initiate contact with the defense, seems open up along the line. The whole idea is to widen one of those seams or to knock defenders out of the box so they can’t fill the seams. This is where the vision of the back comes into play. He has to be able to find where the big seems are and where he can attack the defense at its softest point. Marcus became very adept at this and also, because of his size, was often able to hit small creases in the line and surge forward for a few extra yards. The “inside” zone, a play which is intended to be run between the tightends on the line of scrimmage, became the staple running play for our offense, and it ultimately enabled our offense to evolve and become a little more difficult to defend.

The zone play opened our offense up from the standpoint that it allowed us to modify our playaction passing offense to include bootlegs and other roll-type passes. In bootleg pass plays, when the quarterback fakes to the back and rolls in the opposite direction, the offensive line took the same exact steps as they did on zone running plays without going downfield (that’s a penalty). The defense would often times suck up to the run fake and the quarterback would roll out completely alone and be able to run or pass depending on what was available. Our defense always had trouble defending the boot, but as we saw it more and more in practice, we became more proficient at both recognizing it and stopping it. The bootleg and the zone running play were both crucial in the development of our offense and they gave us a less-predictable dimension.

Defensively, we still used the K.I.S.S. philosophy. Keep it simple, stupid. Though, in the spring of 2001, when we changed for what had to be my final time because it was my final year, a good philosophy predicated the change. We went from being a primarily zone coverage team to a man-to-man coverage team. We had some very good young cornerbacks who we wanted to pressure into making big time plays because they had the physical capabilities of doing so. We also wanted to make this change because we wanted to utilize one of our best players in a number of various ways. Though just a redshirt freshman, Justin Beriault made impacts all over the field; and from the newly modified “hawk” position, he was responsible for stopping the run, covering the third wideout, and blitzing. We switched to an “eagle” front meaning we had four down lineman, three true linebackers, and the “hawk” who would sometimes line up eight yards deep or sometimes right on the end of the line of scrimmage depending on
what kind of offensive formation we saw. Regardless, if the offense lined up with only two wide receivers, then we always had eight defenders in the box to stop the run. That was our primary goal, and this defensive scheme was installed to accomplish that. Every defender was responsible for a “gap” from end to end, and depending on what offensive play was run, each man’s initial responsibility was to cover his gap. We had a lot of blitz packages as well as nickel and dime teams to stop the pass, but Coach Bart was reluctant to utilize a lot of our package because we always seemed to find ways to screw things up. It was simple but people still made too many mental mistakes, and Coach had a hard time dealing with mental mistakes so he was inclined for the most part to signal in “Eagle 11” on first, second, or third down regardless of distance to go.

“Eagle 11” was our base defense with the “11” referring to coverage and “Eagle” referring to the defensive front’s alignment. I know, as players, we got sick of it. What made things even worse was when in games, if the other team was hustling to the line and we were late getting our calls out, it was generally because our coaches couldn’t figure out personnel or what play to call. Then, like it was some big discussion, we’d inevitably run “Eagle 11.” It was like, “Why did that take so freaking long?” Coach was always worried about personnel matchups to the point where we’d wait to see what offensive players were in their huddle before we even reacted. There were times when the offense would be coming to the line and we’d have defensive guys running on because they were on the “Dollar” team or “Dime” team or “Rush” team. After the first three games of 2001 though, we stopped using every team and didn’t worry about personnel as much. All the players benefited because there was no hesitation any more, but still, Coach Bart was overly reluctant to utilize many of our defensive packages.

Following the loss to Miami, our second consecutive home loss, we were scheduled to go on the road to face the Eastern Michigan Eagles. We hadn’t won in Ypsilanti in our last two or three tries. They weren’t better than us, we just usually found a way to lose. Eastern is a lower tier team in the MAC West. They rarely win and going into the game against us, both teams needed to right the ship. They had a lot of young guys
playing and a second-year coach who was trying to build a program. Eastern is really in a tough spot. They have to recruit in Michigan and their school is pretty much a neighbor to UM so their following is slim to none. I remember my freshman year when Brian Conn, my roommate at the time came home from the Eastern game telling me about how terrible the atmosphere and trip was. He traveled as the emergency quarterback as a freshman but still redshirted like the rest of us because he never had to play. When he got back in the early morning hours that Sunday, we got to talk about the game, another loss. He said playing there was awful because the game was at night and half the crowd of about 3,000 was made up of high school bands for some competition. The thing is, their stadium is really nice and holds about 30,000. When I went to watch film the next day, it looked pathetic. It’s hard enough getting up for games when the stands are only half-full, but when you’re talking about 90% empty, you may as well be practicing or something. Two years later, when I made my first trip to Eastern, I was still shocked to see all the empty seats, and I knew that because both teams had one win combined, 2001 would be no different.

Everyone was a little skiddish about the weather forecast for that Saturday afternoon. Fall was progressing and the weather was beginning to turn a little and the meteorologists on Detroit t.v. were calling for scattered showers throughout the day and into the evening. That wasn’t good. It was hard enough getting up for Eastern if the weather would be decent but even harder if it was bad. However, like the four previous weeks, we got very lucky. It seemed as if it was going to rain all day, but it never really did and by game time, it was another beautiful day. Another small crowd turned out to watch two inept teams go at one another on an otherwise meaningless afternoon, and about twenty miles or so away, 107,000 people were jammed into “The Big House” down at UM.

The game changed on a single play. Finally, our defense made a big play. We had let a 14-0 lead at halftime disappear as only we could and it was 14-14 late in the third quarter and Eastern had all the momentum. They were driving for the third consecutive time towards the endzone with relative ease. We hadn’t stopped them the whole second half when, all of a sudden we made a play. Their quarterback took a quick three-step drop to throw a quick slant pass. However, our corner had jumped the route forcing the
quarterback to hold the ball. At about the moment he was bringing the ball back down into his body, Evan Triggs came from his defensive end position and jarred the ball loose. Rachman Crable, our 265 pound strong side defensive end was also in the area and scooped the ball up and raced 60 yards for the go ahead score. He looked great rolling down our sidelines. It was great to see the next day on film as he “scooped and scored” all the guys on the bench jump up and down and run with him down the sideline. It was a huge play because it gave us momentum and confidence. When the fourth quarter began, we had the wind at our backs and Eastern wasn’t able to get their passing game back on track going into it. We added a couple of short touchdown drives late to make the final score 35-14.

* * * * * * * *

My mom and dad are so loyal. If they have a chance to make it to a game, they will. My dad is still coaching on Friday nights and my mom goes to every game. That means they aren’t getting in bed until midnight or later and then driving anywhere from four to eight hours to get to football games on Saturday afternoon all over the Midwest. There have been times when it would have been much easier for both of them just to stay home in Newburgh and find out what happened through a phone call or reading the newspaper. However, they made a pact long ago that if a Lidy boy was playing somewhere, at least one of them would do all they could to get to the game. A couple of times my mom went on trips by herself, most notably to Michigan State, to see my brother play. They do all that they can and I appreciate it more than they know. There are times when I don’t think it’s worth it for them, and the Eastern game was no different. They figured it would take about ten hours to get from Newburgh to Ypsilanti by driving over to Cincinnati and then heading up Interstate 75 all the way towards Detroit. I told them to stay home, to rest, but they insisted on coming.

Their new method of travel is in a nice, new Mercury Grand Marquis. They love that car and it’s made all the difference in the world for them driving it all over the map. They don’t mind flying, but when restricted by such demanding schedules, it’s hard to get flights to match times needed so they drive. Following the Castle game on Friday
night, the hopped in the car and headed towards Ohio planning to drive for about three or four hours before stopping at a hotel along the way. There, they’d spend the night, sleep in a little, and get back on the road early enough so that they could be in the stands and hour and a half before kickoff. Ever since we started going to IU games in 1995, Vince’s first season, we’ve always been some of the first fans in the stands. There were many times when my mom, dad, and I would sit for up to two hours waiting for the game to start, filling the time with idle conversation and talk about game strategy and such. When we went out that day at Eastern approximately and hour and fifteen minutes before kickoff for our initial stretch and warm-up, there were two fans sitting in the Ball State section, John and Nancy Lidy. It’s not unusual, especially at road games, for them to be in the stands nearly alone and at Eastern, with the lack of fans period, it was funny how they looked sitting there side by side, watching their youngest son warm up, knowing, that if today was like the last two weeks, he wasn’t going to play anyway.

I still hadn’t played and that’s why I told them to stay home. I feel bad. I’m the only senior who has no real position on the team. I’m the backup for a few spots on special teams but that’s pretty much it. I don’t get in at linebacker anymore and I wasn’t expecting anything less for this game. My mom and dad spend all this time, all this money and I’m not even hopeful of getting in against what is probably the worst team in the MAC. I was hoping maybe for some mop up time like if we got a big lead or something or maybe a chance to run down on special teams. It would just seem to justify to myself that they didn’t do it all for nothing. They always tell me they love to travel and spend time together and it gives them a chance to talk, but I feel like I don’t fulfill my end of the program. At least, when I used to play on special teams, we could talk briefly after the game about what I did on the field, not on the sidelines.

I played. Yeah rah. I played. Eight plays I think. Mop up time, just like I’d hoped for. We got ahead 35-14 late and Coach Bart asked if I wanted to get in. “Sure, I’m ready to go.”

“Okay, cover 4 the whole time. Tell the front guys to run whatever stunts they want,” were his only words to me.

“Got it.”
I guess those eight plays would have meant more if I knew they were going to be the last eight plays of my life.
BSU fizzes at the end

Cardinals jump out to 14-0 lead in fourth loss

By DOUG ZALESKI
The Star Press

MUNCIE — Miami showed a resilience Saturday that has been in short supply at Ball State Stadium in recent years, and when Ball State was faced with having to replicate that characteristic, it couldn't do it. Ball State built a 14-0 lead in the opening 10 minutes of its first Mid-American Conference football game of the season. It squandered the cushion by halftime, then fell apart in any number of ways during the second half on the way to a 28-20 loss to the RedHawks. It was the fourth straight defeat for the Cardinals, who extended their losing streak in September games to 19. Quarterback Talmadge Hill admitted he and his teammates had to deal with deflated emotions as the game slipped away in the second half.

"Yeah, a little bit," Hill said. "It's tough to keep that momentum and fire going through the game."

The Cardinals flourished early as they scored touchdowns on their first two possessions. The 14-0 lead was the largest in an opening quarter since getting ahead of Toledo 14-0 in the 1997 season finale.

Unlike the game against Toledo, which Ball State won 35-3; the Cardinals couldn't knock out the RedHawks. Miami tied the score late in the second quarter and dominated the final 20 minutes of the game.

"Part of our program, part of our credo is we know the battle isn't always going to go the way we want it to go, and the definition of it is being down 14-0 in the first quarter in a game you think is going to be pretty evenly matched," Miami coach Terry Hoeppner said.

"On the sideline, we reminded guys there was a lot of football to be played. I went around looking for guys to remind them of that, and they were finding me, telling me that we'd be all right."

Cardinals get off to good start

Continued from Page 1C

Ball State couldn't have drawn up a better start to the game. Safety Jade Winchell intercepted a pass on Miami's third play and returned it 33 yards to the RedHawks' 22-yard line. Six plays later, Hill fired a 9-yard pass to Jamarcus Coffee for the fifth-year senior's first career touchdown.

Ball State's defense forced a three-and-out off Miami's next possession. The Cardinals drove 61 yards, scoring on Hill's 9-yard pass on a fake route to Sean Schemihra in the back corner of the end zone. "[Miami's] first two series were quick, and we knew we were better than that," Miami quarterback Ben Roethlisberger said. "There wasn't a panic. We just knew we had to go out and play like we can."

Miami's third possession resulted in an 80-yard drive, ending with a 9-yard run by tailback Cal Murray. The Redhawks (2-2) tied the score with 23 seconds left in the first half as Roethlisberger hit Jason Branch for a touchdown on a 6-yard slant.

Miami faced a fourth-and-16 play from the Ball State 38 on its second touchdown drive, but the Cardinals' defense allowed a 17-yard pass for the first down.

"We needed to make a stop there," Ball State coach Bill Lynch said. "That was a big momentum play in the first half. If we stop them, we get the ball back at the 40-yard line and have a chance to get a score with 2½ minutes to go."

Added Ball State defensive tackle Mark Zackery: "If we get them in a long situation, it's our job up front to make a play. He shouldn't get the ball off on fourth and 16."

Ball State stalled the Miami surge by scoring a touchdown on Marcus Merrweather's 3-yard run with 6:30 to play in the third quarter. The conversion failed when the Cardinals tried to run for 2 points out of a kicking alignment, but they had a 20-14 lead.

Miami scored on its next possession to go up 21-20, and Ball State floundered the rest of the game.

