It's a slow time of year for Ohio State athletics, unless you count the men's tennis team falling in the NCAA semi-finals, or the baseball team making an early exit from the Big Ten tournament down at Huntington Park in Columbus. Off the fields and the courts...now that's a different story.

For the national media, it is officially open season on Ohio State, and their sights are trained on Jim Tressel as the big game target. No old story is too dusty to dig back up...no witness too compromised to take at his word. I wish I had a better metaphor than blood in the water, but that one describes the media feeding frenzy almost perfectly. It looks like there will be no let up until the Tressel trophy is mounted on the wall ...and then the media self-congratulation can begin all around.

It is not to minimize the violations committed by Tressel to notice that some media types are going about the self-appointed task of ending Tressel's career not only as a mission they endow with a certain virtue, but are also carrying it out with a rather unseemly and undisguised glee. All for the good of the Ohio State program, you understand.

While OSU administrators restate their support for Tressel and the coach retains representation for the August 12 hearing before the NCAA, some national media figures seem stunned that the

university has not yet seen fit to sever ties with their head coach. Did OSU administrators miss the expose' about the car deals for OSU players? Don't they know that *Sports Illustrated* has a Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative reporter digging for dirt on Tressel at this very moment? Haven't they heard what Ray Small said?

It's possible that the aforementioned *SI* story, reportedly hitting the stands this Tuesday, will disclose something previously unknown and damning about Jim Tressel, and this time next week you'll be reading my retrospective on his OSU career. Maybe the university will abruptly decide that their previous statements in support of Tressel are no longer operative, as they assess the mounting perception inside and outside the OSU community that his presence in the program is no longer a net positive. Maybe Tressel will resign on his own, or get a nudge from above in that direction. But that's not what I expect to happen.

I expect Tressel and the university to ride out the storm that will inevitably follow whatever it is that *Sports Illustrated* has to say next week, and continue to diligently prepare their case for the August NCAA hearing. They will put their faith in "the process" and count on good relationships with the NCAA hierarchy, from Gene Smith to Gene Marsh, to cushion the inevitable blow(s).

What matters is what goes on during and after that hearing, and so far it appears that Tressel and the OSU administration are going to be on the same side in that room and afterward. And as long as ESPN is leading their coverage of the troubles at Ohio State with the ramblings of Ray Small, then Tressel and OSU can claim a small piece of the high ground...for the moment.

Smallville

Former Buckeye wide receiver Ray Small recently gave an interview to *The Lantern*, the OSU student newspaper, during which he dropped the kind of soundbite that *SportsCenter* producers dream about. In the course of admitting that he sold some of his own OSU memorabilia ("I had sold my things, but it was just for the money") Small said that in light of

favorable car deals and cash-for merchandise exchanges, “They have a lot (of dirt) on everybody....cause everybody was doing it.".

Without so much as a glance at Small’s checkered past at Ohio State, ESPN’s talking head parroted the latter quote at the top of the network’s telecast Thursday night, after Small’s statements had generated a Twitter frenzy of anger and indignation from Buckeyes past and present during the day. I’ll spare you the particulars here, but you can see a sample at the end of Ramzy’s post on the matter at Eleven Warriors. And as anyone who followed the Buckeye career of the former Glenville product could tell you, Ramzy was spot on when he admonished ESPN and others about Small...

“Whether the national media or general outsiders realize this now or not, they soon will: This is not the whistleblower whom you seek. This is not the evidence you desire. This is not the character witness you want.

Character, you see, was never Ray Small’s strong suit at Ohio State. For that matter, neither were effort, “team first” attitude, or reliability. He was suspended countless times over four years by Jim Tressel, for failures in academics and in following team rules of various kinds. He was, however, granted almost as many second chances by his coach, who finally ran out of games for which to reinstate Small, ruling him ineligible for his final opportunity, the Rose Bowl against Oregon following his senior season.

I guess the lesson that giving too many second chances to misbehaving players can come back to bite you is one that went unlearned by Jim Tressel at the time. Ray Small, the ne’er do well, the malcontent, the habitual screw-up, was nonetheless the beneficiary of oceans of patience and concern by Jim Tressel. So obvious is Small’s debt to Tressel that now, players past and present who know all about Ray Small, are outraged that he of all people surfaces at this moment to smear the program. That much of what he said has the ring of truth is almost beside the point. The “everybody was doing it” exaggeration sinks his credibility and makes an outcast of him. Actually, his OSU career sinks his credibility as much as anything else.

Stung by the criticism by his former mates, Small backtracked from his initial statements Friday, saying *The Lantern* had “twisted” his words. No, they hadn't. The student paper promptly released the audio of the interview and said they stand behind every word of the story. Small’s second thoughts were dutifully

reported by the Family of Networks, granting them yet another “development” in the ongoing saga over which to furrow their brows. Everybody wins.

Drip, Drip, Drip

Former OSU basketball bench-warmer Mark Titus, of Club Trillion fame, was another former Buckeye who took some heat from Buckeye Nation this week for telling it like he saw it on his blog. The resulting grief prompted this rebuttal to his critics days later.

Dan Wetzel, one of the *Yahoo Sports* reporters involved in breaking the story of the Tressel cover-up, writes this week that it is the “drip, drip, drip” of continuing disclosures about the football program that is what the immediate future holds if the OSU administration won’t “get serious” about openly dealing with the program’s excesses.

Wetzel is a respected journalist whose case is persuasive. He credits OSU for the culture of self-reporting they have encouraged in the past with regard to NCAA violations, but insists that A.D. Gene Smith and President Gordon Gee are in denial where the football program is concerned. And to be fair, I don’t see in his writing any of the “glee” I referred to above. The repeated insistence by the OSU administration that “this is all there is...there is no systemic problem” continues to be undermined by the ongoing dripping.

It’s hard to imagine any BCS conference football program standing up to the kind of scrutiny that Ohio State is undergoing at the moment, but none of that is the fault of the media. Ohio State placed themselves under this microscope, and the NCAA must be responsive to the public perception of the operation they run. OSU people might not like how that public perception is being shaped in today’s media environment, but it’s time now for self-examination and contrition by OSU...not finger-pointing.

Looking forward, the NCAA will have to act with uncharacteristic dispatch if they are to render a final decision on penalties for Ohio State and Tressel before the coach's suspension is over in early October. That gives them about two months from the August 12 hearing, and if the past predicts the future, that's about enough time for them to sharpen their pencils, not decide much of anything. But where there's a will.....

If Tressel's 5-game suspension is to be lengthened by the NCAA, I suspect they will figure out a way to do it before he has a chance to lead the Buckeyes onto the field against Nebraska in Lincoln on October 8. The timing of the decision figures to be as full of drama as the substance of it.

In the meantime, magazine publishers will do whatever sells magazines, and websites will do whatever gets them page views. In Columbus, Gordon Gee and Gene Smith are looking for a good plumber.

Unless that career retrospective in in order next week, we'll get back to football in the *Buckeye Leaves* .