

Sugar Bowl Clips: Dec. 31

Michigan has thrived under defensive coordinator Greg Mattison Times-Picayune

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Greg Mattison did the unthinkable. He left the perfect job, one in which he had a great boss and had the opportunity to tutor future Pro Football Hall of Famers Ray Lewis and Ed Reed on a daily basis.

But when Mattison stepped down as the defensive coordinator of the Baltimore Ravens, he didn't do it to take just any job. He did it because he was offered the chance to be the defensive coordinator at Michigan, a school he had coached at before and always loved.

"In the three years that I was at Baltimore, it was a tremendous experience," said Mattison, 62, who coached the Wolverines' defensive line from 1992 to 1994 and served as defensive coordinator in 1995-96. "I had the opportunity to coach some of the greatest players in the game. And they were not only great players, they were great people.

"But I just missed the chance to take some young man that maybe is not a great football player, or people say he's not a great football player, or he doesn't believe he's a great football player, and help him to get to become as good as he can."

So far, that's precisely what Mattison has done for the Wolverines, who play Virginia Tech in the Allstate Sugar Bowl on Tuesday at the Mercedes-Benz Superdome.

Mattison's attacking system has been vital to the turnaround at Michigan, which is playing in its first BCS game since the 2007 Rose Bowl.

After being one of the nation's worst defenses a year ago, the Wolverines are having tremendous success in their first season under Mattison, who quickly changed the concepts and the culture of defensive football at Michigan.

"When he's coaching guys like Ray Lewis and Ed Reed, that demands respect right there," junior safety Jordan Kovacs said. "The defense that they have been running, the defense that they have had for the past couple years, has been pretty darn good. So we knew that he was going to be a great coach."

What the Wolverines didn't know, though, was how quickly they were going to be able to grasp the new system.

But they knew they were ready to learn.

"He is unbelievable," senior defensive lineman Ryan Van Bergen said. "When we heard his reputation, that was the first thing we said was we've got to buy into this guy, because he is doing something right. Look at the places he has been, look at the things he has done. He obviously has a very good grasp on defense, and we knew if we would just listen to him we could be a good defense.

Michigan defensive coordinator Greg Mattison's press conference video Michigan defensive coordinator Greg Mattison's press conference video Michigan defensive coordinator Greg Mattison met with the media Saturday morning to discuss the Allstate Sugar Bowl on Tuesday at the Mercedes-Benz Superdome. Watch video

"We were so motivated to be a good defense it didn't take a whole lot for us to start buying in and start doing the things that he said."

To help with the learning process, Mattison tried to pass on some of the things he gleaned from the pros. He even had his Michigan players watch video of the Ravens.

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"That's all we had to watch going into the season," Van Bergen said. "You do a lot of reviews of film before the season. You want to watch yourself on film, but we didn't have that, so we watched a ton of Raven film.

"It was cool. It was cool to watch those guys. To see it at that level just made you think that if we could do this, we are going to dominate in college."

The results have been promising.

After allowing 35.2 points per game last season, including an embarrassing 52 to Mississippi State in the Gator Bowl, the Wolverines have more than cut that number in half. Michigan is yielding 17.2 points, seventh-best in the nation.

Michigan also has improved from 108th (447.9 yards per game) in total defense to 18th (317.6). The defense forced a Big Ten-best 27 turnovers, including multiple turnovers in nine of its 12 games.

Mattison said the reason for the defense's resurgence is simple.

"They started believing the package and the defense and what we're doing," he said.

That's just what Mattison wanted from his players when he decided to leave the Ravens, that great boss (Coach John Harbaugh), and an opportunity to make a Super Bowl run. He's back in college, teaching players how to improve.

"I honestly would never have done this if it was any other school but Michigan," said Mattison, whose lengthy résumé includes stops at Texas A&M, Notre Dame and Florida. "And if you aren't from Michigan, if you haven't been around the University of Michigan, what these young men have done this year is why it's Michigan.

"And it's why you come back. And it's why you leave a great job in the NFL to go coach at Michigan, and I mean I think that's the biggest reason."

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Michigan safety Jordan Kovacs is proving his worth in a big way

Times-Picayune

New Orleans, LA

Trey Iles

01/01/2012

Michigan safety Jordan Kovacs won't wow anyone with his size or speed. He's not the most athletic player who'll take the field at the Allstate Sugar Bowl on Tuesday night at the Mercedes-Benz Superdome, where the Wolverines will battle Virginia Tech.

Rusty Costanza/The Times-PicayuneMichigan safety Jordan Kovacs, left, blocks a teammate on a kickoff return during a practice at Tulane University's Westfeldt practice facility on Thursday.

But if you made Wolverines defensive coordinator Greg Mattison pick out a poster boy for his group, Kovacs likely would be the choice.

"Over the years Michigan has had some players that you can count on, and you just say, 'This guy's going to make the play,' " Mattison said. "And Jordan has showed that all year, that somebody's going to make a big play, if somebody's going to blitz, if somebody's going to be there (it would be him). And he's not perfect, but he is going to go out every single play and go as hard as he can go.

"And that's a Michigan football player, a Michigan defensive player."

Kovacs, a 6-foot, 197-pound junior, has had an impressive season. He's second on the team with 64 tackles, including 45 solo, and has four sacks in 11 games. He missed the Purdue game with a knee injury, but he earned All-Big Ten honorable mention honors and was Academic All-Big Ten. He has become one of the rocks in Michigan's much-improved defense.

But Kovacs didn't arrive in Ann Arbor with much recruiting fanfare.

He made the team in an open tryout after no school offered him a scholarship out of high school, and only one, Toledo, invited him to join the squad as a preferred walk-on. Kovacs, from Curtice, Ohio, followed in his father Louis' footsteps. Louis Kovacs also walked on at Michigan in 1980 and lettered as a defensive back in 1982.

As a redshirt freshman, Jordan Kovacs started eight games in 2009 and made CollegeFootballNews.com's Freshman All-American second team. He was second on the team in tackles that season with 75.

The 2011 season has been even better for Kovacs, he said, simply because of the success the Wolverines — and the defense — have enjoyed. But Kovacs deflects individual praise and said his teammates, specifically the seniors, are the reason Michigan's defense has played better.

"I think I've got great teammates that put me into position to make plays," Kovacs said. "Defensively, we've got a great scheme that has really helped us out. Coach Matt has coached the scheme for several years, and we've caught on to it.

"We like to think we're playing Michigan football now. We're running the football downhill, and we're playing defense. We're running a completely different scheme. But I think the most important thing, I can't emphasize it enough, is our great senior leadership. They've been great leaders for us and helped us stay focused."

JACKSON BACK: Longtime Wolverines assistant Fred Jackson, who coaches the running backs, has strong Louisiana roots.

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He was born in Baton Rouge, lived in New Orleans when he was 8-10 years old and graduated from Scotlandville near Baton Rouge.

Jackson has recruited some Louisiana players to Ann Arbor, including current sophomore wide receiver Drew Dileo of Parkview Baptist in Baton Rouge and former tight end Adam Kraus of Brother Martin. Kraus was an All-Big Ten selection at guard.

Jackson has been on Michigan's staff since 1992, serving under head coaches Gary Moeller, Lloyd Carr, Rich Rodriguez and now Brady Hoke. Before Michigan, he coached at Vanderbilt, Purdue, South Carolina, Navy, Wisconsin and Toledo. But with all that experience and 19 bowl games, he has never coached in a bowl game in his home state until now.

ALABAMA NEXT: Michigan will open the 2012 season against Alabama on Sept. 1 at Cowboys Stadium in Arlington, Texas.

The Crimson Tide meets LSU in the BCS national championship game on Jan. 9 at Superdome. Michigan will play four non-conference games before its first Big Ten game against Purdue on Oct. 6. Ten of the Wolverines' 2012 opponents are in bowl games this season.