"Tom Pucke, who missed a 34-yard field goal with the score tied 14-14 early in the third quarter, missed a 29-yard field goal late in the third period."

Ball State's defense didn't get a hand on Murray when he ran 32 yards for a touchdown and a 28-20 RedHawk lead with 10:06 remaining in the game.

The Cardinals managed only 29 yards of offense in the fourth quarter, and their last two possessions ended with Hill throwing interceptions. The first was the most damaging. The Cardinals drove to the Miami 22-yard line.

On third and 10, Hill was intercepted at the 16 by Miami linebacker Matt Robillard, who was roaming the flat in front of Ball State receiver Corey Pandolph.

Ball State tailback Marcus Merrweather rushed for 182 yards, the second-highest total in his career. Murray, who had carried only nine times in Miami's first three games, ran for 183 yards and three touchdowns while replacing injured starting tailback Luke Clemens.

"Most of it was us missing tackles," Ball State defensive tackle Mark Zackery said of Murray's big day. "We had him in the position we wanted him in. We just didn't wrap up."

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MUNCIE — The question was posed to Ball State defensive tackle Mark Zackery on Saturday after the Cardinals lost their fourth consecutive football game to start the season: Where do you think this team is going?

Zackery, a senior co-captain, didn’t hesitate: “I don’t think we have any place to go but up.”

That’s undeniably true, but it’s also sad that a team with an improved talent base from last year is reduced to thinking in those terms nearly halfway through the season.

The Cardinals shouldn’t be crawling around on the floor.

Ball State entered the season with the belief that it had turned the corner on the road back to respectability. It had every right to think that way. This isn’t one of the elite teams in the Mid-American Conference, but neither is it one of the worst.

Ball State loses opportunities

Continued from Page 1C

Yet somehow the Cardinals find themselves in the same situation they were in at the start of last year, and in 1999, and in 1998, etc., etc., etc. They can’t win games they should be able to win.

Ball State had excellent opportunities in its last three games to get victories. But in home games against Miami and Northern Iowa and on the road at Kentucky, the Cardinals found ways to let victory elude them.

Ball State wasn’t sharp in any of those games. It made a season’s worth of mistakes in just 12 quarters of football.

So that brings the Cardinals to a crossroads of sorts for the 2001 season. Ball State will be idle this Saturday. It will have 2 weeks to prepare emotionally and physically for its next game, at Eastern Michigan on Oct. 13. The Eagles are one of the truly downtrodden programs in the MAC.

That’s a long time to wait for a game, but it will give Ball State ample time to reflect on what it’s done so far and how much improvement it must make.

There are 100 or so players in the program, 10 full-time coaches and a handful of student coaches. Maybe a little soul-searching will go on in the next 2 weeks.

All of them clearly are falling in some manner to live up to their potential. At 0-4, unquestionably this is an underachieving football team.

There can be no argument on that point. Players have continually failed to make plays that determine the outcome of games. Maybe they need to be coached a little differently. Maybe they need to be more accountable on their own.

Ball State doesn’t have bad players, and its coaching staff works as hard as any other in the MAC. But unless those groups improve their performances soon, their chance for success will slip away.

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Fumble recovery for TD propels BSU to victory

By DOUG ZALESKI
The Star Press

YPSILANTI, Mich. — All season, Ball State University’s football team has lamented a noticeable lack of big plays. That wasn’t the case Saturday when the Cardinals used a momentum-shifting play by its defense to send them to their first victory of the season.

Defensive end Rachman Crable streaked 67 yards for a touchdown after picking up an Eastern Michigan fumble to break a tie early in the second half. The score propelled Ball State to a 35-14 victory in Rynearson Stadium.

The touchdown by Crable wouldn’t have come at a better time for the Cardinals. They had turned a 14-0 lead into a 14-14 tie at halftime for the second straight game, and their offense was in a complete stall in the third quarter.

Crable and defensive tackle Evan Triggs gave Ball State (1-1 Mid-American Conference West Division) the jump-start it needed.

Eastern Michigan (0-5, 0-2 MAC West) was trying to take the lead when it used a short punt into the wind by Ball State’s Reggie Hodges and a 15-yard late-hit penalty against the Cardinals to move to the Ball State 25-yard line. Quarterback Kainoa Akina tried to pass on third and eight, but Triggs barreled up the middle and drilled him in the chest.

“He was screaming through his helmet,” Triggs said of the force of his hit on Akina.

The ball came loose, and Crable scooped it up in full stride. He ran untouched down the sideline in front of the Cardinals’ bench to score and give Ball State a 21-14 lead with 10:12 remaining in the third quarter.

“I checked back one time to see how close people were to me. And at the 30-yard line I knew I was going to make it,” Crable said. “We talked all week about somebody having to step up and make a big play.”

Eastern Michigan coach Jeff Woodruff wasn’t convinced the play should have been ruled a fumble.

“I couldn’t see it from my angle, but the guys upstairs [in the coach’s booth] said the ground caused the fumble,” Woodruff said. “But that’s irrelevant. We have to answer back.”

The Eagles had no answer the rest of the game.

Ball State unleashed a power running game against Eastern Michigan to control the fourth quarter. Tailback Marcus Merriweather pounded the Eagles’ defense throughout the second half. While wearing it down, he finished with 173 yards rushing on 38 carries.

“If they get him up to the defensive backs, he’s going to run them over,” Woodruff said. “You have to stop his momentum at the line of scrimmage, and then you have a chance to stop him.”

Ball State scored twice in the final 3½ minutes to wrap up the game. Jason Teeters, who replaced a tired Merriweather for three plays, scored on a 15-yard touchdown run by somersaulting into the end zone for a 28-14 Ball State lead with 3:30 to play.

Merriweather scored on a 26-yard run with 58 seconds to go on the next possession.

“Merriweather just kept pounding away, and the offensive line came to life,” Ball State coach Bill Lynch said. “He did a good job of pushing the pile on a few plays.”

Merriweather carried 22 times for 119 yards in the second half. He represented virtually the entire Ball State offense in the last 17½ minutes of the game. Merriweather rushed on 16 of the Cardinals’ 22 plays.

The ball was given to Teeters for five of those 17½ minutes, which Lynch said was a result of fatigue.

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See CARDINALS on Page 10.
Chapter Six

Homecoming

It's been over four years since we've played a truly meaningful game, meaningful in the sense that the game is important in terms of postseason aspirations and conference contention. Though we're only 1 and 4 overall, we're 1-0 in the MAC West Division, and that record puts us in a tie with Toledo for first place, theoretically. We both have 1.000 winning percentages in the conference, but unlike Toledo, we haven't done anything else. They're ranked in the top-25 in the country coming into this game having compiled a 5-0 overall record and 2-0 in the MAC West. They have one of the top tailbacks in the country in Chester Taylor and their quarterback is one of the most efficient in the country. This game means something. It wasn't like last year when we played Western Michigan at home late in the season with an outside chance of winning the West Division. We weren't ready then. We're ready now. This is the first time that we feel we can truly play and deserve to play on this stage. If you were to ask each man on our team, he would say we can beat Toledo and that we are better than our 1-4 record indicates. We're probably the only ones who feel this way because we're two touchdown underdogs. A victory over Toledo would jumpstart this team. It would give us the momentum we need to continue our search for the goals we set at the beginning of the year.

Miami (Ohio) may be our geographic rival, but Toledo is probably the one team we play the best and hardest against all year. We've always played them tough, and they always reciprocate the intensity. For some reason, whenever we play, there is this heightened intensity. It doesn't hurt that two of the three times we've played them in our house, they've been nationally ranked. In 1997, they came to Muncie strutting with an 8-0 record and #18 ranking, but left about three hours later dragging themselves out of town after a 35-3 drubbing. Though I didn't play in that game, it was one I'll always remember because of the way the fans brought an added level of excitement and intensity to the game. Also, though it was early November, you couldn't have asked for nicer weather. When I got up that morning to go eat breakfast at the buffet in the dormitory mess hall, the air smelled of autumn and football. I don't know how to explain it, but
sometimes, when the wind blows just right, you can sense something exciting is about to happen. The sun beats down enough to warm the air so that it doesn't feel like November. The air is fresher than normal. The grass looks greener. Everything is sharp. Then, when you get dressed to head to the stadium, you just feel good wearing the long pants and collared shirt. That's how it was back in '97 when we played Toledo. When I stepped outside on my front porch the morning of October 24, 2002, I sensed all the same things. The air was right. The sun was high. "It's a great day for football."

There was a slight difference in 2002. Instead of waking up in the cramped dorms, heading to the community bathroom to take a shower, and then finishing off with a buffet breakfast, I got to wake up in my own room on my nice, fat queen sized bed. I still had roommates, but there are five of them now, not one. The food situation was about the same (other than the quality) because I made a breakfast that may as well have been a buffet. Pancakes, sausage, scrambled eggs, a banana, and of course, the ritualistic pot of coffee were all on the menu. Our trainers frown upon the coffee drinking before games fearing dehydration, but I feel as though it is a great eye-opener and pick-me-up for any occasion. There's nothing better than warming the body and getting the blood flowing with a good cup of regular roast with a little skim milk and artificial sweetener. I do it before games at home and on the road. If were scheduled to play an evening game on the road, I'll throw the complimentary coffee on about thirty minutes before we're scheduled to have our team meeting. I just think it helps get the blood flowing, and technically, it's true. Coffee, or the caffeine in coffee, stimulates the nervous system and thins the blood, thus raising the internal temperature of the body. Its effects are well documented. Many professional bodybuilders utilize it in conjunction with their training as somewhat of a kick-start. About the time I had my breakfast down, everyone else was pretty much up as well. John was cussing for no reason as usual. Conn was trying to catch some last minute shut eye. Teeters was running around the house going up and down the stairs for no obvious reason other than to signify, "It's time." Sportscenter was on every t.v. I was reading the paper, checking out the previous night's high school football scores and looking at the weather forecast for that afternoon as well as the pregame notes concerning BSU vs. Toledo.

"Man, I feel good today," I said to no one in particular.
"Damn, this is tight," was the reply from one mouth.

"What a day. Can you believe it?" Teeters chimed in.

I finished the short discussion with the proverbial, "We're gonna kick Toledo's ass."

Each one of us goes about his own business when getting ready on Saturday mornings. Conn likes to listen to his radio at fairly high decibels while showering. John prefers to read the paper ("Sports" section only) when I'm done with it, and Teeters always seems to be trying to figure out which minidisk is appropriate for that particular Saturday. Me, I'm pretty laid back. I prefer to watch t.v. and hang out with Jaime for the last few minutes before having to leave. What was weird though on this Saturday was that I didn't feel normal. After eating, something happened to me that I've never really experienced at Ball State. I almost got sick. I was nervous, but I shouldn't have been. To me, uneasiness comes to those who aren't prepared to play or to those who have quite a bit of pressure on them week in and week out (i.e.- the quarterback). For me, neither one should have been a factor because mentally, I'm always on target, and physically, because I don't play. Before leaving for the team meeting around 11:00 a.m., I downed a protein shake hoping that it would settle my stomach. As Tony used to say, "No dice, chino." The whole way to the Arena I felt like I was going to hurl out my driver's side window.

The routine changed with the 2002 season. Usually, we had team dinner on Friday night and a pre-game meal on Saturday morning, but this year, as a group, we decided to do away with the pre-game meal and go bit time on Friday nights. This is only at home, mind you, because on the road we don't have a lot of choice. This year, we get a prime rib/roast beef buffet from one of the better local restaurants on Friday night. All the players enjoy it immensely because it gives them the freedom to get a little extra sleep on Saturday mornings instead of having to be at a crappy dormitory-style breakfast at 8:30 in the morning. We're on our own now until the team meeting which typically takes place about two hours before the game. There's also chapel, which is generally well-attended, but not mandatory, and what we've begin to call "Imagery Sessions."

During fall camp of 2001, a sports psychologist by the name of Dr. Chris Carr came and spoke to us about mental preparation. It wasn't the kind of mental preparation
one would think of like memorizing plays or certain schemes that take place on the football field. It was about being able to play the game in your mind, almost like having visionary-type dreams that put you out there, on the field, in the middle of the action. Some guys bought into it, others didn't. A big reason a lot of guys didn't do it that first year was timing. He'd come on Friday evenings right after our walk-through practice, and if you stayed for his session, it would really cut down the time between practice and team meal that night. Plus, we'd already been at the stadium for up to three hours and nobody wants to be at the stadium that long the day before a game. The closer game time comes, the more excited we get, but we also need a release, and the hour and a half between practice in dinner was more important than imagery sessions. That was last year though. Before this season, it was decided that Dr. Carr ought to come, when available, to have sessions on Saturday mornings just like we have chapel service. Now, I must say, that I believe in what he was teaching us, particularly about "seeing yourself in the action so that when it happens on the field, you'll know how to react," but I never went hardcore with it. I have one of his manuals. I read the things he gives to us, but I don't focus enough. I needed that focus on Toledo Saturday.

