

# 2013-2014 Ohio State Men's Basketball Clips

## Stifling defense powers Ohio State to impressive road win at Marquette

by Jeff Eisenberg  
The Dagger/Yahoo! Sports

It may come back to haunt Ohio State at some point this season if its jump shots remain off target, LaQuinton Ross stays ice cold and no go-to scorer emerges to replace Deshaun Thomas.

Saturday was not that day.

Ohio State delivered perhaps the most impressive true road victory by any team so far this season even though it scored less points at Marquette than the 60 its football team put up at Illinois around the same time. The Buckeyes thrashed the 17th-ranked Golden Eagles 52-35 behind a devastating defensive effort, forcing 20 turnovers and limiting Marquette to 18.9 percent shooting from the field and 1 of 18 shooting from behind the arc.

With Buzz Williams apparently unready to play highly touted freshman guards Deonte Burton and JaJuan Johnson this early in the season, Marquette lacked the perimeter scoring pop to replace the departed Vander Blue and Junior Cadougan.

Derrick Wilson, Jake Thomas and Todd Mayo seldom generated open looks for themselves or their teammates, sinking just 4 of 29 attempts and failing to get high-scoring big man Davante Gardner enough touches. Shannon Scott had five steals by himself for Ohio State, which played solid team defense by switching screens, clogging the passing lanes, communicating effectively and providing help when necessary.

Marquette's defense matched Ohio State's for a half, but the Buckeyes managed to score more efficiently after the break.

Though Ross went scoreless on six shots and Ohio State made just 3 of 18 attempts from behind the arc, the Buckeyes started attack in transition more effectively in the second half and got some easy buckets before the defense was set. That helped them score 12 points in the first 3:45 of the second half, an offensive explosion that allowed Ohio State to seize control of a game that had been tied at 19 at the half.

The visit to Marquette was Ohio State's only road game of the non-conference season and its toughest game until a Dec. 21 neutral-court date with Notre Dame. A more efficient half-court attack might be necessary that day, but credit the

Buckeyes for winning convincingly without one Saturday.

## LaQuinton Ross' sizzling start leads Ohio State past Maryland

Bob Baptist  
The Columbus Dispatch

After a torturous span of four games in which Ohio State did well to make four of every 10 shots it took, the Buckeyes began not only shooting a lot in practice, which is typical, but also talking about shooting.

"And shot preparation," coach Thad Matta said. "As elementary as it sounds, the hand placement on the ball, feet set, equal push (off each foot), all those things.

"I felt like the last couple weeks, our (field-goal) percentages in practice have been very, very high. To carry it over into the last couple games is good, because when you see how hard these kids work and all the things that we do, you like to see them play well on game night."

For the second consecutive game, the Buckeyes did that. Five days after shooting nearly 70 percent against North Florida, they made more than half their shots again last night in defeating Maryland 76-60 in Value City Arena in the ACC-Big Ten Challenge.

LaQuinton Ross made his first four shots, all of them three-pointers, as fifth-ranked Ohio State (7-0) scored 24 points in the first 8 1/2 minutes and led from start to finish.

Ross scored a game-high 20 points — 17 came in the first half when the Buckeyes shot 53.8 percent and outscored Maryland by 17 points. The Terrapins were never closer than 14 points in the second half.

Ohio State shot 52.1 percent for the game.

"We shot the ball well last game, and we wanted to build off of it," guard Aaron Craft said. "We just wanted to come out and not have a slow start, come out with our minds right, and we were able to do that.

"Obviously, LaQuinton helped out a lot, coming in and knocking down those early shots. ... That was good for us."

Sam Thompson had 14 points for the Buckeyes, including four alley-oop dunks. Lenzelle Smith Jr. scored 12 points and held Maryland's leading scorer, Jake Layman, to two, more than 14 below his average. Craft had 10 points, six assists and five steals.

Guard Dez Wells, a Xavier transfer, led Maryland

(5-3) with 19 points, including half of the Terps' 34 in the second half.

"I thought Ohio State was terrific," Maryland coach Mark Turgeon said. "They came out making shots, and they got a lot of confidence because of that. I thought they executed at a high level.

"Craft was in total control of the game at both ends of the floor, and they're a good defensive team."

Maryland shot 39.1 percent; it was the second time in eight games that the Terps have been held under 40 percent.

"We didn't make shots, but I thought a lot of it had to do with them," Turgeon said. "They were terrific on defense."

Ross, who broke out of an early-season slump with 17 points against North Florida on Friday, carried that success over to last night, when his four three-pointers, combined with threes by Thompson and Amedeo Della Valle and three-point plays by Smith and Shannon Scott, gave the Buckeyes a 24-12 lead just 8:32 into the game.

Maryland whittled its deficit to single digits twice in the last six minutes of the half, but an 8-0 run by Ohio State in the final 1:24 "was the game," Turgeon said.

Craft had two free throws and forced two turnovers that led to baskets in the run, including a diving steal at the top of the key that he flipped ahead to Thompson, who angled in a contested layup at the other end with one second left to make it 43-26.

"Craft is at another level," Turgeon said. "We'll never see that (again this season unless) we play them again."

## Ohio State 64, Notre Dame 61: Ball-Swiping Buckeyes Rally to Defeat the Irish

by Hunter Atkins  
New York Times

Shannon Scott said he and his fellow Ohio State guard Aaron Craft share something of a sixth sense, what he calls a “turnover sense.” When one of them harasses an opponent, the other can sense the turnover coming and even take off to jump-start a transition basket.

“You can tell when the offensive player is getting shaky with the ball,” Scott said. But really, he added, “it’s more of an instinct.”

Defensively, Craft and Shannon are considered the nation’s best backcourt, and they displayed that in No. 3 Ohio State’s 64-61 victory against Notre Dame at Madison Square Garden on Saturday night.

Within the first 65 seconds, Scott and Craft each had a steal. But it was with less than a minute left in the game that their pickpocketing enabled a comeback for the Buckeyes (12-0). Scott nabbed the biggest steal of the game with 43 seconds to play and made two free throws moments later to cut the deficit to 58-56.

Demetrius Jackson hit a pair of free throws for the Fighting Irish (8-4) to stretch the lead to 4 before Lenzelle Smith Jr. made three foul shots to pull the Buckeyes to 60-59. On Ohio State’s next possession, Craft fell as he was dribbling in the lane but managed to pass the ball to Smith for an uncontested layup and a 61-60 Buckeyes lead.

Craft then all but sealed the win when he reached from behind after being beaten by Jerian Grant in the lane. He slapped the ball off Grant’s thigh and sent it out of bounds for a turnover.

Craft and Scott have combined for 57 steals, the most in the country for two teammates. But they cause turnovers in other ways. Early on Saturday, Scott pressured Eric Atkins into dribbling the ball off his foot. Near the end of the first half, Craft slapped the ball out of the hands of Pat Connaughton and into those of Ohio State’s LaQuinton Ross, who passed the ball back to Craft for a layup. Craft’s expertise in disruption led Sports Illustrated to invent a more encompassing statistic, called the Turnometer.

Craft and Scott are all the more impressive because of rule changes that call for a foul when a defender makes contact with a ballhandler using his hand or forearm. While the changes have led to a rise in scoring, fouls and the use of zone defense, Craft and Scott are linchpins of Ohio State’s man-to-man defense, which allows few points and seldom fouls.

“Early on we thought the rules were going to affect the poor defenders more than the ones that can move their feet,” Craft said, indirectly crediting himself. Craft, Ohio State’s career leader in assists with 586 and steals with 277, is particularly good at defending with his chest, abdomen and thighs instead of his hands.

Ohio State coaches preach two things on defense. The first is to guard your yard, or G.Y.Y., as the Buckeyes refer to it. Within a three-foot radius, each defender must prevent his assignment from dribbling by, receiving a pass or sending the ball to the post. The other is to know your personnel (K.Y.P.). Each player studies scouting videos, homework Craft said he loved. He figures out opponent tendencies and uses the knowledge to beat the ballhandler to his spot.

“The game has really become a ball-screen offense,” the assistant Jeff Boals said. He said teams relied on a variety of sophisticated screens to bump defenders off their assignments and open the lanes. Ohio State spends a lot of practice time teaching how to defend these screens, including running a 5-on-4 “scramble,” something Coach Thad Matta learned from Bob Knight.

“You have to fly around and no one really has a guy, no one’s really matched up, but you have to find a way,” Craft said of having to stop the offense when down a man on defense.

Craft and Scott learned defensive technique from their fathers. Craft’s father, John, a former coach, committed his son to shuffling his feet with a drill that required him to hold bricks while he was in the defensive stance. Scott’s father, Charles, was a three-time All-Star in 11 seasons in the N.B.A., and when his son was 6 taught his team how to rotate on weakside defense.

“Everyone would just follow the ball, but on our team, we’d zone up the basket and be like one pass or two passes away,” Scott said, explaining how at 6 he and his teammates understood what it meant to clog the passing lanes. Craft and Scott have an innate ability to know when to go off script — leaving an assignment to double the ballhandler, or swiping at the ball — and be more aggressive.

“You kind of see something on defense, and you go away from the principles,” Craft said.

After Saturday’s comeback, Matta said Craft had “saved the day” because he recognized the defense was out of position and adjusted, which was why he was able to deflect the ball off Grant’s thigh.

But Matta is used to seeing those instincts. “That’s the type of things he does,” he said.

## Aaron Craft is the perfect roommate

by Dana O’Neil  
ESPN.com

COLUMBUS, Ohio -- The answer to the riddle, one apparently as hard to solve as that of the Sphinx, must be here in this basement apartment just off the Ohio State campus, the one with the Fathead of Urban Meyer’s head tilting in the window. There’s no place else to look. Others have tried and come up empty, so the solution must be here. It has to be.

And yet, when the riddle is posed, there is a pause, a bit of head-scratching, and “hm-mmmmm ...”

Until finally, mercifully, Logan Jones, bless his soul, thinks he has it. While his three roommates sit silently trying to come up with something, anything, Jones offers up his aha! moment.

“Ice cream. He eats ice cream like every night,” Jones says.

So there it is America, the secret dirt, the unearthed gossip:

Aaron Craft has a vice and it is a post-sunset addiction to cookie dough ice cream.

Someone alert TMZ.

“It’s true,” the Ohio State point guard admits when confronted later in the day with his problem. “If I could eat ice cream every day and at every meal, I would. But it’s sort of frowned upon in society.”

Asked if he has a go-to brand, Craft shakes his head.

“No. You’ve got to go with what’s on sale,” he said.

Sigh. Of course you do, if you’re Aaron Craft.

Take the basketball out of his hand and what you have here is a four-corner square, a kid so squeaky clean it almost pisses you off. Wait, ticks you off. Craft doesn’t curse. We don’t want to offend.

He carries a 3.89 GPA in nutrition, with an eye on medical school, and he received the first B of his life in college (and it was a B-plus in chemistry). A Google search will lead you to a video of Craft solving a Rubik’s Cube ... in just more than a minute. And in high school, he was both valedictorian of his class and National Honor Society president.

