

Buckeye Leaves goes off the beaten path this week for a couple of reasons. First, we're in one of just two annual slow periods for Ohio State football news...(the few weeks after national signing day but before spring ball starts...and then the time after spring ball ends when many players go home before summer camp.)

Recruiting never stops of course...right now OSU coaches are zeroing in on the best of the 2011 recruits nationwide, having just put their 2010 class to bed. We'll run down some of the early offers they've extended to this fall's high school seniors as the winter chugs along, but this figures to be an atypical, even experimental version of Buckeye Leaves, because we'll get completely away from OSU sports for a while, and into some other issues and news in the football world.

My own brief departure from Buckeye sports is also facilitated by a recent addition to the writing staff here at TCF, as David Regimbal joins the team to cover OSU basketball. David is off to a running start just as Thad Matta's guys are finishing strong, rolling into tourney time in [the nation's Top 10](#)

. Drop David an email to say 'welcome aboard', and then follow

[Evan Turner](#)

and the Buckeyes right on through March.

One more quick OSU note is appropriate here, I think. The USA-Canada Olympic hockey game Sunday night made the sports world sit up and take notice with [a game](#) that was riveting for even the most casual (t

hat's me)

hockey fan. But until I saw the

[report from Jason](#)

at Eleven Warriors, I wasn't aware of how seriously the Big Ten kicked Canadian butt that night.

Most observers would agree that U.S. goalie Ryan Miller from Michigan State was the star of the game, and on offense, Ryan Suter (two assists) and Brian Rafalski (two goals), both from Wisconsin, staked the U.S. to the early lead. Then former Buckeye [Ryan Kesler](#) finished off the Canucks with a hustling, diving, backhanded empty-net goal with less than a minute to go to clinch the first Olympic win for the U.S. over Canada in 50 years. (

[video](#)

) Not bad, eh?

Football Off the Field

Schadenfreude Watch:

Taking note of what's going on with University of Michigan football lately gives you that same creepy, guilty feeling you get when you slow down to look at a car wreck...except at this particular car wreck, you can't decide whether you should feel pity and sadness...or give high-fives to everyone else in your car.

Rich Rodriguez and his Wolverines are back in the news again this week...and it's not a feel-good story. After two seasons under Rodriguez in Ann Arbor, the UM football program has been notified by the NCAA of allegations of [five major rules violations](#) by Rodriguez and his staff.

Citing alleged violations of practice and compliance rules since Rodriguez took over, the NCAA wrote, in a report that the school made public today, that the athletic department "failed to adequately monitor its football program." The NCAA also contends Rodriguez "failed to promote an atmosphere of compliance within the football program and failed to adequately monitor" his staff and time restrictions on football-related activities.

In addition, the program exceeded the permissible limit on the number of coaches *by five*, as all five of Rodriguez' quality control assistants "illegally engaged in on- and off-field coaching activities". This mostly concerns summertime conditioning workouts that UM players expressed concern about of last summer. Complicating matters is the charge that one of the UM graduate assistant coaches "gave false and misleading information" to the investigators. They hate that.

New Athletic Director David Brandon, University President Mary Sue Coleman and Rodriguez appeared at a press conference Tuesday to address the matter forthrightly and put the best possible face on the situation. [This report](#) quotes Rodriguez and Brandon...

Rodriguez said, "We're looking at it to see why we misinterpreted and why we made mistakes." Meanwhile, Brandon reiterated, "Rich Rodriguez is our football coach and he will be our football coach next year."

The same report speculates...

It is hard to figure out how Rich Rodriguez is going to survive this — no matter what incoming athletic director David Brandon says.

Indeed it is. An [AP report](#) says...

According to his contract, Rodriguez can be fired for cause if the NCAA, the Big Ten or the school determines he has committed a major violation of NCAA rules or he has intentionally committed any other type of violation of NCAA rules.

The level of embarrassment for this proud program is reaching intolerable heights for the university. With one foot already out the door and the other on a banana peel after two bad seasons on the field, Rodriguez has to know now that if he makes it through the 2010 season, he won't make it any further than that. OSU fans are no doubt conflicted about all this...shades of Lloyd Carr...you wish he could stay forever...but a weak UM program hurts the conference.

"...pull over in front of the ambulance there, honey...I wanna get some pictures..."

Speaking of the NCAA and Schools Behaving Badly....

