

On November 18, 2006, Ohio State and Michigan met for their annual showdown, each carrying an 11-0 record. For the first time in the history of the rivalry, the two rivals faced off while holding the top two spots in the Bowl Championship Series rankings. Ohio State won the game by a score of 42-39 and became the outright Big Ten champion, earning the right to play for a national championship. I was lucky enough to be there, and like to rerun this account of the day each year during Michigan Week. **** NOTE - This column ran initially on November 20, 2006 ... shortly after Ohio State Beat Michigan 42-39 to complete an unbeaten season, win the Big Ten title, and advance to the national championship game. ****



"This was one of the best football games of all time and we are one of the best teams ever." ~ Antonio Pittman.

Pittman's never been one to mince words. And that quote sums things up a lot better than I could with some verbose opening paragraph heavy on three dollar words.

The entire experience and atmosphere was nothing short of electric this Saturday. I was lucky enough to have a ticket to the game, as a guest of our very own Buckeye Insider Mike Furlan. Furlan invited me to the Michigan game this summer.

As each day passed, this game got bigger and bigger and loomed larger and larger on the calendar ... eventually culminating into a whirlwind of hype and anticipation unlike anything I have ever seen in my life for a sporting event. Monikers like "Game of the Century" aren't just tossed around and handed out to every big game that's played.

The Hype Machine was churning at levels that made even the most passionate of fans roll their eyes at it by week's end. And then the game managed to exceed those expectations? Are you kidding me?

Simply put, Saturday was the second greatest day of my life behind the birth of my son.

It all started at 5:15 AM Saturday morning. Still drunk from a shindig at The House of Blues the night before, that's when I loaded my car for the trek down to Columbus. Even at that wee hour, roughly half the cars on 271 and then 71 south were either adorned with Buckeye flags or paint, or noticeably transporting Buckeye fans down to the state capital for The Game.

And then the scene when we got down by The Horseshoe was nothing short of breathtaking. ESPN Gameday was there; complete with all the madness that surrounds their setup. Hundreds of thousands of people spread everywhere. The smell of red meat blistering through the air, the legendary Heiney Gate and Riverwatch parties jam-packed with crazies, most of whom were feeling no pain well before the lunch hour. As anxious as we were to get our own tailgate, part of me just wanted to roam through downtown Columbus for hours, taking it all in.

From 9 AM to 3 PM, we ate, drank, sang, and fraternized with the Buckeye Nation in a pre-game atmosphere unlike anything I've ever seen. I probably sang "We Don't Give A Damn For The Whole State Of Michigan" and the "Buckeye Battle Cry" 40-50 times before the game. I likely doled out a couple hundred high fives. And I engaged in detailed conversations about the game ahead of us with what seemed like at least 50 total strangers. Our tailgate was right across the street from the Shoe, and it was a surreal feeling all morning. Are we really going to this game? Is that really the famed "Horseshoe" in the backdrop?

There were three moments outside of the game itself that will stick with me for the rest of my life.

The first was when the team left their downtown hotel for their traditional walk through the masses to the stadium. It was a mob scene outside the hotel, and people were lined up 10-12 deep on the chained off sidewalk that the team takes for their jaunt into The Shoe two hours before game time. Seeing Coach Tressel walk right past me (with a downright evil look on his face), followed by his entire football team, dressed in suits and ties ... what a rush. And what a cool tradition that Tressel started. Our warriors of the gridiron, cheered on by legions of crazed fans, marching straight through the heart of campus and right into their home stadium.

The second moment was when I entered the Horseshoe. Its one thing to see hundreds of thousands of people spread out all over the city tailgating. It's another to see them all packed into one building. The scene literally brought a tear to my eye. The Nation, 106,000 strong, pressed into one of the most storied sports venues in the world. As we walked in, the overwhelming sea of red was booing louder than I've ever heard anyone been booed before. Had we missed the start of game? What was going on? They were booing the MICHIGAN BAND. Loudly. And passionately.

The last moment was the scene after the game. I must have hugged 150 different people. The game was so emotionally and physically draining, tears of relief and joy glazing the eyes of many of the fans in my section. I was sitting next to defensive tackle David Patterson's girlfriend, who is one of the coolest girls and most passionate fans on the face of this planet. Despite not meeting her until 3:20 PM, by 7:45 PM I felt as if I had known her my entire life and was sad to see her go off in a separate direction after the game. Two kids in front of me were so broke they couldn't afford groceries for their dorm or a hot dog at the half. They turned down offers of \$1,500 for their pair of seats.

The whole day brought together hundreds of thousands of OHIOANS. Some were there for The Game, and some there for the atmosphere before heading off to a local bar to take in the contest. Ohioans, united in their undying love for this football team, and their unending hatred for that state and that football team up north. Ohioans, desperately seeking a victory for THEIR team, with 75% of the players from THEIR state, proving to the world that OHIOANS are the best football players on the planet. OHIOANS who had never met before ... hugging and singing the final lines to the Buckeye Battle Cry over and over.

"Smash through to victory, We cheer you as we go, Our honor defend, So we'll

fight to the end

'
For O-HI-O!
"

It was the perfect day for this Buckeye fan. Side by side with the denizens of my home state all day long. Cheering on our state university, against our hated rivals from the adjacent state. Playing the most anticipated game EVER in the 103 year history of the rivalry. A rivalry that is acknowledged by most as the greatest in all of sports.

After the game ended, I noticed that my feet were really hurting. Then it dawned on me. I had been standing up for over 12 hours straight. Not one person in that entire building sat down. Not even at halftime. The last Browns game I was at - I got yelled at by four different people for standing up on 3rd and 1.

It was the experience of a lifetime, and that's not even mentioning the game, which was an all-time classic and deserves a column of its own dedicated to it.

I've never been prouder to be an Ohioan.