He’s a devout Christian, engaged to be married and a member of Ohio State’s Athletes in Action.

In August, he joined Mission of Hope in Haiti and when he has time, he visits sick children in the hospital and helps feed the homeless.

*Aaron went to the dentist for the first time in 7 years. No cavities, no wisdom teeth. Of course he wouldn't. #PerfectRoomieProbs*  
— CRAFTRoomies (@CRAFTRoomies) May 2, 2013

Oh, and he's pretty good at basketball, too -- two-time Cousy Award semifinalist, two-time Big Ten Defensive Player of the Year, Ohio State record holder and general glue guy for the No. 5 Buckeyes, who host Maryland on Wednesday night in the Big Ten/ACC Challenge.

Craft is so impeccable, his roommates' Twitter account -- @CRAFTRoomies -- is a send-up of his wholesomeness. Here's a picture of Aaron on the first day of school; here he is doing his homework; here he is vacuuming the apartment.

*Aaron at the bus stop on his last first day of school #backtoschool #SeniorYear pic.twitter.com/emBtK-Cjgq*  
— CRAFTRoomies (@CRAFTRoomies) Aug. 21, 2013

"He really is that guy," Luke Roberts said. "I can see why people at other schools hate him. I'd hate him if I went to another school, probably."

It sounds like the beginning of a bad joke -- a basketball player (Craft), a baseball player (Greg Greve), a football player (Roberts, who is transferring to Harvard next semester), a golfer (Jones) and another guy (that would be Michael Duffy, who played hoops at nearby Division III Wittenberg but somehow has been tabbed the "non-athlete"), walk into a bar.

Except the joke would end there.

Craft would never walk into a bar.

"Yeah, we've learned to not even ask if he wants to go out with us or anything like that," teammate Lenzelle Smith Jr. said. "Or do anything out of the ordinary, or do anything ordinary for a college kid, for that matter."

Not that Craft's roommates are hellions. Part of the comfort here is shared values. The five all met through Athletes in Action, and their faith guides their actions, and at times, inaction.

*Mulan is on. Needless to say the atmosphere in the apartment is tense.*  
— CRAFTRoomies (@CRAFTRoomies) Sept. 26, 2013

"I'm just as happy to hang out with him here," Jones said.

Here would be your typical college apartment, done up straight out of the pages of College

Guy Décor magazine. A play-sized basketball hoop hangs on one wall; an Ohio State decal is opposite, a few sports posters stuck to the other walls randomly.

On this November day, miniature stockings are hung by the chimney with care. But they've been there since December 2012, so this is pure coincidence, not holiday decorating.

A well-worn sectional sofa dominates the room. It has been with the apartment crew for three years, having previously served an unknown period of time with a friend's aunt and her nine cats.

"I think we wiped it off," Duffy said.

The sofa, along with the roommates, has enjoyed a little bit of fame on campus lately. A moving truck came in and took it to the middle of the women's basketball practice gym at the Schottenstein Center in early November, part of the campus celebration of Taco Thursday.

That was the world's first introduction to the goofy side, if not dark side, of Craft, thanks to his roommates.

It began simply enough, a bunch of guys eating dinner one night, each chomping on his own menu selection. Someone suggested they actually have a real meal one night a week, at a set time and actually eat the same food. Tacos, a favorite, were selected, and Thursday became the designated day.

Rules were established -- one guest allowed for whoever's turn it is to buy; no girls -- and a tradition was born.

"We actually say Taco Tuesday," Jones said. "Hard T, no H."

*Taco Night #NoGirlsAllowed <https://vine.co/v/bxUZbVvA32A>*  
— CRAFTRoomies (@CRAFTRoomies) April 29, 2013

Thanks to Twitter, the legend of Taco Tuesday grew to such epic proportions that someone in the university marketing department thought they ought to host one for people on campus.

So last month, the sofa was temporarily relocated, pictures were signed by each of the roommates and Taco Tuesday went public.

More than 1,000 people showed up.

"I said to Greg, 'Picture yourself on move-in day. You move into this humble apartment. A year and a half later, you're called on this stage because of tacos,'" Jones said. "It was crazy."

The novelty of Taco Tuesday was part of the attraction, but much of it, too, was Craft. Even on a campus where football is king, he is something

of a Big Man On (and around) Campus. He has been asked to throw out a first pitch at Ohio State baseball games ("It was really good. Of course," Greve said) and is frequently swarmed for autographs or picture requests. Naturally, he poses and signs for every one. In the offseason, coach Thad Matta stepped in to limit his number of speaking engagements. Otherwise, Craft would have one every night.

"We had a seventh-grade girls' volleyball team run four blocks to catch up and take a picture with him one time," Roberts said.

Which is why his Average Joe roommates and his comfy couch are something of a sanctuary, a place where the boring Craft can be normal. When the door closes at the apartment, he is no longer Aaron Craft, Superstar. He's just the dude who studies all the time, hordes Tupperware and eats ice cream. Even if they struggle to come up with dirt, these guys really do know Craft best. He's not the nationally known point guard here.

He's just the guy who will argue over everything and anything from philosophy to how David Blaine performs a magic trick.

He's the guy they bust on because he's actually done the math to figure out when it makes sense to come home after a road game and when, if he sleeps in the gym, he'll actually get more sleep.

"He's really just a dork," Roberts said.

So the reason the roommates have been asked to dish is because no one else really could.

Asked to solve the riddle and name his four-year starter's biggest vice, Matta just laughed.

"If there is one, I don't know about it," he said.

Craft's teammates, so desperate to find a weakness, have invented a new game. They offer up two scenarios in hopes to trip him up. For example, you have to cut class or go out on a Saturday night: Which do you do?

"I just go at them logically and then they get really mad," Craft said.

At Big Ten media day in October, Craft playfully hid Smith's cell phone, but naturally he had a good reason.

"You don't need your phone," he said. "You're here to talk to people."

Smith just shook his head.

"You know what he said on the way down here? Not 'have a good time.' No. He said, 'Don't say anything stupid,'" Smith said.

Maybe, then, Craft's vice is he has no vices,

which makes him annoying -- which, using the transitive theory, then is a vice.

Or something like that.

Because really, this riddle is that impossible to solve.

"He doesn't make his bed ... every day," Greve said.

"He corrects people's grammar all the time," Duffy said. "I think even Coach Matta. He'll write something on the board that's wrong and, after everyone leaves, Aaron will go up and tell him that it's wrong."

*Aaron's roomies helping him practice his demonstration speech for class. His topic? How to be a teachers pet #Craft pic.twitter.com/crYOyp8Ss4*  
— CRAFTRoomies (@CRAFTRoomies) April 9, 2013

And that's the best they can come up with.

"People are always looking for the inside scoop," Jones said. "What's he like behind closed doors. There just isn't one."

Unless, that is, the scoop is for ice cream.

Then we've got the makings of a scandal.

## Ohio State's Thad Matta quietly gets job done

by Dana O'Neil  
ESPN.com

COLUMBUS, Ohio -- His pregame news conference over, Thad Matta grabbed a chair in the interview room, sat down and -- for 10 minutes and 41 seconds -- dutifully, honestly and occasionally even wittily answered questions about his least favorite topic: himself.

He had been dragged here by Ohio State associate athletic director Dan Wallenberg, who ought to be in line for a raise after pulling off the impossible.

Or, then again, maybe he'll get fired for making Matta do this. It could go either way.

"Dan will tell you, it took everything to get me down here when he told me it was to talk about me," Matta said. "Honestly, I probably turn down eight out of 10, nine out of 10 requests. I just don't care."

Which makes Matta both the absolute right man for the Ohio State job and an anomaly among his peers.

On Tuesday night, the No. 2 and undefeated

Buckeyes meet No. 5 and one-loss Michigan State in an early test of Big Ten supremacy.

On Friday night, the No. 7 and one-loss football Buckeyes faced No. 12 and two-loss Clemson in an otherwise meaningless Orange Bowl.

Guess which one people cared about more?

"Football is front and center, strong and heavy," athletic director Gene Smith said. "You don't want to battle that by having a persona that is bigger than that. That's just reality. You don't try and fight it. You embrace it."

Which Matta does, happily and contentedly from behind the scenes. He is not interested in beating Urban Meyer in a popularity contest. He is interested in beating Tom Izzo in the Big Ten and everyone else for a national title.

It is not that he knows his place.

It is that he knows this place.

On many a campus, basketball coaches bristle at the notion that they are working at a football school, the tag somehow implying their programs are second-class citizens. (No doubt, in some places they are.)

Matta could not care less about what others think about Ohio State. He knows the reality. The hoops Buckeyes might be second fiddle during football season, but they are not second-class.

Matta flies on a private plane, just like Meyer does. The team charters. The assistants are compensated well. There is a freshly renovated practice facility for the basketball team and, per Matta's request, the Schottenstein Center has been reconfigured. The deep-pocketed season-ticket holders were relocated three years ago from their courtside seats to make way for the students and give an otherwise bland entertainment center a basketball arena feel.

"We treat our players well," Matta said. "The environment we create, they're taken care of. That's what I care about. I care about our guys. It's not about me."

The funny thing is, if Matta wanted to make it about him, he could very easily and relatively successfully.

Look at his numbers. (Please, for Wallenberg's sake, take a look. The man has sheets of paper detailing Matta's accomplishments, information that Matta refuses to reference.)

In Matta's nine seasons at Ohio State, the Buckeyes have won five Big Ten regular-season titles and four conference tournament crowns, appeared in four consecutive Sweet 16s, two Final Fours, one national championship game and

won 265 conference games, better than any other team in that span. And they've had seven players taken in the first round of the NBA draft. Yet, if a casual observer were asked to pick the nation's best college coaches, Matta's name probably wouldn't make the top 10.

The simple reason is the glaring omission from that glittering resume -- a national title. Matta is the new Roy Williams, the new Bill Self -- the best coach to never win it all and, in a world measured only by trophies, Matta still doesn't stack up.

"That's his drive and goal every day. He feels like he owes the university that," assistant coach Jeff Boals said. "But I don't think he personally needs that validation. It's not for him."

And that's the less obvious and, frankly, more real reason that has made Matta the most anonymous winner in sports.

In a world full of Kardashians, Matta is Greta Garbo

Social media and the need to sell, sell, sell in college athletics have met in the perfect marriage of self-aggrandizement.

Coaches always have been bigger in the college game. They stick around longer than their athletes; their leadership styles are more of a dictatorship than the democracy of the pros. They are the face of the team, of the department and, often, of the school.

In the ideal world of unicorns and rainbows, recruits pick their future based on schools.

In reality, it is not what can Brown (University) do for you. It's what can (Larry) Brown do for you. Now thanks to social media, which has put the "I" in team and just about everywhere else, there's a resume blowhorn for coaches to say exactly what they can do, have done, will do, what their beliefs are, what their favorite quotes and bagel shops are.

Which makes Matta, who has no Facebook, Twitter or Instagram accounts -- "the only computer he deals with is an iPad to watch game films," Boals said -- a cross between a mime and a Luddite.

