

Early in my tenure in the Club, I remember speaking to Sean Allen about the kinds of things that went on at our monthly gatherings. Sean explained that the membership was an engaging group, and that I'd find myself in conversations covering a range of subjects, what he viewed as one of the Club's great attributes. To put things in context, Sean explained it this way: "You know, we don't just sit around and talk about Ohio State football." Now, having spent the past 17 years in Columbus, I knew exactly what he was getting at. But tonight, I am afraid I will be violating Sean's guiding principle, at least in spirit. Now, I don't plan on lecturing you on Buckeye football; many others could do far better. But if one were to lecture on college football, why, one could fairly ask, would the topic be Ohio State, rather than a more enlightening subject? Indeed, wouldn't one be inclined to talk about the most successful college football program in the history of the sport? One that has won 11 national championships and the first Rose Bowl, plays in the largest stadium in America, and holds a 58-47-6 record against the aforementioned Buckeyes?

You of course know to whom I'm referring. With 923 wins, 915 when I had to disclose a title for this essay last spring, the University of Michigan football team is the winningest team in the history of the sport. And, I dare say, its most important. Indeed, to know Michigan's history is, in many ways, to know the history of college football itself.

The first college football game, however, did not involve Michigan. Played in 1869, that inaugural game pitted the College of New Jersey, today known as Princeton, against long-time Big Ten powerhouse Rutgers. Rutgers prevailed that day, 6-4, before 100 spectators in Brunswick, New Jersey.

First game: Michigan's first game took place 10 years later, in 1879. The Wolverine football team kicked off its inaugural campaign on May 30 in what is now Grant Park in Chicago against the Racine College Purple Stockings. The game was played in front of a crowd of 500 spectators, amid heat described as "oppressive." The Chicago Daily Tribune called it "the first rugby-football game to be played west of the Alleghenies," and the Racine Advocate lauded Michigan's passing and teamwork as the difference in the game. The final score, however, suggests the game was hotly contested, with Michigan prevailing 1-0. The Tribune concluded its game coverage with an injury report: "No bones were broken, but a [Racine player] was stretched out on the turf. A bucket of water however revived him."

Nineteen years later, in 1898, Michigan played another memorable game in Chicago, this time against Amos Alonzo Stagg's University of Chicago Maroons. Again Michigan prevailed, this time by a score of 12-11, clinching its first Western Conference championship, what would later be known as the Big Ten. After witnessing Michigan's victory over Chicago, Louis Elbel, a student in the University of Michigan School of Music, was inspired to begin composing a song to celebrate the Michigan victory. He started the work at his sister's house in Chicago and continued the effort on the return train ride from Chicago to Ann Arbor. His creation, named the "The Victors," became Michigan's fight song, which today brings over 100,000 spectators to sing in unison on football Saturday's in Ann Arbor. Elbel's lyric, "Champions of the West," refers to Michigan's having won the Western Conference championship for the first time in the school's history. "The Victors" similarly includes a refrain identifying Michigan as the "leaders and best." That "best" moniker aptly describes the song itself. But don't take just my word for it. For you have it on higher authority. Indeed, none other than John Philip Sousa, the revered "March King" and composer of "The Stars and Stripes Forever," declared The Victors as "one of the nation's finest military marches and the best original college song he had ever heard."

Fielding Yost: Michigan's first great head football coach was Fielding H. Yost. During his 25 seasons as the head football coach in Ann Arbor, Yost's Wolverines won six national championships, captured 10 conference titles, and amassed a record of 165–29–10. From 1901 to 1905, his "Point-a-Minute" squads went 55–1–1, outscoring their opponents by a whopping 2,821 to 42. Yost's 1901 Michigan team, also his first, outscored its opposition by a margin of 550–0 en route to a perfect season. From 1901 to 1904, Michigan did not lose a game; their streak of 56 straight games without a defeat is the second longest such streak in college football history.

Michigan's lone non-victory during that 56-game streak was a tie with the Minnesota Golden Gophers in 1903. Both teams were undefeated heading into that game, and the stakes were high. Having doubts that Minnesota would provide clean water for its opponent, Yost ordered a team manager to purchase a receptacle for drinking water that would be free from suspicion. Michigan thus brought its own five-gallon water jug with it to Minneapolis.

With two minutes remaining in the game, Minnesota rallied to tie the score 6-6. Fans rushed the field in excitement, and the ensuing pandemonium led to the game being called with time still remaining on the clock. In their haste to leave and catch the train, Michigan left the five-gallon water jug behind. Finding the jug the following day, Minnesota decided to give it a paint job, scribing, "Michigan Jug" on one side. On the other, the score "Minnesota 6, Michigan 6," was painted on the jug, making the Minnesota "6" three times larger than the Michigan "6."