As usual for team meetings, I took my seat in the front row. I'd become accustomed to sitting there because I always enjoyed the highlight videos that our computer experts put together. Before we board the buses to leave for the stadium, home or away, we watch a compilation of clips from previous weeks to kind of set the mood for the room. Some guys get off on it. Others don't care. I love it. It jacks me up. To see us succeeding on the field brings all kind of positive images to my head so I always like to sit up front so I can see what's going on. But, before the highlight video, it was time for an imagery session, and as I took my seat in the front row, I noticed a pair of feet kind of going back and forth across the gray carpet of the Arena Lounge.

All coaches pace on Saturdays. Next time you are at a game, just watch the head coach as he works the sideline. He never stands still. He's hollering at his players, looking for a better angle to see formations and plays, or giving instruction to his players. The feet I saw weren't of Coach Lynch, but of Coach Pethtel. He's our Special Teams Coordinator and one helluva fiery guy. He has a lot of energy and he's kind of pacing in front of me and as I raise my head to look at him, we lock eyes, and I can't help but
notice that he’s grinning from ear to ear. His mustache, which isn’t overly large, seems to be stretched all the way across his face.

“Man Coach P, I feel great today,” I say.

“Great day! Isn’t it?”

“Oh yeah, but man, I’m nervous. My stomach’s turning flips right now and I never get nervous.”

“This should help,” he says in reference to the Dr. Carr imagery session about to take place.

When Dr. Carr leads large groups in imagery sessions, it’s fantastic. If a casual observer were to walk by, he/she may think we were a bunch of weirdos having some sort of religious revival. The lights are dimmed, we either sit up in chairs or lie down on the floor, wherever we feel most comfortable, and then we basically find our “happy place.” Dr. Carr leads us through some mental exercises telling us to relax our body from head to toe by tensing and then releasing our muscle groups one by one. Then, we visualize being warm and calm and focused so that nothing outside of our minds can distract us. After several minutes of total quiet except for his voice and some background music, I for one, felt unbelievable and I hadn’t even gotten to the imagery session yet. We were still working on relaxing, being ready to go out and get thins done. After relaxation has occurred, he asks each man to visualize one play, the perfect play, from start to finish. He’s not talking about the “dream” play where I, as the linebacker, blitz, sack the quarterback, force a fumble, and outrun everyone to the endzone for the game-winning touchdown. He’s talking about the one “perfect” play that can happen in the game because we make it happen. It can be as simple as making a perfect zone drop to take away a “dig” route, or for a running back, making a perfect block against a blitzing linebacker which enables the quarterback to step up and throw the ball. When he told us to begin thinking about that play, everything popped into my head. I didn’t even really have to think about it. I saw the formation, made the line calls, read my initial keys, and then reacted. It was a basic running play out of a particular formation. All I did was take on an offensive lineman, maintain my gap, and make a simple tackle. Then, I saw myself getting up and going back to the huddle. It wasn’t a spectacular play. I didn’t force a fumble or make an interception. I just made a play, a perfect play, and that’s what Dr.
Carr was stressing. Perfection. Then he said, "Now, think about how you feel as the play ends... In a single word, describe what you feel." My word: DOMINATE. He continued, "Now, take that word, write it down somewhere on your wristbands or tape, somewhere where you'll be able to see it. Then, in time when you need to focus, look at that word and it'll bring you back to this image." After that, he brought us out of the relaxed state, and I just kept saying to myself, "DOMINATE."

As I said earlier, this Saturday was slightly different. Usually the pre-game highlight video utilizes clips from our previous weeks' games. This day though, it went more in line with Coach Lynch's theme for the week: The history of BSU-Toledo. Since the Monday team meeting, he'd talked about it and talked about it, telling us about the games, the players, and the circumstances surrounding the BSU-Toledo games of recent history. How, in 1993, we were down big at the half but a 90+ yard touchdown pass ignited a rally that saw us ultimately win the game on the final play. He discussed the scores, the comebacks, and how each one figured into one team or the other winning the conference title. So, this Saturday, instead of watching highlights of BSU vs. EMU from the week before, we were treated to highlights of BSU vs. Toledo from games in the last decade. The films were old. You could just tell because the clarity wasn't there like it is today. The picture was grainy. The uniforms the players were wearing weren't anything like the ones we were going to be wearing later that day. The stadium was completely different. When the final highlight aired, it was of the game-winning touchdown in that '93 game. After the catch in the endzone and subsequent extra point, the field was rushed by players and fans alike (those few who stayed while the others left because they thought Toledo was going to win). It was a great image to leave on, but first, Coach Lynch had to speak.

He was different this game. Before Miami, he was pissed. He was real pissed because he feels as though they don't respect us the way they should because we respected them. He was very excited that day, and I do think that it helped early in the game, but by halftime, we were searching for answers. On Toledo Saturday though, he was very calm, almost cerebral in his talk. He talked about "time" and how if there ever was a "time" to do something, this was it. This was our chance to play and perform well in a big game, bigger than Auburn, bigger than Florida. It was bigger because this was
the MAC and this was Toledo. He told us to block everything out and play the way we knew how. His final words focused on adversity because as he always says, “There are going to be times when adversity hits and we can either rise or we can fall.” The bottom line for that day was that we just couldn’t “blink” in the face of that adversity. We had to face it and go right back at them.

“TTSSSSSSSSSSSSSSS BEAT ROCKETS!!!!!!”

* * * * * * * *

The feeling at the stadium from the time we stepped foot off those buses was electric. Though our stadium is old and decrepit, it seems to come alive on Saturday. The flags from each team in our conference fly high at the top of each side of the stadium. The American flag and Indiana state flag fly both outside the stadium and in the northeast corner as well. The grass is always freshly mowed so that there it appears to be different colors every five yards. It’s just the direction the grass has been cut that makes it lay over one way or another and then seem to lighten or darken depending on how the sun is hitting it. All the signs are up and the concession stands attendants are firing up the popcorn machines and grills for burgers and hot dogs. Outside the stadium, two or three large tents are visible in various places throughout the parking lot signifying alumni parties or Cardinal Varsity Club events. Stepping off that bus onto the sidewalk which leads into our new facility is always a rush. One or more coaches are usually at the foot of the stairwell leading off the bus. They are there to wish encouragement one final time before heading into the locker room. The whole scene doesn’t last more than a minute.

Our pregame ritual never varies, save for the time we played Northern Iowa after the 9-11 attacks. After getting taped and dressed, the “specialists” go out first to begin their warm-up. The specialists consist of quarterbacks, kickers, punters, long snappers, and kick catchers. As a semi-long snapper, I’ve always gone out with the first group. I’ve never snapped in a game and really am not that good at it, but it’s like any other position in football, you have to have an emergency backup. The specialist period lasts about fifteen minutes until we are then joined by the “skill” players. These are all players except for lineman, both offensive and defensive. The lineman stay in the locker room
and stretch on their own for about fifteen minutes while the rest of us are out on the field stretching. Each coach takes his position group to a certain spot on the field and leads his players through the stretch routine. Our routine has developed over the last couple of years to the point where people in the stands might think we were practicing for the ballet. We do what’s called a “dynamic stretch” routine which is a modified, active stretch routine rather than the static stretch routine. In the active routine, we combine body movements with stretching movements to fully warm the muscles before activity. It’s a great way to loosen up, but it does look funny. Our arms and legs are flailing all over the place as we do “straight-leg march” and “dog’n’bush.” There are about a dozen different stretches that we go through. At this point, barely a word is spoken for the ten minutes or so that it takes to warm-up. We’ve done the routine so many times before practice that we just go about it without saying a word. Following our brief warm-up, we head back into the locker room to put on our shoulder pads and make any last minute alterations to our tape jobs or uniforms.

The whole team comes out for our “contact” warm-up that precedes the start of the game. You have to get out that first hit so that when game time comes, you’re ready for it. We don’t have live scrimmage sessions or anything, just enough to “set the pads” as Coach Bart would say. Everything at this point goes fast. It doesn’t seem like we’re out there all together but for about ten minutes when we turn right around and go back inside. Once back inside the locker room, somebody turns the clocks off or at least slows them down. For how fast the time goes on the field, it ekes by at an excruciatingly slow pace as we all sit in our locker stalls waiting for Coach Lynch to come in and talk to us. Some guys like the time, but for the most part, everyone hates it. Almost to a man, I’d say that we’d rather stay out an extra five minutes or so. The sweat is flowing, the body is ready, but it all stops. We come back in and sit. There’s a lot of heads shaking every Saturday. But then, eventually it’s time.

“Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.”
The prayer before we head out is powerful. Over 100 men kneeling side-by-side, clasping hands, speaking aloud the same words. Before a violent game, there is a unified peace. Not too much is made of the prayer, but it is the last thing we do before our final breakdown before leaving the locker room one final time.

“TTTSSSSSSSSSSSSS BEAT ROCKETS!!!”

The day was special from the very start and we had come to play. We matched Toledo blow for blow early in the game. Neither team gained much of an advantage in the first quarter or first half for that matter. Neither team could manage anything on the ground. The top two running backs in the conference were playing on that Saturday, but combined they didn’t rush for 100 yards. Both defenses stack up the middle to stop the running game. Like I said, it was back and forth. We managed to go ahead in the second half and stayed that way until late in the fourth quarter. Ahead 17-10, we allowed Toledo to convert on a fourth down and five from about midfield on a fake punt. We had our regular block team out there when we should have had our defense. The run ended up being the longest running play of the day for either team. It covered about 35 yards, or half their team total for the entire day. A few plays later, they tricked us again. Their quarterback handed off to a back who headed to his right. About the time he got to the edge of the line in front of him, he stopped, cocked his right arm and fired the ball back to the quarterback who was wide open in the middle of the field. Our safety had recognized the play, but couldn’t react in a way to put himself in the proper position to make the tackle. The quarterback caught the ball, sidestepped our safety, and waltzed into the endzone. Touchdown and momentum to Toledo.

Another punting miscue then almost cost us the game. After they tied the score, we got the ball back with plenty of time to march it down the field for the win. However, they stopped us again and we were forced to punt. Their edge rusher went right around our wing man and partially blocked the kick. It gave them the ball in our territory with less than five minutes to go and the game tied at 17. Once again though, our defense came up big. We stuffed their running game repeatedly once they got down inside the twenty-yard line. With a little more than three minutes to play, they had to settle for a field goal attempt. It was good. Toledo 20, Ball State 17. They had come all the way back after we had controlled the entire game for the most part. It seemed like déjà vu.
So many times in my career we’ve been in position to win games in the fourth quarter only to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory. It was happening again. As they lined up for the kickoff, each man on our sidelines was saying the same thing: “Please, kick it to Parch.”

Corey Parchman runs a 4.25 forty-yard dash. For those out there who don’t know, that’s fast. That’s real fast. It doesn’t get much faster. He was a late developer as a football player and probably wasn’t utilized properly during his career. He has the potential to be a pro football player but never found his niche in our scheme. Regardless, in the open field, he is all alone. The kick went up into the bright blue sky high and deep. It was headed towards our one return man, Corey Parchman. He gathered the ball into his chest about two yards deep in the endzone. Sometimes, on kicks like that, you take a knee and take the ball on the twenty-yard line. Not this time. He was bringing it out straight up the field. On about the twenty-five yard line, he saw a crease and headed straight up the field instead of going right as the return was designed to do. The crease closed and he was hit blindside by both a defender and one of our players blocking the defender. The hit was so violent, no one believed he was still up. A couple of Toledo’s players even stopped as if to say, “Okay, he’s down.” He wasn’t. He bounced off the hit and broke to his left towards the Toledo sideline. Green grass. Open field. “Run, Corey, run!” He ran. One defender had a chance. He had the angle and about ten yards on Corey. It didn’t matter. Corey ate up the ten yard differential by the time he reached the fifty and within a couple more strides, was passed their last defender. The Toledo player made a dive but it was completely in vain. Parchman was streaking down their sideline heading towards the endzone where most of our students sit. In my five years at BSU, I’ve never heard the stadium roar like it did that Saturday when Corey Parchman broke free. There was this collective rumbling that is rarely heard in Muncie. Ball State 24, Toledo 20. We did it. We beat the team everyone was picking to win the conference.

As the final seconds ticked off the clock, about 5,000 students and other fans rushed the field to celebrate with the players and tear down the goal posts. It was a mad house on the field. A bunch of drunk students who don’t know us from Adam are jumping around hugging everybody. It’s something that makes college football unlike any other
WHAT WENT RIGHT:
Ball State's defense smothered Toledo's rushing attack, limiting the Rockets to 70 yards.

Next week: Ball State (2-4, 2-0 in MAC West) will play at 12:30 p.m. at Connecticut.