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Bowl preparations 'stepped up a couple notches' under new Michigan football coach Brady Hoke
AnnArbor.com

01/01/2012

NEW ORLEANS — The Michigan football team boarded its team charter to Champaign, Ill. in disarray.

It had dropped two of three games, including a humbling defeat against rival Michigan State and a heart-breaking, controversial ending against Iowa. On the horizon loomed games against Nebraska and Ohio State.

Players already were starting to face the "here-we-go-again" questions after the team's spectacular collapses the past two years.

So, you'd think Michigan would come out fired up to play Illinois. You'd be wrong.

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"That pregame was absolutely terrible," captain David Molk said Friday. "Just lackadaisical, like no one was ready and no one wanted to be there and everyone, I guess, was underestimating Illinois and what they could do."

So, what happened?

sugar-bowl-denard.jpg

Denard Robinson finds a hole Friday as Michigan prepares for the Sugar Bowl.

Associated Press

"We got in the locker room, and I took the entire offense over to the side and ripped them a new one, because it just needed to happen."

Response: A butt-kicking of the Illini.

Or, as Molk puts it: "The turning point in our season."

The point at which Michigan showed, indeed, it is different.

Molk said he delivered a similar pregame speech before the Nebraska and Ohio State games, too — both wins, which boosted the resurgent Wolverines into a BCS matchup with Virginia Tech on Tuesday in the Sugar Bowl (8:30 p.m., ESPN).

And, man, the vibes around this team, in this city, couldn't be much different than last year's bowl prep.

"Culture change" might be a cliché, but it's applicable here.

"I would think we have a blueprint, like I've talked about all year, of what not to do," senior defensive lineman Ryan Van Bergen said. "That means with preparation. That means with our attitude, our effort, our enthusiasm, where your focus is in a bowl week -- especially in a place like New Orleans."

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Van Bergen said Gator Bowl practices last year were less physical and less was expected of them as compared to this year's Sugar Bowl prep.

"I just think that, overall, the focus wasn't there, as far as preparing for the game," he added. "It was more that we just have to go to practice because it says that on the schedule."

Of course, winning also helps chase bad vibes.

When a team isn't winning, things fall apart, evidenced by the Wolverines' uninspired performance in the Gator Bowl last year. They fell 52-14 to Mississippi State and coach Rich Rodriguez was fired the following week.

After 10 wins and a spectacular first season by coach Brady Hoke, players no longer are dealing with the specter of losing their coach at any moment.

"I think that was definitely somewhat of a distraction (last year), because we did have that kind of hanging over our head," Van Bergen said. "You can't count it out and say it wasn't a distraction. It had to be on the minds of some of us. It was on my mind."

Hoke isn't much of an X's and O's coach, unless he's talking about big, hulking linemen doing whatever it is big, hulking linemen do. But what Hoke does spectacularly well is he sets tempo and he sets expectations.

Molk said last year, it was "one guy saying this, this and this," and that was it. He didn't indicate who that one guy was, but you're free to venture a guess.

This year, Hoke has leaned heavily on his seniors to self-police. The fiery Molk, among others, has taken ownership of that role, and underclassmen have responded.

It's kicked up preparation and accountability to a new level.

Make no mistake, the players have enjoyed themselves in the Big Easy the past five days. They've been spotted several nights on Bourbon Street, the epicenter of New Orleans' famed nightlife.

One player was seen on the second story of a Bourbon Street venue, tossing beads onto the street.

Mike Martin has checked out some jazz joints. Kevin Koger has beefed up on alligator. Fitz Toussaint has taken on the New Orleans Saints cheerleaders in a dance-off. Van Bergen and Will Campbell squared off in a rap battle.

Multiple people in the hotel business have said there isn't a vacant room within city limits for the next two weeks as Sugar Bowl and national title game fans descend on the Big Easy.

Spirits have been high and players loose, and there couldn't be a more stark contrast with last year's pressure-packed lead-in to the Gator Bowl.

But there is a BCS game two days away.

Players seem at ease with that fate.

"The mentality is different," Molk said. "There's a different goal at hand, a different strategy on how to take on this bowl and practices and preparation. It's something that's been stepped up a couple notches from last year."

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"I really like the direction we're headed in."

Even if it requires a little butt-chewing now and then.

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Michigan quarterback Denard Robinson grows from 'scared little kid' into rising star AnnArbor.com

01/01/2012

NEW ORLEANS — Denard Robinson is one of the most electrifying players in the country.

Yet, just days before playing in front of the nation in the Sugar Bowl, he acknowledged there was a time he thought he might never play big-time college football.

"My dream was to be an NFL player — then when I got to high school, I was like, 'Hopefully, I can get to a Division II school,'" Robinson said.

Eventually, he landed at Michigan to operate former coach Rich Rodriguez's spread-option offense. But center David Molk still can remember when the teenager from Deerfield Beach, Fla., first stepped onto campus as a "scared little kid that didn't know what to do."

"He'd be so scared, he wouldn't catch the snap half the time and then just go," Molk said.

Sure enough, Robinson bobbled the first snap he took at Michigan, perfectly capturing that temperament. But the play also presaged what was to come, as Robinson proceeded to pick up the ball and sprint — untouched — for a 43-yard touchdown against Western Michigan.

The past three years have been anything but smooth for Robinson, but after leading his team to a BCS matchup Tuesday against Virginia Tech in the Sugar Bowl (8:30 p.m.), it's safe to say he's all grown up.

"In the past, he's had a little too much fun, sometimes, and he's come down from that a little bit," Molk said. "He's grown up in front of my eyes. I feel like I'm a father, but he's matured."

Robinson burst onto the scene last year as a sophomore, putting up video-game stats in the first two weeks against UConn and Notre Dame to leap from obscurity into Heisman Trophy contention in a single bound.

He was the big man on campus, as his long, flowing dreadlocks and megawatt smile helped to make him a recognizable face. He was constantly stopped around school and became the Wolverines' most-requested player for media interviews.

The soft-spoken and ultra-shy Robinson went from backup quarterback to face of the Michigan football program overnight, a transition he had difficulty traversing.

"I was undersized (in high school) and I didn't know anyone would look at me," Robinson said. "I was like, 'Hopefully, I can just get out of the city of Deerfield.' ... Then my sophomore season came around and it was, like, wow, I was in the Heisman running.

"Those were things I dreamed about. I didn't think I could do it, but those were all dreams that came true."

Robinson rushed for 1,702 yards last year as a first-year starter. That happens to be an NCAA record.

But his world was shaken when the coach who made him a star, Rodriguez, was fired for a coach that planned to de-emphasize him in the offense, Brady Hoke.

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Offensive coordinator Al Borges has worked this year to blend the spread-option into his preferred West Coast system to capitalize on Robinson's dual-threat talents, but he had to warn the quarterback: Your numbers will never be the same.

Many quarterbacks, particularly those with pro aspirations, would not have reacted well to such a pronouncement. Robinson, though, isn't like most quarterbacks.

He rushed for 1,163 yards and threw for 2,056, which is a combined 1,053 dip from last year, and did it with that same megawatt smile.

"I think he's handled it great, and I mean, I can answer that with all my heart, because he's had to make sacrifices," Borges said. "He accepted that, and really worked at developing other phases of his game. Now, in the interim, he took some hits, literally and physically. Some scrutiny, because he didn't have his feet on the ground.

"It'd be easy for some kids to say, 'Hey, what the heck?' Not him."

Robinson began the season slowly in the passing game as he adjusted to the new offensive scheme, then was beset by an assortment of injuries, most of which he kept to himself. That includes a staph infection that hospitalized him for a night and nearly kept him from playing against Minnesota.

But he persevered, eventually hitting his stride in the season's final three games. Borges said the tipping point was the Illinois game, when Robinson began to master the passing attack of the new offense.

After completing less than 50 percent of his passes in five of the first eight games, he hit on 31 of 45 passes (68.9 percent) in the final four.

He's also continued his maturation off the field, turning into a more vocal leader.

