

Buckeyes played better on Saturday. There's no shame in that.

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By: Jim Carty

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COLUMBUS, Ohio - Years from now, when people look back and all they can see is the black-and-white of dates and events and scores, someone will call this the darkest weekend in University of Michigan football history.

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They'll see that Bo Schembechler passed away on Friday and a city and state stopped to mourn.

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They'll know that one day later, the football team the legendary coach loved so much lost a chance to play for the national title in perhaps the most epic game in the storied series between Michigan and Ohio State, falling 42-39 at Ohio Stadium Saturday.

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The two things are irrevocably linked, Bo and Michigan football, Bo and this series, now

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Bo and this game.

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But football isn't life and death.

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The last two days have underscored that once again.

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Michigan lost Saturday, but there was nothing mournful or dark about the game Lloyd Carr's team played. They came into an absolute whirlwind of noise and fury and took the best shot the No. 1 team in the country had to offer, falling behind by 14 points twice and coming back each time.

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The defense that had carried this team all season finally broke, not just once, but three times, giving up huge runs to Chris Wells and Antonio Pittman - runs that would have been almost unimaginable given this unit's performance coming into the game - and a 39-yard pass to wideout Ted Ginn Jr.

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They didn't quit, though, and that matters, too. LaMarr Woodley and Alan Branch, Leon Hall and David Harris, all the rest, they got better as the game went on. Probably never as good as they wanted to be or expected to be, but good enough.

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The offense answered every question anyone had about it. Chad Henne and the wideouts carried them early, then Mike Hart jumped into the mix and delivered what might have been the hardest 142 yards he's ever gained. They were all full of heart and guts and never-say-die.

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Yeah, Michigan made mistakes, on both sides of the ball, none bigger than Shawn Crable's tough helmet-to-helmet hit on Ohio State quarterback Troy Smith that kept a late drive alive and led to what was eventually the winning touchdown.

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But in the end, Ohio State was just better Saturday.

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There's no shame in that.

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Sometimes part of sportsmanship is taking your hat off to someone and admitting that. Admitting that Smith, dominant in all three of his wins in this series, is one of the most special players ever to come through this special series. Admitting that Jim Tressel's game plan, especially going time and time again with multiple wideouts, using his team's multitude of weapons to stress Michigan's secondary, was brilliant.

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Michigan didn't play its best game, but it played tough and never quit and came as close as anyone is going to come this season to beating the Buckeyes.

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"They are the toughest team we played all year," Ohio State defensive lineman Quinn Pitcock said. "Hats off to them. They are unbelievable. They were not going to let down at all. Hart? Best back we've faced. (Henne), just knew when to hit, throw a perfect ball.

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They're a good team, and they represent the Big Ten well."

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Ohio State was just better Saturday, a great team.

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Henne and Woodley said it, and then Carr said it.

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They said it with respect, but also with a sadness.

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This series means a lot. It is filled with pressure on both sides, internal and external, and there's no way Michigan's players and coaches will be able to think of Jim Tressel and his team for the next 364 days and not feel the dull ache that's come with losing five of the last six games to Ohio State.

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Yet another two classes graduate without ever having won here.

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Yet another year is incomplete, even if every other game is won.

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No, they didn't win it for Bo.

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They didn't try. Lloyd Carr wanted everyone to know that, his voice quivering with emotion when asked about how the last 24 hours had affected him and his team.

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"I told our team we weren't going to use Bo and his passing away as a motivational deal. That would have been to dishonor him," the coach said. "I told them the way we could honor him was to coach and to play in a way that would have made him proud."

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They did that Saturday.

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They do it every Saturday, win or lose.

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But football isn't life or death, just an escape, really.

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Especially from a reality that'll hit home hard over the next few days as those who care about this football program, especially the coaches and support personnel who work in Schembechler Hall, begin to feel the full impact of the huge empty hole that's been left behind.

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