeyes are certainly entering the Season of their Discontent and there are many too willing to pile on. Whether it's the Columbus Dispatch, The Lantern (the OSU campus newspaper), ESPN the Magazine, Sports Illustrated, the Associated Press, Yahoo Sports and any other outlet looking for its own spin, the stories coming out of Columbus don't look to end any time soon.

There are no real victims in this story which is why it must feel so good for so many to pile on. Most everyone associated with this story did something wrong in some way so there isn't much sympathy that any of them can generate. But still there is a sense that the real story is being missed.

As all of these publications are busy trying to uncover their own little dirt on the Buckeyes program they can't seem to connect the dots. It's not that hard.

The "big" scoop this week, courtesy of The Lantern, was their interview with former Buckeyes receiver Ray Small. He talked about how he knowingly broke NCAA rules by selling his Big Ten championship rings so he could pay rent and then went all Maurice Clarett on it by saying "hey, everyone was doing it" as a way of justifying his own misconduct.

Predictably, Small is backpedaling in light of the abuse he's taking publicly from some of his

former teammates. Small's inability to follow rules is almost legendary as his multiple suspensions from the Buckeyes program attest to. But that doesn't mean Small didn't do exactly as he said—break NCAA rules. He did and claims it was the smartest plan he could come up with to pay his rent.

There's nothing new in Small's revelations except to the extent that that Tattoed Five were not acting alone. I don't think anyone thinks they were anyway, including the NCAA. But if we're going to take Small at his word, then let's take him at all his words—he did it because he needed the money. That's a key dot.

In the last few weeks, another emerged when several Big Ten athletic directors, including the Buckeyes' Gene Smith, pushed for the Big Ten to increase the value of their scholarships so that they include stipends for players to meet every day living expenses.

The issue Smith and his counterparts are trying to address is the same that Small spoke to: money. College athletes are students and they like to do a lot of things that other non-athlete students like to do, spend money. I've been funding college education for three daughters since 2006 and I can personally verify that students like to spend money.

College athletics, even at the Division III level, demands a heavy price from its participants. Their time is rarely their own. There is practice and conditioning and drills and study. There is downtime, but not enough for most athletes to take on a part time job as well to get some spending money, assuming the NCAA would even allow it. You don't have to feel sorry for the athletes but they are just kids. And like any other kid in college they want money to spend when they go out.

The proposal by the Big Ten athletic directors is designed simply to account for this reality of every day life, but it's not without some controversy. Schools in the Mid American Conference, for example, oppose it not on philosophical grounds but simply on cost. Ohio State athletics has a budget to rival that of several small countries. It's a cost it can more readily absorb. Kent State, not so much.

Then there are the philosophical reasons. An athlete on a full scholarship at a school like Ohio State is already receiving around $80,000 in benefits, at a minimum, in the form of a college

education assuming he or she sticks around for 4 years. At private schools, the value is even higher. That's a nice perk not available to 98% of the rest of the student population. To some, that is more than enough. Maybe it is.

Then there are those who feel that even the modest proposal by the Big Ten doesn't go nearly far enough. This is the camp who believes, with some justification as well, that colleges exploit their athletes. You could make the argument that the value the players receive in comparison to the money generated by just one BCS game is a little lopsided in favor of the schools and that would be true as well.

There is no right answer to any of this but that's not any reason to ignore it. The reason the media outlets piling on the Buckeyes at the moment are focusing only on the alleged dirt in the program is because it's the easiest of stories to communicate. We tend to like our narratives as simple as possible and what's more simple than the hero taking a fall?

But if you want to put another dot to connect on the map, then consider for a moment the deafening silence from virtually every other program as the Buckeyes take their turn twisting in the wind. Whether it's Michigan or Alabama or Florida or pick your favorite team, there isn't an athletic director out there that would dare come out and say that similar activities haven't taken place in their programs.

A simple search on Ebay will reveal that you can buy a Florida Gators 2006 national championship player's ring. With a little digging, I'm also certain you can find player rings from virtually every other team somewhere on the internet or some local pawn shop.

None of that is to excuse any aspect of what the Buckeyes players did. Unquestionably the NCAA has a rule against a player selling his own goods for money while still in college and the players broke that rule. But the trafficking in memorabilia is strong, the money is good and young kids are immature. It's a powerful confluence of events that makes probably every program dirty at some level.

The problem is trying to convey all of this to a public that likes its news in clever quips from snarky journalists. Most just don't have the time or inclination to see what's going on at Ohio State at the moment as a cultural turning point in our approach to college athletics. It's far

easier to label Tressel a hypocrite, consider Pryor as just another loser who couldn't live his life any better than the rest of the general population and treat bragging loudmouths like Small as just another joke.

Perhaps the final dot on the map has everything to do with the raging debate over how exactly this great nation should go about crowning its college football national champion as if that is perhaps the most pressing issue of the day.

At the center of every debate I've ever read on the subject is the supposed money that can be made from a playoff system. That's because the only way to get something done is to appeal to everyone's most basic instinct: greed. The same journalists that are imploring college presidents to further sell their school and their football program for even more money are decrying the awfulness of Buckeyes players selling their rings and baubles for a pittance. And Tressel's the hypocrite?

What bothers me most about all of this is the abject failure of nearly any of these same people going after the Ohio State program with pitchforks in hand to put this in the larger context. There's a way to explain that doesn't have to come across as acquiescence.

Instead, they pick on the most vulnerable pieces of this entire equation, the kids, and rub their hands in smug self-satisfaction without ever recognizing they missed the far bigger story.

I think kids, particularly big time college student-athletes, need constant reinforcement in how to conduct their lives between the ditches of what's right and what's wrong. But when every adult in every room, whether it's those running ESPN, CBS or ABC, or the college presidents, or the athletic directors or the coaches, constantly send the message the cash is king, it gets awfully hard to really blame the kids who stupidly think that there's nothing wrong with getting a little cash of their own.