"I remember just talking to him (when he first got here), and he was shy, didn't really talk," junior receiver Roy Roundtree said. "But now, he's a leader on our team and, when he's in our huddle, he's demanding. He's someone who I look up to right now, even though he's younger than me."

Robinson's progression isn't much different than that of another mobile quarterback he grew up idolizing: Michael Vick, the former Virginia Tech star who led the Hokies to the 2000 national championship game in this city.

"That's what I'm trying to work for — that's why I'm trying to be a better quarterback and passer," Robinson said. "Hopefully, I can have the blessing of playing quarterback in the NFL some day, just like Michael Vick."

Virginia Tech coach Frank Beamer sees a connection between his former star and the rising star he's about to face.

"Certainly the same type of athlete," Beamer said. "A lot of quarterbacks are tough to tackle in open spaces. This is one that's hard to tackle in close spaces.

"You look at video and a lot of times guys you think are going to get him, they don't get him. I mean, he's got a skill now. And he throws the ball well. I think he's not only an athlete, but he can really throw the ball well."

The Hokies didn't recruit Robinson. They might pay for that decision now, as Robinson looks to take the next step in his evolution against them.

"That was a mistake," Beamer quipped. "I'll tell you one thing: The ol' boy can do it. He can flat do it."

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Possible Brady Hoke victory celebration, singing 'The Victors' motivate players Detroit Free Press - Online

01/01/2012

NEW ORLEANS -- Though the Michigan football players are motivated to win Tuesday's Sugar Bowl -- the 11th win, a BCS bowl title, sending the seniors out with a final-game victory, something that hasn't been done since the 2008 Capital One Bowl -- there might be another drive as well.

"I envision and I visualize us singing 'The Victors' and us celebrating together and coach (Brady) Hoke taking his shirt off he's so happy," U-M defensive tackle Mike Martin said, grinning at the prospect, Saturday during a pre-Sugar Bowl news conference at the New Orleans Convention Center Marriott hotel. "I want to see that and we're going to make that happen. I want to see Coach Hoke jumping around happy ... He was real close after the Ohio State game, and I think this one will tip him over the edge and he won't have a choice."

If Michigan wins, will the Wolverines be back?

"I'd say that's fair to say," Martin said. "But we still haven't done what we want to do as a program. This is my last game, and after this I won't have any power to affect this program as much, but these younger guys are going to (need to) win the Big Ten championship. We didn't do that this year.

"Winning this football game would be a huge step for this program."

HEININGER UPDATE: Michigan defensive coordinator Greg Mattison wasn't making any promises about defensive lineman Will Heninger's availability after not practicing with a sprained foot, but has seen recoveries before. Either way, it's not his call. "That's really up to Paul (Schmidt), that's up to our medical staff," he said. "Over the years in coaching, I've had guys who missed an entire bowl practice and all of the sudden they were cleared and you now have another hand, you now have another guy who can play. You can't worry about that as a coach."

THE BEGINNING: Virginia Tech might be a powerhouse program now, but it was all new at the 1996 Sugar Bowl, the Hokies' first experience with a big-time game. After beating Texas, 28-10, it became the program's hello moment. "I remember after that game coach (Frank) Beamer in the locker room saying we're going to be back and we're going to be better," said current Tech offensive coordinator Bryan Stinespring, who was the recruiting coordinator on that team. "And I was in the back thinking, whoa, slow down little fella, enjoy the moment here. You're a little giddy, I understand. But he was right."

ODDS AND ENDS: U-M's defense took significant abuse last season, including a derisive comment from ESPN analyst Chris Spielman, calling the Wolverines "Mike Martin and a bunch of nice little subs at Indiana." Martin answered that Saturday after U-M's impressive 2011 season on defense -- with most of the same players. "That's definitely not the case now. Ask Spielman what he thinks right now." Martin said the topic came up at the U-M Bust when lineman Ryan Van Bergen wanted ESPN analyst Desmond Howard to text Spielman for a response. ...

One of the week's most entertaining moments came Thursday night when Van Bergen busted a rap for his teammates -- who howled in appreciation -- at the Roc and Bowl function. Going freestyle, he rified on the week, his team and boosted his fellow rapper Will Campbell, standing next to him -- without a script or preparation. "That was, as they say, straight from the dome," Van Bergen said Friday.

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Join Free Press special writer Nick Meyer for a live blog of the Sugar Bowl between U-M and Virginia Tech on Jan. 3 at freep.com/sports.

Though the Michigan football players are motivated to win Tuesday's Sugar Bowl -- the 11th win, a BCS bowl title, sending the seniors out with a final-game victory, something that hasn't been done

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Mike Thompson

Sugar Bowl Clips: Dec. 31

UM's Campbell gets his chance Toledo Blade - Online

01/01/2012

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Former 5-star recruit has struggled in career

Will Campbell. Enlarge

NEW ORLEANS -- Michigan senior Ryan Van Bergen grabbed a microphone Friday night during a team event at a local bowling alley and engaged in a freestyle rap battle with teammate Will Campbell.

The jabs Van Bergen delivered at his fellow defensive lineman were playful, unlike most of the criticism Campbell has endured since he arrived on campus with major hype three years ago.

To this point, the Wolverines haven't seen great returns on their investment in the former five-star recruit from Detroit's Cass Tech. But there's time still left for that to change, beginning in Tuesday's Sugar Bowl when Campbell's expected to take on an expanded role against Virginia Tech because of injuries to two other linemen.

To prepare Campbell for the moment, his coaches have been all over him at practice. Head coach Brady Hoke has appointed himself Campbell's personal coach down here, junior end Craig Roh said, which speaks to the staff's desperation to squeeze everything they can out of him on game day. Defensive coordinator Greg Mattison and line coach Jerry Montgomery also have offered their input in Campbell's crash course. Even Will Heining, the man Campbell will likely replace, has chipped in by pouring over practice film with his understudy.

"We have three coaches all in our ear," Campbell said. "It's a gift and a curse. If you mess up, everybody's going to see it. If you do something good, there's three coaches who are going to find something you did wrong."

Added Roh: "They're getting into him. He's been absorbing as much as he possibly can."

In his first two seasons, the five-star prospect had only five tackles. He's been more productive this year, totaling 11 tackles and two sacks, but he has struggled to get on the field because of consistency issues. As has been the case for his entire career, it seemed every time Campbell made progress, his next step would be backward.

If Heining is inactive because of a sprained foot, Campbell seems to be in line for his first career start. Quinton Washington could get a shot too, but in all likelihood, both of them will see time on a line riddled with injuries. Reserve Nathan Brink already has been ruled out, and no one seems optimistic Heining will play.

"I'm excited for him because he has an opportunity now to show what he can do," Mattison said of Campbell. "That's what this game is going to give him."

Campbell's problem has never been his ability. Athletic and limber at 6-foot-5 and 322 pounds, he sometimes has displayed the capability of manhandling offensive linemen. His inconsistent practice habits and poor conditioning turned off the previous coaching staff, and Van Bergen said Campbell arrived in Ann Arbor strapped with an ego because of the praise people were showering on him. His attitude and conditioning have improved, and now is time for Campbell to show he's a better player.

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"He's actually really humbled himself out, and he takes coaching just as well as anybody else on the team," Van Bergen said. "He probably is criticized more than anybody else on the team. He takes it very well and used it as motivation, and you're starting to see that show up more and more. You'll see a lot more of him in this bowl game than you guys have seen him the rest of the season."

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Critics help fuel Michigan defense's turnaround

Detroit News

Detroit, MI

Angelique Chengelis

12/31/2011

New Orleans— Maybe it was a Buckeye that actually helped jump-start Michigan's defense this season, thanks, in part, to a healthy dose of criticism.

Then again, Michigan's 2010 defense endured plenty of criticism.

"And rightfully so," starting safety Jordan Kovacs said Saturday. "I don't think we played very well and we could have been much better."