WHAT WENT WRONG:
The Cardinals had a tougher time on the ground than Toledo, gaining just 44 yards.

Electrifying finish
By DOUG ZALESKI
The Star Press

MUNCIE — Corey Parchman had to rely more on bat-like radar than his eyesight to deliver a stunning football victory for Ball State on Saturday at Ball State Stadium.

Parchman electrified a homecoming crowd of 21,278 with a 100-yard kickoff return for a touchdown with 3 minutes to play. That erased a 3-point deficit and gave the Cardinals a 24-20 victory over No. 25 Toledo.

“Corey Parchman. That was one big kickoff return.”

But it didn’t clinch the victory. Toledo quickly moved to a first down at Ball State’s 14-yard line with 1:15 to play. But holding penalties on each of the next three plays pushed Toledo, the most penalized team in the MAC, back to the Ball State 44 with 42 seconds to play.

“When the game’s on the line and [three holding penalties] in a row when nothing has been called all day long on either side — you think about it,” said Amstutz, who was displeased with the calls.

On first and 40, Toledo quarterback Tavares Bolden tried to pass to Manny Johnson. Johnson fell down, and Ball State’s Quentin Manley intercepted the ball at the 24 and returned it 49 yards to the Toledo 27. The Cardinals took three snaps from there and ran out the clock.

Ball State’s defense choked off Toledo’s running game, which ranked as the second-best in the MAC at 239.2 yards a game. The Rockets managed only 70 yards on the ground.

Ballyhooed tailback Chester Taylor, whom Toledo was promoting for the Heisman Trophy, had the worst day of his career in a game in which he had at least 10 carries. Taylor managed only 25 yards on 18 carries, and he fumbled once.

“We knew Toledo ran four plays: the cut, counter, boot and screen,” Ball State nose guard Mark Zackery said. “If you can stop those four plays you can stop Toledo.”

The nearsighted Parchman, who is Ball State’s fastest player with a 4.25-second time in the 40-yard dash, broke to the outside, where he had only Toledo’s Demetris Simms to beat.

Parchman could see Simms up close and easily got past him, but the end zone that was still 60 yards away was fuzzy.

“I just saw the yellow goal posts, and I aimed for them,” Parchman said.

His aim was 20/20, if not his eyesight.

Parchman arrived in the end zone ahead of a trail of delirious teammates, who piled on top of him.

See VICTORY on Page 6C
Vision becomes reality for senior

Ball State kick returner Corey Parchman glanced at his taped left wrist with just over 3 minutes remaining in Saturday’s football game against Toledo and saw the word “there” that he had written on the tape before the game started. Seconds later, Parchman sprinted the length of the field to add to the lore of Ball State home football games against Toledo.

Confused? It made perfect sense to Parchman, whose 100-yard kickoff return for a touchdown gave Ball State a 24-20 victory over Toledo.

Parchman participated Saturday morning in a mental imagery session conducted by sports psychologist Chris Carr. Carr told the players who attended the meeting to visualize one play that they would make during the game and then remember the first word they thought of after seeing the play unfold in their minds.

Parchman envisioned himself running back a kickoff for a touchdown, and immediately the word “there” popped into his head.

“[Carr] said to remember the word and put it somewhere where you can look at it,” Parchman said. “I looked at the word, and it all just clicked for me.”

Ball State has crushed Toledo’s spirit at Ball State Stadium three times in the past 8 years.

In 1993, the Cardinals set a school record by rallying from a 27-point deficit with 4:10 remaining in the third quarter to beat the Rockets 31-30 on the last play of the game.

In 1997, Toledo came to Muncie with a No. 18 national ranking, and it went home with a 35-3 whipping administered by the Cardinals.

Now the No. 25 Rockets have to live with the knowledge that a mental word-association game knocked them from the rankings and possibly ruined what looked like a special season.

It’s been a memorable season for Parchman, too. Four months ago, he couldn’t even be sure he would be a part of Ball State’s football team this year. The senior had been arrested and charged with stealing a pair of tennis shoes from a Muncie store.

He entered into a diversion program Aug. 8, performed community service and will have charges dropped if he stays out of trouble.

Parchman was suspended by coach Bill Lynch for the Cardinals’ first game of the season. Parchman has been a member in good standing with the team since, and he’s appreciative to have been granted a second chance.

“Coach Lynch and his staff stood behind me 100 percent, and I felt like I had to do something one of these days to pay them back,” Parchman said.

After he was arrested, Parchman spent 4 days in a hospital with an infection in a finger. That gave him a lot of time to think about his situation and how he wanted to proceed with his life.

“It gave me a wakeup call without getting punished too hard,” Parchman said. “Coach Lynch could have kicked me off the team for that. There were a lot of people after my neck.”

Add Toledo’s kickoff coverage team to the list.

Doug Zaleski covers Ball State football for The Star Press. Phone: 213-5813. E-mail: dzaleski@thestarpress.com.
STORRS, Conn. — After its upset of Toledo a week ago, the Ball State University football team had to go on the road and play a young, hungry team in its homecoming game.

The Cardinals didn’t play great Saturday, but they left Memorial Stadium with a 10-5 victory over the University of Connecticut.

"You take the win, particularly on the road in a tough environment," Ball State coach Bill Lynch said. "The weather conditions weren’t great, and sometimes you have to win those kind of games. And that’s what we got done. We came up here to win a football game. We got that done. we’re getting on a plane and going home.”

The Cardinals (3-4) were unable to generate much of a passing game — quarterback Talmadge Hill was 10 of 16 for 101 yards and an interception — and the running game was held in check for the better part of the game.

But there was one exception. With Ball State trailing 3-0 early in the second quarter, Marcus Merriweather (33 carries for 144 yards) showed why he’s averaging more than 100 yards a game when he burst through a hole at the line and broke it for a 37-yard gain.

On the next play, from the UConn 41-yard line, Jason Teters ran the same play for 37 more yards. Merriweather finished the drive with a 4-yard run up the middle to give Ball State a 7-3 lead.

The Cardinals had a chance to take a two-score lead in the third quarter when it embarked on an 11-play, 77-yard drive. But they were stopped at the UConn 2-yard line and had to settle for a Mike Langford 21-yard field goal.

"We needed to jump on them and try to make them really come from behind, but we didn’t," Lynch said.

Ball State .......... 10
Connecticut .......... 5

* The Cardinals (3-4, 2-0 MAC West) will play at 1 p.m. Saturday against Central Michigan.

See CARDINALS on Page 4C
By DOUG ZALESKI
The Star Press

MUNCIE — Ball State didn’t show much of a vertical passing attack during its first seven games of the football season. The Cardinals completed only 10 passes for 20 yards or more in those games as they relied mostly on short- and medium-range throws.

That changed dramatically Saturday when the Cardinals played Central Michigan.

Ball State quarterback Talmadge Hill completed six passes for 20 yards or more, including two for touchdowns, on the way to a 38-34 victory in Ball State Stadium.

Ball State (4-4, 3-0 Mid-American Conference West), a winner of four straight games, also threw another half-dozen passes down the field that were incomplete.

The change in philosophy also showed in the team’s passing attack during its first seven games of the season. The Cardinals completed only 10 passes for 20 yards or more in those games, including two for touchdowns, on the way to a 38-34 victory in Ball State Stadium.

By DOUG ZALESKI
The Star Press

Cardinals rely on big plays

Continued from Page 1C

The play that stuck in DeBord’s mind was ultimately the one that beat his team. The Chippewas had scored with 12:34 left in the game, and 5 minutes later they made Ball State begin a drive on its 22-yard line after a punt.

On second down, Hill fired long to Sean Schembra along the Ball State sideline. Schembra caught the ball at the Central Michigan 38-yard line behind the defensive coverage of Chippewas freshman safety James King.

Schembra out-sprinted King and cornerback Tedaro France to the end zone for the 78-yard touchdown that gave Ball State a 38-34 lead with 7:28 remaining in the game. It was the longest pass play for the Cardinals since 1983, when Mike Neu threw 98 yards to Brian Oliver in a comeback victory over Toledo.

“We definitely opened up the offense more today, and as a receiver that was fun,” Schembra said. “We knew if we just kept doing our stuff, [Central Michigan] has been known to blow some coverages. They blew a coverage, and we were able to make the big play.”

Hill put the ball on the money several times in the game. He lofted the ball high into the end zone in the third quarter, and Corey Parchman outjumped Central Michigan cornerbacks Epps for a 37-yard touchdown that gave Ball State a 24-13 lead.

Hill also connected with Schembra for a 39-yard play that helped set up Marcus Merriweather’s 4-yard touchdown run early in the fourth quarter. Merriweather surpassed the century mark in rushing for the fifth time in his last six games with a workmanlike 143 yards.

Hill completed a 38-yard pass to Billy Lynch, a 32-yarder to Tim Streit and a 20-yarder to Jamar Cottee as seven Ball State players made receptions.

“We stressed all week that the offense had to play better,” said Hill, whose 303 yards passing was a career best and the eighth-highest single-game total in Ball State history. “We wanted to take a couple of shots because we knew their secondary was susceptible to giving up some big shots. I thought I threw the ball pretty good in practice, and guys made big catches.”

“You can only nickel and dime people so long,” Cardinals coach Bill Lynch said of the new strategy.

In beating Central Michigan 38-34 for the second straight season, the Cardinals made big plays and gave up big yardage. Ball State gained 492 total yards while allowing Central Michigan to get 533.

“There’s a history of our games against Central being wild ones, and this was the same as a year ago,” Lynch said. “We anticipated it, and we found a way to win.”

The combined 1,052 yards was the most by two teams in a Ball State game since the Cardinals and Bowling Green put up 1,052 yards in a 1994 game.

For all the offense on display, including a career-high 199 yards rushing by Central Michigan sophomore Terrence Jackson, it was the Ball State defense that sealed the victory. The Chippewas had four possessions after taking a 34-31 lead with 12:34 remaining in the game, but they punted three times and threw an incomplete pass on fourth down from their 15-yard line on the fourth possession as the clock expired.
Streak is snapped

MAC FOOTBALL: Offensive turnovers and defensive letdowns resulted in a Kent State victory.

By DOUG ZALESKI
The Star Press

MUNCIE — Ball State University’s football team paid a heavy price Saturday for assignment breakdowns on defense and turnovers on offense in its final regular-season home game.

The Cardinals’ tendency to get out of position on defense opened gaping running holes for Kent State quarterback Joshua Cribbs in Ball State Stadium. The true freshman led the Golden Flashes to a season-high 309 rushing yards on the way to a 31-18 victory that ended Ball State’s four-game winning streak.

Only two opponents rushed for more than 300 yards against Ball State in its previous 30 games: Kansas State had 322 in a 76-0 victory last season, and Army gained 447 in a 41-21 triumph in 1999.

When Kent State (4-5) wasn’t running circles around the Cardinals (4-5), it was pressuring them into turnovers. Ball State committed a season-high four turnovers, including three interceptions by quarterback Talmadge Hill.

“We just got an old-fashioned butt kicking,” said Hill, who threw three interceptions for the third time in his career.

The fast, elusive Cribbs led Ball State’s defense out of sync on Kent State’s second possession of the game. Twice he ran through the middle of the Cardinals’ defense, the last one going for 29 yards and a touchdown that gave the Flashes the lead for good at 7-3.

Ball State defensive coordinator Bob Bartolomeo said the Cardinals had one player out of position on each of Cribbs’ two big runs on the drive.

“That makes you do then is [force] other guys to try to compensate, and they lose all focus on what they’re supposed to do,” Bartolomeo said.

Cribbs ran outside on the Cardinals several times the rest of the game. He had a 39-yard run and a 21-yarder in a drive that led to a touchdown that gave Kent State a 17-3 lead with 5:46 left in the third quarter.

Cardinals can’t avoid big plays

Continued from Page 1C

Cribbs eluded two Ball State defensive linemen on a pass play and scrambled 33 yards in the third quarter. The run set up a touchdown that put the Flashes on top 21-11.

“A lot of it was just the kid,” Ball State coach Bill Lynch said of his team’s breakdown on defense. “There were times we had containment, and he just stepped inside it or reversed his field and found a seam. His speed... we haven’t played against a quarterback with that kind of speed. He made play after play.”

Kent State coach Dean Pees said his team made it a point to try to get outside to offset Ball State playing eight defenders in the box and man-to-man pass coverage with its safety and two cornerbacks.

“You have to do that against their defense.” Pees said. “If you’re going to run the ball on them, you have to get it on the perimeter. We hurt them running on the perimeter to start the second half, and they moved out a little bit. Then we hit them inside a little bit.”

Added Cribbs: “At first it was hard to get outside. Then we started cutting back inside, and they expected that a little more.

The back-breaking play for the Cardinals came with 1:39 to play in the third quarter. Ball State nearly tackled Cribbs for a loss on a third-and-three option run.