"He's not a self promoter and obviously I've been doing this quite a while, so I've seen the self promoters," Smith said. "He's not a guy that the media is coming at so he can talk about what he's done. When you compare him to those kinds of people, I can see why people don't think he measures up. He's out of sight, out of mind."

Wallenberg and his assistants try to nudge him to, if not brag, at least share what he's accomplished. He won't. He has a weekly call-in radio

show and TV show (both contractually obligated), but he directs the conversation to game conversation and steers clear of anything about himself.

And while other coaches willingly head to Bristol for what ESPN calls the car wash (a run through of appearances on the network's shows), Matta would prefer to stay home and wash his car.

"He really doesn't care," Boals said. "He wants to coach his team and spend time with his family. He doesn't -- or he won't -- toot his own horn."

The old-school style goes back to his retro roots. Raised in the aptly named Hoopston, Ill., Matta is a quintessential Midwesterner -- polite, gracious, humble. His dad, Jim, was a basketball coach and Matta and his brother, Greg, starred as players for the local Cornjerkers.

Folks there knew a coach when they saw one and locals saw Matta's destiny even before he did. He took his first job at nearby Indiana State, the first of six stops as an assistant.

He was, not surprisingly, a grinder more than razzmatazz, memorably forcing his soon-to-wife into a hastily arranged wedding rather than waiting a week for a more organized affair because of the recruiting calendar.

"Yeah, that was a good one," Matta chuckles.

And now that he is the CEO, he hasn't changed much. He's still a grinder, a guy who trusts his gut to make a decision more than modern-day analytics. He prefers coaching to recruiting and family time to media time.

Pretty much any topic other than his own life story.

## **OSU-MSU starts appetizing B1G season**

by Chantel Jennings  
ESPN.com

EAST LANSING, Mich. -- Count it as a win for basketball that, after one of the most exciting comebacks, finishes and overtimes this season, both coaches stood at the podium, brows furrowed, voicing their disappointments about their respective teams.

Count it as a win that Tom Izzo wasn't happy with No. 5 Michigan State's 72-68 win over No. 3 Ohio State. Or that Thad Matta wasn't pleased with the 20-3 run his Buckeyes accomplished in the final 10 minutes of regulation, forcing overtime. Or that you couldn't find a smile on a Spartan or a Buckeye. Count it as a win that nobody who actually took part in the game was happy.

Count all that as a win because it means that Big Ten basketball is back, living up to its billing yet again.

No, it wasn't always pretty. The basketball was far from perfect.

Ohio State went 4-for-18 from 3-point range. Michigan State was outrebounded 42-28. The Buckeyes started slow and couldn't find an answer as the Spartans jumped out to a 55-38 lead. But then MSU choked that up -- badly.

"I should be happier than I am," Izzo said. "But I'm a big-picture guy and you shouldn't have those kind of letdowns no matter what the other team does."

Both teams' highs were high and their lows were low, but when it was working and when the teams were on, it was really fun.

It's extremely early in the season. There's time for Ohio State to work on switching defenses, and there's time for the Spartans to get healthy and figure out their rotation.

So much can happen between now and March, but the fact that it's so good so soon has to mean something, right?

Because on the first full day that college football was over, a day that it would still seem appropriate to be discussing Jameis and Tre, Jimbo and Gus, a night that was just 24 hours removed from crowning the national champion in football, all eyes were on a green-and-white gymnasium in East Lansing -- a gymnasium that possibly held the eventual national champion.

This was just two games into the Big Ten season, making for one heck of an appetizer to the conference slate.

Sure, the nonconference schedule featured matchups with talented teams and some trips to tropical locations, but this is what it's all about: the bitter, Midwestern cold and the refuge found inside a gymnasium with gritty, hard-nosed basketball.

Big Ten basketball is back, and on Tuesday night, the Spartans and Buckeyes confirmed to everyone that this is the conference to watch.

"You know, it just keeps coming," Matta said. "We'll build on the positives from this game and we'll correct the negatives. We'll get ready to go again, because it doesn't get any easier."

The Buckeyes play No. 20 Iowa, then travel to Minneapolis to play a hungry Golden Gophers team that came dangerously close to knocking off Michigan. Before the season is over, they'll have road games at Wisconsin, Iowa, Illinois, Penn State and Indiana before closing out the regular season with, you guessed it, Michigan State.

And the Spartans get Minnesota, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan and Iowa before the month of January is over.

Week after week, these teams get the chance to pick up marquee wins in tough venues. Week after week there will be reason to be thankful that Big Ten basketball is back. And it'll leave basketball fans wanting more.

Because even after everyone got five extra minutes of Ohio State and Michigan State last night, most people wished it would've gone into double or triple overtime. That's how good it was.

That's how much people wanted to watch Aaron Craft on Keith Appling and Gary Harris. That's how much people wanted to see Adreian Payne -- who didn't even think he'd play today because of injury -- go to work. That's how much people wanted to take in Matta and Izzo's chess match and the ensuing foot stomps and glares.

The coaches can be upset right now because they know the potential of these groups and they know better than anyone how far Tuesday's product was from that. They see it every single day in practice; the rest of us have to wait until game days to take it in.

But having the coaches this upset at this point means that even the good we saw this week is far from the good we could see in March. And if that's the case, we're in for one heck of a ride the next few months.

"Hopefully, by tomorrow I'm going to say, 'Thirty-some minutes we played damn good,'" Izzo said. "I think I'll appreciate the win more tomorrow. It ain't going to be tonight, though. Promise you that."

Matta, Izzo, Appling and Craft can all be unhappy with what happened Tuesday night. Basketball fans everywhere should plead that the coaches are never truly satisfied, never happy enough with what was put on the court, always wanting their group to get to that next level.

But for everyone else? Just be happy that Big Ten basketball is back.

## 'Best college has ever had'

*Ohio State's Aaron Craft is the rare player who has built a reputation as an on-ball defender beyond his own program, gaining notoriety on opposing campuses and respect from others who toil in anonymity*

by John Akers  
Basketball Times

Many have assumed the defensive stance, locked eyes on an opponent's belly button and accepted the challenge of anticipating and intercepting that player's every move.

Few have identified themselves – or been identified – with on-ball defense in the way that Ohio State's own crouching tiger, senior Aaron Craft, has embraced the skill.

"He's the best that college basketball's ever had," said Craft's coach, Thad Matta, stating his opinion as an indisputable matter of fact.

Even if there's no way to prove such a statement.

"He is a little biased," Craft offered.

There's also no way to disprove Matta's statement. The on-ball defender is a member of an obscure world that cannot be quantified by statistics or verified with anecdotal evidence. Playing great on-ball defense is both a great way to get noticed – by the coaches who dole out playing time – and a way to be forgotten soon after one's career is over.

If Craft is indeed the best on-ball defender that college basketball has ever had, then who was the best before him? There are no lists that tell us. Even if Matta is right, Craft won't be receiving any trophies or appearing in any record books as an on-ball defender.

Not that Craft or anyone who built his reputation with a defensive shuffle ever did it for recognition. To get on the court, yes, or to please a father figure, maybe. For recognition, no.

"It all goes back to our team," Craft said. "If we can find a way to get in the record book as a team, and if that has to do with defense, then so be it. That's fantastic. I'm not here to get myself in any book or set any record or anything like that. My biggest focus is to find a way to win."

Craft, who averages just 10.2 ppg, is the rare on-ball defender whose case has been made through both statistical and anecdotal evidence. He was the Big Ten defensive player of the year in 2012, unseated by NABC national co-defensive player of the year Victor Oladipo in 2013. He was the

Most Outstanding Player of last season's Big Ten tournament after holding Nebraska's Ray Gallegos to 2-for-12 shooting and Michigan State's Keith Appling to 6 for 17. Winthrop coach Pat Kelsey called him a "piranha," and Florida coach Billy Donovan said he "physically beat up our guys, and I'm not saying they got fouled." Matta said Craft, a pre-med student with a 3.88 gpa, plays defense with his mind and has the greatest lateral quickness he has ever witnessed.

Craft also set the Ohio State career record for steals as a junior, though steals are an incomplete statistic for the great on-ball defender. Luke Winn of Sports Illustrated took the analytics a step further by turning on the "Aaron Craft Turnometer," which measures how many turnovers a player creates. According to Winn, Craft created turnovers on 7.56 percent of opponents' possessions and was off to a 6.61-percent start this season.

In many cases, fans might not even understand what announcers mean when they mention on-ball defense, which by definition is the act of staying between the ballhandler and his desired destination.

"Ideally, you want to take that player out of his comfort zone," said Mike Kelley, the Big Ten defensive player of the year in 1999. "You want to make them uncomfortable.

"There aren't stats for it. But you know it when you see it."

Kenneth Ortiz, a two-time defensive player of the year in the Northeastern Conference, agreed: "It's basically turning your guy, making it uncomfortable for him. He turns his back, he really can't see his other guys. A spectator probably wouldn't notice that, but me, I notice if a guy's making (the point guard) turn three or four times before he gets to halfcourt. If you do that, you're bound to get a steal or (create) some kind of error."

On-ball defense is a mindset, according to Craft. "I'd say on-ball defense is being there every play," Craft said. "I think a lot of people get discouraged when their guy scores, when their guy makes a shot. Being a great on-ball defender is letting the offensive guy know you're going to be there every play, from tipoff until there are zeroes on the clock."

On-ball defenders have been trained with a cascade of clichés, drilled into them from the time they began playing youth basketball.

Sit down. The lower man always wins. Keep your head on a swivel.

Don't watch the man, watch the hips. See your man and the ball.

For all the wrong reasons, on-ball defenders are

finally getting noticed this season. The much-discussed emphasis on cleaning up defense along perimeter – in an effort to create a more free-flowing game – left many defenders feeling like they'd been targeted by the NCAA.

"It's not easy to guard someone for 35 seconds without being able to touch them," said Charlotte's Pierria Henry. "Because that's what they're doing. They're calling touch fouls. It is what it is, though. You live. You learn."

Added Ortiz: "It's pretty hard, because you start to second-guess yourself. It scares you from playing."

The changes in emphasis is having the desired results, however. The NCAA announced about a month into the season that scoring is up by 5.4 ppg, which would be the greatest spike in scoring since the 1952-53 season. Scoring dipped last season to 67.5 ppg, the lowest total since that same '52-53 season.

Among that emphasis was a crackdown and the hand check. Ortiz said he is making such a point of showing his hands to officials, he could be accused of being sarcastic.

"The hand check? Yeah, Michael Jordan taught me that one," Henry said. "You put your hands on the hips, you're going to control (your man). "But with me, it doesn't really bother me, because I'm watching your hips with my eyes. My hands are going for the ball."

But the best defenders say the new emphasis is hurting bad defenders more than it is them. Craft was called for 21 fouls after his first nine games of this season, the same number as after nine games the year before.