The Wolverines finished that season ranked No. 110 nationally in total defense and No. 108 in scoring defense. A comment that seems to have stuck with the Wolverines came the week of the Michigan-Ohio State game in 2010 when former Buckeye and current ESPN analyst Chris Spielman went on Columbus radio and said of the Michigan defense: "A lot of guys would be nice little subs at Indiana."

"We've been trampled on by a lot of people," senior Ryan Van Bergen said Saturday during a Sugar Bowl news conference, as 10-2 Michigan continues preparations for Virginia Tech. "We got called backups at Indiana by some analysts, and we heard all the criticism even though we didn't respond.

"We have the exact same guys back this year and now we're nationally ranked in the top 10 in some categories. It's a more motivated group. We always had the confidence we could do it, it just became a matter of are we going to be able to embrace the scheme, and is the scheme going to fit the athletes we have. We have a perfect mix of that. We've got guys who are motivated, we've got a scheme that fits the personnel that goes to it. Everybody has bought in. Everybody believes that we're a good defense."

Michigan head coach Brady Hoke, formerly a defensive line coach for the Wolverines under Lloyd Carr, replaced Rich Rodriguez. Hoke hired Greg Mattison, who spent the last two seasons as the Baltimore Ravens' defensive coordinator, as coordinator who employs a 4-3 scheme.

Now, Michigan is ranked seventh nationally in scoring defense, giving up an average 17.2 points, and is 18th in total defense, allowing an average 317.6 yards a game.

"Some of those comments (last season) were surprising, and we did take it to heart a little bit," Kovacs said. "That made us even hungrier this season. And our past failures and struggles from the past few seasons have really made us hungry and really made us the defense we are today."

Senior defensive tackle Mike Martin, the only player Spielman singled out a year ago as a quality talent on Michigan's defense, smiled when asked about the comments.

"Ask Spielman what he thinks right now," Martin said.

For the record, Spielman, who has worked several Michigan games this season for ESPN, has praised Mattison and the improvements of the defense.

But clearly, Van Bergen still is smarting. When he saw former Michigan Heisman Trophy winner Desmond Howard, now an ESPN analyst, at the Wolverines' football banquet, he encouraged Martin to send a message.

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"Ryan said, 'Hey, tell Desmond to text Spielman about that comment,'" Martin said, laughing. "And Desmond laughs, because it's definitely not the case now."

Will Heineinger play?

Michigan has been without starting defensive lineman Will Heineinger since he sprained his right foot in practice nine days ago.

It is unclear whether he will play Tuesday in the Sugar Bowl, and Mattison said it will be up to medical trainer Paul Schmidt to clear him.

"I've had guys that have missed an entire bowl practice and all of a sudden they were cleared," Mattison said Saturday. Adding some bulk

Since his move earlier this season to fullback, sophomore Stephen Hopkins said he has added about 10 pounds. He now carries 238 pounds on his 6-foot frame.

"I'm still running pretty well," Hopkins said.

Michigan has two 1,000-yard rushers for the first time since 1975, and Hopkins has been getting praise for helping tailback Fitz Toussaint gain 1,011 yards this season.

Quarterback Denard Robinson leads the Wolverines in rushing with 1,163 yards.

Taking it all in

Michigan's resident bon vivant, left tackle Taylor Lewan, is enjoying New Orleans, its food, culture and atmosphere. This is his first visit to the Big Easy.

"I think this place is awesome," Lewan said. "I feel like I should have been born here."

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Injuries give Michigan's Will Campbell chance to shine in Sugar Bowl

Detroit News

Detroit, MI

Angelique Chengelis

12/31/2011

New Orleans— When Will Campbell arrived at Michigan fresh from Cass Tech in Detroit and with a resume that lauded him as a five-star recruit, expectations ran high.

The 6-foot-5, 322-pounder was supposed to come in and be the next big thing.

As Campbell is about to enter the final game of his junior season, Tuesday night against Virginia Tech in the Sugar Bowl, he could be preparing for what very well may be his coming out party.

Starting defensive lineman Will Heiningler might not play because of a right foot sprain suffered nine days ago in practice — he is walking in a boot, has not practiced, and his availability remains uncertain — and backup lineman Nathan Brink is definitely out with injury.

That means Campbell and Quinton Washington should see more playing time against the Hokies. Campbell has played in every game this season and has 11 tackles, including two sacks, and Washington has played in eight games, including six as a defensive reserve, and has one tackle.

"When all of a sudden it's time for you to say, 'OK, instead of you coming in the second quarter, you're going to start the first quarter,' that's about where it's at with Will," Michigan defensive coordinator Greg Mattison said Saturday during a Sugar Bowl news conference. "I have the utmost confidence, and I'm happy for him.

"I'm excited for him, because he has an opportunity now to show what he can do, and that's what this game is going to give him."

Senior lineman Ryan Van Bergen likes what he's seen from Campbell, not only during bowl practices, but also in terms of his evolution since arriving at Michigan in 2009. In that first year, Van Bergen described Campbell as a player who rejected criticism. Now, Campbell takes it and tries to use it to benefit his game.

"When he first got here, he had a little bit of an ego about him as a freshman with the five-star and all that stuff, and that happens with all the high-school hype because of the media," Van Bergen said. "He's actually really humbled himself and he takes coaching just as well as anybody else on the team.

"He probably is criticized more than anybody else on the team. He takes it very well. He takes it and now uses it as motivation, and you're starting to see it show up more and more and you'll see a lot of him in this bowl game — a lot more than you've seen probably throughout the season."

Campbell has worked hard to keep his weight down, something Mattison and head coach Brady Hoke have wanted to see. And, while Campbell has changed his diet, perhaps more importantly, he has changed his attitude.

"I just feel like I've been more coachable, you could say," Campbell said.

The attitude change has been noticed by his teammates, including Van Bergen, who joined Campbell to rap onstage Friday night during a team function.

"He has high expectations because of how high his potential is," Van Bergen said. "Everybody says one of the most

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talented defensive linemen on this team is probably Will Campbell because of his size and his athleticism and the uncoachable things he possesses. When expectations are that high, you're going to be criticized and it's only good as long as you keep a good attitude about it, and that's what's changed in Will. His attitude is really good."

The Sugar Bowl could be the game that launches Campbell's senior year and give some insight into how the defensive line will take shape next season.

"We've asked them to stand up a tremendous amount and learn things in a very quick manner," Van Bergen said of Campbell and Washington. "They have to basically learn both positions at nose and tackle, and Big Will is learning the end as well to back me up. They've done a great job with it. I think they're going to be really good backups and next year huge contributors. This is just grooming them for next year because they're going to have such a huge role."

Sugar Bowl Clips: Dec. 31

Roundtree casualty of system change

ESPN.com

Ann Arbor, MI

Michael Rothstein

12/31/2011

ANN ARBOR, Mich. -- Michigan saw many positives this season. It had two 1,000-yard rushers, a former spread quarterback transitioning somewhat successfully to the pro style, and a team that went 10-2 this season to make the Allstate Sugar Bowl.

But not every transition is perfect.

As with any change in scheme, someone is going to see his role significantly changed.

For Michigan this season, the man hurt the most by offensive coordinator Al Borges' pro-style offense was junior wide receiver Roy Roundtree.

The Trotwood, Ohio, native had the worst numbers of his career this season, catching just 18 passes for 345 yards and two touchdowns. That was a massive drop from his breakout sophomore season, in which he caught 72 passes for 935 yards and seven touchdowns.

His numbers are even worse than his freshman season, when he caught 32 passes for 434 yards and three touchdowns.

It should be noted, though, that while Michigan was posting two 1,000-yard rushers for the first time since the 1970s, it also was throwing the ball a lot less. In fact, the last times it attempted fewer passes was more than 20 years ago.

Another answer for Roundtree's precipitous drop in production is the change in the offense. Former coach Rich Rodriguez, in his zone read version of the spread offense, liked to feature the slot receivers.

It made guys such as Roundtree and Martavious Odoms immensely valuable, while it hurt the production of outside receivers such as Junior Hemingway and former Michigan receiver Greg Mathews.