But Cribbs pitched the ball to tailback David Alston just before being hit. Alston got outside and ran 32 yards for a touchdown to give Kent State a 28-11 cushion.

“We had two guys on [Cribbs] instead of [one guy] going to take the pitch,” Bartolomeo said. “Everybody’s overcompensating to play the quarterback, and that frees up their other guys.”

Ball State didn’t have the firepower to come back. It fell behind 31-11 early in the fourth period and Kent State took off on Hill when the Cardinals were forced to throw the ball.

Hill’s three interceptions were the result of trying to squeeze the ball through tight coverage.

“That’s what it looked like to me,” Lynch said.

Kent State shut off the deep pass that Ball State opened up a week ago against Central Michigan with good coverage by its secondary. The Golden Flashes’ aggressive pass rush forced Hill into a 12-for-23 performance for just 93 yards. He was sacked three times and forced to scramble seven times.

“That’s probably the best pass defense we’ve played all year,” Pees said. “Our guys were relentless. I thought [linebacker James Harrison] was relentless. If there’s a better defensive player in this league, I haven’t seen him.”

Harrison had 14 tackles, including two for losses.

“We’re told to remain, keep him inside and get him to scramble,” Harrison said. “If he doesn’t scramble, I’m supposed to make him.”

The Associated Press

At first it was hard to get outside. Then we started cutting back inside, and they expected that a little more.”

Joshua Cribbs
Kent State quarterback on his team’s success at running the ball against Ball State
There's something wrong with MAC setup

MUNCIE — Reminisce with me about the good, old days of Mid-American Conference football. Close your eyes, tip your head back and think about those bygone years — all the way back to 1999 and earlier — when every game between MAC schools meant as much one week as it did the previous week.

It isn't that way any more, gramps. In the modern-age MAC, games between conference schools can make or break a season one week and hold the pulsating suspense of a team scrimmage the next.

There's something wrong with that.

Ball State's euphoric victory over West Division favorite Toledo on Oct. 20 gave it the inside track for the division title. The Cardinals then beat division foe Central Michigan in a nail-biter to keep suspense at a high level.

But since games against division opponents are weighted with more importance than games against teams from the “other side,” cross-divisional games have become almost as meaningless to the championship race as a non-MAC game.

That could make Ball State's lackluster 31-18 whipping at the hands of Kent State on Saturday just a footnote to the 2001 season. If the Cardinals beat Northern Illinois next Saturday, they'll clinch the West title and earn a spot in the MAC championship game.

Never mind that Ball State is 0-2 against East Division teams this season. A victory against Northern Illinois will render those crossover games worthless.

Doug ZALESKI

See MAC, Page 5C
We have just finished the Friday practice for tomorrow's game against NIU. It's about 6:45 p.m. Muncie time, and I'm sitting on a bus, less than 24 hours away from what could be the culmination of a championship season or the continuation of mediocrity. In an odd twist of fate, we find ourselves in the driver's seat to win our first MAC Championship since 1996. After 1996, the MAC expanded to a 12 team league and split those 12 into two divisions of six. The conference promoted a championship game pitting the winners of the two divisions against one another at the end of the season. Under the rules outlined by the league, only divisional games count in the race for the division championship so even though we had two MAC losses, they both came against Eastern Division opponents. Thus, a team only needs to win five games a season in order to play for the championship. Today, we are that team. We are 3-0 in our division having beaten EMU, Toledo, and CMU. We control our own destiny. In fact, I'd say we're the only team with a losing record that is still bowl eligible. We're 4-5 overall and hold no tiebreakers over anyone. If we lose tomorrow, the dream is smashed. The chance to create a legacy will come to an end. On the other hand, if and when we win, the wave we're riding only gets bigger.

I haven't discussed opponents much this year, but I think this is the right time. If there are two teams more similar in terms of coaching staffs, players, attitudes, and philosophies, I would be surprised. Our two head coaches and several assistants on each staff are mutual friends and former colleagues on the same staffs. Our head coach and their head coach, Joe Novak, were both coordinators at IU in 1993-94 for Coach Bill Mallory. Our defensive coordinator, Bob Bartolomeo and their offensive coordinator are good friends. In fact, they talked on the phone midweek. Coach Bart said their O-coordinator said something to the effect of "You guys had trouble with the QB-trap last week," making reference to the fact that we had trouble containing Joshua Cribbs the week prior in a loss to Kent State. Coach Bart also said several things like, "I can guarantee he'll do this," or "Once we shut down 'jumbo', they'll go to this." The funny thing is, their coach was probably saying the same things about us.
Not only are there connections between the coaches, but their styles and philosophies, which are reflected in their players, are similar as well. Both ball clubs pride themselves on being tough, hard nosed ground attacking offenses with the capability of making big plays in the passing game. Then, on the other side of the ball, both teams sell out to stop the run. We put eight guys I the box against base offensive sets whereas they’re only going to use seven, but their two safeties play at ten yards and scream downhill as soon as they read run. Furthermore, the attitudes of both coaches and players are witnessed on the field. For example, we’re a predominantly one back, two tightend offensive team; but this week, in honor of the old school tradition, we reinstated the “iso” play in which the fullback in the I-formation goes nose to nose with the middle linebacker. It’s as old school smashmouth as it gets. Thus far, we’ve played nine games, and I don’t think we’ve run a single “iso.” But now, we’ve brought the most physical play in football back into our offense and I bet it’s the first play we run tomorrow.

Coach Lynch has said all week, “We’ve got a great plan. We’ve changed a few things up, but men, we’re going to be so prepared on Saturday that all we have to do is go play and not worry about anything else.” I’m not necessarily a big fan of installing new things into the game plan week to week. However, it’s different this time. All the changes and adjustments that we made starting on Monday have taken shape and we are prepared as well as we’ve been all season. Offensively, I hope we “iso” them off the field. Then, I hope we kill them on playaction pass. In our defensive preparation for Kent State the week before, we had a chance to see Kent State’s offense versus the NIU defense, and they killed them with playaction pass and bootlegs. We’ve been running the boot effectively all year and hope it continues. Also, we’ve implemented a new shotgun set which utilizes two backs as protectors or option route runners if necessary. This will not only sure up our protection against their zone blitzes, but also get one of our most exciting players on the field a little more. Jason Teeters, the roommate whose name has appeared before, is that player, and we’ve developed a little screen pass to him that I think has a chance to make big yardage. Defensively, we’ve been reinvigorated because the whole package is in. So often this year, we’ve gone into games with a limited amount of coverages and blitzes because the offenses we were playing mandated a controlled, simple climate. But now, we’ve brought it all back and put it into the game plan. We’re
going to play up to five different coverages and three different types of blitzes. We’re still only going to show them one basic front, eagle, but we’ll be doing a variety of different things especially if we’re able to control the line of scrimmage early in the game. The more we control things up front, the more Coach Bart tends to take risks with blitzes. He likes to attack, but it always concerned about giving up the big play, which killed us early in the season.

The key to the game tomorrow is the line of scrimmage. As I said, if we control it, we can be a little more aggressive than usual which allows for our players to use their God-given talents. Many people argue that intensity and emotion are going to be the most important things in a game of such magnitude. It’s easy to say that as an outsider, one who doesn’t really understand the inner-workings of a football team. When teams, such as Ball State and NIU, have struggled for so long to earn the respect of other teams around the conference, every game is emotional. Add to that the idea that this game is essentially for the MAC West Division Championship, and the emotional levels are going to neutralize one another. It’s going to be a hostile environment and both teams are going to come in jacked up. There’s going to be a big crowd. It’s going to be a beautiful day. It’s what I signed on for over four years ago.

I think any college football player would say that he signed on to play with a certain team because of the thought of winning a championship. If not, I would say that the player signed on for selfish reasons like just taking advantage of a scholarship or because he thought it was a step before going to the pros. To a man though, the class that I came in with came in because we thought we were going to win championships. Nobody needs to tell any of the players how important tomorrow’s game is. At some point in all of our careers, we’ve been in a situation like this. Whether it was before championship game or another sport at another time. I wouldn’t hesitate to say this is an entirely novel situation. We’re not kids anymore. A lot of us are 22 years old. We have 20 seniors. I’d say we all expected to be at this point before today, but now, after five years of trying, I’ll take anything. I’ll take a 2-0 victory. We don’t need a big win or to score a whole ton of points, just a win will do nicely. Coach Lynch said something else tonight at our team meeting. He said, “Ten years from now, you’ll think back to this moment, and you’ll remember the other faces, the other people in this room. You’ll
remember because you genuinely care about one another because, to a man, you’ve stuck together through all the tough times. All we’ve asked for is a chance. We have that chance tomorrow.”

The atmosphere surrounding big college football games is unmatched. Even on the small scale that is the MAC, big games have an electric atmosphere. Just ask Toledo about their trip to Muncie five weeks ago. They knew coming in that it was our homecoming and we would be juiced to play, but I don’t think they could have envisioned how wild the fans were. I’m anticipating the same type of thing tomorrow. Luckily, the good Lord has also blessed us once again with what is supposed to be another immaculate afternoon on which to play. Before the season, I for one dreaded this date in terms of potential weather conditions. Usually, by mid to late October, Dekalb, Illinois begins to see its fair share of nasty conditions but for late November, I wouldn’t have expected anything better than 25 degrees with about a 30 mile per hour wind. The actual forecast: 65 degrees and sunny with a gentle breeze or to the sports enthusiast, “football weather.” The end is near and it’s time to go to bed. Tomorrow, the Ball State “Fighting Football” Cardinals as Dave Letterman likes to say are going to attempt to fulfill a dream that began so long ago.

I discussed before the pregame video ritual that takes place before each time we load the buses to head to the stadium for that afternoon’s game. What I want to do now, is describe to you the real time events of that Saturday, not just tell you what happened and how it all turned out. The night before felt special. The morning felt special. Everything seemed so perfect, yet, with that there was a certain tension that day which I cannot begin to describe. We weren’t tight or nervous, just something that was different.

Saturday, November 17, 2001 began like any other game day with our normal relaxed pregame breakfast meal. In the last two years, our meal times on the road became a more relaxed atmosphere hoping to lessen the mental stresses that the players were under. We could report at any time during an hour span, eat, and then leave whenever we wanted. There was no longer a “pecking order” in terms that seniors went first followed by juniors and so on down the line. There was nothing special today about
breakfast. I ate my normal allotment, which is quite a bit because I know that I won't be eating anything real solid until after the game. Some guys like to eat a lot, while others prefer some bagels and fruit for breakfast and then grab an energy bar from the training room when we get to the stadium. It's quiet though. Some tables are naturally louder than others, and typically, it's the younger guys or maybe a group of fellas taking turns cracking jokes on one another. But today, man, it was pretty quiet but not too extraordinarily tense. After breakfast, as usual, we had some time to go back to the room, collect our things, catch about 30 minutes of GameDay or Sportscenter, and then it's time for the pregame video. It's always fun to watch what else is going on in college football, because even though we are all on a team, of course there are teams that we follow. I think very few of us would say that we "grew up" rooting for Ball State. Most people have some interest in the big time games going. That's usually the conversation at breakfast. "Who's going to win between so and so?" But, when we come down to meet with our position coaches before the video, it's time for business.

Things got fun and a little bit more exciting following today's pregame video. Our video guys do one helluva job with the new video editing system we had installed and it really shows when the put the pregame highlight videos together. The new Creed song, "My Sacrifice" was the title track for the NIU video. It was absolutely electric. But before that, it was the business-like way each player came into the room, set his travel bag down, took his seat, and sat there with the only audible noise stemming from the numerous headsets blaring into seemingly deaf ears. Sometimes, I think I hear the music coming out of the headphones more clearly than the person who has them on. It's just the focus in the eyes. A blank stare that says, "I don't care what happens, I'm getting my job done today." I've never seen 60 faces look more similar. Facial expressions are at a minimum.

"Alright, we ready? Let's go!" Those are Coach Lynch's basic instructions for the starting of the video.

Man, it was amazing. Seeing the runs by Marcus, the throws by Talmadge, the hits by 'Zo. It's so positive because the Cardinals are always the ones "laying the smack down on that candy ass!" We never lose in those highlight videos, and when the pictures are combined with a powerful song like "My Sacrifice," it can really speak to heart of a
man who has sacrificed all that he has known in order to sit in these seats today. The end of the video was special as well, because, as had been done before, they spliced in a movie clip. It was an older movie, from around 1987 I think, Major League. The “has been’s and never will be’s” were sitting around in the clubhouse, and Lou Brown had just told them how the owner would get rid of them after the season if they won too many games. Tom Berenger’s character, Jake Taylor, stands up and says, “Well, I guess there’s only one thing to do then.”

“What’s that,” says Roger Dorn (Corbin Bernson).

