Ohio State's demoralizing 26-23 overtime loss at Purdue last Saturday afternoon put the kibosh on any loose talk about a seventh consecutive Big Ten Championship. It isn't happening; nor should it. This game once again revealed the Buckeyes for what they are: young, erratic, prone to error, shaky in the defensive back seven, uncertainly coached and reliant more on prayers from playmakers than on the hard currency of execution.

The rest of the sport hasn't fared much better. All season long, college football has been buffeted by the winds of scandal and upheaval culminating in the tornado of the Jerry Sandusky abuse case. Teams will win games and championship trophies will still be hoisted, awards will still be laid into brawny arms, but the game on the field and all of its trappings has been overshadowed by events off of the field. It's been that way since this summer.

And I'm not saying that because I'm partial to an Ohio State team that has existed in turmoil since long before the season started. Rebuilding years happen to every program, and I don't weep for the days of Jim Tressel. They're over and done with. There really has been a dark cloud over this season. How else can you describe a season in which Joe Paterno is fired because of a sex-abuse scandal? Did you see *that* coming? Wasn't he supposed to die on Penn State's sideline one fall afternoon?

On to this wretched game:

Slow Starters: After falling behind early to Indiana the previous week, the Buckeyes could have been expected to emphasize a good start in West Lafayette. They didn't get off to one, however. After one quarter the Boilermakers led 10-0 and had outpointed the Buckeyes 136-11 on total yards and 8-0 on first downs. Purdue gashed their guests early on the ground behind Ralph Bolden and Akeem Shavers, who each scored on runs in the first half. Ohio State helped its hosts with another round of the bad tackling we've almost come to expect out of this defense.

Missed Opportunities: Another characteristic of this year's defense is near-misses on potentially game-changing turnover opportunities. Early in the second quarter, in a two-play sequence with Ohio State trailing 10-7, the Buckeyes first failed to recover a fumble at the Purdue 35 and then watched Christian Bryant- who else- take a would-be interception off his shoulder pad. The Boilermakers drove 88 yards to a touchdown on their next possession to take a 17-7 lead into the break. Early in the third period, with the score now 17-14, C.J. Barnett had an interception bounce directly off his chest at the Purdue 40.

Third-Class on Third Down: In addition to poor tackling and an inability to capitalize on opportunities, Ohio State had all kinds of trouble getting Purdue's offense off the field. The Boilermakers converted 9-of-18 on third downs Saturday, including the two massive pickups on their game-winning drive in overtime.

All Quiet on the Bollman Front: While Purdue happily marched up and down the field, Ohio State's offense was as non-existent as Piltdown Man. The vaunted Buckeye running game was stuffed early while a well-schooled Boilermaker front contained Braxton Miller- for the most part- and forced him to lose yards making up his mind. Anything the Buckeyes did early- including Jordan Hall's 38-yard catch and run for a score early in the second period- seemed by improvisation more than design. As a result they punted on all but one of their first-half possessions. It played out like a Jim Bollman's Greatest Hits album. First-down runs, play-action on obvious passing downs, ignorance of screen passes and the tight end; all the old favorites were on display.

To be fair, the offense was again not 100 percent physically. J.B. Shugarts was forced out early and his place at right tackle was taken by freshman Antonio Underwood, who did not exactly cover himself with glory. Dan Herron was beat up, taking some more steam out of Ohio State's running attack. But injuries aside, it was more of the same for this offense. The play-calling was

conservative; the execution, shaky. Ohio State was whistled for seven penalties Saturday afternoon, most of them false-start and illegal-procedure calls.

More Missed Opportunities: The Buckeye offense joined its brethren on the other side of the ball when it came to blown chances. On back-to-back plays early in the third quarter with the score still 17-14 Braxton Miller missed wide-open receivers on what would have been touchdown passes of 60 and 70 yards. It was that kind of day for the Buckeyes.

Final-Drive Drama: Despite the mistakes, missed opportunities and shaky execution, Ohio State was still within a score at 20-14 when it took over at its own 33-yard line with 6:14 left. With Herron's 21-yard run setting the tone on the first play, the Buckeyes ground 67 yards on ten plays, eight of them runs. Miller passed only twice on the drive. He completed both- the second providing what should have been one of the more memorable game-winning plays in recent Buckeye history.

With the clock running down toward the one-minute mark Ohio State faced fourth-and-three at the Purdue 13. Taking a shotgun snap, Miller stepped up in the pocket, rolled out to his right- hurdling a fallen Mike Brewster along the way- and launched a fall-away, across-the-field heave in the direction of Jordan Hall, who hauled in the prayer and tumbled backwards into the end zone with 55 seconds left. It was 20-20 and the Buckeyes, who hadn't led all afternoon, were now within an extra point of moving out in front.