As legend has it, when Yost realized he left the jug behind, he sent a letter requesting that it be returned to Ann Arbor. Minnesota allegedly wrote back, "If you want it, you'll have to come up and win it." Which Michigan would do in their next meeting, in 1909, returning to Ann Arbor with the new trophy. To this day, Michigan and Minnesota continue to play for that "Little Brown Jug," the oldest trophy game in college football. Currently, over 75 other trophies are also competed for during the college football season by teams across America. Each of those owes its beginning to Michigan, Minnesota, and some misgivings over water and a 30-cent jug.

Yost's contributions to college football, however, went far beyond the inspiration for collegiate trophies. He invented the position of linebacker, supervised the building of the first on-campus facility dedicated to intramural sports, was among the first coaches to allow Jewish players on his teams, and initiated the concept of coaching as an actual profession, when he was paid as much as a Michigan professor. And no fewer than 72 men who either played for Yost or coached under him as an assistant went on to become head coaches in college football. That is not a coaching tree. It is a coaching forest.

Rose Bowl: Originally titled the "Tournament East-West football game," what is now known as the Rose Bowl Game, was first played on January 1, 1902 in Pasadena, California, starting the tradition of New Year's Day bowl games. The inaugural game featured Yost's 1901 Michigan Wolverines football team, representing the East, matched against Stanford University, representing the West. Ironically, this was Yost's first year at Michigan, having served as Stanford's coach the previous year. These academic powerhouses may well have been competitive in a game of Quiz Bowl that day, but not in the Rose Bowl. Michigan dominated the game, prevailing by a score of 49–0. The beating was so severe that Stanford requested to quit with eight minutes remaining. Indeed, the game was so lopsided that for the next 13 years, until 1916, the Tournament of Roses officials ran chariot races, ostrich races, and other various events instead of football.

Michigan Stadium: 1927 was a historic year for Michigan, and for college football. That season, Michigan unveiled Michigan Stadium, with a capacity of 72,000. The stadium was designed with footings to allow its capacity to be expanded beyond 100,000, as Yost envisioned a day where up to 150,000 seats would be needed. While that projection proved overly optimistic, Michigan Stadium today holds over 107,000 spectators, making it the largest stadium in the country and second largest in the world, and it earning the nickname the "Big House." On September 7, 2013, the game between Michigan and Notre Dame attracted a crowd of 115,109, a record attendance for a college football game. Since 1975, the school has sold over 100,000 tickets for every home football game — a string of more than 200 contests.

The Big House has made history in contexts other than college football. In 2014, it hosted a hockey game between the Toronto Maple Leafs and the Detroit Red Wings, with an official attendance of 105,491, a record for a hockey game. That same year, a soccer match between Real Madrid and Manchester United brought over 109,000 spectators to Michigan Stadium, a record crowd for a soccer match in the United States. And in 1964, Lyndon Johnson outlined his Great Society program at commencement ceremonies in the stadium.

Gerald Ford: In the first half of the 20th century, many collegiate football players were two-way players, playing both offense and defense. Michigan's 1934 team, however, was captained by an outstanding three-way player, playing offensive center, defensive linebacker, and special teams longsnapper. The player's contributions were so significant, he was voted the team's most valuable player at season's end. While that honor would be a lifetime achievement for nearly anyone else, this player would move from the Big House to the White House. Indeed, for Gerald Ford, his playing days at Michigan were only the beginning of his run of success. Ford, of course, became the 38th President of the United States. And even at that stage of his career, his ties to Michigan were strong. Ford often had the Naval band play Hail To The Victors, rather than Hail to the Chief, before state events. He also selected the song to be played during his funeral procession at the U.S. Capitol. In honor of his many accomplishments, Michigan retired Ford's No. 48 jersey in 1994.

Further proving Michigan's leading role in the world of college athletics and beyond is none other than the "incomparable" Script Ohio. In 1936, the Ohio State University marching band first performed Script Ohio, which features a revolving block O and a cursive formation of the word Ohio. But the inspiration for the Ohio State band's now decades—long tradition was none other than the Michigan marching band. During the 1932 Michigan-Ohio State game, held in Columbus, the Michigan band spelled out the word "OHIO" in script diagonally across the field, to the accompaniment of the O.S.U. marching song, "Fight the Team," today referred to as Across the Field. In attendance that day was Ted Boehm, an Ohio State marching band member and authority on Script Ohio, who later wrote that indeed, Michigan had performed the first Ohio in script.