Then Rodriguez was fired, Brady Hoke was hired, and Roundtree was a receiver learning a new position -- he moved from the slot to an outside receiver's role -- midway through his career.

"We took Roy and moved him outside. Roy was basically a slot receiver," Borges said. "He caught a lot of bubble screens, he caught a lot of short balls and a few balls down the field, too.

"But because of the nature of what we were doing, and because of the progress of a guy like Jeremy Gallon, Roy, he sacrificed some catches. But he's been absolutely awesome about it."

Roundtree, to his credit, didn't complain publicly the few times he talked to the media this season. He was not made available for this story.

It didn't help, either, that junior quarterback Denard Robinson was also essentially learning to play a new offense on the fly. Robinson was inconsistent for the majority of the season, failing to string together three straight games with a completion rate of more than 50 percent until the final three games of the regular season, when he was at 60 percent or better each game.

In many ways, Michigan turned Roundtree, who had always been known for his blocking, into even more of a blocking

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wide receiver. Add in his splitting time with Gallon opposite Hemingway, and his numbers were almost destined to fall.

Hoke explained it even more simply, saying they just weren't throwing the ball to Roundtree as much.

Frankly, Michigan wasn't throwing -- or completing -- many passes to anyone this season. The Wolverines' 145 completions are the lowest by a Michigan team since 1988, when Michael Taylor, Demetrius Brown, Greg McMurtry, Wilbur Odom and Ken Sollom combined to complete 130 passes.

The 262 pass attempts are the lowest since 1989, when Michigan attempted 245 passes.

That could change, however. As Robinson becomes more comfortable in the offense, Borges figures to feature the passing game more often.

"When they've all played in the offense more, Denard understands the passing game more and more, those kids are going to be catching more balls. They'll be more involved," Borges said. "At San Diego State, I had two kids -- wide receivers -- have over 1,000 yards receiving. There's no reason why you can't do that here, too. But we're not ready for that yet. That took us a year at San Diego State to reach that point.

"But once Denard understands our passing game in its totality, all those kids are going to catch more and more passes."

San Diego State provides an interesting example. In total, SDSU receivers caught two fewer passes (244) in 2010 versus 2009 (246). However, they gained 677 more yards in Borges' second season with the Aztecs than the first. And two receivers, Vincent Brown and DeMarco Sampson, each gained more than 1,200 yards receiving and had eight or more touchdowns.

Whether that happens at Michigan during Borges' second season depends on the progression of Robinson and how he continues to adjust, along with running back Fitzgerald Toussaint and the wide receiver corps that will lose Hemingway but return redshirted senior Darryl Stonum.

Sugar Bowl Clips: Dec. 31

Dance moves, food highlight Michigan's fun in Big Easy Detroit Free Press - Online

12/31/2011

NEW ORLEANS — The Wolverines have practiced hard during the days in Louisiana preparing for the Sugar Bowl, but they are starting to enjoy the nightlife.

One of highlights of last season's trip to the Gator Bowl — the beach party dance-off that had the players hooting and hollering while taking turns dancing in a big circle — was replicated Thursday night at the Rex Den event. Tailback Fitz Toussaint

"I showed some of them," Toussaint said of his dance moves. "It was a DJ playing different types of music. The guys had to throw me out there. I don't like to go out there firsthand. They've got to push me because I'm shy. Everybody was pushing me, grabbing on my clothes to go out there. So I said, 'OK, I'll show you a little something.'

"Once I got comfortable, I was probably out there the rest of the night."

U-M tight end Kevin Koger said it was hard to see Toussaint with other players crowding around, so he went up a level to make sure he didn't miss any of the action.

As the players have walked down legendary Bourbon Street and in the French Quarter near their hotel, they've been stopped by fans. Denard Robinson — he laughed that someone called him "Bernard" — said he's enjoying the interaction with fans because he's a people person.

For others, like Koger, the favorite part is the food.

Already with oysters checked off his list, the captain from Toledo dug into an alligator po-boy sandwich Thursday night, which he loved so much he planned to go back for more Friday.

"It was absolutely amazing," Koger said. "It doesn't taste like chicken. It's a lot different. You know how some things you smell it, you eat it and it tastes like nothing else? Skunk smells like skunk. Alligator tastes like alligator.... It's definitely chewy."

Contact Mark Snyder: msnyder@freepress.com. Follow him on Twitter @freepwolverines.

Join Free Press special writer Nick Meyer for a live blog of the Sugar Bowl between U-M and Virginia Tech on Jan. 3 at freep.com/sports.

The Wolverines have practiced hard during the days in Louisianapreparing for the Sugar Bowl, but they are starting to enjoy the nightlife.

for home delivery today.

High School Sports

Mike Thompson

Sugar Bowl Clips: Dec. 31

Hoke wins over Michigan players with sincerity Detroit Free Press

12/31/2011

NEW ORLEANS _ Troy Woolfolk is naturally skeptical.

He has good reason to be, considering what he has endured during his five years as a Wolverine.

So his expectations weren't high when he was introduced to Michigan's new coach, Brady Hoke _ the third in his five-year career _ in January.

"It's really hard for me to connect with coaches, because in the past I've lost contact because they leave all the time," Woolfolk said this past week, leading up to Tuesday's Sugar Bowl against Virginia Tech. "But I've built a relationship with Coach Hoke because I believe he's a sincere, genuine guy.

"That's most important thing for me. You can be a good coach, but I like to see that you're a good person, and I believe he is, so I try to reach out to him."

Woolfolk doesn't have a flashpoint moment that convinced him of Hoke's sincerity.

The daily interactions between Hoke and his teammates over the season have sold him.

"He's been that person every day, and it hasn't changed," Woolfolk said. "I never thought he could earn my trust in a year, and he did that. He's a great coach."

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Sugar Bowl Clips: Dec. 31

Hokies, Michigan succeed through evolution ESPN.com

12/31/2011

Icon Sports Media Virginia Tech's Bud Foster and Michigan's Al Borges have benefitted from being flexible.

NEW ORLEANS -- If ever a coach had earned the right to be stubborn about his system, it'd be Bud Foster.

He has coordinated Virginia Tech's defense for the past 16 seasons, and the unit has finished in the top 12 nationally on 10 occasions (the Hokies currently rank 13th in total defense). He has had 34 players drafted in the NFL, 45 different players score touchdowns and at least one player earn All-America honors in all 16 seasons.

The pillars of Foster's defenses -- speed, athleticism, pressure, opportunistic play -- have become synonymous with Virginia Tech's program.

Foster could enter rooms with "My Way" blaring in the background if he wanted to. But he doesn't.

His success isn't tied to stubbornness. He has adapted over time, while maintaining an attacking foundation.

"It's changed a lot but it hasn't changed a lot," Foster said Friday. "We were more of an eight-man front group in the mid-1990s through probably the mid-2000s. You were seeing a lot more two-back offenses at that time. ... We've just tweaked things year in and year out. We're always trying to make it a little better."

More on the Sugar Bowl

For full coverage of the Michigan-Virginia Tech matchup in the AllState Sugar Bowl, check out the Sugar Bowl home.

More:

- [Sugar Bowl blog coverage](#)
- [Big Ten blog](#) | [ACC blog](#)

Michigan made more than a few tweaks in its offense this year, as coordinator Al Borges integrated some of his pro-style elements while maintaining a spread framework. The results were predictably choppy, but Michigan still scored more points (410) than it did in 2010, when the offense set several team and individual records.

Although Foster has led the Virginia Tech defense since 1995 and Borges had led the Michigan offense only since January, both have benefited from being flexible.

"He's like we have been offensively," Borges said of Foster. "Their defense is ever-evolving."

The next step in the evolution takes place Tuesday night at the Allstate Sugar Bowl, as Virginia Tech's defense and Michigan's offense square off in a fascinating matchup.