That point never came. Defensive tackle B.J. Gaston bull-rushed through Ohio State's right side and batted down Drew Basil's kick, preserving the tie. Purdue went on to win in overtime on the heroics of alternate quarterback Robert Marve. The ex-Miami Hurricane scrambled for five yards on third-and-four; found Gary Bush for 14 yards on third-and-twelve and sent Ross-Ade

Stadium into hysterics with his game-winning one-yard sneak. Failure to execute one of the most routine plays in football cost the Buckeyes the game, the season and, very likely the jobs of most, if not all, of the coaching staff.

Fatal Blow: Luke Fickell might have saved his job had he won out and gotten Ohio State to at least the Big Ten Championship Game. Neither will happen; indeed, the Buckeyes are going to have to get a lot better if they want to avoid a 6-6 record, their first non-winning finish since 1999. Saturday's game was a must-win- they all are- and Ohio State came out flat, sloppy and stagnant. That doesn't bode well for this coaching staff.

Around the Nation

Game of the Week- TCU/Boise State: The Broncos may fatten up their BCS resume at the

expense of woefully outclassed opposition, but they're victims of the same mid-major status and schedule that benefits them. They have zero margin of error. One slip-up for the LSU's of the world simply means another trip to another high-money BCS game- just not the Game. One slip up for Boise and it's off to the San Diego County Credit Union Poinsettia Bowl.

That's where the Broncos are likely headed after their 36-35 loss to TCU on the Smurf Turf Saturday afternoon- their first regular-season home defeat since September 8, 2001. Freshman Dan Goodale's miss of a game-winning 39-yard field goal - eerily reminiscent of senior Kyle Brotzman's two flubs in last season's loss to Nevada- ended Boise's BCS chance for keeps. There's no back door to the title game for the Broncos- not like some others.

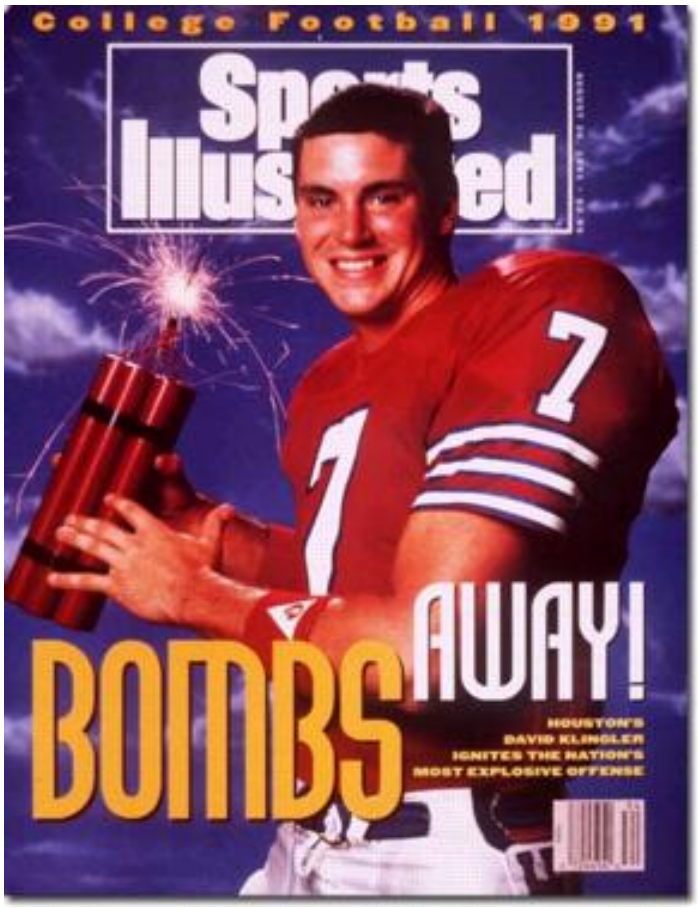
TCU, meanwhile, has recovered nicely from heartbreaking early-season losses to rivals Baylor and SMU. The Frogs are 8-2, winners of five straight and control their own destiny in the Mountain West. The Rose Bowl isn't in the offing, but winning your conference certainly isn't a bad thing in a rebuilding year. And with a fairly young group coming back, Gary Patterson's team has a great chance to be ultra-competitive next year when it joins the Big 12.

More Unbeatens Fall: Two more teams were knocked from the ranks of the unbeaten this past weekend, shriveling the number of remaining perfect squads to three- Louisiana State, Oklahoma State and Houston. In addition to Boise State, Stanford suffered its first loss of the season, to the same team that handed the Cardinal its only loss of 2010. Forcing five turnovers- including two interceptions by Andrew Luck- Oregon went down to the Farm and showed who is boss in the Pac-12, ripping the Cardinal 53-30.

Oregon's win puts the Ducks back in play for the BCS Championship. The Ducks are fourth in the latest rankings, trailing only LSU, Oklahoma State and Alabama. Fifth-place Oklahoma is in the thick of it despite losing at home to a Texas Tech team that couldn't stay within five touchdowns of Iowa State. Oregon is in the thick of it despite already getting soundly beaten by LSU on a neutral field.