Fritz Crisler: Michigan's next great head coach was Fritz Crisler. Crisler took over the head coaching position in Ann Arbor in 1938, leading the Wolverines for 10 seasons and winning over 80% of his games. Crisler's 1947 Michigan Wolverines football team, dubbed the "Mad Magicians" due to Crisler's complex shifts, stunts, and schemes, had an undefeated campaign, ending with a 49–0 triumph over the USC Trojans in the Rose Bowl. Afterwards, the team was selected the national champion by the Associated Press, edging out Notre Dame for the distinction. Years later, the 1947 team was selected as the best team in the 136 year-history of Michigan football. In honor of Crisler's contributions to Michigan, one "extra" seat was added to Michigan Stadium. Since Crisler's time at Michigan, Michigan Stadium's seating capacity has always ended with the number one, although the location of the one "extra" seat is unknown.

Crisler's tenure at Michigan gave birth to the modern version of football we know today. As it was at that time the Crisler developed "two-platoon football," an innovation in which separate units of players were used for offense and defense. He unveiled the system in 1945 in a game played at Yankee Stadium against Army. Before Crisler switched to the platoon system, players handled both offensive and defensive duties with only occasional substitutions. Recognizing the significance of this innovation, in November 1947, Time magazine ran a feature article about Crisler and the Wolverines, detailing the new era of specialization marked by Crisler's decision to field separate offensive and defensive units.

While Crisler's ingenuity changed the sport of football as a whole, he likewise left his mark on every Wolverine team that would suit up in the years ahead. For it was Crisler who introduced the distinctive winged football helmet to the Wolverines, unveiling the design in 1938. The Michigan football team has worn a version of the design ever since. Crisler created the distinctive design to help his halfbacks find receivers downfield. According to Crisler, "[t]here was a tendency to use different colored helmets just for receivers in those days, but I always thought that would be as helpful for the defense as for the offense." Crisler's ingenuity is recognized still today. Earlier this year, a poll of football fans ranked Michigan's uniforms as the best in college football, in no small part due to the distinctive winged helmet introduced by Crisler some seventy years earlier.

Heisman Trophy Winners: Crisler coached the first of Michigan's three Heisman Trophy winners, the annual distinction bestowed upon college football's most outstanding player. The 1940 Heisman Trophy was awarded to Michigan halfback Tom Harmon, who led the nation in scoring.

In the opening game of the 1940 season, Michigan defeated California by a 41 to 0 score. Harmon scored four touchdowns, kicked four extra points, and threw a touchdown pass. His first touchdown came on the opening kickoff, which he returned 94 yards. His second touchdown came in the second quarter on a 72-yard punt return. And his third touchdown was on an 85-yard run. At the end of the run, a spectator jumped from the stands and ran onto the field trying to tackle Harmon. But even the twelfth man could not stop Michigan's eventual Heisman winner.

In his final college football game, Harmon led the Wolverines to a 40–0 victory over Ohio State in Columbus, one of the greatest individual performances in college football history. Harmon scored three rushing touchdowns, passed for two touchdowns, and kicked four extra points. He also intercepted three passes, and punted three times for an average of 50 yards. Ohio State fans gave Harmon a standing ovation at game's end, surely the only Wolverine to be so honored.

Michigan's next Heisman Trophy winner was Desmond Howard, who took home the award in 1991. During his career at Michigan, Howard set or tied five NCAA and 12 Michigan records. He also led the Big Ten Conference in scoring in 1991, reaching the endzone a remarkable 23 times, on his way to winning the Heisman Trophy. Howard captured 85 percent of the first-place votes in balloting for the Heisman, the largest margin in history at that time.

Howard's run for the Heisman was capped by a Michigan-record 93-yard punt return against Ohio State. Before the game, Howard "had told his friends from Ohio State that if I got in the end zone, I'd do something special for them." Howard did just that. Upon reaching the end zone, Howard punctuated his punt return by striking a Heisman Trophy pose. That iconic pose has been repeated numerous times by other players since Howard's initial version in 1991, in many ways a tribute to Howard as much as a tribute to the trophy itself.

Following his collegiate career, Howard spent 11 seasons in the NFL, starring as a kick and punt returner. He was voted Most Valuable Player of Super Bowl 31, the only special teams player to win the award, and one of just four players to win both the Heisman Trophy and Super Bowl MVP.