"The first time were told (about the new rules emphasis), it raised questions that were disturbing," Craft said. "But when you sat down and thought about it, if that's how the game's called, that's how we need to adjust. I try to play with my feet anyway, doing it the right way.

"When it first came out, everyone wanted to ask me about it, and it kind of amazed me. Apparently I'd been fouling with my hands for three years and hadn't been playing any good defense at all. I looked at it as a challenge and to the best we could with whatever they wanted to change."

Consider the challenge met. Craft, who looked up to David Lighty as a freshman, is now the role model for a Buckeyes' defense that has led the nation in stats guru Ken Pomeroy's defensive rankings, at 86.8 points per 100 possessions.

The crackdown on perimeter defenders is nothing new. When halftime of a 2000 Final Four semifinal between Wisconsin and Michigan State ended with the Badgers leading 19-17, it had the same effect as last season's low scores.

In the October 2000 issue of *Basketball Times*, the late Larry Donald wrote: "It was not only the media that became critical of the way Wisconsin played, but some of (former coach Dick) Bennett's fellow coaches, as well. At a meeting this past spring between a number of high-profile coaches and various conference officiating supervisors, there was a lot of discussion about the use of hands on defense. The coaches were urging the supervisors to have their officials make it a point of emphasis. 'After all,' said one of the coaches who shall remain nameless, 'we don't want college basketball to become Wisconsin.'"

That nameless coach was revealed to be Roy Williams, then the head coach at Kansas and the chairman of the rules committee.

"We felt like we were being targeted unfairly after we went to the Final Four in 2000," Kelley said.

"And it seems like every season since then, they've been trying to do this. Every year, the emphasis was on hand checking, but nothing ever really changed. This is the first year that it feels like it's actually been enforced."

Kelley, the Craft of his day, was featured on the cover of that BT, the last player before this issue to appear there in a defensive stance. The former ESPN analyst, who now calls only home games at Wisconsin and Northwestern in a designer schedule with the Big Ten Network, was the Big Ten's defensive player of the year in 1999.

Kelley was coached in his youth by a father who believed that the pervasive emphasis on offense was misguided.

"Every day, we'd read the sports section, and it would kill him if there was a three-sentence re-cap of the game and it would include only the leading scorers," Kelley recalled. "He would constantly be going on about how that was wrong and it was all they ever write about. He thought that was why so many kids grew up only wanting to shoot."

He didn't have to worry about that with his son, who averaged only 4.7 ppg in four seasons at Wisconsin.

Kelley has tremendous respect for Craft's on-ball skills, though he stops short of calling him the best ever, only because he believes that carrying such a label should require the defender to be able to defend all positions. (Though the 6-3 Kelley once defended 6-10 former Rhode Island star Lamar Odom, he was quick to say that he wasn't trying to make a case for himself.) Craft, at 6-2, is limited to defending other guards.

There were a trio of three-time winners of the NABC award, all by forwards: UNLV's Stacey Augmon, Wake Forest's Tim Duncan and Duke's Shane Battier. Besides Oladipo, the only guards

to win were Duke's Tommy Amaker in 1987 and Steve Wojciechowski in 1998 and Providence's John Linehan in 2002.

Many of the NBA's most storied on-ball defenders – Jordan, Walt Frazier, Sidney Moncrief, Scottie Pippen, Michael Cooper, Bruce Bowen – played on the wing against the game's great scorers. Gary Payton is the only point guard to be named the NBA's defensive player of the year. Among current NBA point guards, college defenders emulate tenacious defense displayed by six-time all-defensive team member Chris Paul.

But as time passes, reputations become more important. While it might be assumed that Frazier was as great a defender at Southern Illinois as he was with the Knicks, that Payton was as fierce at Oregon State as he was with the old SuperSonics and that Moncrief was as dogged at Arkansas as he was with Bucks, they were able to play in the NBA because they were equally skilled offensively.

But as college players, reputations are often not yet fully formed. Metta World Peace, the player formerly known as Ron Artest, was the NBA's 2004 defensive player of the year but never earned similar Big East honors while at St. John's. Those who were defensive specialists rarely reach the NBA or any other pro league. Players such as Kelley and Gary Grzesk of Green Bay didn't even get a look in Europe, where the exemptions and money that can be used on U.S. players are saved for scorers.

Grzesk was also no scorer. Though he averaged just 4.5 ppg during his four seasons as a starter at Green Bay, he is best known as the key player in the greatest upset and only Division I NCAA Tournament victory in school history.

Before he became the coach at Wisconsin, Bennett had another great defender as the head coach at Green Bay. The 6-4 Grzesk, the Phoenix's defensive player of the year in all four years he played for them, was versatile enough to defend Wright State's 6-10, 285-pound Vitaly Potapanko, a future NBA player. As a sophomore, Grzesk was assigned to Cal's Jason Kidd, the nation's top point guard, in the 1994 NCAA Tournament. Grzesk, whose foot speed was developed as a soccer player, was allowed to be aggressive at the point of Bennett's pack defense, which clogged the driving lanes by placing the other four defenders in a 16-foot area in the lane.

"We were just trying to keep everything in front of us, especially Jason Kidd," said Grzesk, the head coach at Division III St. Norbert. "Not only could he finish and pass, but he was so great at creating shots for his teammates.

"Maybe we made him take a jump shot or two early on, to see if could make them. I think he missed his first couple. We had great team defense. If he got by me, we had two guys in

the gaps to help me. That gave me even more confidence on the ball, to go ahead and play him harder than I would normally."

The Bears went nearly the first 10 minutes without scoring a field goal. Kidd went 4 for 17 from the field, making only layups, and was held to 12 points in UWGB's 61-57 upset victory.

Kelley, Grzesk, Moncrief and Payton are just a few of the names who might be considered in any discussion of the college game's great on-ball defenders. This is a list that is most certainly incomplete. But it is also a list that must include Craft, no matter who else might deserve to be a part of the discussion.

Greatest-ever conservations of any kind are an under-appreciated rarity in this one-and-done era of college basketball. Doug McDermott is a terrific scorer, but he is no Pete Maravich. There is no rebounding equivalent to Jerry Lucas, and no one who's going to challenge Bobby Hurley's record for career assists. Even in more obscure categories, there are no claims that anyone is throwing outlet passes the way that Wes Unseld once did or that anyone in today's college game is throwing down dunks with the grace of a Clyde Drexler or a Darrell Griffith.

Craft can take pride in being one of the most annoying college defenders ever. Websites are devoted to him. Grantland.com placed him in a bracket of the most hated college players over the past 30 seasons. And few players are targeted by opposing fans as much as Craft.

"It's drastically different from when I was younger," Craft said. "Freshman year, nobody really cared about (Craft). We had a great team with some older guys who were great. As I've gotten older, (the opposing attention) has definitely gotten worse and gotten more interesting.

"It kind of hit me all at once. I can remember going to Wisconsin my sophomore year and just how different it was from the year before. Hearing my name a lot more. Hearing my parents' names and stuff like that. That just didn't happen the year before. I viewed it like, 'I must be doing something right if I'm garnering this kind of attention.'"

Craft grew up in a defensive household, the son of John Craft, a linebacker coach and a basketball assistant at Fostoria (Ohio) High School. "We would go home and talk sports, and one thing he always talked about was the fact that there are going to be days when the offense isn't going to be there," Aaron said. "But you should never have a day or a game like that on defense. Defense is mindset and defense is attitude, and that's something you can control every single day. That's something I took to heart.

"Probably the No. 1 thing he kept telling me over and over was that you get steals with your

feet. You don't get steals with your hands." Aaron Craft had to play defense just to hang in the backyard games with older brother Brandon and his buddy, future Buckeye Jon Diebler.

Craft's own best childhood friend, Micah Hyde, is – you guessed it – a rookie defensive back with the Green Bay Packers and a former Big Ten Conference defensive back of the year at Iowa. "It's not like he was a prodigy or anything," John Craft said. "But he was a product of his environment."

Craft played every sport with a ball, including a stint with soccer that his father believes developed his son's quick feet and taught him the importance of finding the angles needed to beat the offensive player to where he wants to go. John Craft recalls the pride that Aaron took in running the zig-zag drill, a simple basketball drill used by every high-school team in America. An offensive and a defensive player zig and zag down the court, with the offensive player protecting his dribble and the defensive player shuffling hard to cut off his path. John Craft would add a twist to the drill. When he would blow the whistle the first time, the offensive player would come to a jump stop and the defender would be allowed to body up on him.

"The huge part, where Aaron does a good job to this day, is that I would blow the whistle a second time," John Craft said. "That was the sign for the drill to begin again, right where the guy came to a jump stop. The defensive player had to jump back, re-establish that distance you had with the ballhandler and the drill would continue. If the defender doesn't give ground, he'll either foul or the offensive player will drive by him.

"To this day, that's something that I think Aaron is still practicing."

On-ball reputations have also been earned by such players as LSU's Anthony Hickey, Alabama's Trevor Releford, Scottie Wilbekin of Florida, Russ Smith of Louisville and Oklahoma State's Marcus Smart at the BCS level. (Again, it's an incomplete list.) But like European teams, fewer high-major programs are willing to invest in defensive specialists who arrive without a complimentary offensive game.

"In this day and age, I don't know if I'd have gotten any Division I scholarships," Grzesek said. "I think more and more, coaches are recruiting athleticism and offense, and then they'll go back and teach the defense. I don't know if you have that specialist who's recruited to play that end any more."

Great defenders can also be found just below the BCS level, though the phrase "on-ball defender" might not always apply.

Briante Weber is a whirlwind in VCU's HAVOC defense, who are leading the nation in steals for

the third season in a row, but he says "ballhawk" is a better descriptor for him than "on-ball defender."

Bernard Thompson was a long-limbed defensive presence during Florida Gulf Coast's Sweet 16 run, but he considers himself an "anticipator" who plays the passing lanes.

Guys like Ortiz and Henry are perfectly comfortable with being called on-ball defenders. Ortiz began his career at Southern Mississippi but transferred to Wagner to be nearer to his New Jersey roots. Ortiz built his reputation on defense and is the rare player who is recognized for it beyond his own coaching staff. But he knows it's not that way for everyone.

"People don't notice someone taking a player out of their offense," Ortiz said. "People don't see that. They just see the people who are scoring. "If you take me off the court, you'll notice the difference."

Henry gets fewer chances to show off his on-ball skills at Charlotte, which plays a considerable amount of zone.

"Honestly?" Henry revealed. "I hate zone. I hate it."

When he gets the chance, Henry plays in a more laid-back style. He is like a spider, calm right up until he pounces.

"You're not going to be able to play 100 mph all the time," Henry said. "Being a junior, I understand that I'm able to pick my spots to go at it and be really aggressive.

"Being the point guard, I know it starts with at the beginning. If I can stop mine, I can help others stop theirs."

They are a cerebral lot who can't help but to watch the defensive side of the ball, even when they're not playing. Sidelined by a groin injury, Henry noticed that Davidson was scoring layups when it ran a play to the right side, but not to the left. He stood up during the game and, like a coach, tried to inform his replacement, only to be told by an official that he had to sit down. And they all agree that Craft is the best in the game at what they do.