Both units faced some obstacles to reach this point. A look at Virginia Tech's defensive depth chart shows seven sophomores and a freshman in the starting lineup. The Hokies were hit particularly hard by injuries this season, losing starters Antoine Hopkins, Jeron Gouveia-Winslow and Bruce Taylor as well as key reserves like Kwamaine Battle.

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Despite the losses and the abundance of youth, Virginia Tech maintained its standards on defense, ranking in the top 20 nationally in scoring defense (17.2 ppg), total defense (313.9), pass-efficiency defense (111.8), rushing defense (107.8 ypg) and sacks (2.92 spg).

"[Foster] has enough flexibility," Borges said. "He's been there a long time. That system, although he's got some young players, that system that he has ... they know it. ... You're not teaching every little tiny thing, and you can start dealing more with nuance and things like that. Bud's at that point because he's been there so long."

Borges inherited a more seasoned offense and benefited from a lack of major injuries. His challenge was blending what he had done for decades with personnel suited to a vastly different scheme, particularly junior quarterback Denard Robinson.

"You can see they've done a great job adapting to their talent," Foster said. "But then, there's nothing real fancy about them, either. They're going to line up and hit you in the mouth and be physical."

Virginia Tech must not only contain Robinson on Tuesday night but be wary of Michigan's power game, which features sophomore running back Fitzgerald Toussaint and a big offensive line led by All-America center David Molk.

While the Hokies boast good size at defensive tackle, they're giving up a few pounds elsewhere. Sophomore defensive end J.R. Collins checks in at 240, while outside linebacker Alonzo Tweedy weighs just 189 pounds.

"We obviously have to get off on the football and be physical," Foster said. "That's what [Michigan] is going to do."

Virginia Tech has faced mobile quarterbacks in the past -- former West Virginia star Pat White among them -- and practiced against one the past few seasons in Tyrod Taylor. But linebacker Jack Fuller said Robinson gives the Hokies a look they haven't seen this season.

The closest comparison, according to Tyler, is Clemson's Tajh Boyd, who torched the Hokies in the ACC title game (240 pass yards, 3 TDs).

"But [Boyd's] not much of a scrambler," Fuller said. "He's quick and he can run the ball, but they look for Denard to run the ball. They have set plays for him and that's part of their offense, getting him to run the ball and getting that extra blocker."

Michigan also must adjust to some different elements from Virginia Tech, which doesn't shy away from press coverage and has the athletes to do so.

"It is a challenge," Robinson said. "They have some unique defenses and great athletes."

Added Toussaint: "They are very athletic at every position and play every play with maximum effort."

Virginia Tech's defense and Michigan's offense both should be improved in 2012, as only a handful of players depart each unit.

Both groups will look to use Tuesday night's game as a springboard.

"This is a big step for all of us," Toussaint said.

Adam Rittenberg

Sugar Bowl Clips: Dec. 31

Rittenberg joined ESPN.com in 2008 after four years at the Arlington Heights (Ill.) Daily Herald, where he covered sports at Notre Dame, Northwestern, DePaul and several other colleges. He lives in Chicago.

Brian Bennett

Bennett joined ESPN.com in August 2008 after nine years at The Courier-Journal in Louisville, Ky., where he covered college sports and the University of Louisville beat. He lives in Louisville.

Sugar Bowl Clips: Dec. 31

Michigan D-line looks for next man in ESPN.com

12/31/2011

NEW ORLEANS -- Michigan's defensive line has been the engine for a 10-win season, but the group's depth will be tested Tuesday night in the Allstate Sugar Bowl.

Reserve defensive end Nathan Brink is out with an injury, and starting defensive tackle Will Heining remains hobbled with a sprained right foot. Heining, who sustained the injury Dec. 22, has yet to practice with the team here.

Defensive coordinator Greg Mattison said Heining is day-to-day. Heining, a walk-on, has started all 12 games this season on the line and has 23 tackles, including four for loss and a sack.

"I've had guys that have missed an entire bowl practice and all of a sudden they were cleared [to play]," Mattison said. "And now you have another guy that can play. You can't worry about that as a coach."

Junior Will Campbell and sophomore Quinton Washington would see increased field time if Heining can't play. Campbell, a great talent who has battled weight issues throughout his career, has two sacks and a fumble recovery this season.

"He's in tremendous shape for a guy for being 315-plus pounds," defensive end Ryan Van Bergen said. "He could be the guy who's first to the ball every time. That's what I'm saying about his raw ability that hasn't shown up. I think he'll be a tremendous, tremendous influence on guys. When your biggest guy is running to the ball the most ... everybody else will get motivated by that."

Mattison has the "utmost confidence" in Campbell.

"It truly is, at our place, with Brady [Hoke] and our staff, next guy," Mattison said. "Next guy. These are our players. This is Michigan defense. This is how you play. You're expected to know what to do."

Adam Rittenberg

Rittenberg joined ESPN.com in 2008 after four years at the Arlington Heights (Ill.) Daily Herald, where he covered sports at Notre Dame, Northwestern, DePaul and several other colleges. He lives in Chicago.

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Sugar Bowl Clips: Dec. 31

Michigan football team gets surprise defensive boost from West Ottawa freshman MLive.com

12/31/2011

By Josh Berenter | The Grand Rapids Press

Ann Arbor File Photo Michigan freshman linebacker Desmond Morgan tackles Nebraska's Ameer Abdullah during a game last month.

Desmond Morgan's dream of playing football at Michigan became a lot bigger than he expected his freshman season.

Instead of adjusting to the bench, Morgan became a starter at linebacker and is now preparing to play in the Sugar Bowl on Tuesday in New Orleans against Virginia Tech.

It has been a fast trip for Morgan, who went from an all-state special mention player in Division 1-2 at West Ottawa High School last season, to fifth on the Wolverines in tackles this season, despite starting only six games.

Morgan has peaked at the right time.

In the past five games, he has averaged 8.6 tackles per game for the No. 3 scoring defense in the Big Ten Conference and was named to the All-Big Ten freshman team.

They are unexpected results for a first-year player who averaged 2.1 tackles and started one game in the Wolverines' first seven games.

Morgan said the turning point came during Michigan's bye week that followed a loss to Michigan State on Oct. 15. Defensive coordinator Greg Mattison said things during the off week that started to click for Morgan.

"He's a real willing football player, and now he's starting to make the transition of, you don't just run into the guy every time, your job is to make the tackle," Mattison said. "He's started to figure that out. Before, when you tell him something, it was kind of, like, he'd look at you, and you'd explain it and he'd get it. Now you just have to say it once."

Desmond Morgan

- Size: 6-1, 220 pounds
- Position: Inside linebacker
- Hometown: Holland (West Ottawa)

Scott Morgan, Desmond's father, said Mattison saw something unique about his son during the bye week.

"The kid has an unbelievable amount of determination," Scott Morgan said. "I think Mattison saw early on, Desmond doesn't back down to a challenge.

"He's dedicated himself to his dream. And lo and behold, he persevered."

Morgan didn't think his son would play much as a freshman, and said he worried that next season he would have lost out

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to the heralded 2012 Michigan recruiting class.

"I thought this was an automatic redshirt year," he said. "I worried if he didn't prove himself, he might get overlooked because he isn't a national recruit. Now it's going to be tough to push him off the field."

Morgan saved his best effort for the biggest game of the year. Against rival Ohio State, which Michigan hadn't beaten since 2003, Morgan recorded a season-high 10 tackles, leading the Wolverines to a 30-24 victory.

"It was a great team victory," Desmond Morgan said. "Growing up, I watched the Ohio State vs. Michigan game every year. I knew what the rivalry meant. It was a special moment.

"Probably one of the most special moments I've ever had in football."

Morgan tried to savor the victory against Ohio State, but said the team quickly shifted focus to the Sugar Bowl.

"Everyone's excited, but now we're focused on Virginia Tech and this bowl game," he said about Michigan's first BCS bowl appearance since 2007. "The most important thing we have to keep doing is moving on."