“Win the whole fucking thing,” says Taylor.

It was great. Everybody got a kick out of it and it loosened us up a little. With that, the film ended, the lights came on, and Coach Lynch had already started to make his way to the front of the room with his hand in the air getting ready for our ritualistic breakdown before heading to the buses.

“SSSSSSSSSSS, Beat HUSKIES!”

Tonight, we will return to Muncie, Indiana. We will make the tip back. There will be something attached to that return, a label if you will. Either we return as champions or we return as pretenders. Right now, it’s up to us. There is no more practice. There is no more preparation. There is no more writing; just success or failure. Maybe it’s not fair that the legacy of one team, of a group of 100 men, is determined by one battle fought on a Saturday afternoon in late November. Will people remember whether we played hard and gave it all we had? Probably not. Will they remember how great a season this has been or how far we’ve come since ending the 21-game losing streak? Again, I would have to say no. Sadly, they will only remember if we won or if we lost. This team has always been more than that. We’ve been above just mere wins and losses. We’ve been about pride, faith, and believing in each other. A few years ago, we described faith as belief without evidence. Then, as we began to win, we received the evidence to have true belief. Now though, we have to have that blind faith again. We have to have faith that regardless of the past, we are a championship team.

The fog hasn’t lifted. It’s now 10:30 a.m. and the fog is still surrounding everything. Though there’s not much to see, we’ve left the outskirts of the big city behind and now, The Great Plains stretch out in every direction. Only a simple field is
visible on each side of the bus when normally, one could see for miles. We’re driving blind, with only the immediate future in sight. We can’t see down the road. We can’t see what tomorrow holds or the day after that. Like the driver of this bus, our senses must be focused on the task at hand or else we were going to lose our sense of direction. Our forefathers fought battles on plains like these, in these open fields. They marched into battle shoulder to shoulder. They didn’t run and hide and hit and run. When the fighting was to be done, they stood as one on the open field, faced down seemingly insurmountable odds and drove back the enemy. Today, we are heading towards our own private war, marching towards our open field on the plains of Illinois. The battle is unavoidable and the outcome is in question. Like our forefathers, we too are underdogs. We, too, are fighting against the odds. We’re playing at Northern Illinois, on their new turf. They’ve had two weeks to prepare. They have the superior record. They are favored by more than a touchdown. The last time we were “dogs” was against Toledo, and there is no sense in retelling that story. I would like to sit hear and write about how great we’re going to play today, how we’re not going to make mistakes, and how they are going to give us opportunities to capitalize on theirs. I would like to say we’re going to step onto that field and walk all over them, but I can’t. All I can say is that when the day is done, we will have played like champions. I can say that because of the faces that I have looked at this morning. I can say that because of the determination, the desire, and the commitment I know that each man on these buses has. We are champions.

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It doesn’t get much worse than this. Ahead twice in the 4th. Ahead with under 5:00 to go. We gave up two touchdown drives in the last ten minutes. TWO!! Final score: NIU 33 – BSU 29. Bottom line: They made more plays than we did. We turned it over and they capitalized. They didn’t turn it over to give us a chance. The referees were awful. Were they a better team? I’d say every fan watching that game would say both teams were very even and that if we played a seven game series, it would probably take all seven to decide a winner. Still, they made the plays they had to in order to win the game.
I can't say I've ever hurt worse than this. To know, that next week is the last week I'll ever put on shoulder pads. To know, that we only had one chance to make our dreams come true and failed. To know, that our class, five years ago came into this program with so much hype, so much promise, and yet nothing has changed. Things have only gotten worse. 5-6, 1-10, 0-11, 5-6, and 4-6 with one more to go. We're the first class to leave this institution without winning a championship ring in something like over a decade. What I mean is, every Ball State football player who has played throughout his entire career, either four or five years, has walked away with at least one championship ring. We ended that streak. I'd say it's all over now.

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Or, was it conspiracy? At the time, I didn't think of all the circumstances that surrounded the game against Northern. If we win, we host the MAC Championship Game in Muncie, in a 23,000 seat stadium without lights, a tiny press box, and potentially minimal fan support. Also, we could end up at best with six wins and five losses if we were to beat Western Michigan in the final week of the season. Worse, we could be 5-6 if we lose to them, which means, a team with a losing record would be in line to go to a bowl game. Either way, we would be pitted against Marshall, 10-1, and a Top 25 team. Just on the surface, do you think our conference officials really wanted Ball State to represent the West Division? Or, do you think they wanted All-American Chester Taylor and the 9-2 Toledo Rockets to represent? Here's what makes it all seem that much worse: In the weeks before our game against NIU, MAC officials visited Muncie in pre-preparations for a potential championship game. The following account of what happened can be considered "hearsay" or "rumor," but I think that's what makes it all a little more interesting. What if it's true?

The first thing they commented on were our facilities, or lack thereof. In order for the MAC Championship to be played in Muncie, the MAC would have had to bring in a portable press box to handle all the extra media that would be there because it is a nationally televised game. They would also have to ring in portable lights because the game was scheduled for 6:00 p.m. on Friday, November 30. These things, combined
with the fact that the MAC wants its "best" teams in the showcase game—i.e. Toledo and Marshall lead to a conspiracy. Here are some more things when just looking at our game against NIU. In all football games, there are always going to be penalties, and there are two kinds: those the officials judge to be penalties based upon what they see and those that are obvious mistakes by either team. The "judgment" calls as I'll call them are things like holding or pass interference whereas the non-judgmental calls are things like offsides or illegal motion. There are many times because of a team's discipline level that it may naturally have more mental mistake penalties like offsides, but the judgment calls generally have a way of evening out over the course of an entire game. In our game against NIU, they had nine judgment calls go in their favor. We had zero. The officials did not call a single hold or pass interference or facemask, nothing. We had holding on at least two crucial plays on which we gained first downs. We had a huge pass interference called against us that was questionable and had a "block in the back" not get called on the same play that we get "kick catch interference" called on us. In fact, the only reason our player even got close to the punt returner was because he was pushed squarely in the back. If he hadn't, he could have stopped and given the man more than the required two yards. When the flag was thrown, our entire sidelines started jumping up and down expecting the "block in the back" to be called, thus giving them the ball on their own 30-yard line instead of at mid-field. There was no way NIU was going 70 yards in less than five minutes. But when that official signaled interference on our man, our sideline was in shock. Still, we had to play the game, but the officials still couldn't give us a break.

On the ensuing drive following the interference call, NIU faced third down and six on about the 35-yard line. Their slot receiver, knowing how far he had to go to get the first down, ran a short "under" route across the middle. Our corner chased him and tackled him right as he cradled the ball into his arms. As our defender, Jesse Avant, was making the tackle, he used his left hand to punch the ball from the receiver's grasp. They both are twisting to the ground and the ball is already loose. A melee ensues and one of our safeties jumps on the fumble. The side judge on our sideline runs into the mix with his hand up and pointing in our direction, signaling Ball State possession. Our
whole team is going absolutely nuts. The game is over as our offense begins taking the field and defense starts heading off.

"Lavar, get off the field!" I hear Rach yell at one of our offensive linemen. The umpire who stands right in the middle of the field, just in front of where the fumble took place, had ruled the receiver down by contact before the fumble. We were in shock. In that 30 second span, every one of us ran the entire gamut of emotions. If this were the NFL, Coach Lynch would have thrown the red flag calling for a review. All of our guys on the field knew it was a fumble simply by the reaction of the receiver who lost the ball. Fumbling the ball is not allowed in football, and when a ball carrier loses grip of the rock, he’s the first one to notice and react accordingly. When the receiver lost the ball, he immediately began scrambling for it and even tried to pry it from the hands of our safety who recovered it. In fact, he fought for the ball so fiercely, he was able to gain possession of the ball from our man who had initially recovered it. His reaction told the true story, but I think the officials had predetermined that one all the way. One official, who probably mistakenly ruled in favor of us, was overruled by an official who had no right making the call. After watching the film, the umpire who made the call was turning as the ball was being fumbled, and by the time he saw the action, both players were on the ground and the ball was out. The line judge is the only one who saw the play clearly. It was awful.

We were never supposed to win that game. We were supposed to lose so the MAC would look better and the officials were the final piece of the puzzle in completing our predestined end. The MAC wanted Toledo and Marshall all season long, and I bet those officials were under orders to preserve that matchup. It’s not sour grapes, just a combination of a lot of circumstantial facts.
Title hopes dashed in defeat.

BSU comes up short on drives

Continued from Page 1C

After Finlen's score, the Cardinals got the ball back twice, but the two possessions resulted in five incomplete passes and three sacks. Merriweather, who gained 171 yards, didn't touch the ball in the last 3 minutes. "With 3 minutes to go, maybe we tried to pass too much," Lynch said. "But that's second guessing, and that's for somebody else to do." Merriweather scored four of Ball State's TDs, rushing for a 35-yard score and a 1-yard plunge.

Ball State's other points came early. After Northern Illinois' 39-yard field goal on its second possession, Parchman returned the ensuing kick 93 yards for a second touchdown of the season. "My blockers did a good job," Parchman said. "I might not have touched once."

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Turnovers haunt Cardinals, who couldn’t capitalize on final drives
Chapter Eight

The End of it All

We got back to Muncie rather late that Saturday night. In fact, it may have been almost Sunday morning, but to our luck, the establishment adjacent to our house was still open. Sometimes, you just need to let off some steam so a few of us headed next door to Muncie Liquors #1 and pick up a couple of cases of our famous “tall boys.” For the layperson, those are 24 packs of 16-ounce beers. It was a “Bud” night as John, Jason, Brian, Dave, Colin and I fell into a few rousing games of hockey. Budweiser and Bud Light comforted us into the wee hours of the morning, as we got smashed around the card table downstairs. It started off normal, just knocking back a few cool ones, bitching about how the last five years of our lives basically are worth nothing now. Then, someone, I forget who, asked the question that usually starts it all, “Anyone up for some hockey.”

The game, really a simple drinking game, has become more of a phenomenon over the last four years. Until my second year at BSU, I’d never heard of such a game. I’d played a few drinking games, but none as simple, yet outright cutthroat and hateful as this one. The rules go as follows: Two teams, two players on each team. Team members sit across from one another at a table. All 52 cards in a standard poker deck are dealt out evenly. Eights are safe. The game begins with the player to the dealer’s left throwing down a card. Then, the next player (he/she is on the opposite team) can either “score” by matching the played card or if he/she doesn’t have the same card, throw a card that the next player won’t have. If a card is matched by an opposing player, then the team who matches scores a goal. Then, as deemed by the individual players, the “losers” of the goal must drink until their opponents “snap” or say stop. This goes on until all 52 cards are played. After that, the goals are tallied and the cards re-dealt for period number two and play resumes in the opposite direction. In all, three periods are played just like in hockey. Then, at the end of the third period, the team with the fewest total number of goals must slam an entire beer. Needless to say, this is what we deemed a “meathead” game.
Hockey always brought the meatheads out. It always seemed we’d end up arguing or fighting about something any time a hockey game got interesting. It’s all about how much you make your opponent drink. Some guys like to be assholes early in the action and as soon as they score a goal, they make their opponents drink for a long time. In the end though, this only incites the opposing players to do the same back to you because eventually, they will be able to score at least one goal. It’s also fun because the losing team can still get its shots in because though it may be losing by four or five goals, it can still make the other team drink as much as it feels necessary for a single goal. For example, one night, one guy told another guy to drink an entire half-gallon cooler full of beer for a single goal. He did. But it came back to haunt the other guy because as soon as he got scored on, he got the same treatment. Coffee tables have been shattered, fights have broken out, and many dinners have been tossed off of porches because of this wonderful game. It was really huge my sophomore and junior years. We played damn near every weekend. We never needed an excuse. Lately though, it’s kind of been forgotten. Most people are afraid to truly play. That Saturday night though, there was no fear.

We played for a long time just like in the old days, trying to forget how bad we felt about what had happened just ten hours earlier. It never works though. It just makes things worse. Still, we had fun that night. I think I ended up “ralphing” off the porch around 4:00 a.m. or something. It was okay though because I came right back inside and kept going. I don’t know for how long, but for a while at least. We yelled and hollered at each other, smacked down goal after goal in each other’s faces, and made each other drink until we couldn’t drink anymore. It’s not healthy, physically or emotionally, but the camaraderie was still there that night. Partying after games has always been a time honored tradition around here whether we win or lose. The wins are always more enjoyable. Everybody’s happy after a win. But sometimes, after all those losses in the middle of our careers, it just felt good to let loose. The old crew is pretty much gone, meaning that we had a lot of friends that were a year older than us and they’ve all moved on, away from the college scene just like we will a year from now. It’s been on helluva ride, and there’s not going to be any more of these left really. This was it and we kind of all knew it.
Sunday was bad. Usually, on Sunday, I find something productive to do. I just felt so horrible from the day and night before though that I just sat around in bed and watched t.v. and movies all day long. I should have hit the books or something, but I didn’t care. I knew that we only had one week left and it was going to go by too fast. I did go to the stadium to watch the film as usual and to see the looks on the coaches’ faces was tough. They’ve been through a lot. The uncertainty of whether or not they’re going to be employed. Whether or not the 14-hour days they put in are truly worth it. How everything they do may not have been enough. The facility was like a wake. A few tried to keep the beat up, but most looked the same as the rest of the players who were out getting the normal day-after-game treatments. Beaten. Done. I too wanted it to end.