Thompson: "He's the toughest defender in the country, in my eyes. He has great on-ball pressure, and you can see how much pride he takes in playing defense."

Weber: "His feet are so quick, he can keep you in front of him. That's how I describe him, as having quick feet."

Ortiz: "He just has that will to not allow a man to do anything to him. He just works hard. He outworks his opponent."

Henry: "I love the way he plays defense. I love how he moves his feet and uses his hands. I love watching him."

But a great on-ball defender is also a great competitor. Henry pondered his praise of Craft for only a second.

"But I'd love to go at him," Henry said. "For me to guard him, and for him to guard me. I'd love that."

## Ohio State vs. Wisconsin: Aaron Craft huge in picking Buckeyes off the mat

by Roger Kuznia  
Sporting News

Wisconsin had never been beaten three straight times at the Kohl Center under Bo Ryan. Ohio State had lost five of its last six games entering Saturday's game in Madison.

And yet it was the Buckeyes walking out of Madison with the win, erasing that stat from the Badgers' history book and rewriting some of its own story in beating Wisconsin 59-58.

Neither side played exceptionally well, but it was Ohio State that got the stops when it needed to, holding the Badgers without a field goal in the final 6:48.

The Buckeyes' biggest plays came from senior Aaron Craft, who scored his only seven points of the game in the final four minutes, and his lockdown defense on Traevon Jackson on Wisconsin's last possession in the final seconds forced the ball out of Jackson's hands and over to Sam Dekker, whose off-balance jumper while being well defended was right on target but short.

Two days earlier, the Columbus Dispatch reported that Ohio State held a players-only meeting, the day after losing to Penn State, an effort where senior Lenzelle Smith was questioning his team's leadership and toughness, and Craft was among those who couldn't believe what just happened. Maybe belief will return to the team after winning in such a tough environment. But the Buckeyes must play better than they did Saturday to continue doing damage.

"Going through (adversity) last game helped us a lot today," Craft said. "Everyone had a look in their eye in the timeout, and we didn't want that to happen again."

It could have just as easily gone in the Badgers' direction after the Buckeyes' Smith turned the ball over after missing a layup in transition, then fell to the floor after retrieving the offensive rebound and was whistled for traveling. But Jackson had trouble against Craft, and Ohio

State survived.

Now tied in the Big Ten standings at 4-5, the urgency to win remains for both the Buckeyes and Badgers. Wisconsin faces three ranked opponents in its next five games, including road games at Michigan and Iowa, and Ohio State has the Hawkeyes and Wolverines in two of its next three games.

But it's the Badgers who have more questions with an unprecedented loss. Maybe they would benefit from their own players-only meeting.

## Ohio State topples Iowa on road, avenging earlier loss

by Rick Brown  
USA Today

IOWA CITY, Ia. — Ohio State turned the tables Tuesday on No. 13 Iowa at Carver-Hawkeye Arena.

The 25th-ranked Buckeyes got revenge for a loss against the Hawkeyes last month with a 76-69 triumph. Iowa contributed to the change of fortune by making just 3-of-20 3-pointers.

Iowa has now lost back-to-back home games after taking a 20-game Iowa City winning streak into a game with Michigan State a week ago. The Hawkeyes host No. 16 Michigan on Saturday.

The loss was also crushing for the Hawkeyes' Big Ten title hopes. Iowa fell to 6-4 in conference play and 17-6 overall. The previous losses had all come to ranked teams. Ohio State, winning a fifth straight game at Carver-Hawkeye Arena, dropped out of the Associated Press poll for the first time in four years on Monday.

The Buckeyes were ranked third when Iowa beat them 84-74 in Columbus on Jan. 12. The Hawkeyes' 84 points in that game are 12 more than Ohio State has allowed in any game this season, and 16 more than they had allowed in regulation play.

Ohio State had lost five of six games before winning 59-58 at Wisconsin on Saturday. The Buckeyes improved to 18-5 overall and 5-5 in the Big Ten.

Aaron Craft led Ohio State with 17 points. Mike Gesell scored 16 points and Gabe Olaseni 14 for Iowa.

With the student section booing Craft every time he touched the ball, the defensive wizard helped the Buckeyes take a 26-17 lead with 5:32 remaining in the first half. His strip of Adam Woodbury and layup was followed by two more Iowa turnovers that turned into Ohio State transition hoops. And then Craft buried a 3-pointer from

the right corner to give his team a 26-17 lead.

Craft, the Big Ten leader in steals with 53, had four in the first half.

But Iowa finished the half on a 16-5 run for a 33-31 advantage. It matched the Hawkeyes' largest lead of the opening half. Iowa got the lead on an Aaron White dunk with 15 seconds left. The basket came after Devyn Marble and Mike Gesell trapped Craft just over the timeline and dug the ball loose before Gesell threw it to a streaking White.

Iowa had that lead despite going just 1-for-11 from 3-point range in the first 20 minutes. Iowa missed its first nine before Zach McCabe finally made one from the top of the key in transition with 4:32 left. Ohio State made 4-of-6 from long range in the half.

Craft, averaging 9.1 points, had 14 in the first half. Gabe Olaseni had eight points, four rebounds and a blocked shot in the first half.

Iowa missed its first three 3-point attempts of the second half before Josh Oglesby hit one in transition to cut Ohio State's lead to 45-43 with 12:11 remaining.

Iowa trailed 49-47 on two Olaseni free throws with 9:32 remaining, but Ohio State went on a 9-2 run. The Hawkeyes closed to 58-54. But with 2 seconds on the shot clock, Craft threw an inbound pass to Amir Williams for a dunk with 4:09 left. Sam Thompson followed with the Buckeyes' seventh 3-pointer to take the air out of the arena

## Stirring tale of victory

### *Disability can't stop Derek Upp from being student-manager*

Mike Lopresti  
NCAA.com

COLUMBUS, Ohio -- It is basketball practice at Ohio State, and Derek Upp is the fastest-moving Buckeye. He zips here with a cup of water, there with a towel, somewhere else on another duty.

Earlier, he had been to class, and then driven his Dodge Grand Caravan to Schottenstein Center to help haul out the equipment for practice. It's a busy day in the life of a student-manager, just like all the other guys.

Well, not quite like all the other guys. Did we mention Derek Upp is a quadriplegic in a wheel chair? From the day he was born, with a congenital condition that robbed him of the full use of every limb, fate tried to tell him he couldn't. He has spent his first 23 years determined to prove

that he can.

There was the T-ball when he was young. The bike races and wheel-chair basketball later. And for the past two seasons, the manager's job with Ohio State. None of it has been easy. Not a second of it. But whatever took his limbs never took his passion.

"I've always been in love with sports, and I'm very competitive," he was saying before practice began. "It always just felt like I was more independent in sports. I felt more like everyone else, and not a person in a wheel chair."

His is one of Ohio State basketball's most stirring tales of victory, even if never seen in a box score or Big Ten standings. He can use his left arm some, his right arm less, his legs not at all. At practice he races around in his Formula I wheel chair. At home games, he is there under the east basket, often keeping stats, ready to zoom to the huddle during timeouts on the ramp the university has for him.

Meanwhile, so many wonder at the resilience of his spirit.

Take David Egelhoff, the director of basketball operations at Ohio State, who oversees the managers.

"When you think there's something hard in your life, whether it's snow on your car or the little things in life that are difficult, when you see a guy like Derek, who has trouble getting up every day, it makes you put things in perspective," he said. "It's not easy for him to get to practice. It's not easy for him to get to class. But that's what he wants to do because he wants to be a part of something."

"I think he inspires the players, that there's more than just putting the ball in the basket. There's more to life than that."

Or Curt and Cheryl Upp. The father and mother who have been on the journey through the good times and bad in Lancaster, 30 miles southeast of Columbus.

It was Cheryl who said of her son's managing at Ohio State, "It's not exactly what he wants to do. What he wants to do is be out there on the court playing. This is the next best thing. He's competitive enough to be able to look on the good side of things with what he's got ahead of him, and move on."

And it was Curt who said, "I know it is very hard for him sometimes, but he perseveres. We've had pastors tell us that he's not only making people with disabilities think, he's making people of faith think. He's giving everybody reason to believe there's more to life."

It has been such a demanding road, from the day in 1990 when a little baby was born with so many trials ahead of him. “Doctors told us he was one in a thousand,” Curt said. “This just doesn’t happen. But it was congenital. It happened. And for the first six or nine months, you had doctors not giving out optimism at all of surviving.

“He had seven pretty bad years the first part of life.”

But he survived, through spine fusions and hip fusions and so much else. If the limbs couldn’t work right, the heart certainly could. It would not take long for a love of sports to become a motivating force in his life, even though neither parent was a particularly avid fan.

Curt remembers the T-ball years, when his son “would come home after the game and still be rehearsing everything in his head.”

Cheryl remembers the day she heard her son intensely following a game on TV, and walked into the room expecting to find a real football game. Instead, it was an Adam Sandler movie, *The Waterboy*.

And it was Cheryl who mentioned that her son’s fervor for sports was good for another reason. “I think any anger he’s probably got over his situation comes out in that way. I don’t know if he recognizes that, but I would guess that’s probably true.”

Curt said Cheryl is the eternal optimist. Cheryl said she figures she has to be that way when she sees Derek’s will to fight.

“I think I’ve had more anger sometimes than him because he’s never known anything different,” she said. “Some of the things I miss for him, I know what they could have been, but he doesn’t. So he’s had a little easier level of being accepting.”

With a mother’s instinct to protect, when Derek was old enough to be in youth football, she made sure to find out all the times and places the teams would be practicing and playing. Then she never drove with her son to that side of Lancaster. “I didn’t want him to know. I felt that sadness and disappointment for him, but he didn’t.”

Somewhere along those years, Derek and Curt were able to attend a Buckeyes basketball practice. Head coach Thad Matta and his staff told them that if Derek ever attended Ohio State and would like to be a part of the program, there’d be a spot.

After two years studying at Ohio University at Lancaster, he decided to transfer to Ohio State. And now here he is, majoring in sports industry, and loving every second with the Buckeyes. A special van with hand controls has allowed him to drive.

Yet there is still peril, and ghastly luck. Last summer, in a race on his hand bike, he missed a turn and hit a wall, breaking his right arm. Then the Mirsa infection set in. Then pneumonia. He was sick for months and had to miss much of the fall term at Ohio State. More hardships, more challenges.

“It brought back a lot of very nervous and bad things in your mind,” Curt said. “The main thing he was worried about was losing his position [as manager]. They all told Derek that’s not going to happen.”

Said Egelhoff, “He’s not going to let any of his disabilities stop him from doing what he wants to do, that’s obvious.”

But will he ever be able to get back on the bike? “I’m praying,” Derek said.

In two years or so, he’ll get his diploma. Whose voice would not waver at the mention of it? His mother’s certainly did. “It’ll be a big dream for him,” Cheryl said. “I just cry thinking about it.”

