



This is The Rivalry. This is The Game.

It's the State Up North. It's Woody and Bo. It's more than football. It's 200 years of antipathy built up between two neighboring states that once fought over the squatting rights to Toledo.

To suggest that it's anything less would be to reject your roots. Blasphemy in its most brazen form. The records aren't supposed to matter. The recent history of the series isn't supposed to matter. What matters is this November, this Saturday, somebody is going to win The Game. And you hope its your side.

That's how it's supposed to be. That's how it was. But even those who believe in the sanctity of the Ohio State-Michigan rivalry with the fervor of a faith-healed tent revivalist have to start wondering where the spice went.

The Buckeyes' 37-7 pummeling of Michigan on Saturday was anticipated. It wasn't supposed to be a game. Ohio State is a top 10 football program one loss in Wisconsin removed from national title contention. Michigan's program has devolved into a one-trick pony, reliant almost solely on whatever magic carpet sophomore quarterback Denard Robinson is capable of weaving.

The win was Ohio State's seventh straight against Michigan, their longest streak in the series, which dates to 1897. Buckeye supporters are quick to point out that it's a lopsided stretch of payback for all the years that the Wolverines swung John Cooper from a noose on the town square.

In Jim Tressel's first six years on the job, when he was matching wits with Lloyd Carr and

coming out on top all but one year, it was indeed a reversal of fortune, with Carr playing the role that Cooper had played prior to 2000.

But after Ohio State bested Michigan in a 42-39, No. 1 vs. No. 2 thriller that sent the Buckeyes to the national title game, things started to change. Carr retired a year later and Michigan wooed West Virginia coach Rich Rodriguez to Ann Arbor. Rodriguez promptly began an attempt to revitalize the Michigan football program in a way that you could argue is far more suited for Conference USA than the Big Ten.

Rodriguez is trying to pound the square peg of a gimmicky spread offense into the round hole of what has traditionally succeeded in the cold-climate Big Ten: defense, ball control and a good kicking game. Michigan has none of the above.

No coincidence, since Rodriguez took over in Ann Arbor, Ohio State -- along with much of the rest of college football -- has been beating up on the Wolverines. The Buckeyes have torched Michigan by a combined score of 100-24 in the past three matchups.

Even when Michigan was whipping Cooper's Buckeyes around like a rag doll for most of the 1990s, the games were still contests. The largest margin of victory for Michigan over Ohio State during Cooper's tenure was 28 points in 1991. The teams frequently met with bowl implications for both sides.

Now, a 7-5 2010 campaign is an improvement for Michigan, which went 5-7 a year ago. There is nothing for the Wolverines to play for by late November, except the role of spoiler. And against Ohio State's deep, talented squad, that's not enough to force an upset.

Which is why, from the south side of the border, Saturday's game had a very "playing Indiana in mid-October" vibe to it. You show up, you take care of business, you go home. As long as you don't have a colossal brain cramp, you're winning the game. It's just a matter of by how much, and how sharp you look while you're winning.

At some point in the future, if Rodriguez can't make the Wolverines any more competitive than what he's shown in his first three seasons, he'll be fired. And the replacement will assuredly have a background in more traditional Big Ten football. And the Wolverines will rise again.

But even if that happens, it's beginning to look like the Ohio State-Michigan rivalry might be undergoing a permanent redefining. Next year, Ohio State and Michigan will, barring a last-minute change of heart from the Big Ten front office, be headed to separate divisions.

The game will remain on the calendar as the regular season finale for both teams. But its place on the schedule will be more ceremonial than anything else in the championship-game, Cornhusker-infused Big Ten of 2011 and after.

Gone forever will be the days when the Buckeyes and Wolverines will meet with the conference

title on the line. They won't even be able to meet for a division title. Even if they're battling for their respective division titles, The Game might be The Prelude to a Rematch in the Big Ten Championship Game the following week.

The weight of the game will be largely circumstantial in the coming years. Ohio State's games against division rivals such as Penn State and Wisconsin will have more weight in terms of getting the Buckeyes to the conference title game. Ohio State won't have to worry about a tiebreaker with Michigan.

And this all assumes that Michigan will reclaim its position as a national powerhouse at some point soon, and isn't looking at an extended stay with Purdue and Illinois in the middle of the Big Ten pack.

It will always be The Game. It will always be a border war. But it's not a marquee matchup anymore. And it might never be again -- at least as we've come to know it.