I took my fourth “Labor Day” holiday of the semester that Monday morning. I was supposed to go to three classes in the morning but I didn’t go to any of them. I just don’t care about school anymore. It’s easy. I got a bunch of joke classes and I’ll probably be getting mostly A’s anyway so I just decided to sleep in and catch up on some rest from the weekend trip. I also needed to finalize some more important things: my letters of recommendation for law school. I haven’t applied anywhere yet but I’ve decided to try Notre Dame, IU-Indianapolis, and UNC-Chapel Hill. I know that the strongest parts of my applications will be my letters of recommendation because they are coming from three of the people most directly associated with my career both athletically and academically at BSU. Coach Lynch was my first and most obvious choice. He has not only been my head coach the last five years, but also someone I could rely on in the chance that I was to need anything. He’s always there for his players and is willing to do anything for us and he said it would be a privilege for him to write such a recommendation. My other two writers were Dr. Walter Moskalew and Dr. Mathew Fisher. I had Dr. Moskalew for more classes than any other professor at the university and Dr. Fisher was a close second. I had Dr. Moskalew for all my 300 level Latin courses as well as several Classical Culture courses. I’ve always done good work for him and he recognized that fact by agreeing to write a letter for me. Dr. Fisher was my favorite professor. I first came into contact with him my freshman year as I began the “Humanities” sequence for the Honors College. Soon after that, I switched my major to English and because he was the director of the undergraduate program for the English
department, I made him my advisor. Therefore, I always tried to take the classes that he taught because we developed such a strong bond. He was great because it wasn’t always academics with him. It never failed that when we met that instead of the scheduled fifteen or thirty minutes we intended, we’d talk about football or old times or current events for anywhere up to an hour. We’d often get to the point where one of us would have to go and so we’d quickly discuss the matter which brought us to meet in the first place. I knew, that with the help of the words of these three men, I would be given adequate consideration for any law school in the country.

I took the LSAT back in February of this year. Looking back on it, I probably didn’t study or prepare for it the way I should have. All I did was download the test off the internet. Then, I took it on my own time in two separate time spans. I did half of it one day and the rest of it the next, and that was like three days before I was supposed to take the actual test. That Saturday morning, I got up early as usual and made myself an enormous breakfast with pancakes, eggs, sausage, and fruit. The coffee was also flowing so my nerves would be on point for the early morning start time. By the time I left the testing room that day, I felt like I’d been in a war. My hands, eyes, and head all hurt about the same. I don’t think I’ve ever read so much so fast while trying to understand it in my entire life. The reading comprehension sections and the logical reasoning sections are just incredibly difficult. I left the room feeling unsure about my performance, but hoping, that I would never have to take the test again. I didn’t. Thankfully, I scored a 154 (180 is the highest possible) and that was above average, around the 60th percentile. I was pleased and thought the score, combined with my GPA (3.6), athletic background, and strong letters of recommendation would be plenty to get me accepted to law school. I sent out my three applications in late November making sure to be early in the application process. Now that football was about over, my future was taking shape, because that same Monday on which I skipped class and solidified my letters of recommendation, I asked Jaime to marry me.

Before the marriage proposal of which I’ve already spoken, I went out for one last Monday practice. Like every other Monday, we meet and watch film for a good portion of our time at the stadium and then head out onto the field for nearly an hour to walk through some things, warm up, work on special teams, and then run our customary
“gassers.” They are the conventional conditioning exercise favored by most coaches around the country on every level of football, though the requirements of “gassers” may vary a little from coach to coach. Our coach believes in the six-lap principle, meaning that we must run across the field six times to complete one gasser or three times, down and back. There not tough on Monday because most people who play a lot on Saturday aren’t even out there on the field, but this last Monday was rather well attended if I must say so myself. It was cold and drizzling that afternoon as the light of the day was fading away. The missed week during the season had pushed us back a week and we were now playing on Thanksgiving weekend for the first time in my collegiate career. It was getting dark as we started off on that last gasser, the offense together then the defense. Coach Lynch even let us run an extra one, just for the seniors, kind of a going away gift. A group of us senior defensive players kind of hung out together the whole time back and forth across the field, acting like we were too damn old to be running by limping or stiff-legging it. As we crossed the line for the final time, a large defensive lineman uttered the words, “I’ll never run another gasser again.” Appropriate.

Tuesday was our last full-padded practice. We had a couple of good hitting sessions as kind of a way to go out for the seniors. The last week of the season is always fun. All the offensive and defensive players switch numbers so there are linemen running around with single digit numbers and defensive backs playing with numbers like “72” or “92.” It’s always funny watching 300 pound men trying to squeeze into small jerseys and at the same time, seeing how the little guys look like they’re wearing dresses. I wore #2, Charlie Avant’s jersey on that Tuesday. I didn’t want practice to end. Because the routine doesn’t change once we get in season, we always know what period is next and ultimately, what period is the last one of the day. It’s always fun trying to take a peek at one of the coaches practice schedules. They don’t post them for us to see, but each coach and many of the managers have them so we always try to catch a look at them before meetings or sometimes while on the field. It’s usually because we want to know if there’s conditioning at the end of practice. There’s no real importance, just the fact that we want to know what’s going on. As the end drew close, I found myself taking it all in between my playing reps. After my three reps, I go away from everyone else, take a knee and just look around. I wasn’t necessarily paying attention to what we were doing
defensively, but rather thinking about how I'm going to miss everything about football. I'm going to miss the action, the comedy, and the relationships. Wednesday was going to be difficult. It was senior speech day a day earlier than normal because Coach Lynch was letting the non-travel guys go home for the Thanksgiving holiday.

There was no school on Wednesday so about the only people on campus were football players. The dorms were closing Wednesday afternoon so the guys who lived there had to be out and in another player's house or somewhere. About half the guys who live in the dorms are non-travelers though so as soon as practice was over that morning, they were going home anyway. Coach had us come in around 8:30 a.m. or so for meetings and a quick practice. Because of the large number of seniors, 20, it called for an extended time of speaking. I'd thought about what I wanted to say to the younger guys, but it wasn't anything rehearsed. I knew though, that it was going to be tough to look at all the faces around and keep control. Over the years, I've seen many players shed a few tears while talking. Some guys have a harder time than others, but it almost never fails that when someone starts getting a little emotional, a joke will come in from the back of the pack to kind of lighten the mood. I still remember JP and Howard Simms giving their speeches in 1997, my first season as a Cardinal. JP spoke mainly to the young guys, saying to cherish every moment of the next five years because once it's over, there's nothing like it again. There are many of these types of words, but some more than others stick with you. Following his respective speech, each senior takes his last tackle. We get a good running start, and tackle a dummy with a helmet on top of it, in this case, Western Michigan. This is the part of the speech that I wanted to prepare for.

The last tackle has evolved from simply hitting the dummy to a contest of who can do the most creative thing to it. There's been dropkicks, punches, dancing, a little bit of everything. As far as my technique for the tackle, I knew what I wanted to do. For years, I've been the wrestling enthusiast on the team. Since high school, I've followed professional wrestling religiously. I watch it every Monday and Thursday, and if I'm not home, I set the VCR. Therefore, I wanted to combine my love for the WWF with my last tackle. I got dressed early and grabbed one of the managers and asked her if she could let me see the dummy we were using for the last tackle. She took me out to the equipment shed and pulled out one of the big "Titans." They are six-foot tall dummies used in
linemen drills and are weighted with about 150 pounds of concrete and sand in the bottom. I did a test run on the dummy and it worked perfectly. I couldn’t wait.

We went alphabetically through the roster. There were some tears shed, more than in past years actually. I got close to shedding a tear when my roommate Brian was talking. He had a hard time being in front of everybody. It was tough for him because of how his career went. He came in and started at quarterback as a redshirt freshman late in the season and then held the starting job for the next year and a half. Then, in mid-season 2000, he was replaced by Talmadge Hill, another redshirt freshman. This year, Brian came back to play even though he graduated in May and was in grad school. He was named team captain and played extremely well during spring ball and in fall camp, but alas, was never able to re-earn the starting spot. Like any other player, he was a prideful person and not being able to be on the field a lot during his senior campaign was tough. Still, like he said, there were no regrets. He almost got me more so than any other player. Then, it was my turn. To keep in the emotion I was feeling, I turned it up a notch. I wasn’t yelling, but I was speaking rather loudly to the players. It wasn’t long. I just told the guys that the last three years have been like steps. We gotten better and better, and that next year, it was time to take the last step. There’s a foundation at Ball State now, somewhere to grow from, and the guys playing next year are going to re-establish the tradition that was once great. With that said, I headed down the corridor of players towards the “Titan” dummy with the Western Michigan helmet.

When I got within five yards, I ripped off my helmet threw it over my head, grabbed the dummy around the mid-section and by one of the handles on the bottom, and yelled, “Rock Bottom!” I gave “The Rock’s” signature move to the dummy and laid it down flat so that I could give “the people” what they wanted. As I stood up and faced the group of players, the dummy popped up. It wouldn’t stay down, but luckily, Brian was there to help out. He held the dummy down while I, in a perfect imitation of “The Rock,” ripped off my right elbow sleeve, ran to my left, hit the “ropes”, jumped back over the dummy, hit the “ropes” on the other side, and then came back to the dummy where I delivered the perfect “People’s Elbow.” It was a riot. The move made it on the Senior Highlight video shown at the banquet and it garnered several laughs there as well. It was my highlight of the year.
The day after the "last tackles" was Thanksgiving. There's only been two years during my lifetime that I haven't been with family for traditional Thanksgiving dinner. The first was in 1994, the year of the state championship. We practiced on Thanksgiving in the RCA Dome so, after practice, we drove back to Terre Haute and stopped at the Holiday Inn for a team Thanksgiving meal. All I remember about that dinner was there wasn't enough food. It wasn't that bad, but it wasn't good either. There just wasn't enough, especially of the side items. I ate one plate that was just turkey with a little bit of gravy. No potatoes, no stuffing, no corn. That wasn't the greatest meal, but I must say, it was special because I was still with my family so to speak. My dad was there. My brother was there. My best friends were there. It was just a little different, just like this year. This year, though, was much more memorable and much better.

They had the meal catered-in to the new facility. All the coaches brought along their families and the entire travel team ate together in the big team meeting room. There were about twenty long banquet tables set up and two buffet lines of food. I got in on the grub early so my plate was stacked. A few people kind of got the shaft because the good turkey ran out. Still, we sat and ate and talked for at least a couple of hours, and I doubt anyone went home hungry. It was almost like Thanksgiving at home because they had the football games on the big screen televisions, and some of the players brought in video game systems and were having challenge matches in a couple of the meeting rooms. We resembled a single big family more than a football team. The coaches' wives were all going around talking to players about this and that, just making us feel a sense of home away from home. I talked to Mrs. Lynch about my recent engagement and she sat down at our table and kind of heckled a few of my friends (her son included) about who was going to be next to fall. It was nice having the atmosphere like we did, an atmosphere different than what is the norm when the team gets together for meals. In hotels and even at home, the mood is usually serious and quiet and the conversation is somewhat minimal at times. This day though, was just like a dinner at home with conversations going in four or five directions non-stop. Two Thanksgivings away from home seven years apart, and I got to spend both of them with my surrogate families for the time. That was both lucky and fun.
I spent the evening with my parents. Because my brother went to his girlfriend’s house for Thanksgiving and my grandmother was at her son’s family’s dinner, my parents got a head start on the trip to Kalamazoo early. They left from Newburgh on Wednesday and had dinner with Vince and Shelley and then came up to Muncie that night and spent a couple of nights at the Radisson downtown. On Thanksgiving Day, they ate together in the hotel’s restaurant, just the two of them. They said it was a little strange, but fun nonetheless. They got to spend some time together without really being stressed in terms of scheduling. It was a micro-vacation if you will. Anyway, following dinner with the team, I headed over the hotel and hung out with my parents for most of the rest of the night. It was nice to just have some quiet time with them. Normally, our time together is at a dinner table in a noisy restaurant or outside of a stadium’s gates as I prepare to board the buses for the trips home. There was no rushing around or worrying about being in any certain places. The bus wasn’t leaving too early in the morning so it didn’t matter what time I got home. Just like me, my parents are learning to adjust to my new lifestyle and my brother’s lifestyle as well. For over twenty years, they had the confidence that Vince and I would always be home for holidays, but now, that’s not so true. We’ll make it home when we can, I’m sure, but there are going to be times whether it’s Easter or Christmas or Thanksgiving that my parents might be on their own. This was the first time, and yet, they seemed to handle everything in stride.