Cheryl lost her mother and Derek a grandmother last year. His grandfather, Russell Woodard, wants badly to be around to see Derek graduate. “I think in a way it gave his grandpa the reason to live,” Curt said.

So he’s inspired Buckeyes and pastors and family. And maybe most of all, other kids with disabilities, who often contact him.

“I believe Derek’s purpose in life is to help people with disabilities,” Curt said.

“People see me sometimes and they’re like, ‘I didn’t know you could do that,’” Derek said. “If you can put your mind to it, you can do it.”

So in the end, his message is about power. The power of a young man’s will to carry on, and the power of being part of a team. “No. 1, great gratitude,” Curt said of his feelings toward Ohio State.

In the end, Derek Upp is the unbeaten Buckeye.

## Taco Tuesday to benefit LiFE Sports during Ohio State, Michigan basketball game

Eric Seger

The Lantern

The fans who attend the college basketball showdown between No. 22 Ohio State and No. 15 Michigan Tuesday at the Schottenstein Center are set to have a chance to cheer on their teams with a belly full of tacos.

Courtesy of senior guard Aaron Craft’s roommates — who run the Twitter account @CRAF-Troomies — and OSU, students and fans are set to have a chance to participate in Taco Tuesday, complete with a taco stand and T-shirt sales.

The shirts are slated to be sold at the southwest (student) entrance at the Schottenstein Center, as well as the team shop inside. The shirts cost \$20 each, and patrons will be able to purchase three tacos for \$5 at a taco stand in the southwest rotunda. The tacos are from the Schottenstein concessions and are not catered, according to an OSU athletic spokesman.

All proceeds benefit OSU LiFE Sports, a program that allows underprivileged kids to participate in athletic camps on campus during the summer.

Craft said Monday he and his roommates came up with the idea over winter break “to make it more than just about ourselves and make it more than just fun for us to have.”

“We were trying to think of what shenanigans we are probably most known for, and it’s definitely the tacos,” Craft said. “It goes back a few years with some of the guys I’ve lived with. Hopefully doing tacos and making it a night, we can do it more than just at a basketball game.”

Craft and his roommates hosted another Taco Tuesday Nov. 19, where 1,000 OSU students got the chance to ask the senior and his roommates questions, tour the basketball facilities at the Schottenstein Center and even sit at center court on the roommates’ couch and get their photo taken.

Craft said he hopes for Taco Tuesday to become an annual event.

“I have a baseball roommate and a golfer so, maybe at a baseball game sometime this spring and then beyond when I’m here ... you can have an annual taco night or something just to continue hopefully helping the kids and everything,” Craft said.

Craft said he got the idea to give the proceeds to an organization from former OSU walk-on Mark

Titus, who started “Club Tril,” sold T-shirts and donated money to the nonprofit called A Kid Again.

Titus’ goal as founder of “Club Tril” was to play in a college basketball game and record no statistical significance other than minutes played, thus having his box score have a number one in its first slot followed by eight zeros and look like the number one trillion.

Titus and the organization continue selling T-shirts and donating today, and OSU coach Thad Matta said Monday he’s pleased to see his players reach out and give back.

“I love that,” Matta said. “As I’ve always said to our players, take the opportunity you have here to make the most not only for yourself but for the people around you. I think that Aaron is definitely doing that in his time at Ohio State and I think it says a lot about him that he would do something like that. He’s an amazing kid.”

## **Columbus Dispatch Letter to the Editor: Team made young lady’s wish come true**

On Saturday, our charitable foundation took an eighth-grade girl from North Canton to see the Ohio State University men’s basketball team. She has a brain tumor.

We went to the shoot-around before the 6 p.m. game vs. Minnesota. Her “wish” was to meet Aaron Craft and the team. And with the help of former player Rick Smith, coach Thad Matta and assistant coach Jeff Boals, we were able to make her wish come true.

I was told how great the players were, but until one actually sees it for oneself, one is never 100 percent sure.

I can tell you that this young lady, her parents and her 10 friends we brought were treated like royalty, beginning with OSU legend Jim Jackson coming over and talking to everyone and signing autographs.

We all watched an energized practice, and upon completion, Matta came over to spend time with her and her family. He was followed by players Sam Thompson, Lenzelle Smith Jr., LaQuinton Ross, Trey McDonald, Marc Loving, Shannon Scott and, of course, Craft.

They spent time with everyone, answering questions, taking pictures and signing autographs for them, and all of this on game day.

Craft had just finished spending time with another young boy from Florida for his “wish.” Aaron told me that this was the third “wish” child this year, to which I replied, “It is a tribute to you, your team and the class in which you

carry yourselves.”

Thompson also told her that he would get a dunk for her that night (he got three, and scored 19 points).

At a time when a lot of scandal happens in college athletics, let it be known to Buckeye Nation that Matta’s boys are a class group of guys led by Craft, a three-time Academic All-American, and they gave a young lady a day she will never forget.

Thanks, coach, for recruiting such classy players. Go Bucks!

ANDY LOGAN

Logan Family Foundation.org  
North Canton

## **Buckeyes’ classy Lenzelle Smith, Aaron Craft easy for fans to root for**

Michael Arace  
The Columbus Dispatch

Thad Matta has spent 24 years at nine schools, the past 10 at Ohio State. He has had a direct hand in coaching about 200 basketball players, give or take, and the best student he has ever seen is Aaron Craft.

“One day last summer,” Matta said, “I walk into the locker room and there are sheets of paper spread all over the benches. Aaron is going up and down the benches, page to page. I said, ‘Aaron, it’s 85 degrees out. Not a cloud in the sky. What are you doing in here?’

“And he said, ‘Coach, I’m memorizing molecules.’”

What else should he be doing?

Seniors Lenzelle Smith Jr. and Craft will play their last home game, against Michigan State, at Value City Arena this afternoon. Smith and Craft are a credit to their university, and not because they have provided programming for the Big Ten Network, kicked in bonuses for their coach and athletic director and allowed referee Ted Valentine to be a star.

No, these young men deserve applause because they have represented their school with honor, and they have embraced their scholarships as useful tools to better themselves. Some of the older folks among us would call that “old school,” and it is — just like \$100 booster handshakes, crib sheets from “tutors” and point-shaving scandals are old school.

The reality is, student-athletes in the mold of Smith and Craft have always been rare, and they

are rarer now in an era of AAU teams, street agents and John Calipari.

Smith had wrist surgery when he reported as a freshman. He was part of a recruiting class that included Jared Sullinger and Deshaun Thomas. He also has played in the shadow of Craft, who has been compared with John Havlicek in terms of popularity, playing style and prominence to the program.

Not only has Smith handled all of this with great aplomb, but he also has been the most polished and eloquent of Buckeyes — often sought to give voice to the tough times — and he has maintained a perspective that often eludes college students.

On Friday, speaking of his regret at not redshirting his freshman year, Smith said, “Graduating is a huge accomplishment — but I won’t be able to put my Ohio State jersey on anymore, and look at some of my classmates on campus and see the smiles on their faces after a victory. This has been the best part of my life, bar none, being a student-athlete here, and it’s coming to an end.”

Four years ago, Smith played in the High School Academic All-American Game, an event with a national scope and a stingy selection process that focuses on classroom achievement and community involvement. He will graduate on time with a degree in sport industry. He is thinking of becoming an agent.

If my kid could dunk, I would send him to Smith. He plays without fear on the court. Off of it, he says things like, “I just want to leave this place knowing that I gave my all for this school,” and he says it with all humility, and not a trace of fraudulence.

Craft is similarly guileless. The spotlight has shone brightly on him, and he has accepted and deflected it in equal measures and with a deft touch a person his age should not possess.

“I’ve just tried to do my best to enjoy the time I’ve played,” Craft said. “Ever since I was little, I’ve tried to find a way to be a small part of a team. It has worked out pretty well.”

Craft, studying pre-med sciences, has a grade-point average that is just shy of perfect. He is the first OSU player to be named first-team academic All-American three times. He has twice been named the academic All-American of the Year by the College Sports Information Directors of America.

Today, fans ought to thank the Smith and Craft families for lending their children to Ohio State for four years. Can they stay for grad school?

## Ohio State 69, Michigan State 67: Not Broken

Bob Baptist  
The Columbus Dispatch

It was during a momentary lull in another demanding practice on Saturday that Thad Matta overheard one of his players mutter something that the player thought was out of earshot of the Ohio State coach.

“Does he know we’ve got a game tomorrow?” the player griped.

The teaching point could not have been teed up more perfectly for Matta, who said he and his assistants had “gone at” the players hard in practice in the week since their loss at Indiana, their eighth in 17 Big Ten games.

“It was the perfect opportunity,” Matta recalled yesterday, “because I said, ‘See? This is where we break, and you just broke. We can’t break tomorrow.’”

“We went on and had a great practice. I told them this morning at shootaround, ‘We are a better basketball team than we were a week ago,’ and I thought we played like it today.”

The unranked Buckeyes threatened again to break down the stretch against No. 22 Michigan State in their Big Ten season finale at Value City Arena. With the score tied at 67, they missed six of eight free throws in the final 1:28.

But their defense never broke. Michigan State did not score after taking a 67-65 lead with 4:29 remaining. The Spartans missed four shots and had three turnovers in their last seven possessions as Ohio State seniors Aaron Craft and Lenzelle Smith Jr. won their last home game, 69-67, for the Buckeyes.

Ohio State forced 16 turnovers, 10 of them steals, and scored 21 points off them.

“That’s the type of team that we have to be,” said Sam Thompson, whose defense on Adreian Payne’s missed three-pointer was one of the key plays in the final minute. “We’ve always been a team that leans on our defense, and today was no different.”

LaQuinton Ross scored 22 points to lead Ohio State (23-8 overall, 10-8 Big Ten), which will be the No. 5 seed in the Big Ten tournament this week and play Purdue in a first-round game on Thursday in Indianapolis.

Craft finished with 12 points, seven assists and four steals to become the sole leader in Big Ten career steals with 328. He punctuated his farewell by diving on the rebound created when the leaping Thompson distracted Payne on his three-

point attempt with 24.8 seconds left and Ohio State ahead by one point.

“They took the timeout (with 32.9 seconds left) and we drew up the play they ran against Wisconsin; we actually went through it at shoot-around today,” Matta said. “We said, ‘All right, fellas, chances are they may try to run this again.’ We got buried (on the screen for Payne), but Sam comes out of nowhere and challenges that shot. It was an unbelievable play.”

Payne had 23 points and eight rebounds to lead Michigan State (23-8, 12-6), which had 22 fouls to 12 for Ohio State, a fact coach Tom Izzo wryly noted when he said he was happy to finally have his entire lineup healthy.

“I got my team back,” Izzo said, “but I really didn’t get my team back because none of them were out there playing.”

Ohio State trailed by seven points with less than 13 minutes to play and by five with less than six minutes to go but refused to quit, tying the score at 67 on a Ross runner with 3:52 left.