Michigan's most recent Heisman trophy winner is Charles Woodson, who took home the award in 1997. Starting at cornerback, Woodson developed into a "two-way player,"

playing both offense and defense, and scoring touchdowns in all three dimensions of the game: offense, defense, and special teams. In winning the 1997 Heisman Trophy, Woodson became the first (and so far only) primarily defensive player to win the award. In addition to winning the Heisman, Woodson also led the Wolverines to an undefeated season, a victory in the Rose Bowl, and a national championship. In the Big Ten Championship-clinching victory over Ohio State, Woodson made an interception in the end-zone, had a 37-yard reception that led to Michigan's only offensive touchdown of the game, and, like Howard before him, sealed his Heisman Trophy by returning a punt for a touchdown.

As remarkable as Woodson's college career proved to be, his professional career has matched his collegiate efforts. This season, at age 39, Woodson leads the NFL in interceptions. He is sixth on the all time interceptions list with 65, and is tied for most career defensive touchdowns, with 13. Woodson is one of the few players in NFL history to play in a Pro Bowl in three different decades.

Harmon, Howard, and Woodson represent the best of Michigan, on and off the field. And they share one more thing in common: All three were born and raised in Ohio.

Bo Schembechler: In 1968, Michigan track and field coach Don Canham was promoted to athletic director. Soon thereafter, in December of that year, Canham called on to replace retiring football coach Bump Elliott, who would go on to serve 21 years as Athletic Director at Iowa. Canham offered the job to Penn State coach Joe Paterno, a friend of Canham's for over 40 years. Paterno, however, three years into his tenure at Penn State, was gearing up for his first bowl game, and told Canham he could not make a decision until January. But Canham could not wait that long, and continued his search. He ultimately hired the head coach at Miami of Ohio, Glenn E. "Bo" Schembechler. Given his pedigree, Schembechler was a somewhat surprising hire. First, he came to Michigan from less-heralded Miami of Ohio. And second, he was a disciple of Woody Hayes, surely public enemy number one in Ann Arbor, having played for Hayes at Miami and later serving as an assistant coach under Hayes at Ohio State. Canham's decision to hire Schembechler, however, was the right one for Michigan. For the next 21 seasons years, Schembechler would roam the Michigan sideline with a tenacity matched by few others. In those 21 seasons, Michigan won 13 Big Ten titles and a program-record 194 games.

The first decade of Schembechler's tenure was underscored by a fierce competition with Hayes, his former mentor, in a stretch of the Michigan–Ohio State rivalry dubbed the "Ten-Year War." The Ten-Year War elevated an already storied rivalry into one of college football's greatest annual grudge matches. For ten years, the two dominated the Big 10, splitting ten conference titles between them and finishing second eight times. The two were so dominant that the Big Ten earned a nickname of "Big Two, Little Eight," during that era. After a decade of memorable sideline antics, running plays, and the occasional pass, Schembechler held a 5–4–1 advantage over Hayes.

While Schembechler was known for his emphasis on "The Team," he did have a number of individual standout players during his tenure. Rick Leach, a left-handed quarterback who wore number 7, started all four years at Michigan, earning All-Big Ten honors in three of those seasons. A duel threat, Leach was the first Division I college football player to pass for more than 200 points and to run for more than 200 points as well. But perhaps Leach's greatest contribution was inspiring a new generation of Michigan fans, including the 14-year old ball boy pictured here, who helped Leach celebrate a touchdown against Duke in 1977. Ironically, that ballboy would go on to be Schembechler's next star quarterback, leading the Wolverines to the 1986 Big Ten Championship following his guaranteeing a victory over rival Ohio State. And today, that former ballboy remains on the Michigan sideline, albeit standing closer to midfield. Yes, that's young Jim Harbaugh celebrating with Leach in the endzone.

As to Schembechler, having learned the value of "three yards and a cloud of dust" from Hayes, he was nonetheless forced to embrace the passing game when wide receiver Anthony Carter arrived in Ann Arbor in the late 1970's. By the time Carter graduated in

1981, he was a three-time All-American, and Michigan's all-time leading receiver. Along the way, he helped Schembechler evolve his offensive philosophies, opening up the offense to the pass. At least on occasion. Carter also enshrined the Number 1 jersey into Michigan lore, with a host of high-profile wide receivers later following Carter to Ann Arbor in hopes of earning the right to wear the No. 1 jersey the way Carter did during his playing days in Michigan Stadium.

Schembechler retired in 1990 at the relatively young age of 60 due to a history of heart problems. But Schembechler's legacy continued well past the time he retired from Michigan's sideline, with long-time Schembechler assistants Gary Moeller and Lloyd Carr leading the team for the next 18 years. And by and large, Moeller and Carr continued the high-level of success Michigan enjoyed during the Schembechler era. Moeller won three Big Ten Championships in his five years as head coach, but was replaced by Lloyd Carr in 1995 following Moeller's arrest on a charge of disorderly conduct. Carr defeated Ohio State in his first three attempts, as had only Yost and Crisler, and in 1997 led the Wolverines to their 11th, and most recent, national championship. But while Carr never posted a losing season, either in Big Ten play or overall, the second half of his tenure was less successful than the first. He lost six of his last seven games to Ohio State, and four of his last five bowl games, winning only the Citrus Bowl, his final game, over Florida and head coach Urban Meyer. And in 2005, Michigan finished outside the top-25 for the first time in over decades.