Indeed, there's a very real possibility that the BCS Championship Game could wind up being a rematch between LSU and Oregon. That's just about the worst possible scenario- but par for the course for this lost season of college football. Again, this is a case where the old bowl system wins out. I'd rather see LSU play a team that hasn't lost to them yet in, say, the Sugar Bowl than a sequel that is unfair to the Tigers. They'd have to beat Oregon twice to be BCS Champions, yet Oregon only has to beat them once? How is that just? How does that really

decide a championship?



Somewhere, Manny Hazard is smiling: TCU now has the inside track to the Mountain West title, but the biggest beneficiaries are down in Texas, where 10-0 Houston now controls its own BCS destiny. The Cougars haven't played in a major bowl game since losing to Doug Flutie and Boston College in the '85 Cotton. The Andre Ware-David Klingler teams were accomplished enough but weren't even allowed to be nationally televised, let alone bowl-eligible.

Actually, it's been a not-so-lost year for most of the old lodge brothers of the Southwest Conference, particularly the schools cut out of the Big 12 alignment. Houston, TCU, Arkansas, Houston, SMU and Baylor are all playing at or above their accustomed levels. Of the ten former SWC schools, only traditional whipping boy Rice currently has a losing record.

The only perfect team among those has miles to go before it sleeps. After hosting SMU on Saturday (and getting a visit from ESPN Gameday) the Cougars go to Tulsa in the finale- and that will not be an easy trip. The Golden Hurricane are (is?) on fire, winners of six straight after a hellacious non-conference slate that included Oklahoma, Oklahoma State and Boise State. If

Houston gets by Tulsa it likely faces 9-1 Southern Miss in the Conference-USA Championship Game. The Cougars may be 10-0, but they haven't played their toughest games yet.

Fireworks in Glass City: It's been a strange season all around in this sport, but perhaps no team has had a more eventful 2011- on the field, at least- than the Toledo Rockets. And if things were strange at the beginning of the season- with the near-win at Ohio State and the extra-point-that-wasn't-yet-was at Syracuse- the latter stages have gotten downright surreal.

Two weeks ago, in a showdown for the MAC West lead, the Rockets fell at home to Northern Illinois, 63-60. At the time it was the second-highest scoring non-overtime game in conference history. It took one week to make it the third-highest scoring game in conference history- or, as long as it took the Rockets to lift off against Western Michigan November 8. Getting 216 rushing yards from Adonis Thomas, 318 passing yards from Terrance Owens and a three-pointer at the buzzer from Casey Shaw , Toledo overcame seven Alex Carder touchdown passes and hung on to beat the Broncos, 66-63.

The 126 combined points in two games were more than Florida Atlantic has scored in nine, but the Rockets could only scrounge one win out of their outburst; as a result, they're looking up at Northern Illinois in the West standings.

(Just in case you were wondering, Ohio State's 301 total yards against Toledo represents the second-fewest the Rocket "defense" has given up this season.)

Flashes-in-the-Pan: It might be Darrell Hazell's first season as head coach, but up until a month ago it looked like business as usual for Kent State footba ll. After seven games the Flashes were 1-6, hadn't scored more than 12 points against any FBS opponent and looked well on their way to yet another lost season- one of a ton for a program which has posted three winning records since 1977. You could argue that Kent has been the worst program in Division I-A over the last three decades, and this year's edition wasn't exactly bucking that trend.

Until lately, that is. With an excellent defense shutting down opponents and the offense finally scraping something together behind junior quarterback Spencer Keith, the Flashes have reeled off three straight wins, the latest a 35-3 rout of Akron in the Battle for the Wagon Wheel. If they win their final two at home against Eastern Michigan and at Temple their 6-6 overall record and 5-3 conference record might even merit a look from a bowl committee, however brief. In other words, Kent still has a dim chance of reaching its first bowl since the fabled '72 Tangerine and finishing with a winning record for the first time since 2001, when Josh Cribbs and James Harrison eked out a 6-5 mark.

Kent has been down this road before with first-year head coaches. Doug Martin's first team in 2004 started out 1-6 before winning its final four by an average of thirty points. The Flashes capitalized on that hot finish by going 1-11 the following year. Whatever transpires the remainder of this season, Hazell has to find a way to carry the momentum of this late surge into next season- something that hasn't happened very often at Kent, where one step forward is usually followed by multiple steps backward.

Local Favorites: This column usually favors college football over college basketball completely and utterly, but early kudos must go out to the Western Reserve's four Division I hoops programs. Kent, Cleveland State, Akron and Youngstown State are a combined 7-0 with road wins over Mississippi State, West Virginia and a top-ten Vanderbilt team. Three of the four- the Flashes, Vikings and Zips- will be in the thick of their conference races all season long.

Winners of the Week

[redacted]