The only points after that were free throws by Amir Williams with 37.2 seconds left and Craft at 20.9. The Buckeyes forced a turnover by Denzel Valentine and Craft contested a shot by Gary Harris on the Spartans’ last two possessions.

“I wanted to keep him from getting to the basket and try to contest his shot as much as possible,” Craft said. “I didn’t want him to get a three off because that beats us. He got a good shot off. Luckily he was short, and Lenzelle did a phenomenal job of tipping the ball so Adreian couldn’t dunk it and make it go to overtime.”

### Craft’s dive affirms his lasting image

Bob Hunter  
The Columbus Dispatch

It seems as though Aaron Craft has spent at least 10 percent of his Ohio State career with his compact body propelled like a basketball-seeking missile in a headlong dive to the sideline, toward a tangled pile of bodies or to the floor.

OK, here’s the setup: It’s the last home game of Craft’s college career, and his Buckeyes are in danger of losing.

Could we have a scriptwriter please?

Michigan State’s Adreian Payne missed a three-point attempt with 29 seconds left that would have given the Spartans a two-point lead. The ball landed not far from Payne, and several feet and one long dive from the ever-alert Craft.

So the 6-foot-2 senior dived. He dived like a

safety who sees a fumbled football lying a few feet from the end zone in the Super Bowl, or like a basketball player who wears his floor burns as proudly as some rappers wear their tattoos.

“You’ve got to love Craft,” Michigan State coach Tom Izzo said. “I do. It was an honor to coach against him for four years. ... He struggled a little bit this year because of a lot of different reasons, but he made some big plays and had a very good game on senior night, (the way) a kid like that deserves to. That was kind of his staple. So probably the poetic justice way to end the game was the way he did it, and I give him a lot of credit for that.”

This came from an Izzo who was fuming after the game, unhappy with the officiating and with the way his team played in its 69-67 loss to Ohio State. But he let his anger cool long enough to compliment Craft and senior guard Lenzelle Smith Jr. — “Those two guys are all that’s right about college basketball, they’re great kids” — and what he said about Craft’s dive to the floor was dead-on. It was fitting that Craft would close out his home career by pouncing on a basketball that might have been scooped up by Payne and turned into a Spartans victory.

OSU coach Thad Matta laughed about it, because five seconds later Craft had forgotten about what he had done.

“As only Aaron Craft can do, he comes over and says ‘Why did you call time out? It was a possession. We didn’t have to waste the time out,’” a grinning Matta said. “I said, ‘I didn’t call the timeout.’ Sam Thompson chimes in and says ‘I called the time out.’ It was a big-time play, but for him to have that awareness and challenge my coaching intellect ...”

There was a lot of what Craft does — and what this team has to do to be successful — condensed in the final minutes of this game, and in that one play in particular. It has been obvious most of the season that this offensively challenged team gets most of its offense from its defense, and when its defense is good, so are the Buckeyes.

Thompson closed fast on Payne as he prepared to shoot, causing him to alter his shot. The Spartans’ 6-foot-10 senior was 3 of 5 from beyond the arc before the miss.

“Sam did a great job of contesting it,” Craft said. “We thought we knew what play they were going to run, and he made a good play on it. Down the stretch this year, we haven’t found ways to make plays like that. And at that moment, that was what I had to do for our team.”

Craft was fouled on the ensuing possession and made 1 of 2 free throws, then was back playing tight defense at the other end when Denzel Valentine lost control of the ball while trying to drive the lane against him. Just knowing that the

ball-flicking Craft is there can sometimes cause havoc; his four steals yesterday made him the Big Ten's career leader.

It's the dive that will be remembered, though

"I would say that would probably be the most fitting end to an Ohio State guy's career, in his last home game to make that play," Matta said. "Just his awareness. He was in timeouts and he was saying 'We're not losing, we're not losing, we've got to make plays.' And for him to come up with that, I don't know if you could describe his career any better than that."

## Ohio State beats Purdue, 63-61

by Teddy Greenstein  
Chicago Tribune

INDIANAPOLIS -- Purdue was playing to extend its season.

Ohio State was playing to avoid an embarrassing loss before Selection Sunday.

The Buckeyes did just enough to escape with a 63-61 victory in the first round of the Big Ten tournament, as Terone Johnson's last-second, game-winning try came up short.

Fifth-seeded Ohio State will play Nebraska on Friday in the 4 vs. 5 quarterfinal game.

The game was in doubt until the final seconds. Aaron Craft made 1 of 2 free throws to give Ohio State a 62-60 lead.

Then Lenzelle Smith made the key play -- intercepting a pass from Terone Johnson to Ronnie Johnson. Smith made one free throw to make it 63-60 with 5.1 seconds to play.

Ohio State purposely fouled Ronnie Johnson with 2.8 seconds to play, and he made the first. He intentionally front-rimmed the second, and the ball scooted to the side, where Smith and Purdue's Kendall Stephens tried to grab it.

After a review, Purdue was given possession with 1.2 seconds to play.

Purdue coach Matt Painter set up a good shot for Terone Johnson, but his 3-point try missed. Smith might have gotten a piece of the ball.

LaQuinton Ross scored a game-high 19 points, and Craft had 16.

The game was hardly an offensive masterpiece, with the teams combining to hit just 3 of 24 from downtown.

The only showstopper was an alley-oop from Craft to Sam Thompson.

But the Buckeyes advanced, and Purdue's season could be over. At 15-17, only the College Basketball Invitational, which Purdue played in last season, remains a possibility.

The Buckeyes are projected as a 5-seed in the NCAA tournament.

## Ohio State pressure saps Nebraska desire

by Mike DeCourcy  
Sporting News

INDIANAPOLIS — If merely wanting to be a part of the NCAA Tournament were among the factors considered by the selection committee, along with collecting high-level victories and avoiding bad losses and all the rest, the Nebraska Huskers would be a No. 1 seed.

Oh, man, do they want this. It is there on the court for anyone to see. The committee is a few blocks away in a hotel conference room at the Conrad, but if its members were here at Bankers Life Fieldhouse for the Big Ten Tournament they would be immediately convinced of the Huskers' sincerity. These young men are loving the pursuit.

There was a moment in Nebraska's quarterfinal game against Ohio State when center/forward Walter Pitchford, retreating to the center of the Huskers' defense, broke out in a wide smile as he stretched his arms to the side to cover more territory.

The fun was short-lived.

The smiles faded in the stretch as Ohio State demonstrated the pugnacity that enabled the senior class of Aaron Craft and Lenzelle Smith to become the winningest in the program's history, with a Sweet 16, Elite Eight and Final Four already on the resume and another NCAA appearance coming to try and add to that.

And the Buckeyes have done pretty nicely in this competition, as well, and will continue on to play Michigan in the semifinals after one of the great comebacks in Big Ten Tournament history to secure a 71-67 victory. They've played in the finals in seven of the past eight seasons and are one game away from stretching that another year.

The loss by the Huskers (19-12) may haunt them into Selection Sunday evening and beyond.

Craft scored six points, but two came on what amounted to a game-clinching layup inside the final 25 seconds. Forward LaQuinton Ross scored 26 and grabbed 13 rebounds. At this early stage, with his second double-double in two games, Ross ranks as the player of the tournament.

The Buckeyes rallied from an 18-point deficit that stood with 13:45 left after Nebraska star Terran Petteway made two free throws. It was 48-30 at that point. Nebraska committed three turnovers in the entire first half. That was how the game was going.

And then out of desperation OSU did something it rarely does: Coach Thad Matta ordered an all-out full-court press. There are worse players to use in a press than Craft and backcourt partner Shannon Scott, but most of their steals have generally come in half-court defense. Their fury here, though, engulfed the Huskers. Nebraska turned it over seven times — it seemed like twice that — as Ohio State went on a 27-11 tear to trail by a single basket after a Sam Thompson slam dunk that made it 59-57.

Nebraska inched back to a five-point edge a couple of times, but it was cut again to two points when guard Amedeo Della Valle hit his second 3-pointer of the game with 2:47 left.

Playing much of the time at point guard, Petteway had a terrible time with Craft's ferocious defense. He had 20 points on 6-of-14 shooting, but Petteway committed three turnovers and could not get clear to initiate his team's offense.

Ohio State at last went ahead when Ross was fouled by Petteway on an attempt at the rim and made both free throws. Then, Huskers guard Benny Parker traveled against minimal pressure and gave the ball right back to OSU.

Nebraska almost certainly would have clinched a spot in the NCAA Tournament field with a victory against the Buckeyes and now must wait and wonder if its meltdown against the OSU press — and the pressure of trying to get that big win — cost the team a dream.

The Cornhuskers not only gave up the ball on turnovers, they also attempted a numbing series of early-clock jump shots that gave OSU more time to complete a comeback and didn't amount to much in the way of baskets.

A bad shot is a turnover, too, even if it doesn't look that way in the box score.

## Della Valle for president? Why not?

by Dana O'Neil  
ESPN.com

INDIANAPOLIS -- Jimmy Staley already has demanded a recount. As the campaign manager for #Deo4President, Staley is convinced his candidate was robbed.

Amedeo Della Valle, after all, only had two platforms in his hastily convened campaign for Ohio State student government president:

1. That he would officially declare snow days via Twitter.

2. That he would teach people how to spell his name properly, via a video tutorial where he went letter by letter with single sheets of paper to spell out all 16 letters.

"The whole video was about spelling his name right," said Staley, whose day job is Ohio State basketball student manager, "and the official results come back and his name is spelled wrong? C'mon."

Added fellow campaign manager Kyle Davis: "I think they counted people who were dead or something."

Chances are, if Staley gets his wish for the recount, Della Valle would now win in a landslide.

The Alba, Italy, native, previously best known for his moppy hair, scored 12 points, pulled down six rebounds, blocked three shots and was, in Thad Matta's estimation, "the difference in the game," as Ohio State rallied from 18 down to beat Nebraska in the quarterfinals of the Big Ten tournament.

"I definitely would win now," Della Valle agreed.

Truth is, Della Valle is a reluctant politician. OK, he's not a politician at all. That's all the byproduct of a late-night inspiration from an old episode of "The West Wing," a video concocted on the road in lieu of a few beers, and an Italian goofball's willingness to put himself in a video wearing a variety of ridiculous outfits.

But more on that later because for these purposes, we first must discuss Della Valle's other job -- being a basketball player. Prior to the Nebraska game, Della Valle, who came to Columbus by way of Findlay Prep in Nevada, averaged just 12 minutes and 4.1 points this season but earned the 21 he played against Nebraska with hustle plays, a big 3 and defense, including a critical snuff of a David Rivers' layup that set up the last push in Ohio State's rally.

The idea that Della Valle's defense could save the day would have been laughable two years ago.

When he came to Columbus, he was your typical European player, sweet on offense, not so much on D. But two years in the gym and early morning workouts paid off to the point that Matta even used the 6-foot-5, 195-pounder (up from 170) in the post for part of the game.

"That was a lot of hard work, a lot of hard work," Della Valle said. "And it paid off. I was just thinking, 'Finally, finally.'"