As I was saying, we didn’t leave that early the next morning. We did leave earlier than usual because we made a stop in South Bend to visit the College Football Hall of Fame. Jaime took me there previously so it wasn’t new trip for me, but it was still fun. The best part about the trip was the room in which we ate lunch. It’s what they call the “Press Box.” They had a spaghetti lunch for us but the memorabilia on the walls was what made the room so neat. They had a plaque of each Heisman Trophy winner with a picture and brief bio. Going up and down the wall several times, I took the time to read about each award winner. The game of college football can be summed up by looking at those pictures and reading about those men who are the winners of the top honor in intercollegiate athletics. The Heisman Trophy carries with it a prestige unlike any other award in college athletics, and to see how the players have changed lets you know how the game has changed since the first half of the 20th Century. Now, it’s the 21st Century,
and the game is still evolving. The players are bigger, faster, and stronger. There are more resources to use in order to fully develop the body as well as the mind. Coaches are more informed, and the strategy involved week in and week out has grown many times over. Still, what remains at the heart of college football are the players who make up the team of eleven men that ultimately step onto the field to determine who wins and who loses. The essence of the game can be seen in the bonds that must be in place so that an entire unit can act harmoniously rather than as eleven individuals. That hasn't changed, and it never will. We got to Kalamazoo Friday evening, had our normal team dinner, and watched our normal film.

* * * * * * * *

It's about time now. I'll suit up one more time. I'll run out onto that field one more time. It's Saturday, November 24, 2002, seven years to the day I played my first true championship game. Seven years ago I walked onto the artificial turf inside the RCA Dome with my high school teammates and walked out wearing a blue ribbon and gold medallion signifying me as a state champion. Now, I'm not going to get a ring or ribbon, but hopefully, a simple memory that will last the rest of my life. It's hard to describe everything I feel right now. To know that all I've worked for over the last decade comes to a close today. There will not be anymore running or lifting in preparation for a season the following autumn. There is no next year or next week whereas every year before this, I could always say, "Well, next year we got a shot," or "I think I'll start watching film next week just to stay sharp." It's finished today. It's not reality. It's not even real. Fifteen years—every year the season ends but begins anew the next. Not now. I have to find a new passion, something to push me. I've never known emptiness or boredom before—never felt a void in my life. Will I now? Will this haunt me? How am I going to be affected? Eventually, it all comes to an end for each and every one of us. Sooner or later? Some people get that choice. Now, it's sooner. Last week seemed like so long ago. When we were preparing for Northern, I felt for sure that we'd be playing into December as MAC Champions, but the loss effectively ended our season. Right now, there's nothing I'd rather do than go out with a win, with one last
shot. I just want to run down on one more kickoff, step on that field for one more play. I don’t just want to watch. Before 2002, I was 33 for 33 in terms of games played. Now, I’m 34 of 43. One game. Eight plays.

The tears almost came again, sitting here on the bus, but I choked them back. It’s hard to hold them in. I just try to stop thinking. I look out the window at the early winter sky to see the darkening clouds and unstable weather patterns. It looks like rain today. Good, maybe the wetness outside will hide the pain in my eyes. I stopped focusing on the moment. Right now, there are no thoughts in my head—I guess there is this question though as the bus comes to an abrupt stop: “Was it all worth it? All the time? All the pain? All the losses, the sweat, the effort?” I don’t know what today holds for me, or us. I think a win. For seven years this day has been coming—this final day. I look into the steely eyes of 18-22 year olds for the final time. I see their love, their desire, their focus. I dress with my buddies in the cramped confines of Waldo Stadium one last time to see who will win the day. Nothing in this world is comparable to football, nothing. There is no substitute. There is no replacement. There are 60 brothers going to battle for the final time as one.

35-31, BSU wins. We end up 5-6 and 4-3 in the MAC (4-1 in the West). It was one helluva game, much like the CMU game. As usual, we had to make it a little more interesting than it needed to be. We had an eleven point lead with less than a quarter to go but couldn’t finish them. They came back to go ahead 31-28 with about 5:00 remaining. We roared back, not in one shot like against Toledo, but rather with an impressive offensive drive highlighted by a couple big plays. A 40 yard pass from Talmadge to Parchman set up a long run by Scotty V to get us down close enough for our big back to take over. Merriweather went in from about four yards out to put us on top to stay. The defense took over after that. The front four defensive players “pinned their ears back” and got all kinds of pressure on the quarterback. Rachman got a sack on 3rd and twelve to set up a 4th and twenty situation. An incomplete pass one play later was all she wrote and the fat lady finished her vocals. Personally, I’ve
played my final game. I have worn that helmet for the last time. There is still no reality yet. It's too soon. I don't think it will truly hit me until about Tuesday when I don't head to the stadium for practice for the second day in a row. Maybe, maybe not. After the game, it was tough for everybody, especially the older guys. There were a lot of tears being shed inside that small little room from the coaches all the way down. We all hugged. We all shook hands. We all looked into each other's eyes one last time. It was a special group.
Cardiac Cardinals win another shootout

BSU FOOTBALL: The victory clinched BSU a share of the MAC West championship.

By DOUG ZALESKI
The Star Press

KALAMAZOO, Mich. — Ball State saved one last cardiac finish for the 2001 football season, and this one produced a share of the Mid-American Conference West Division championship.

The Cardinals scored with direction when senior nose tackle Mark Zackery said, "I've been here fighting 5 years for this one goal. Things were going in the wrong direction when I started my career, but we knew we could build off last year and that we could get this done."

But it wasn't easy. For the eighth time in 11 games, the Cardinals' fate wasn't decided until their or their opponent's last possession of the game. "This was a great win for our kids; they've been through a lot," Ball State coach Bill Lynch said. "Every time people wrote us off for dead, these kids came back. They're a resilient group."

Ball State fell behind 31-28 with 5:12 to play after it allowed two Western Michigan (5-6, 2-3 MAC West) touchdowns in the fourth quarter. But the Cardinals responded quickly on their next possession to regain the lead.

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Ball State committed just one turnover, a fumble with 12 seconds remaining in the first half. It denied the Cardinals a chance for a field-goal attempt, but it didn't provide Western Michigan an opportunity to score.

Ball State quarterback Talmadge Hill hit speedy receiver Corey Parchman for 41 yards on a deep crossing pattern on the first play to get the ball to the Western Michigan 24-yard line. Three plays later, Marcus Merriweather scored on a 5-yard run to lift the Cardinals (5-6) to a 35-31 lead.

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Drach, who had four touchdown passes, no interceptions and one anti-inflammatory injection for swelling in his left shoulder at halftime, had one more chance after Ball State regained the lead. But unlike last week in a spirits-crushing loss at Northern Illinois, the Cardinals' defense preserved the lead.

Ball State defensive end Rachman Crable sacked Drach at the Western 30-yard line with 1:15 to play. Drach's long pass on fourth down passes, no interceptions and one anti-inflammatory injection for swelling in his left shoulder at halftime, had one more chance after Ball State regained the lead. But unlike last week in a spirits-crushing loss at Northern Illinois, the Cardinals' defense preserved the lead.

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Western Michigan coach Gary Darnell said he thought Ball State's defense might be susceptible to yielding another touchdown drive. "They backed off a bit and were playing with the clock, and I felt like we could get it down there," he said. "I was confident it was still there for us, but when we got the [holding] penalty [on second down] I knew it was lights out."

Hill bounced back from an erratic passing performance the past two games, when he threw six interceptions and lost a fumble in losses to Kent State and Northern Illinois. Against the Broncos, the sophomore passed for 284 yards (his second-highest total in 22 career games) and three touchdown passes without an interception.

His scoring tosses went for 53 yards to Sean Schembra, 57 yards to Jamar Cottee and 27 yards to Jon Eckert.

"Last week was somewhat of a disappointment with the turnovers and the performance we had at Northern," Hill said. "Coach preached that we still had a shot to become co-champs, and we just wanted to come out and play well. We practiced very seriously and studied hard, and I thought we played hard."

Cardinals tailback Marcus Merriweather was bothered by a swollen knee for the second straight game. But he rushed for 79 yards on 21 carries to break Ball State's single-season rushing record with 1,244 yards. The national mark of 1,210 was set in 1994 by Tony Nibbs.

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WHAT WENT RIGHT:
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Decision time at hand for BSU’s future

Major decisions concerning the future of Ball State's football program will be made within the next few days. No one associated with the football program knows for sure what the future holds, and Cardinals athletic director Andrea Seger didn't tip her hand Saturday when she asked her whether coach Bill Lynch's job was in jeopardy.

"I have no comment on any coaching situation until the last game is played," Seger said before the Cardinals ended the 2001 season with a 35-31 victory over Western Michigan. "There are some games that we obviously have not been pleased with, and there are games we were very, very pleased with."

"The only thing we know for certain is that Seger will meet with Lynch this week. It's customary for her to talk with coaches immediately after the end of a season and evaluate the program."

With that meeting looming, Lynch might have been facing a win-or-lose situation when the Cardinals played Western Michigan.

A loss would have left Ball State with a third-place finish in the Mid-American Conference West Division and given it losing records in games against all MAC teams and in all games. But the Cardinals won to finish 4-1 in the West and share the division championship with Toledo and Northern Illinois.

Ball State had a 4-3 record against all MAC teams and a 5-6 record overall, its fifth consecutive losing record.

Seger gave Lynch a less-than-overwhelming vote of confidence last year by adding a year to his contract after the Cardinals were 5-6, including 2-3 in the West. Seger said at the time that she saw enough improvement in the football program to give Lynch the extension through the 2002 season. She also said her expectations for the football program, like all 21 other sports at Ball State, was to reach a competitive level with the top teams in the Mid-American Conference.

Under those guidelines, Lynch made an improvement this season with the football program. Despite a losing overall record, Ball State tied for the West title, and along the way defeated a Top 25 team in Toledo.

"The absolute first thing we're competing for is the MAC West Division championship," Seger said. "Bill knew that, and I knew that. That's what our goal has to be."

Seger said she never discussed reaching certain goals beyond that with Lynch. He was never told he had to win X number of games to keep his job or earn another extension.

It would be difficult to argue that the Cardinals didn't underachieve this season. They posted their fourth straight losing record in home games, going 2-3. In their heart, they thought they could win six or seven games this year with 17 starters returning. Instead, they won five. They lost their first four games, two of which were at home. They closed the season losing two of three games.

Lynch has plenty of detractors who think that five straight losing seasons is reason enough to give another coach an opportunity to take over the program. They've seen first-year coach Urban Meyer transform Bowling Green's 2-9 team in 2000 into an 8-3 team this year.

A coaching change could make that happen, but there's no guarantee. The Cardinals could be worse off. And Lynch is why the football coaching position at Ball State is one of the least desirable jobs in the MAC.

The school's administration has dragged its feet for years while trying to decide what kind of financial commitment to make to the program.

Ball State has a brand, spanning new football training building that was constructed for $6 million. That's a lot of money. But even as that project finished, the Cardinals were falling behind in games against all MAC teams. And most of the schools ahead of them are their rivals in the West Division.

Central Michigan's football complex dwarfs Ball State's and includes one of the MAC's finest stadiums and the best indoor-practice facility in the conference.

Earth is being moved here at Western Michigan for the construction of a $25 million indoor practice building that also will include skyboxes in one end zone. Waldo Stadium, which already has skyboxes on the home side of the field and an impressive press box/booster seating area on the other side, is top notch.

Toledo has a top-shelf stadium that includes a Jumbotron screen to televise the game to fans in the stands and show replays. Northern Illinois installed a Jumbotron this season.

We're talking about amenities and recruiting advantages— that Ball State's division rivals enjoy. It doesn't even address what Marshall has and the multimillion dollars in improvements Ohio made the past few years in the East Division.

So if you enjoy that nice football training building in Ball State's south end zone and think the Cardinals have caught up to their rivals, you're not in touch with the game.

That brings us back to Lynch. The days of a football coach going 7-4 or 8-3 consistently at Ball State, with its current stadium setup, are long gone. You can bring in a new coach or change coaches every couple of years, but Ball State is going to continue to hover around 5-6 or 6-5 until Ball State's administration and board of trustees make a major financial commitment to give their school's coach the advantages that the majority of his peers enjoy.

It was done in basketball, and it's no surprise the Cardinals are annually among the best teams in the MAC.

If it isn't done in football, Ball State can't flourish in that sport.

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