During this period, the legendary Schembechler, who had dominated the Michigan athletic department for decades, first as head football coach, then as athletic director, and finally as trusted advisor and senior statesman, was aging, and began experiencing significant health issues in the fall of 2006 associated with his longstanding heart condition. At the same time, his beloved Wolverines were enjoying their best season in a decade, entering the Ohio State game undefeated, and setting up a classic No. 1 vs. No. 2 match up. But the day before the game, Schembechler died. Michigan played the game with a heavy heart, losing a close contest to the Buckeyes.

Michigan seemingly would not recover from the loss of Schembechler's presence over the program, at least not for the foreseeable future. Michigan opened the following season by losing at home to Appalachian State, a division I-AA team, in what was quickly labeled one of college football's largest upsets. When Carr retired at season's end, he was replaced by Rich Rodriguez, a West Virginian both by birth and employment, serving as head coach of the home state Mountaineers for a decade before arriving in Ann Arbor. But Rodriguez never caught on in the north, and was dismissed three years later in favor of Brady Hoke, an Ohioan by birth and former coach under Lloyd Carr. After initial success, Hoke too fizzled, resulting in his termination just a year ago.

Seven seasons of mediocre football in Ann Arbor was testing even the most loyal of Michigan fans. So too was the worst stretch against Ohio State in the 135 years of Michigan football. Schembechler was surely turning over in his grave. Who, if anyone, could turn the tide in Ann Arbor?

Not surprisingly, it would take one of Bo's boys to do it. Jim Harbaugh, the former Michigan quarterback and Big Ten MVP under Schembechler, 14-year NFL quarterback, and Super Bowl-caliber NFL coach, announced he would return to Ann Arbor to lead the Wolverines. His impact was immediate. In his first season, he has lead the Wolverines to a top-15 ranking in the polls, and has the team in the hunt for the conference championship. Perhaps for my next essay, I will be able to discuss Michigan's 12th national championship. But no matter how Michigan ranks in the polls this season or next, there is no contesting Michigan's top-ranking as the most influential program in the history of college football. Or so says this admittedly biased observer.

Postscript: Let me add a brief postscript to my essay. The 1969 season, Bo Schembechler's first at Michigan, was a memorable one. Entering the Ohio State game that season, Michigan was a game behind the Buckeyes in the standings. The year before, however, Ohio State had trounced Michigan 50-14, the game in which Woody Hayes famously went for a two-point conversion late in the game, when it was well in-hand for Ohio State, because, according to Hayes, "he couldn't go for three." The Buckeyes would go on to win the national title that season.

In November 1969, Hayes brought his undefeated, top-ranked Buckeyes into Michigan Stadium riding a 22-game winning streak. Before the 1969 season, sportswriters had dubbed the 1969 version of the Buckeyes "the greatest college football team of all time." A win over Michigan in the season finale would lock up the Buckeyes' second-straight national championship. But in stunning fashion, Michigan upset Ohio State that day, 24-12. The game's television announcer dubbed the outcome "the upset of the century," and Michigan fans consider the 1969 victory over Ohio State the greatest win in Michigan's incredible football history.

Fast forward to today. Ohio State, again undefeated, eyes not only a Big Ten championship, but also, like 1969, a second straight national championship. Coach Urban Meyer's squad, one of the best college football has seen, three-deep at quarterback, is riding a 30-game winning streak, and most likely, as in 1969, will head to Ann Arbor undefeated. Michigan, for its part, has a new man at the top, Jim Harbaugh, a disciple of Schembechler. And while Harbaugh (like Schembechler) has brought immediate improvement to his squad, the team has dropped two games in his inaugural season, including, as in 1969, to its other major rival, Michigan State.

The parallels between 1969 and 2015 are many. Will there be one more parallel on November 28, another historic upset to re-start the rivalry? Can Coach Schembechler's star quarterback and protégé surprise the college football world, the way Schembechler did in his rookie campaign in Ann Arbor? Only time will tell. But if Michigan plays with the same inspiration they had on that November day in 1969, nothing is impossible. And so I leave you with the words of Bo Schembechler, who so eloquently sums up not only what it means to be a Michigan Wolverine, but indeed a teammate of any kind.