Sugar Bowl Clips: Dec. 31

Michigan receiving corps is a 'nasty crew' because of their punishing blocking style AnnArbor.com

12/31/2011

Junior Hemingway pulls a pass from Denard Robinson toward him in the back of the end zone. Officials ruled that Hemingway did not catch the ball. Associated Press Brady Hoke and his Michigan football players aren't ...

Roy Roundtree: "I'm going to go out there and block my tail off."

Melanie Maxwell | AnnArbor.com

NEW ORLEANS — Michigan receivers coach Jeff Hecklinski looked around the film room before the Nebraska game, and made a simple request.

"Hey, somebody needs to knock (star linebacker LaVonte David) out of the game," recalls Roy Roundtree. "Who's it going to be?"

"We all looked around like, 'Challenge is in the air'" Roundtree said.

It was the junior who answered the call.

"It was a screen play, and I went to go crack him, and I got him good," Roundtree said Friday during the team's bowling trip to Mid City Rock 'n' Lanes in New Orleans. "He ran off to the sideline, took his helmet off and took a knee.

Junior Hemingway: "We try to be a nasty crew, try to be the best blocking receiving corp in the nation."

"He was out for about two plays, and we ran it up the middle for a touchdown. So, I guess I did my job."

The Michigan football team's receivers have posted diminished stats almost across the board this year, with only receiver Jeremy Gallon exceeding expectations among the regulars.

Roundtree's numbers have plummeted the most, going from a 72-catch, 935-yard season a year ago to just 18 catches for 345 yards this year.

The Trotwood, Ohio, native had the worst statistical season of his career — including his freshman season, when he grabbed 32 passes for 434 yards and three scores.

That decline is a function of a lot of factors outside of Roundtree's control, such as the change in offense and the often-erratic passing of quarterback Denard Robinson.

There also has been a greater emphasis on the running game, where Michigan has two 1,000-yard rushers for the first time since 1975. That means there were fewer opportunities for the receivers as a group, not just Roundtree.

Senior Junior Hemingway led the Wolverines with 32 catches for 636 yards and two touchdowns.

But to the receivers, there is more than one way to judge their performance, and they've maintained all year that, to them, blocking their position is just as important — or more important — than racking up receptions.

Sugar Bowl Clips: Dec. 31

In fact, the only statistical goal they set for themselves weekly is for "pancake blocks," which tracks the number of defenders knocked on their butts.

Such as the one Roundtree delivered on David.

"If it's a run, we're gonna block 100 percent every time and try to embarrass the DBs and try to put them on their back," Hemingway said. "We try to be a nasty crew, try to be the best blocking receiving corp in the nation and, when it's time to make our plays in the receiving game, we can do that too.

"We're just multi-dimensional when it comes to playing receiver."

Virginia Tech has noticed, and is bracing for, that dimension when the teams square off Tuesday in the Sugar Bowl (8:30 p.m., ESPN).

"They're not good blockers, they're great blockers," Hokies defensive coordinator Bud Foster said.

Roundtree said they're great at it because of the new coaching staff's emphasis on blocking.

"Coach Heck emphasized if you don't block, you're not gonna play," Roundtree said. "So, I'm not one of the biggest guys, but I'm going to go out there and block my tail off ... marking sure no one touches my quarterback or my running back."

Kyle Meinke covers Michigan football for AnnArbor.com. He can be reached at 734-623-2588, by email at kylemeinke@annarbor.com and followed on Twitter [@kmeinke](https://twitter.com/kmeinke).

Sugar Bowl Clips: Dec. 31

Michigan's Stephen Hopkins on how he carved out full-time role at fullback AnnArbor.com

12/31/2011

NEW ORLEANS — Stephen Hopkins committed to play for Rich Rodriguez.

Now, the sophomore finds himself with more playing time than ever at a position that didn't even exist under the former Michigan football coach.

Hopkins enrolled at Michigan as a beefy 6-foot, 235-pound tailback from Double Oak, Texas, and he received 37 carries for 157 yards last year as a freshman.

He entered this season as a candidate to land the lead tailback job, but never really threatened Fitz Toussaint or Vincent Smith for playing time and found himself at the end of the bench.

Until fullback John McColgan got hurt.

When Michigan coach Brady Hoke was hired in January, he brought with him offensive coordinator Al Borges from San Diego State, and together they've implemented a system that meshes their West Coast principles with components of the existing spread-option offense run by Rodriguez.

That meant the re-introduction of the fullback, which hadn't been used since the Lloyd Carr days, and McColgan, a walk-on from Saginaw with no career carries coming into the season, suddenly found himself in a starter's role.

He suffered a midseason injury, though, and because Rodriguez did not recruit any true fullbacks during his tenure, the Wolverines didn't have a backup.

Hopkins' big body made him the logical choice to fill in for the senior, so he did. And he excelled. He decided to approach the coaching staff about making the switch full time.

"I brought it to them because I kind of wanted to play the position," Hopkins said Friday during a team bowling trip in New Orleans. "I was just hoping to get more time."

Hopkins said he also saw a possible future for himself at the position in the NFL.

The coaches agreed to the position change, and running backs coach Fred Jackson took Hopkins under his tutelage. But one thing became clear right away: Hopkins might have had a big body for tailback, but he was undersized as a fullback.

So, Hopkins started pounding the protein to bulk up. He added 10 pounds during the season — he's playing at about 238 pounds right now — and eventually overtook McColgan as the full-time starter at fullback for the Iowa game.

He'll be in the lineup Tuesday against Virginia Tech in the Sugar Bowl (8:30 p.m., ESPN).

Hopkins said his relationship with McColgan remains strong.

"John is like a player-coach, basically," Hopkins said. "He's really smart, knows the game well and has helped me a lot. ... I look up to him a lot."

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Hopkins has just 11 carries for 43 yards this season, but his greatest impact, like any good fullback, has come in the blocking game. He said he takes great pride in the fact Toussaint and quarterback Denard Robinson each broke the 1,000-yard rushing barrier this year.

"That's a big deal around here," Hopkins said.

Hopkins also has become a target in the passing game, where his background as a tailback makes him faster and more agile than most fullbacks.

Sugar Bowl Clips: Dec. 31

Sugar Bowl could present Michigan's Will Campbell with big opportunity Detroit Free Press - Online

12/31/2011

NEW ORLEANS -- Michigan junior defensive tackle Will Campbell has spent time in the coaches' crosshairs over the past few years.

Blessed with major talent but challenged to reach his potential, Campbell has just begun earning the coaches' praise.

With Nathan Brink out and Will Heininger questionable for the Sugar Bowl on Tuesday, Campbell may get significant snaps.

"I feel like I've been more coachable, staying lower, and lost weight which has helped me out a lot," Campbell said Friday night at the Wolverines' bowling event.

To maintain the weight loss: "It's not that hard when the coach is in your ear telling you something worse is going to happen if you don't do it."

This season, he had 11 tackles and two sacks, playing all 12 games. But still not the dominant numbers expected for a five-star recruit from Detroit Cass Tech.

With three starting spots opening on the defensive line next fall, Campbell is in prime position to make an impact.

He's learned to model himself after seniors Heininger, Mike Martin and Ryan Van Bergen.

"Their effort and relentlessness to the ball," he said. "They just always play hard."

Having three coaches watching the D-line -- coach Brady Hoke, defensive coordinator Greg Mattison and position coach Jerry Montgomery -- Campbell's getting enough coaching.

They all have different tips, including Montgomery telling Campbell to widen his base, a major breakthrough.

"I've had a great time with coaches that are here and I'm glad they're here," Campbell said.

For now, he's looking forward to the Virginia Tech matchup and facing talented running back David Wilson and quarterback Logan Thomas, who Campbell said he played with in the U.S. Army All-American Bowl.

Contact Mark Snyder: msnyder@freepress.com . Follow him on Twitter @freepwolverines.

Join Free Press special writer Nick Meyer for a live blog of the Sugar Bowl between U-M and Virginia Tech on Jan. 3 at freep.com/sports.