I heard a rumor Tuesday via one of the respected OSU writers that USC's NCAA penalty from the combined Bush-Mayo investigations will be something on the order of a two-year bowl game ban, a ban on national TV appearances of some sort, and the loss of numerous scholarships.

The source was admittedly "third-hand" (*and now it's fourth-hand*) so make of it what you will. If that's approximately what it turns out to be, I'm not sure the punishment will have fit the crime(s)...but it's sure no slap on the wrist. No way to know how the TV ban will work or how much it will cost the university, but that and the bowl game ban hit them where it hurts...in the pocketbook. Pete Carroll's sense of timing is looking better with each passing day.

The time frame for USC's NCAA penalties to be announced is six to ten weeks. [This report](#) suggests USC Athletic Director Mike Garrett's fortunes might be about to take a turn for the worse.

Oversigning Reined In

The [recent report](#) of a two-year probation being handed down by the NCAA to the University of Central Florida for self-reported recruiting violations got me digging into the issue of oversigning in recruiting...especially in the SEC, where it had become something of an art form. The UCF violations related to illegal contacts with recruits by staff members who were not on the coaching staff, but [eyebrows were raised](#) when the two guilty parties from the UCF staff landed new gigs in the SEC (at Tennessee and Alabama) and were punished with mere two-week suspensions.

The message being sent to these recruiting specialists by the NCAA and their new employers was that nothing terribly serious had happened. Maybe that's true...but the image of the SEC as a conference hospitable to cheaters was further enhanced...(the writer linked above quips that the league motto is..."if you ain't cheatin', you ain't competin'")

But even the SEC is capable of embarrassment about their public image, so last summer the conference took action to address the problem of oversigning in recruiting, a practice surely not limited to the SEC, but arguably [perfected there](#) . The recruiting classes signed this month represent the first group of recruits brought in since the SEC (

[in May, 2009](#)

) and then the NCAA (in November, 2009) acted to end the practice by imposing a 28-player maximum on the size of recruiting classes.

A brief summary of NCAA recruiting limits could be helpful here for those not familiar with the numbers: there is a limit of 85 total players on scholarship at one time, and a maximum of 25 players can be enrolled in a given year. Thus, if every player qualified academically, enrolled on time, and stayed for four years, an average annual recruiting class of 21 players would work out about right.

Most schools do sign a few more players each year than they plan on losing to graduation or early defections to the NFL, as a way to account for transfers, academic casualties, career-ending injuries and the like. Numerous other factors come into play to affect the totals and give coaches flexibility; giving scholarships to walk-ons, enrolling recruits early so they count on the previous year's numbers, or "greysirting", a practice that permits a player to enroll and pay his own way for a time, (with an implied future scholarship) so as not to count against the scholarship limits.

But the SEC had come to embrace the recruiting and signing of players that they knew had no chance of qualifying academically. This had the fully intended effect of establishing a tie of loyalty to the school, along with the creation of a farm system of sorts for the program, as these kids would be shuffled off to prep schools or junior colleges, where they could be expected to gain experience, develop physically in weight programs, and hopefully gain academic eligibility....all while keeping them away from competing programs. Maintaining the loyalty of sympathetic high school coaches was another side benefit of the practice, which was working nicely....until Houston Nutt took it over the top.

The new SEC limit on recruiting class size has come to be known as the [Houston Nutt Rule](#) , after Nutt's signing of

37 players

in his 2009 class at Ole Miss finally

[shamed the conference into action](#)

on oversigning. In the words of one writer, "Nutt didn't just push the envelope. He put it through the shredder". Troy, another perennial offender (though not in the SEC), signed 40 players in 2009, and averaged 32.4 signees from 2005 to 2009. There's a handy chart

[here](#)

that compares the numbers for 36 programs over the last nine years...(OSU has averaged 20.0 players per year since the class of 2002. Perhaps not coincidentally, the Big Ten was the first conference to impose limits on signees a few years ago.)

We'll never know how much the practice of oversigning by SEC schools may have contributed to the conference's recent domination of the BCS Championship (the last four titles in a row,

and five of the last seven) but now [they have to adjust](#) to the new realities, and time will tell if they lose some of their edge.

The NFL Players Are So Screwed

Venturing out of the college football world for once won't hurt, will it? After all, this is in keeping with my theme of off-the-field football issues...