He said that in the locker room after leaving the more formal press conference setting. There, under the bright lights and microphones, Della Valle had been asked about his ability to hit 4 of 4 free throws in the final 12 seconds after clanking two badly only minutes earlier.

"Yeah, I think I didn't release the ball well at all on my first two free throws," he said. "And to be honest, I don't really like the ball. I hate the ball."

The ball here, it turns out is a Spalding, not the Nike version the Buckeyes practice with and Della Valle said it felt smaller and "weird" in his hands.

Of course, such honesty could very well doom his political future if Staley can resurrect it.

Not that there's much to resurrect. Della Valle's dive into American politics lasted just a few days, begun when Staley, inspired by a 3 a.m. rerun of "The West Wing" decided one of his players ought to run for student government president. Obvious choice Aaron Craft is a senior and no longer an option, so Staley went with option two, Della Valle, a popular kid on campus who, he said, "loves Ohio State."

There was some initial concern about his eligibility -- "Could an Italian really be the Ohio State student government president?" Davis asked -- but Staley and Davis figured, why not roll the dice?

Della Valle agreed and one night on the road at Indiana, instead of going out for beers, Staley and Davis made a video. They'd seen the other candidates' pitches filled with big promises. One promised to fight the administration's decision to eliminate the tradition of jumping in Mirror Lake prior to the Michigan game; another vowed to do something about the price of textbooks.

"Student government has no real power," Staley said. "So we always find out about snow days a few hours ahead of time. Amedeo was going to have an official Amedeo snow day."

Splicing together the theme song from "Rocky" (Italian Stallion, get it?), Falco's "Rock Me Amadeus," game highlights and random pictures of Della Valle in everything from a whirlpool to a banana suit, Staley and Davis submitted a video to nominate Della Valle as a write-in candidate.

He finished fifth overall, with 479 votes but the election was the best voter turnout since 1972, when current Ohio governor John Kasich won.

Staley and Davis call that the Della Valle effect.

And hey, there's always next year.

And more, there's always Saturday, when the Buckeyes play hated rival Michigan for a shot at the Big Ten Tournament title game.

If Della Valle plays like he did against Nebraska, they might as well call off the election next year and crown him king.

## Former Ohio State student-body presidential candidate Amedeo Della Valle is winning ticket vs. Nebraska

by Pat Forde  
Yahoo! Sports

INDIANAPOLIS -- Ohio State's Big Ten tournament existence was saved by a mop-haired Italian bench jockey whose biggest claim to campus fame before Friday was his failed write-in campaign for student-body president.

His "platform," as seen in a comical campaign video that was produced as a brainstorm by the Buckeyes student managers: more snow days.

Hey, countryman Silvio Berlusconi came up with much worse than that as Italian prime minister. And for a college audience, I'm not sure how that isn't a winning platform. But apparently the big issue was getting Ohio State students to successfully spell "Amedeo Della Valle."

Far easier to be a write-in candidate when your name is John Smith.

Della Valle finished fifth in the voting with 479 votes. Hold a re-vote today, however, and you would have a different result. The Italian Stallion would be a landslide favorite.

"I definitely would win," Della Valle said with a smile.

Unkempt perms might become the campus hairstyle of choice, too.

Who in Columbus wouldn't change their vote to the sophomore whose 12 points, six rebounds, three blocks and two steals keyed a comeback from 18 points down to beat Nebraska, 71-67? This was a completely unexpected performance from a guy averaging 12 minutes and 4.1 points per game. But as the Cornhuskers pulled away, expanding their lead to 48-30 with 13:45 to play, Ohio State coach Thad Matta needed somebody -- anybody -- to be the fire-starter.

Up stepped Della Valle, suddenly experiencing la dolce vita. His 21 minutes played was a career high in a Big Ten game. He sunk a big 3-pointer. He drove with verve and nerve to the basket. And after missing three of his first four free throws, he iced the game with four late swishes from the foul line.

The explanation for the earlier misses?

"I don't like the ball," Della Valle said of the Spalding brand the Big Ten is using here. "It feels smaller. It feels weird. We've been practicing all year with the Nike ball. I had to get the feel for it."

Feel for the ball is one thing. What Della Valle really provided Friday was a zest for stopping the Huskers.

"His defensive presence was the difference in the game, to be honest with you," Matta said. "Wow, was he good."

The defensive production alone was a staggering upset. When he arrived at Ohio State after a year at Findley Prep in Las Vegas, the native of Alba, Italy, was a stereotypical Euro player: skilled offensively and a sieve defensively.

"I'm not known for my defense," Della Valle admitted. "I was really bad when I first came to Ohio State. So bad."

That kept him nailed to the bench for all but 15 games his freshman season, and was still the biggest reason he's been little more than a spot sub this year. But after packing on 30 pounds and embracing Matta's defensive exhortations, he has gotten better – and there was Della Valle actually protecting the paint for long stretches of the second half after the Buckeyes benched their centers and started pressing. Three blocks and two steals was a godsend from a guy who had five blocks and five steals all season.

Della Valle's performance was a dagger for Nebraska, which is probably in the NCAA tourney but now will spend two days living with bubble anxiety while waiting to find out.

"I'm a Catholic, we're not putting [the loss] behind us," Cornhuskers coach Tim Miles joked, gallows style.

"We're going to live in it for a while."

Ohio State, meanwhile, lives on in this tourney. Next up: regular-season champion and arch-rival Michigan, which also happens to be one of the schools Della Valle considered attending. He chose the Buckeyes over Arizona, Texas A&M and Michigan and said he's never regretted it, despite limited playing time in Matta's famously short rotation.

Della Valle made a few believers last summer

when he was named the MVP of the Under-20 European Championship. The confidence gained from that has carried over, to the point where Della Valle at times has a Russ Smith-level aggressiveness offensively.

Which happened to be something the Buckeyes needed Friday, as they flailed in search of a spark. With his father, Carlo, in the stands, Amedeo took over.

"I do some crazy things sometimes," Della Valle said. "My confidence never goes down. ... But I worked hard for this. It doesn't just come for free. All the work I put in finally paid off."

We'll see if there is a carryover to Saturday and beyond for Della Valle, who probably just earned himself a much more prominent place on the Michigan scouting report. When the season is over he will go back to work on his Marketing degree, and when his basketball career is over it will be on to something else.

"I'd like to travel," he said, then laughed. "Definitely not politics."

## Ohio State heads home early: A new Selection Sunday plan, a new NCAA Tournament outlook

by Ari Wasserman  
Northeast Ohio Media Group

INDIANAPOLIS – Here's a question you couldn't have asked Thad Matta after the Big Ten Tournament semifinals each of the last five years: What are your plans for Selection Sunday?

Ohio State has been so successful in this tournament for so long, it never had to worry about anything other than finding a TV in the locker room after the final to find out its NCAA Tournament fate.

Three times the Buckeyes were Big Ten Tournament Champions. Two times they lost. But they always were left standing on the final stage on the final day in arguably the deepest conference in college basketball.

But this year is different. After No. 5-seeded Ohio State's 72-69 loss to top-seeded Michigan on Saturday, the question was appropriate. Michigan and No. 3 Michigan State will face each other for the first time in tournament history in the title game Sunday.

So Thad, what are your plans?

After staring off in the distance with a confused look, he said ... "I don't know."

What he does know is that Ohio State isn't a finished product with issues that need to be

corrected in a matter of days.

"Now if we don't, we're going home," Matta said. "But we are definitely a better basketball team now than we were when we got here."

The feeling in Ohio State's locker room after the loss was different, but not devastating. Sure, it was the first time any of the players had experienced losing before the Big Ten Tournament final, but there was a sense of satisfaction.

Why? The Buckeyes erased a 32-16, first-half deficit to Michigan – the regular-season Big Ten champion, and a projected No. 2 seed in the NCAA Tournament – and even took a 61-60 lead on an emphatic alley-oop slam from Sam Thompson with 7:58 remaining in the game.

They lost, but they withstood the best shot from a team that's better than anyone they could face before the NCAA Tournament's second weekend. They pushed the Wolverines to the limit, even in a game Michigan, a team stacked with NBA talent, made 12 of 23 threes. Ohio State learned a lot about itself in three games in Indianapolis.

- LaQuinton Ross has become far more aggressive - he's scored at least 19 points in six straight games – and said he's found comfort in putting Ohio State on his back.

"It's NCAA Tournament time. That's what I have to do," Ross said. "I know this team needs me to score, so I have just been aggressive, tried to drive more, because I know when I get to the rack I will either finish or draw a foul."

- It even got major scoring contributions from Amedeo Della Valle and Shannon Scott, who tied a career-high 18 against the Wolverines. Scott was confident in his jumper, and he even answered big-time threes from Michigan forward Nik Stauskas.

"I've just got to learn to stay aggressive on offense at all times," Scott said.

- The Buckeyes fought back from 18-point and 16-point deficits. One game it won, one it lost, but they have a sense of pride for being resilient team in March.

"With this loss, everyone is hurting, so I expect the pain we're feeling to carry over to the next game and to take it out on the next opponent ... Bad enough for them, whoever they are, I feel sorry for them," senior Lenzelle Smith Jr. said. "We're not in the best position we wanted to be in for the NCAA Tournament, but I am I pretty confident in the position we are after how we played here."

That's where it's really different from years past. Ohio State has always been Michigan in this equation – the superior team that plays a

close game, but ends up squeaking out the win because it has more talent.

And even through all the good things that happened for the Buckeyes, its loss to Michigan was another reminder that this team is different than the four previous ones that advanced to the Sweet 16 or beyond.

The Big Ten Tournament wasn't the salvation Ohio State was looking for. There is no trophy to validate an otherwise average regular season. And really, it had to avoid a game-winning shot attempt to beat No. 12 Purdue in the first round, and claw back from down 18 to survive Nebraska.

Now it has to turn the page. Start over. Find a clean slate. Put everything in the past. You know, the usual.

This time, though, it's welcomed. And it has been since Ohio State lost back-to-back games to Penn State and Indiana two weeks ago, before the Buckeyes knocked off Michigan State in the regular season finale and won two Big Ten Tournament games.

"Everything that has happened to this point, it really doesn't mean anything," senior Aaron Craft said after Ohio State's loss at Indiana. "The years before when we had success going down the stretch, we'd play in the Big Ten Tournament Championship and we'd win or we'd lose. Then you come in and the next thing you say is 'Hey, new season, nothing matters.' That's easy to say when you're winning.

"But I think that with the way things have been going, we need it. We almost need a fresh start. It's almost like, 'Do we need the pressure of if you lose you go home?' That's the position we put ourselves in."

Matta never had a reason to make his own plans for Sunday, and perhaps it's a good sign that he didn't this year despite Ohio State's struggles during the regular season. But Matta, too, is ready for a fresh start.

So he got up from his interview, patted a few reporters on the back and headed into an office situated in the locker room where his assistants were sitting.

It was time to pack up and head back to Columbus. Arranging plans for how to handle the Selection Sunday announcement is just another question for which Matta has to find an answer.