Michigan junior defensive tackle Will Campbell has spent time in the coaches' crosshairs over the past few years. Blessed with major talent but challenged to reach his potential, Campbell has just

for home delivery today.

High School Sports

Sugar Bowl Clips: Dec. 31

Sugar Bowl win would be big step for Michigan football program, Mike Martin says Detroit Free Press - Online

12/31/2011

NEW ORLEANS -- While the Michigan football players have obvious motivations to win the Jan. 3 Sugar Bowl -- the 11th win, a BCS bowl victory, sending the seniors out with a final-game win for the first time since the 2008 Capital One Bowl -- there may be another drive as well.

"I envision and I visualize us singing 'The Victors' and us celebrating together and coach (Brady) Hoke taking his shirt off he's so happy," U-M defensive tackle Mike Martin said, grinning at the prospect, this morning during a pre-Sugar Bowl press conference at the New Orleans Convention Center Marriott hotel. "I want to see that and we're going to make that happen. I want to see coach Hoke jumping around happy. ... He was real close after the Ohio State game and I think this one will tip him over the edge and he won't have a choice."

If Michigan wins, will the Wolverines be "back"?

"I'd say that's fair to say," Martin said. "But we still haven't done what we want to do as a program. This is my last game and after this I won't have any power to affect this program as much, but these younger guys are going to (need to) win the Big Ten championship. We didn't do that this year.

"Winning this football game would be a huge step for this program."

- Michigan defensive coordinator Greg Mattison wasn't making any promises about defensive lineman Will Heineinger's availability after not practicing with a sprained foot, but has seen recoveries before. Either way, it's not his call. "That's really up to Paul (Schmidt), that's up to our medical staff," he said. "Over the years in coaching, I've had guys who missed an entire bowl practice and all of the sudden they were cleared and you now have another hand, you now have another guy who can play. You can't worry about that as a coach."

- Virginia Tech may be a powerhouse program now, but it was all new at the 1996 Sugar Bowl, the Hokies' first experience with a big-time game. After beating Texas, 28-10, it became the program's hello moment. "I remember after that game Coach (Frank) Beamer in the locker room saying we're going to be back and we're going to be better," said current Tech offensive coordinator Bryan Stinespring, who was the recruiting coordinator on that team. "And I was in the back thinking, whoa, slow down little fella, enjoy the moment here. You're a little giddy, I understand. But he was right."

While the Michigan football players are motivated to finish the Jan. 3 Sugar Bowl -- the 11th win, a BCS bowl title, sending the seniors out with a final-game victory, something that hasn't been

for home delivery today.

High School Sports

Mike Thompson

Sugar Bowl Clips: Dec. 31

Sweet memories give Michigan's Al Borges insight into Virginia Tech's defense Detroit Free Press

12/31/2011

Dec. 31--NEW ORLEANS -- Virginia Tech defensive coordinator Bud Foster and Michigan offensive coordinator Al Borges have played this game before.

In the 2005 Sugar Bowl, the pair matched wits as undefeated Auburn edged Virginia Tech, 16-13.

Borges was the coordinator for the Tigers, who claimed their right to a share of the national title as they were kept out of the BCS title game which featured Southern Cal and Oklahoma.

Auburn won, but Foster made a statement why he's considered one of the nation's best defensive coordinators, holding the Tigers to just one touchdown after averaging 33 points per game during the season.

"Knowing Bud and knowing what they do and have an idea what they do (helps)," Borges said. "He's like we have been offensively. Their defense is ever-evolving. They're a little different than the last time we played them, but still some of the base schemes are the same.

"He's a well-respected guy because he's done such a nice job and presents some problems for you."

Foster has similar feelings about Borges.

"I've got a lot of respect for Al," Foster said. "We've battled with each other a couple different times. And you can see that they've done a great job adapting to their talent. But then there's nothing real fancy about them, either. They're going to line up and hit you in the mouth and be physical, play in, play out, and that's what we've got to be able to do. We've got to be able to match that."

OVERCOMING INJURIES: While U-M has played most of the season without major injuries, Virginia Tech's defense has been challenged.

"We lost probably, arguably our best football player in (linebacker) Bruce Taylor," Foster said about Taylor's sprained foot, which required surgery at midseason. "We lost probably our best defensive lineman in Antoine Hopkins (with a knee injury.)

"We lost Jeron Gouveia-Winslow (left foot Lisfranc sprain in midseason), who was playing extremely well early on at our whip position, which kind of started getting us rolling with some position changes. But those were significant losses, along with some other guys throughout the course of the year.

"That's where I was really proud of, more importantly, was how our kids responded, how they stepped up."

PLAYING INSIDE: Michigan will play indoors for the first time this season.

"It doesn't really matter where you play or when you play, it only matters how you play," Borges said. "What's kind of nice is there's really going to be no weather issues. The biggest thing with our guys, we've got to get used to getting in the Superdome. I found this last time we were here, you have to get in the Superdome, get used to catching the ball in the lights, because that part of it is a little different."

Sugar Bowl Clips: Dec. 31

WIDE RECEIVER CHALLENGE: U-M receivers coach Jeff Hecklinski's focus for the receiving corps is blocking, and he's turned it into a personal challenge, pitting them against each other.

"We take a lot of pride in that," U-M receiver Junior Hemingway said. "We compete with one another for how many pancakes (blocks) we can get in a game. We set a goal of how many we can get total. During the game, we'll come back to the sideline and be like, 'How many pancakes you got?'... We're just competitive about it."

Hemingway said 5-foot-8 Jeremy Gallon probably has the most, but everyone has a few.

PRACTICE TIME: Tight end Kevin Koger, on Brady Hoke's practice focus this week: "He's definitely demanding. He says all the time we're not going to be out here long, but we're going to get great work in. (Hoke says) 'If we don't get great work, we'll stay out here all day, I have no problem with that.' He doesn't believe in killing us, but he believes in hard-hitting and physical football."

Contact Mark Snyder: msnyder@freepress.com. Follow him on Twitter [@freepwolverines](https://twitter.com/freepwolverines).

Join Free Press special writer Nick Meyer for a live blog of the Sugar Bowl between U-M and Virginia Tech on Jan. 3 at freep.com/sports.

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Sugar Bowl Clips: Dec. 31

Van Bergen assumes captain role in every way but title Michigan Daily - Online, The

12/31/2011

NEW ORLEANS — Every Monday afternoon, the Michigan football team had its weekly press conference this season. And every Monday afternoon, there was Ryan Van Bergen, ready to answer for his teammates.

The unofficial team spokesman looked groggy sometimes, perhaps out of sorts others. Not even a captain, Van Bergen took pride in being the voice of the team.

"It's kind of nerve-racking at first, but it's fun because you get to represent your team," Van Bergen said. "I've said some things I think people have taken off with. But it's interesting. I've enjoyed it. I'm not going to miss it all that much. But it's been fun and I'm ready to see who the next spokesman's going to be next year."

Van Bergen revealed that the voting for captains was extremely close. Michigan coach Brady Hoke had wanted just two captains, he said, and senior defensive tackle Mike Martin won the voting. But Fifth-year senior center Dave Molk and senior tight end Kevin Koger tied for second place — each was only one vote behind Martin. Hoke decided to make both of them captains as well.

Van Bergen was left out, sitting behind Martin by "two or three" votes.

All four were regulars speaking to the media throughout the season. But no one gave more insightful and thoughtful responses than Van Bergen, who Molk would tease, saying Van Bergen has a "media voice."

Hoke had met with Van Bergen after the voting, and still wanted him to be a strong team leader

"I still felt a tremendous amount of responsibility for leadership," Van Bergen said. "Coach Hoke still treats me like a captain."

In everything but title, Van Bergen assumed the role. Still, his picture won't appear on captains' wall in Schembechler Hall.

"Even though the fact that I won't be on the wall, doesn't make as big of a difference to me," Van Bergen said, his voice trailing off. "I just want to be a leader for the team."