Until recently I haven't paid a lot of attention to the NFL's labor relations situation outside of being vaguely aware that the league was facing the prospect of playing the 2010 and 2011 seasons "uncapped"...that is, without a salary cap constraining the owners, if a new collective bargaining agreement wasn't reached by March 5th. Well, crunch time is almost here.

You'd think that the absence of a salary cap might portend a crazy unchecked escalation of player salaries going forward, and in fact, when the owners inserted that option, it was meant in part to help them guard against their own worst inclinations. But as it has played out, and the hopes of a new CBA happening within two weeks are all but dashed, it's apparent that the owners are holding most of the cards in this game.

See, the rules change in the absence of a CBA, and the new rules almost exclusively favor the owners. Consider:

In an uncapped world, the requirement for players to achieve unrestricted free agency shifts to six years of accrued service time from the mere four years that have been required in every CBA since 1993. This effectively guts the free agent pool for at least the next two years, as all players from the 2005 draft that signed five-year deals, and all those from the 2006 draft that signed four-year deals, and who would have been unrestricted free agents (UFA) this year, are now ineligible for true free agency this offseason.

Instead they can be protected and retained by their current teams as restricted free agents (RFA) missing their long-awaited opportunity to cash in on what had been "the system" up until now. Next year, in the second uncapped season, the draft class of 2007 is similarly affected. Browns players D'Qwell Jackson, Eric Wright and Jerome Harrison among others all fall into those categories. More listings of affected players [here](#). (I'll defer to my estimable TCF colleagues on the Browns beat [Gary, Chris, Dave, Jerry] to explore the impact of all these developments on the local franchise.)

Not only does this hurt the proven NFL player who might not have been a high draft choice (with the instant-millionaire status that goes along with that), but it also hurts the bad teams in the league that use this pool of four and five-year experienced players as their primary method of getting better outside of the draft...even if they're often forced to overpay to get them.

When the salary cap goes away, so does the salary 'floor', currently at \$111 million/yr. In a down economy, owners of the weaker teams may be more inclined to spend far less than the average franchise than they are to escalate payroll in order to compete. In an [article at ESPNtheMag](#) (In *sider subscription req'd*)

Seth Wickersham warns "Fans shouldn't worry about the Redskins becoming the Yankees of the NFL. They should worry about the Jaguars becoming the Royals.

Even unrestricted free agents get jobbed under the revised rules for uncapped seasons. UFA's are limited to raises of no more than 30% increases over their 2009 salaries, with additional limits on the number of bonus clauses they can negotiate. Movement by players is further restricted by an increase in the number of players that can be "tagged" by owners. Under the CBA, a team could use *either* the 'franchise' tag *or* the 'transition' tag to prevent *one* player from reaching free agency. In the uncapped world, they now have one franchise tag *and two* transition tags available to them to help them keep more players...at lower salaries.

This NFL circumstance turns on its head the customary situation in which the owners favor a salary cap and the players are against it. All the owners are looking for in order to end the madness is for the players to take an 18% pay cut in any new CBA. Rock...meet hard place.

Word is that the owners regret having guaranteed the players 59.5% of all team revenues (at least the revenues the teams are willing to acknowledge) in the last agreement. Even if they are good enough as businessmen to grow the size of the overall revenue pie, they resent having to shell a majority of it out to players, especially if they have been judicious (or collusive?) enough to limit player salaries and bonuses to less than that 59.5% figure.

Although the owners have never opened their books to the union (nor should they, in my opinion) informed and unbiased observers say they are all demonstrably profitable, some of them wildly so. And in my view, they've always been smarter and more cohesive than their brethren in MLB and the NBA (no guaranteed contracts...equally shared TV revenue, etc).

But now that they have a gun to the head of the players union, they are trying to make the case that they are struggling in a bad economy (attendance was down 2% last year) and require a re-ordering of the state of play. And considering the hand they've dealt themselves, they have the luxury of being patient and watching the union squirm. They are probably also guessing that fans living in the cold 2010 reality of 10% unemployment will demonstrate very little sympathy for relatively wealthy football players complaining about being exploited for playing a boys game 20 times a year. I suspect they're right.

Back to OSU stuff next time, gang. Go Bucks!

p.s. if you're not pumped yet for OSU football 2010...maybe [this](#) helps.
